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The Model of Masculinity: Youth, Gender, and Education in Fascist Italy, 1922-1939

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The Model of Masculinity: Youth, Gender, and Education in Fascist Italy, 1922-1939

An Honors Program Project Presented to
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College of Arts and Letters
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Introduction

*Youth, Youth, springtime of beauty
In the harshness of life,
your song cries out and goes.*

*From Italy and its borders:
The Italians are remade,
Mussolini has remade them
for tomorrow's war.*

*For the glory of labor
For peace and laurel*

-excerpt from "Giovinezza" (1924)¹

Italian Fascists believed that a strong nation was built upon the sturdy bedrock of virile, patriotic youths willing to sacrifice themselves for the glory of the fatherland. This sense of masculinity engrossed Fascist officials and is key to understanding the culture enforced under Mussolini from 1922 to 1939. Fascism stood for all things virile: young, strong, obedient, sacrificial, and heroic. However, this rhetoric of youth and masculinity limited the roles women were supposed to play in the country. Girls were supposed to find their personal glory in motherhood and domestic life rather than on the battlefield. This insistence of strict gender norms ultimately did not work because the Fascist regime never cohesively reinforced its rhetoric and the realities of inter-war life in Italy blurred traditional gender roles and raised a generation of Italians who were ambivalence to Fascist propaganda.

The language of educational institutions and youth groups was dominated by a binary gender code that reinforced Fascism's sense of masculinity. Curriculum, textbooks, and youth group activities promoted chauvinism as an essential Italian

¹ Stanislao Pugliese, ed. and trans., *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 131-132.

characteristic. Expectations were different for boys and girls: propagandistic publications gave boys heroes to idolize while they told girls that their duty to Italy was to raise healthy families. Italian Fascism, through propaganda, education, and political indoctrination, prioritized traditional gender roles but allowed limited departures for girls. They entered in political activity alongside the boys and learned about the Fascist Party, recited the Italian Constitution, joined Fascist youth groups, and participated in military drills. However, unlike the boys, schools taught girls feminine duties like how to sew and care for babies.

While Fascist officials consistently, if not coherently, promoted distinct gender roles, they constantly scrutinized and revised the role of young Italians in the party. The Fascist movement was originally composed of young, revolutionary men who wanted to overthrow the liberal government in favor of a strong, nationalistic program. As the movement consolidated into a regime, the first generation of Italians was socialized under a Fascist system of law and order. Over time, the initial energetic spark of revolution burned out and Fascism was no longer innovative and exciting. In response, the Fascist Party attempted to revive the movement's youthful vigor by mobilizing boys and girls. Their fundamental goal was to create Italy's future soldiers and mothers but they ultimately failed. The children grew into young adults who wanted a voice in the Fascist Party. They were continuously repudiated by party officials who only wanted their labor, not opinions. By the mid-1930s, there was a frustrated awareness among the youth that the regime had not fulfilled its promise to deliver Italy to glory. Young men became disillusioned with the Fascist system and realized they could not change the system from within.

Historical Background

Italy had a short history as a united country before the rise of Fascism. In the 19th century, politicians, artists, and educated Italians formed a movement to unify the people culturally and politically known as the “Risorgimento” (“Resurgence”). Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion and occupation of Italy from 1796 to 1815 was a difficult period in Italian history but the occupation disseminated revolutionary ideas about the role of government and society. The ideals of freedom and equality gained popularity amongst intellectuals but they conflicted with the old ruling orders and feudalism. Nationalism became widely discussed and secret societies formed to fight for a united Italy. The most notable was Giuseppe Mazzini’s Young Italy, which later became instrumental in the Italy’s fight for autonomy against the Austrians in 1859.²

The 1848 Revolutions furthered nationalist sentiments and an armed middle class revolted in insurrections in almost all the major cities. The occupying Austrian troops quickly and brutally suppressed the agitators but the spirit of the *Risorgimento* continued. Success finally came when Count Camillo di Cavour, the Prime Minister of Piedmont-Sardinia, an independent Italian kingdom, allied with France in the Franco-Austrian War of 1859. The Austrians were defeated and forced to release Lombardy to Piedmont-Sardinia. The northern Italian states voted to join the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in 1859 and 1860 and Garibaldi launched his plan of attack to bring the southern states into unification. His army known as the “Thousand” marched into the southern part of the peninsula in 1861, overthrew the Bourbon monarch, and gave the southern territories to Victor Emmanuel II, the King of Piedmont-Sardinia. Final

² Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84-99.

unification occurred in 1871 after a second march captured Venetia and the Papal States of Rome.³

The seizure of the Papal States created a hostile relationship between the Italian government and the Catholic Church. This had important repercussions because it meant Catholicism, the common bond of the people, could not unite Italy's different regions. Instead, Italy's politicians looked towards a war to unify the people. The country's entrance into World War I created a more cohesive Italian character, but the victory was costly and there was little reward. Italians felt marginalized at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and were upset the conference gave Fiume to Yugoslavia instead of Italy, despite the city's majority Italian population.⁴

The Allied victory placed Italy on the winning side of democracy against the losing autocratic states. Italy could no longer resist the demands for a fully representational government. Universal male suffrage was granted in December 1918 and the country went through a political transition in the early 1920s. It attempted to become a proportional representational government. The government became a full-fledged system of parliamentary democracy in which the bulk of the seats in parliament were now held by modern, mass political parties instead of its former system of parliamentary governments dominated by small cliques that used traditional methods to manipulate members of Parliament and the electorate. While it seemed like Italy was taking a step forward, the parliamentary system was unruly and parties were in such heated disagreement that legislation never passed. In the four years between the end of the

³ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 117-146.

⁴ Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 16-19.

war and Mussolini's appointment as prime minister, there were six short-lived, unstable coalition governments and none could solve Italy's problems.⁵

In addition to political turmoil, the country's economy was in chaos as millions of Italian troops demobilized. Without a proper leading government, Italy was slow to return to a peacetime economy and inflation became high, which particularly affected the middle and working classes.⁶ The bad economy caused an upsurge of working class militancy and led to what was dubbed the "Red Two Years." This created an intense fear of Bolshevism that helped set the stage for the Fascists.⁷

The Fascists cashed in on the national chaos and made a bid for power in the early 1920s. Mussolini and his eclectic assortment of Futurists, Nationalists, and syndicalists did not have a clear political platform besides a shared support of war and abhorrence for communism and the liberal parliament. Fascists were a very small minority party in parliament. They had such a small following that Mussolini did not receive a single vote from his hometown of Predappio in the Romagna. In an attempt to gain popularity, Fascism moved its program towards the right and dropped its most obvious leftist elements. It instead focused on masculinity, patriotism, anti-Socialism, a concern for national glory, and a justification of WWI. This strategy successfully earned the attention of conservative Italy.⁸

⁵ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 195-196.

⁶ R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915-1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 124. GDP had fallen by 14.5% in 1919; it declined by another 7.6% in 1920 and by 1.8% in 1921, which caused the cost of living to skyrocket. Workers led strikes, bread riots, occupied land and factories, and engaged in sporadic socialist violence. Agricultural strikes increased from 3,437,000 in 1919 to 14,171,000 in 1920 and factory workers struck for 18,888,000 days in 1919 down to 16,298,000 in 1920.

⁷ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 200-202.

⁸ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 198-199.

The Fascist Party truly entered the national scene when it allied itself with the large landowners against the revolting peasant leagues and agricultural trade unions. The Fascist *squadristi* (fighting squads) fought on behalf of the landowners and other middle class elements in what was effectively a civil war. The *squadristi* beat, shot, and humiliated peasants, workers, labor organizers, journalists, and politicians from the autumn of 1920 to the autumn of 1922. They targeted Socialists, Catholics, liberals, state authorities, Freemasons, and dissident Fascists.⁹

The Fascist Party finally seized power in the March on Rome on October 24, 1922. Mussolini issued a warning that if Parliament did not give the Fascist's power, then the *squadristi* would take it by force. The venomous divide between the Socialist Party and the People's Party¹⁰ paralyzed parliament and made it unable to defy the Fascists. The king was similarly useless and did nothing to defend Rome from the Fascists. Columns of the *squadristi* marched into Rome from various neighboring towns while Mussolini securely waited at the Fascist headquarters in Milan. Once the forces entered the city, the king sent representatives to Milan to beg Mussolini to come to Rome and negotiate. With a crippled parliament, the leading liberal/conservative politicians, the army, the monarchy, and the Catholic Church were willing to cooperate to minimize any societal disruption.¹¹

The king named Mussolini as the new prime minister in 1922 and the Fascists spent the next two years consolidating their power. Mussolini's contemporaries believed they could easily manipulate him and the *squadristi* would be absorbed into the military.

⁹ Michael R. Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23-39.

¹⁰ The People's Party was a Christian-democratic party inspired by Catholic doctrine.

¹¹ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 202-204.

Mussolini spent the next three years carefully maneuvering between appeasing the powerful politicians so he could stay in power and creating Fascistic reforms to satisfy his followers. Playing both sides did not work though and there was growing dissension in the Fascist ranks by 1925. The *squadristi* was not interested in pursuing a middle ground and informed Mussolini that he must either take a stand against the liberal elements in Italy or they would revolt and cause general chaos.¹²

After the *squadristi*'s assassination of reformist Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti, Mussolini was in an awkward situation. He either had to disown the *squadristi*, his most potent followers, and be at the mercy of the liberal parliament, or lose respectability through association with a criminal element. Mussolini decided: he marched into Parliament on January 3, 1925 and declared, "If fascism has been a criminal association...the responsibility is mine." Neither the king nor opposition moved against him, stunted by the thought of a full-fledged civil war, and thus cemented Mussolini's power and gave legitimacy to the *squadristi* and Fascism.¹³

Mussolini's reign as Italy's dictator was characteristically haphazard. Fascism never had a definitive platform and the program often reacted spontaneously to whatever situation that arose. Mussolini lauded that as a positive trait of Fascism: it was sporadic, fresh, and young. Instead of the ritualism and rigid rules of bourgeois Old Europe, the Fascist ideology was new, able to meet challenges, and supposedly open to new ideas. This ideology continued throughout the regime and was evident in the Fascist educational institutions.

¹² Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 209-210.

¹³ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 209-210.

Historiography

The subject of Italian Fascism has a diverse and sometimes divisive historiography. Historians often examine the period in a broader context, and usually analyze Italian Fascism by its relationship with other European fascists or Fascism's relationship with Mussolini. Lately, liberal Italian historians have emphasized that Fascism was a mistake born in post-WWI problems rather than a reflection of Italian culture. They explicitly argue that Fascism did not reflect the Italian character, but was instead created from the devastating economic and social impacts of WWI. In noticeable contrast, the Italian historian Renzo De Felice published a multivolume biography of Mussolini between the 1960s and 1990s that argued with British historian Denis Mack Smith's popular interpretation that Mussolini was opportunistic and relied on propaganda to convince the people of Fascism's merits.¹⁴ De Felice instead argued that Mussolini firmly believed in his mission to restore Italy to its former glory and that his regime rested upon the consent of its citizens until WWII. De Felice also sharply distinguished the differences between Fascism and German Nazism. He insisted that Mussolini's foreign policy was moderate in comparison and the alliance with Germany was tactical rather than ideological.¹⁵

De Felice's approach has been heavily criticized by other historians who have returned to the conventional view that the failings of the unification process and the oppressive economic and social problems that followed WWI created Fascism. Mussolini, an opportunist politician, only gave Italians short-term hope but failed to

¹⁴ See Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato, II. La Guerra civile, 1943-1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997) and Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

¹⁵ John Laver and Robert Wolfson, *Years of Change: European History 1890-1990*, (London: Hodder Education, 2001), 177-178.

achieve anything lasting or substantial.¹⁶ In recent years, an anti-revisionist movement school has been established that rebukes the previous thesis of consensus. It instead reclaims that the Italian population overwhelmingly rejected Mussolini's regime but the systematic repression made resistance difficult. Prominent historians in this line of thought are Paul Comer, Kate Ferris, Maura Hametz, Christopher Duggan, and Michael Ebner, the latter two whose works were utilized in this thesis. This thesis utilized their conclusions that all Italians did not wholly support Fascism and the instruments used to spread Fascist culture were ultimately ineffective.¹⁷

Fascist culture and its effects on children are not as well researched as other areas of Italian Fascism. There are only a few comprehensive monographs devoted to the subject and most historians study the subject either broadly, such as Victoria De Grazia's *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945*, or focus on specific areas, like Tracy Koon's *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943*. De Grazia's monograph presents an excellent gender-focused analysis of the influence of the Fascist institutions over women's daily lives. She discusses family, motherhood, sex, leisure, work, politics and how political discourse shaped women's participation in society. She analyzes how education and female youth groups shaped how young women participated in the public and private sphere and contributed to the regime's mixed message about the role of women. She attributes this to the contradictory nature of the regime, which pushed for modernity while it waxed for the

¹⁶ Laver and Wolfson, *Years of Change: European History 1890-1990*, 177-178.

¹⁷ Paul Comer, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kate Ferris, *Everyday Life in Fascist Venice, 1929-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Maura E. Hametz, *In the Name of Italy: Nation, Family, and Patriotism in a Fascist Court* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (London: Bodley Head, 2012); Ebner, *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini's Italy*.

days of tradition. Women, in their imposed image, were representative of this contradiction. They desired to participate in politics and the workplace but they embodied traditional values as the creators of families.¹⁸ My thesis incorporated De Grazia's emphasis on the duality of women's experience in Italy under the Fascists.

In contrast, Koon focuses on the regime's use of propaganda, policies, and reformed institutions to secure the political loyalty of Italy's youth. She delineates the changes in the education system and the creation of various political youth groups, and the negotiation between the Catholic Church and the regime for the indoctrination of Italian children. Her focus on the institutions that politically socialized children strongly demonstrates the Fascist Party's paranoid control over who taught what in schools and their growing fear over the "youth problem".¹⁹ Gigliola Gori's book, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers*, examines the effect of the Fascist regime on women and sports in Italy and explored the limitations placed on women's participation in sports.²⁰

While there are limited monographs, numerous articles discuss various specific aspects of Italian education. Myra Moss analyzed Giovanni Gentile's philosophical pedagogy in "Values and Education: Fascist Italy's *La Riforma Gentile*, 1922-1924" and focused on Gentile's belief that pre-fascistic education was false and needed to focus

¹⁸ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Tracy Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

²⁰ Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Submissive Women and Strong Mothers* (London: Routledge, 2004).

on moral, academic, and religious instruction.²¹ An older article by Michael A. Ledeen from 1969, “Italian Fascism and Youth” described the relationship between “Young Italy” and the fascist government. He highlighted how important the spiritual meaning of “youth” was in the Fascist message given to children and young adults and demonstrated how the relationship between youth and Italy changed with the rise of Mussolini.²²

It is unfortunate that there is not extensive research on Fascist pedagogy despite the viable primary source base. Prominent pedagogical philosophers of Mussolini’s era, such as Giovanni Gentile, have published a plethora of works that express what they believed the purpose of education was and how it should be implemented.²³ The Fry Collection at the University of Wisconsin-Madison holds a collection of documents that covers various elements of Italian life under Fascist rule, including many school books, posters, yearbooks, and student newspapers. Lorenzo Mineo-Paleullo published *Education in Fascist Italy* in 1946; his monograph analyzed the changes made to the Italian education system between the 1920s and 1940s.²⁴ He wrote his analysis immediately after the fall of Mussolini so it lacks the analysis recent scholarship has but it is an interesting source for an alternate political perspective. *La Biblioteca digitale dell’Istituto Storico Parri Emilia-Romagna* has digitized a collection of school textbooks and posters aimed towards elementary and middle school children. These primary source collections were essential to this study’s research.

²¹ Myra Moss, “Values and Education: Fascist Italy’s La Riforma Gentile, 1922-1924,” in *Values and Education*, ed. Thomas Magnell (Atlanta: Rodopi B.V., 1994).

²² Michael A. Ledeen, “Italian Fascism and Youth,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 3 (July 1969), 137-154.

²³ Giovanni Gentile, *Guerra e fede: Frammenti politici* (Naples: Ricciardi, 1918); “The Philosophic Basis of Fascism,” *Foreign Affairs* 6, no. 2 (January 1928); *The Reform of Education* (Harcourt: Brace & Company, 1922); *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act* (London: Macmillan & Co., Limited, 1922).

²⁴ Lorenzo Minio-Palleullo, *Education in Fascist Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946).

Chapter One: Mixed Messages about Gender Roles in Fascist Youth Groups

The Fascist Party established youth groups to create future Fascist citizens who followed the authority of the regime and understood their roles within the nation. They were supposed to reign in the wily, sometimes revolutionary aspects of youth, and create obedient citizens but failed because of inconsistent programming, poor administration, and inefficient funding. Participation lost its earnestness once youth groups were no longer a path to social mobility. The message of binary gender roles was not always absorbed by the children because girls participated in public political activity alongside boys, while being told that their roles were limited to the private sphere. As a result, youth groups unintentionally inspired masculine qualities, like confidence and competitiveness, in many young girls.

It is impossible to discuss Fascist gender expectations without fully understanding the importance of the Fascist youth groups to the regime. The educational reforms of Giovanni Gentile and Giuseppe Bottai completed the integration of youth groups in education by requiring all Italians to participate in school or youth organizations until they were twenty-one.²⁵ The creation of youth groups was an important step in the indoctrination of children with the Fascist message. Many children, some of whom were raised in dissenting or ambivalent home, were first exposed to Fascism at school and youth groups.

The Fascists' goal was not just to stay in power; it also wanted to proselytize and spread the word to save the nation and safeguard the revolution. The youth groups

²⁵ Anthony A. Scarangelo, *Progress and Trends in Italian Education* (Washington, D.C.: US Department of Health and Wellness, Office of Education, 1964), 6.

served as an outlet for the party to give the children the physical and military training that was so important to the regime. They also supplemented the schools' propagandistic curriculum with additional political indoctrination. The *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF), the Fascist Party, believed that youth groups and schools would work simultaneously to create model Fascist citizens.²⁶ The effectiveness of youth groups depended on the individual child's predisposition for involvement and his or her acceptance of the political system. Members' responses to the programs varied from enthusiastic involvement, activism for the sake of political opportunity, apathy or noninvolvement, to active or passive opposition.

Youth has always had an important role in the regime. The Fascist leaders in the 1922 March on Rome portrayed themselves as youthful, virile young men that destroyed the decadent liberal government of Italy and created the new Fascist government. This myth was partially true. Youthful enthusiasm played an important role in Fascism's early success. Many students, particularly from the universities, participated in the interventionist campaign of WWI in 1915 and had a very different wartime experience from working class and peasant Italians. They served as officers in the war because of their education and avoided many of the horrors of the trenches and survived with a glamorized vision of war. Fascism did not appeal to them because of any united political belief; they united under Fascism's banner of masculinity defined as heroism, devotional patriotism, and the promise of returning to the glorious world of the fathers.²⁷

²⁶ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 90.

²⁷ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 91.

These young men formed the early movement and were active in several violent insurrections, like Gabriele D'Annunzio's highly predictable seizure of Fiume from Yugoslavia (now Rijeka in Croatia) in 1919.²⁸ The revolt ultimately failed but many who participated still wished to form the new aristocracy promised by D'Annunzio. Young men continued to play a role in the early moments in the revolution. The local *fascio* invited students to enroll in combat schools led by *ex-arditi* to learn how to be shock troops in the revolution. The *Avanguardia Studentesca dei Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* (the student vanguard) formed in Milan on January 20, 1920. It enrolled 3,700 members, or 12% of the total enrollment of the *fasci*, in just months. In addition to military training, they published their own journal by December 1920 that discussed the imminent revolution, the glory of Italy, and the corruption of the Catholic Church, which it saw as the chief obstacle to expanding Fascism to the schools. They led agitation against the government's educational policies, particularly Minister of Education Benedetto Croce, who proposed the institution of a state examination, which Fascists considered a concession to clerical interests.²⁹

The *Avanguardia's* violence expanded Fascism's popularity in 1920 and 1921. They saw themselves as the defenders of the revolution and thought their contributions earned them more autonomy within the party. Leaders in the upper-echelon of the PNF, particularly Mussolini, appreciated their efforts but wished to keep the concentration power for themselves. The Fascists attempted to create a compromise with the existing

²⁸ Fiume was given to Croatia in the Paris Peace Treaty, despite the mostly Italian population in 1919. D'Annunzio led a force of 2,000 in an insurrection against the inter-Allied (British, American, and French) occupying force in an attempt to annex Fiume for Italy. Italy denied them instead and blockaded the city, to which D'Annunzio responded by declaring Fiume an independent state and designated himself as *Duce*. He eventually surrendered in December 1920 after intense bombardment from the Italian navy.

²⁹ Benito Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions* (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1968), 264-265.

elite while still maintaining their claim to power. Empowering those perceived as radical, violent ruffians was not an appropriate approach to winning the minds of the elite over but it reflected the hyper-masculinity that Fascism promoted.³⁰

Instead of giving the *Avanguardia* power, the *fascio* created a youth wing that enrolled men aged fifteen and eighteen so the *fascio* could maintain strict control of the young men. The PNF changed the organization's name to the *Avanguardia Giovanile Fascista* (AGF) in December 1921 but kept the headquarters in Milan. They were under the leadership of a seven-council appointed by the central committee of the PNF. The council divided the organization into two separate sections, students and rural youth and workers, to ensure that the more radical ideas of the students would not reach the workers and rural young men. The new statute emphatically stated the group's subordination to the PNF and confirmed that the group existed to serve the party.³¹

The PNF created the youth group *Balilla* on June 15, 1922 by the PNF and began the organization and indoctrination of children at an early age. The radical roots of the *Avanguardia* inspired the youth group: its purpose was to turn a spirited, and sometimes rebellious, component of the early movement into a tool of political programming for the Fascist regime. Giuseppe Bastianini, the former vice-secretary of the PNF, was the original director of the group. Under his leadership, the early vanguards directed their energy towards the goals of the PNF, with a heavy focus on spreading Fascist propaganda.³²

³⁰ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 91-92.

³¹ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 91-92.

³² Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 93.

The *Balilla* began every morning reciting the Fascist anthem “*Giovinezza*.” It was a popular song in the PNF before the *Balilla* adopted it. Originally composed in 1909 as “*Inno degli Arditi*” (“Hymn of the Arditi), the lyrics were rewritten by Salvator Gotta at Mussolini’s request in 1924 to focus on the Fascist themes of youth, renewal, nationalism, and belligerent masculinity. The anthem highlighted Italy’s historic past in the line “the valor of your warriors/the virtue of your pioneers/the vision of Alighieri/today shines in every heart.” It described Italy as a once great militaristic empire under Rome and referred to Italy’s role as a cultural beacon during the Renaissance in its allusion to Dante Alighieri. There is very little room for women within this anthem, even though young girls recited it every morning. Women never participated in “the valor of warriors” and their contributions to the Renaissance are not well known. This masculine rhetoric left little room for women in the national dialog of Italy’s glory and left girls without “proper” role models.³³

It also calls upon everyone for the fight for Fascism: “There is no poor neighborhood/that does not send its ranks/that does not unfurl the flag/ or redeeming fascism.”³⁴ Students pledged that they would defend Italy, regardless of their economic situation, but what did this mean for girls? Their role within the state, to produce children and raise families, was not part of the rousing anthem. Boys could bask in the glorifying rhetoric of masculinity dispelled at school and in the youth groups. This rhetoric left girls in the barely mentioned, secondary role of mothers.

³³ “Fascist Anthem: *Giovinezza* (1924),” of Marla Stone, trans, *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History in Documents* (London: Macmillan & Co., 2013), 68-69.

³⁴ “Fascist Anthem: *Giovinezza* (1924),” of Stone, *The Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 68-69.

The PNF continued tinkering with the youth groups to gain better control over young Italians. The *Avanguardie* and *Balilla* were successful early in the regime but quickly lost favor with the groups' participants. In the beginning, membership in these organizations could lead to later personal success for boys. Many of the *Avanguardie* leaders moved into positions within the PNF and became prominent party members. However, after October 1922, membership dropped and the activities became more modest. With little money from the PNF and few trained leaders, recruitment failed. Those enrolled were typically the younger brothers or sons of zealous older brothers and fathers. On March 16, 1924, the PNF assumed direct control of the *Avanguardie* to prevent membership from dropping further. The PNF's total control and devotion of more resources altered the overall youth group structure and created an active youth culture.³⁵

The PNF established the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) on April 1926 as the overarching youth organization for boys, girls, and young adults. It gained its name after the myth of Balilla, the nickname of Giovan Battista Perasso, a Genoese boy who started a revolt against Habsburg forces in 1746. The youth groups chose Balilla because he represented the myth of the male youth the Fascist Party so desperately wanted children to buy.³⁶ According to Mussolini's *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*, the party formed the *Balilla* "for the moral and physical training of the young" and the "training of the young in preparation for military service."³⁷ Young boys first joined the *Figli della lupa* (Children of the She-Wolf) at six, the *Balilla* at eight, graduated to the

³⁵ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 93.

³⁶ Sebastiono Cerrone, *Memorie d'infanzia e di scuola* (Napoli: Liquori, 2010), 49-52.

³⁷ Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*, 264-265.

Balilla moscettieri at eleven, the *Avanguardisti* at thirteen, the *Avanguardisti moscettieri* at fifteen, and lastly, they enrolled the *Giovani Fascisti* at seventeen.³⁸

Mussolini clearly outlines what he expected of members in the ONB. “The Militia of *Avanguardisti* and *Balilla* is intended to give moral and physical training to the young, in order to make them worthy of the new standard of Italian life” by teaching them discipline, pre-military training, physical training through sports and gymnastics, spiritual and cultural training, professional and vocational training, and religious teachings. This training was extremely militaristic but both boys and girls participated in it. The practical difference was that the boys were training for a future war while girls were making their bodies strong for childbirth and work at the home. Youth group directors told the children stories about the glory of war and how important it was that the boys trained to become strong soldiers in the future. In contrast, the leaders told girls that they must learn their proper duties as future mothers. The physical component of their education was supposed to strengthen their bodies for childbirth.³⁹

The goal of the boys’ groups was to create Fascist soldiers with conservative values and prepare the next generation of the Italian military. Mussolini claimed that it was necessary to “train the conscience and minds of these boys, since they are destined to become the Fascist men of the future, from whose ranks national leaders will be selected.”⁴⁰ Italy needed disciplined men to set the national tone. Girls are conspicuously absent in his statement. Girls could not rise through the ranks to lead the

³⁸ Scarangelo, *Progress and Trends in Italian Education*, 6.

³⁹ Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*, 265.

⁴⁰ Mussolini, *Fascism: Doctrines and Institutions*, 274.

Fascist Party. They were expected to serve the state by being wives so their minds were supposed to be shaped to accept a life of domesticity.

This goal irradiated throughout the *Balilla's* organization and themes. The Mussolini continued to choose the central council and the *Balilla* president from the Fascist militia. The power structure was similar to the PNF: authority was hierarchical and flowed from the top down. Mussolini had ultimate control and gave demands (when deemed necessary) to the central council, who then commanded the provincial and communal councils. The ministries of war, the air, and the navy sent representatives to council meetings to voice their opinions about how to teach and train according to their needs.⁴¹

Publications like the *Fascist Decalogues* were distributed to serve as a training guide for young Fascists. Written in a similar style as the *Ten Commandments*, there were different decalogues for public schools, youth groups, and militiamen. The language and content changed as the regime evolved but they always stressed obedience, loyalty, militarism, and nationalism above all else. The 1936 “Decalogue of the Young Fascist” began with the command to put first “God and Fatherland. All other affections, all other duties come after.” This meant that family came after God and country in Fascist Italy. The state called for utter devotion to the country and, in frank terms, said that “he who is not ready to give body and soul to the Fatherland and to serve the Duce without question, does not deserve to wear the Black Shirt: Fascism

⁴¹ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 94.

shuns lukewarm faiths and health measures.” In other words, Fascism shunned weak masculinity and only accepted wholehearted devotion.⁴²

It urged children to “learn to suffer without crying out, to do more than you are asked to, and to serve without expecting rewards.” It is important to remember that teachers gave children these commands to memorize and fulfill. These commandments are a lot to ask from children who in many cases rarely left the area that they were born. To put military service and the state, a somewhat abstract concept for a child, ahead of the family was mindboggling. It was easier to repeat the rhetoric than it was to fulfill the *Decalogues*.⁴³

In addition to the *Decalogues*, the schools and youth groups tried to create a cult of Mussolini. Margherita Sarfatti’s widely read biography, *The Life of Benito Mussolini*, created a hagiographic portrait of the dictator.⁴⁴ It depicted Mussolini as the epitome of Fascism. He was brave, strong, martial, yet he was sensible and a man of the people. Like the perfect youth group child, “he is a man of courage. He loves danger. The very idea of cowardice revolts against him.”⁴⁵ The biography tried to appeal to the youth with exciting stories of his daring, such as when he played with a lion in the cage of the zoo (leaving out the detail that the lion was toothless). Sarfatti claimed Mussolini’s fearlessness prevented the lions from mauling him. Instead, they accepted him as one of their own. She insinuated that the lions feared his physical strength. Sarfatti

⁴² “Fascist Decalogues,” of Stone, trans., *The Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 91-93.

⁴³ “Fascist Decalogues,” of Stone trans., *The Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 91-93.

⁴⁴ “Fascist Decalogues,” of Stone, trans., *The Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 91-93.

⁴⁵ Margherita Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini*, trans. Frederic Whyte (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), 342-343.

portrayed him as such a virile, aggressive man that even the kings of the jungle feared the *Duce*.

She also recounted a story of Mussolini when he touted his youthfulness in Parliament. “Why do I go about on horseback?” he exclaimed once in the Senate...”Why, because I am young! Youth, however, is a malady of which one becomes cured a little every day.” As Sarfatti put it, “youth with Mussolini is something more than a matter of mere chronology, it is a synonym for life and energy and power.”⁴⁶ This was a cajoling message for youth. The *Duce*, the most powerful man in the country, believed that they were the spirit of the revolution.

Officers from the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN) trained the *Avanguardisti* while teachers, who preferably were also militia members, led the *Balilla*. In addition to the group leaders, each cohort had a chaplain to teach religious doctrine, hold Bible studies, and officiate over religious ceremonies. These chaplains were often in the militia themselves and their job was to combine religious fervor with patriotic passion. They were also necessary to soothe the tensions between the Catholic Church and the Fascist regime.⁴⁷ The provision of religious instruction within these youth groups, in addition to classroom curriculum, was important to Catholic-Fascist relations and signified how far the *Avanguardisti* had departed from its anti-

⁴⁶ Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini* trans. Whyte (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), 342-343.

⁴⁷ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 143-146. Catholicism and Italy had a long history of tension since the Second Unification of 1871 when Italy seized most of the territory of the Papal States. The Pope excommunicated the leaders of unification and restricted Catholic Italians (nearly the entire voting population) from voting in Italian elections, with mixed success.

clerical origins. The original *Avanguardisti* would have found the inclusion of Catholicism as a perversion of true Fascism.⁴⁸

Like the *Avanguardisti*, the ONB changed leaders often and were not always the most capable Fascist officials. Renato Ricci, a man of little distinction with a reputation for being a violent, overbearing, warmonger, became the President of the ONB, despite his minimal qualifications. He was an excellent example of how difficult it was to create a good bureaucrat out of action-oriented *squadristi*. He was typical of the new Fascist man. He was a working class young man who volunteered for military service with the *bersaglieri* in 1915. He proved himself martially and returned home with two medals of valor. After the war, he joined the Fascist Party in 1919 in D'Annunzio's rebellion in Fiume. He was then active in *squadristi* punitive raids and *fascio* politics in his hometown of Carrara in Tuscany. He participated in the March on Rome, rose through the ranks, and was elected as a deputy in 1924, and as vice-secretary of the PNF from 1925-26. Through his actions, he gained the attention of Mussolini and was appointed president of the ONB. His appointment outraged many people, who accused him of corruption, ignorance, and sadism. They anonymously sent angry letters to the police and painted graffiti on public buildings instead of publicly voicing their opinions. The hierarchal power structure did not allow room for such dissidence, especially against the opinions of Mussolini.⁴⁹

Party secretaries were willing to risk unpopular measures to gain further control over young people. Party Secretary Achille Starace was another example of a detested

⁴⁸ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 94.

⁴⁹ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 94-95.

party member. His failure to mobilize the youth was partially due to his excessive fanaticism. He believed in “*Sabato fascista*,” or “Fascist Saturday:” the idea that every Saturday should be put aside for fascist and military education and drilling. This was widely unpopular and died from passive resistance. Italians considered Saturday to be the day of rest and they were not willing to give it to the state. Party statistics showed an increase in youth group enrollments but there was an overwhelming sense of alarm in the writings of PNF leaders about the second generation of Fascists. Youth group enrollment and the attendance of meetings were more a matter of conformity than passion.⁵⁰

The external rigor of the regime was only adapted superficially; it was not inspired by any real belief in the regime. Even children knew that participation in party events and organizations was necessary for any advancement in their schools or the future workplaces. The PNF received monthly reports from group leaders bemoaning the state of the youth and their overall apathy in group meetings or activities. A report from the provincial secretary of Turin on November 1931 aptly quoted the problem: “Detachment between fascism and the youth sector seem to us to be growing... [There] is an aversion to what fascism represents and a repulsion for the idea of coming closer and understanding what fascism really means.” Lack of enthusiasm and inefficient funding were the chief complaints amongst provincial secretaries and youth group leaders who had front row seats to the degradation of youth groups. It became difficult to convince children to show up to events. While there could have been political fallback for the parents in the late 1920s, the youth groups had lost their organization

⁵⁰ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 95.

and funding by the late 1930s to enact any serious consequences. Children could skip party meetings and ceremonies or behave poorly without fear of reprisal.⁵¹

Inefficient funding made it difficult for youth group leaders to create meaningful activities that captured the children's attention. Southern Italy reported a lack of financial subsidies from the Central Office of the Party and complained about the administrative disorganization of the PNF. A November 1933 report from Matera described the state of the *Fasci Giovanili* as "extremely deficient... [there is] an absolute lack of organization and financial means." It again mentioned the children's lack of enthusiasm and lamented not having enough money for all the children to have black shirts.⁵²

The lack of funding particularly affected girls because they were not able to participate in youth group activities with the same stature as their male counterparts. Rosetta Loy, a young girl who grew up under Mussolini in the Piedmont region in the 1930s, despaired about not having a "Little Italian" uniform as a child. Her youth group did not provide uniforms for the children and her parents did not think it was necessary for her to have one. It was an additional expense and her parents claimed that she could just borrow her older sister's if necessary. It was a religious school so the state had less control over its activities and the students. As a result, the nuns that taught at her elementary school never asked her to wear her uniform to school except for when the students took the graduating exam in fifth grade. However, Loy felt left out because many of the other children wore the "wheel-shaped cape and the silky beret" and she

⁵¹ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 112-113.

⁵² Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 144.

wanted to blend in with the crowd.⁵³ In contrast, Loy later recounted how her older brother met at the school every Saturday to practice military drills, like exercises with marches and muskets to train for war. In order to properly participate, his mother bought him a new Fascist uniform with khaki shorts and a black silk shirt, which he wore “with his chest puffed out, his beret just off to one side, according to the rules.⁵⁴ By wearing the Fascist uniform, he epitomized the masculine image of youth. He showed others that he was the proper, virile Italian man when he openly wore the uniform in public.

Loy’s anecdotes showed that despite their best efforts, the PNF and the youth groups did not have the resources to reach everybody. As a girl, she was not a top priority, unlike her brother whose mother bought him a brand new uniform. The difference between the brother and sister was that the brother needed the uniform to prove his political merit. It was preferred that Rosetta wore a uniform but it did not matter enough to influence her mother. Her political participation was not valued as much as her brother’s was.

The reports convinced Mussolini and the other party leaders that Starace was correct: the youth could only be true Fascists if the PNF reorganized youth groups and placed them under the direct supervision and control of the party. Mussolini eventually gave into the reforms and reinvigorated the youth program in 1938. In October of that year, the regime created a united youth organization, the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*. This renewed interest in the youth, on the cusp of World War II, provided youth groups

⁵³ Rosetta Loy, *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*, trans. Gregory Conti (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 31.

⁵⁴ Rosetta Loy, *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*, 24-25.

with the resources to enforce strict discipline, elaborate ceremonies, and full participation.⁵⁵

Piccolo italiane inducted girls aged eight to thirteen and who graduated to the *giovani italiane* once they turned fourteen.⁵⁶ Boys started earlier and went through many more stages.⁵⁷ The *fasci femminili*, the women's division of the PNF, was originally responsible for these groups and maintained control from 1925 to 1929. The female youth groups were put under the *Opera nazionale balilla*, but they finally ended under the supervision of the Ministry of National Education. The girls' programs more closely paralleled the boys' under the Ministry of National Education, though they continued to receive less state money or national attention.⁵⁸

The PNF designed the girl groups and the boys groups to reinforce the sexual division of labor. The boys training varied according to age group but placed emphasis on militarism, gymnastics, health, parades, discipline, and patriotism, and encouraged the image of boys as "fighters, doers, and conquerors." The walls of their meeting places hung banners declaring "*Credero! Obbedire! Combattere!*" (Believe! Obey! Fight!), and their motto was *Mussolini ha sempre Ragioni* (Mussolini is always right).⁵⁹ The girls' divisions stressed the domestic sciences and focused on first aid, rhythmic exercises, and charity, and offered courses on childcare, flower arranging, and crafts.

⁵⁵ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 114.

⁵⁶ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 158.

⁵⁷ Scarangelo, *Progress and Trends in Italian Education*, 6.

⁵⁸ Scarangelo, *Progress and Trends in Italian Education*, 6.

⁵⁹ Scarangelo, *Progress and Trends in Italian Education*, 6.

In contrast with the boys' military drills, the girls had doll drills where they paraded with their dolls, careful to hold them as if they were real babies.⁶⁰

Like the boys, they called each other *cameratea*, responded to orders with the same sense of discipline, and took the oath to Mussolini: "In the name of God and Italy I swear that I will execute the orders of the DUCE and serve with all my strength and, if necessary, with my blood the Cause of the Fascist Revolution." The state had intended there to be a difference in meaning when boys and girls took the oath though. The boys promised to give their lives in battle to Italy, if necessary, while girls promised to endure the dangers of childbirth and serve their families, fulfilling their duty in the eyes of Fascism.⁶¹

These groups, following Fascism's typical contradictory style, created characteristics in young girls and women that its ideology wanted to suppress. Despite being minimized to a small role, the girls' desire to earn badges and move through the ranks made them aggressively self-confident and competitive. These traits were not typically encouraged in girls by their families and the youth groups allowed girls an outlet where they could express themselves more openly. This ironically allowed girls to enter the public sphere and escape the monotony of home life and the strict gaze of their mothers, almost the antithesis of the traditional roles Fascism encouraged.⁶²

A photograph from one of the summer camps the PNF ran for children between the ages of kindergarten and high school shows three athletic girls in matching uniforms performing the Roman salute. They were on top of a platform that read, "you are in the

⁶⁰ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 157-159.

⁶¹ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 159.

⁶² De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 157-159.

dawn of life, you are the hope of the nation, you are above all, the army of tomorrow.” This vernacular appealed greatly to children, especially girls, whose roles were so often minimized or limited to the home. It told children that they were important and tasked them with the mission of saving Italy. This is an important example of the regime doing one thing while telling the children another. Women could never enlist in the army. Instead, they would be soldiers of the hearth and home. This image invoked a great sense of nationalism and patriotism and allowed both sexes to participate and to define “the army of tomorrow.”⁶³

Iste Cagossi joined the youth groups as a child and later became a partisan leader in the Resistance. In her memoirs, she recalled gaining her self-confidence and sense of right in the *piccolo italiana*. She remembered the pride she felt as she walked the streets in her uniform and proudly displayed her awards pinned to her chest. Her daydreams consisted of daring adventures where she rescued the “beloved Duce from assassination attempts, accidents, drowning, and for every feat there was a solemn ceremony at which another shining metal cross was pinned on my white shirt, making me walk even more with my chest out and my stomach pulled in.” Mussolini would have most likely been appalled at Cagossi’s ‘masculine’ self-concept. Again, this is an example of where Fascism failed to impress upon women their ‘natural duties.’ After all, doing laundry hardly inspires the confidence of a national hero.⁶⁴

It would be far too simplistic to say that youth groups liberated young women. Despite stories such as Cagossi, these groups indoctrinated the youth with a patriarchal

⁶³ “Three Girls Do the Roman Salute at a Summer Camp in Marina di Pietrasanta (1930-1931),” of Stone, trans., *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History in Documents*, 89.

⁶⁴ De Grazi, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 159.

message of male superiority and gender roles. One girl in elementary school wrote in her school notebook about how she felt to be in *piccolo italiana*. She made it clear that she loved her organization and was proud to be a part of it, and said in a later passage that she wished to embody the ancient Roman women, who “stayed at home to raise their and educate them.... We should follow their example, stay at home, and clean, wash and cook. These are the duties of a real Italian woman.” These two stories demonstrate how the Fascist message of binary gender roles failed to reach all children. While it is partially due to poor administration and lack of funding, the inconsistent programming sent mixed messages to boys and girls about their roles in Italy. Participation in political activity via youth groups unintentionally inspired confidence and competitiveness in many young women.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 95.

Chapter Two: Gentile's Education Reform and Gender

Youth groups were only part of the indoctrination process for children. Fascists believed they could manage the devotion of young people through political socialization.⁶⁶ Fascism implemented several strategies to ensure total control over children and young adults. The schools underwent reforms again and to keep pace with the revolution. Teachers were strictly monitored and forced into compliance with the regime's values, textbooks were pieces of propaganda, and school routines became increasingly militaristic. Schools, in combination with youth groups, attempted to mold children into perfect young Fascists. The Fascist message of traditional gender roles pervaded the schools system and affected curriculum.

Fascism's attempt to collectivize Italy's young minds began with Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini's Minister of Education from 1922 to 1924. Gentile was considered a brilliant philosopher by both his Italian and European contemporaries, and he most notably created Fascism's theoretical foundation. His idea of "actualism" rejected the egotistical individualism of liberalism and the concept of "negative liberty," the promotion individual autonomy against society and the state. He instead advocated for "positive liberty," the collective identity of society in which individuals had ultimate freedom in a continuous, natural identity with society and the state.⁶⁷ His political philosophies were consistent throughout his education reform. He reshaped and centralized the education administration and forced the curriculum to undergo a Fascist transformation. The

⁶⁶ By this, I mean the process through which young people develop attitudes, values, and beliefs about their political system or the way they learn a certain political inclination from their environment. Agents of political socialization can be the school system, friends, family, and culture.

⁶⁷ Danilo Breschi, "Fascist Historiography" *Telos* 133 (Winter 2006): 7.

additional government focus meant more resources were devoted to education, and allowed classes and pupil size to grow, especially in higher education.⁶⁸ However, as students went through the school system, they found there was no better life waiting once they finished school. Italy's poor economic situation and limited industrialization forced students to return to their farms, join military, or become mindless bureaucratic administrators.

The Fascist education system's emphasis on collectivism originated from Gentile's pedagogical philosophy. Gentile believed that the essence of the self "is organically related to other selves, as well as the history and culture of the nation" and education was a means for the nation "to express a unified consciousness through its citizens."⁶⁹ Italy unified in 1871, merely fifty-one years before the March on Rome, and had to overcome regional differences to build a strong national identity. Gentile believed the best place to start was with the country's youth.⁷⁰

The government passed *La riforma Gentile* on March 15, 1923 and implemented it throughout the 1920s.⁷¹ Some of the reforms were very helpful to students. The new endorsed curriculum modernized the schools, simplified the administrative reform, and fired inefficient teachers and officials.⁷² The reform tasked all public and private schools with the education of students from the kindergarten to university level, as well as the duty of instilling the values of their culture and nation, predominately virility,

⁶⁸ L. Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 123.

⁶⁹ Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, trans. Dino Bigongiari (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1922), 18-24. *Project Gutenberg*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36762/36762h/36762h.htm#CHAPTER_I_EDUCATION_AND_NATIONALITY.

⁷⁰ Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 143.

⁷¹ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers*, 93.

⁷² Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 7

heroism, and devoted patriotism. While this nationalistic agenda may sound extreme today, other European and Britons heralded Gentile as a great pedagogical philosopher during his time and represented Italian Fascism's celebration of the strong man.⁷³

Mussolini strongly endorsed Gentile's reform in its early days, and called it "*la riforma fascistissima*."⁷⁴ It was very important to Mussolini because it was the first important reform by the Fascists and he wanted to prove that they could create legislation on an important national issue and utilize academia to better the country. He was also attracted to the idea of eliminating some schools, thereby saving the state money that it could devote to stabilizing the economy. However, he abandoned it because it proved to be incredibly unpopular amongst the majority of the party, who thought it had too much theory with little practical value. Those who saw Italy's economic future in industry rather than agriculture found it elitist and questioned its attention to physical education and neglect of technical and vocational training. Italy's subsequent education ministers amended the reform to include the lower class but Gentile's philosophy that the role of education in building good citizens remained.⁷⁵

Many PNF officials did believe in Gentile's stance on gender roles. Gentile believed that World War I triggered the erosion of the education system. The slumped economy that followed the war caused grammar and elementary school teachers, most of whom were men, to leave the field for more lucrative employment or to pick up extra tutoring classes to supplement their income. Women were hired in their place, which greatly displeased Gentile, who believed they did not possess "the spirited originality of

⁷³ Moss, "Values and Education: Fascist Italy's La Riforma Gentile, 1922-1924," 1-4.

⁷⁴ Moss, "Values and Education: Fascist Italy's La Riforma Gentile, 1922-1924," 4.

⁷⁵ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 60.

thought or the iron strength of character which are the highest intellectual and moral endowments of humanity and should be the core of the school that molds the higher culture of the country.”⁷⁶ He thought increasing the salary of elementary school teachers would draw more men to the field and eliminate the need for women but it only had a minimum impact.⁷⁷ He also banned women from the headship position in middle schools in 1923, and later restricted what they could teach. He also blocked the recruitment of female secondary school teachers in literature, philosophy, history, Greek, and Latin in 1926. However, as Italy entered wars and men left to fight, women filled their vacancies and kept the numbers of female teachers steady. Gentile ultimately failed to create the masculine environments in the schools he desired but the measures he passed signifies the apprehension that women teachers created feminine boys.⁷⁸

Gentile also believed that the secondary school system had an overinflated amount of students and teachers. In his reform, all students had equal opportunity to enter the *liceo* but access was determined and limited by the scores students achieved on national competitive examinations. This idea gained a lot of criticism for being classist because only upper middle class students could afford to take the test so the system did not operate on merit. Teachers also worried that the exam would evaluate them more than the students and give reason for their dismissal. The government never implemented the exam but the idea that only the best students should have access to higher education remained. This belief deftly denied higher education to the

⁷⁶ Gentile, *Guerra e fede: Frammenti politici*, 14.

⁷⁷ Moss, “Values and Education,” 3-5.

⁷⁸ Perry Wilson, *The Clockwork Factory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 8-10.

majority of girls, who most of society thought belonged at home rather than in schools already.⁷⁹

Gentile's reform created new types of schools and changed the fundamental characteristics of the already existing schools. The overarching structure remained mostly the same and sorted students into pre-elementary schools, elementary schools, and secondary schools. Students were obligated to attend school until they were fourteen, rather than the previous age requirement of twelve.⁸⁰ It extended elementary schools to last five years instead of the previous four, so students entered secondary schools when they were eleven years old. Students who pursued secondary school education had several choices: the gymnasium-lyceums, the *Scuola Complementare e Normale*, or technical schools.⁸¹

The few technical schools that existed lasted three years and specialized in industrial, commercial, and art schools. The bulk of the changes made to them were largely superficial, such as the name change of the *Scuole Popolari* and *Scuole Popolari Professionali* to *Classi Integrative di Avviamento Professionale*. Schools, like the *Scuole Complementari*, were created to replace the outdated technical schools in an attempt to modernize and match the pace of industrialized Europe. Much like the teaching schools, these institutions were directed towards men and offered limited opportunities to women.⁸² The structure of the classical gymnasium-lyceum remained mostly the same, with some modifications made to the curriculum. The *Scuola*

⁷⁹ Moss, "Values and Education," 6-7.

⁸⁰ Moss, "Values and Education," 5.

⁸¹ Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 77.

⁸² Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 83-88.

Complementare e Normale trained elementary school teachers and was directed mostly towards men. The atmosphere of the schools was described as a 'masculine' culture, in an attempt to bring more men back to the field. This deliberate marginalization of women facilitated the binary divide of traditional gender roles. Women were not supposed to participate in industry, the future of the nation, or in the education of the nation's citizens. This limited women to the private sphere by denying them jobs or job training in these growing sectors of the economy.⁸³

However, many men were not interested in becoming educators and concessions were made so women could fill the void. Party Academy at Orvieto was founded in 1932 and trained female instructors. Part convent boarding school, part military academy, it offered young women a two-year course, with a third year to prepare for examination. The academy tried to establish "virile but not masculine" teaching methods that encouraged teaching masculinity without instilling masculine characteristics in female teachers. With a steep tuition of 5,000 lire a year and an additional 300 lire in school fees, only well-off middle class urban girls could afford to go.⁸⁴

The academy promised secure jobs at high pay, with salaries starting at 9,500 lire and rising eventually to 16,000 lire. The reality teachers faced upon graduation was quite different. Teachers braved the different social and sexual customs that separated urban and rural Italy, north and south, as they lived as boarders in unfamiliar places on small salaries. Again, women were forced to diverge from the Fascists' message of

⁸³ Minio-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 77.

⁸⁴ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 161.

domestic femininity and met a different reality than what Fascism promised. They never made as much money as promised, and they had difficult lives in these strange places.⁸⁵

Despite the difficult circumstances, these young female teachers, who mostly taught in elementary and middle schools, became role models to girls. They were much different from the older generation of teachers who wore dark, ankle-length skirts, tightly pulled back hair; and put king, country, family, and religion first. In contrast, these young teachers wore stylish clothes with modern haircuts. Country girls viewed them as sophisticated urbanite women and daydreamed of being like them one day. Their popularity amongst students made them an excellent choice to dispel the nation's new youthful mentality. To put it simply, they made Fascism look trendy. However, Fascism's desire to restrain women to the private sphere made Fascist leaders unwilling to accept how effective these teachers were and they fired many female teachers over time.⁸⁶

Despite the Fascist Party's emphasis of women in the home and the secondary concern given to girls in school, girls' school attendance increased, along with female literacy, which rose from 50% in 1911 to 76% in 1931. The number of boys in primary schools continued to be about twice the amount of girls and the gap only grew as girls progressed in school. Girls only composed about 25-30% of the total national high school enrollment of 379,000 students. The dropout rate in primary and secondary schools was highest among girls because their families and societies usually did not

⁸⁵ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 161.

⁸⁶ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 161.

expect as much out of them and it seemed impractical to prepare girls for jobs they would never have.⁸⁷

The girls who typically climbed the highest up the educational ladder were from the upper class. Unlike provincial girls, they were usually allowed to continue in school because they were not needed at home for domestic chores. Some attended all-girls schools, where they studied a varied curriculum that focused mostly on the humanities and traditional feminine household activities.⁸⁸

The Education reforms reflect the promotion of masculinity within Italian fascist culture. Gentile blamed the flood of women teachers during WWI for the destruction of the education system because he thought they feminized the children and could not create the unified, masculine character of the Italian nation. His education reform limited women from vocational schools and thus denied them economic opportunity and limited them to traditional roles. Women who remained in education continued to face difficulties that made it hard to teach because of their gender. Low pay, limited education opportunities, and a “virile” curriculum discouraged women from teaching and prioritized them below men.

⁸⁷ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 94.

⁸⁸ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 94.

Chapter Three: Fascism's Tight Control over Curriculum and Teachers

The years added to primary schools increased the school attendance of citizens from twelve years to fourteen years. The state financially supported all public schools and partially subsidized private schools with national taxes, which effectively allowed the government ultimate authority over all schools and responsibility over the quality of national education. Gentile's reforms dictated the curriculum in schools and introduced newly revised courses that emphasized the patriotic history of the nation and stressed Italy's cultural contributions to humanity. Latin, Italy's national classic language was reintroduced to almost all secondary schools and all normal schools, along with philosophy and pedagogy.⁸⁹ Physical education, art, and music were emphasized in the elementary schools in an effort to recall the glory of the Roman Empire. The schools promoted a masculine curriculum that emphasized militarism and patriotism.

Control was so important to the regime that even the institution that managed the school system underwent revision to become more centralized. In 1929, the Ministry of Public Instruction became the Ministry of National Education and the curriculum became increasingly controlled by the state. The change signified the indoctrination and political formation of Italy's youth and expressed Mussolini's desire to change the school into a more virile, disciplined, and Fascist institution. The highly centralized ministry brought all academic personnel under tight supervision. The state-sponsored textbooks and schools became blatantly propagandistic and increased the militaristic regimentation of the school day.

⁸⁹ Mineo-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 5.

The textbook *Vacanze liete*, published in 1937, was racked with quotes from Mussolini that discussed the strength of youth and the importance of character, such as “We must be strong in courage, never turning back when a decision was made, but keep on going. I need to be strong in character, so that the balance is not upset, nor when the nation is sunlit jade, nor when it is struck by the unmerited blows of fate.” The children reading it were supposed to be courageous as citizens and stand united behind the state.⁹⁰

Each learning activity was purposeful indoctrination. The penmanship exercises inspired messages about the youth that were “growing rapidly in number and yearn for conquest.” A reading exercises ensured that the “Duce sincerely loves peace but times are dark” and boys will become “the new Italian fiery warrior” that would realize Italy’s dream through military preparation.⁹¹ Through exercises like this, the children in the schools were told of the wonders of war and stories of glory and patriotism but not the accompanying horror and bloody sacrifice. Many men read stories like this as children and later learned how untrue they were in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War or WWII.

The history sections described the glory of past battles and heroic Italians. They boasted of the first Italians “to take the risk in distant, adventurous travel: Marco Polo, Columbus, Cabot, Vespucci, who visited mysterious worlds” and about Italy’s past maritime history, while it celebrated its latest fleet. The portrayal of Italy’s air force created a heroic picture of the “almost legendary exploits of our brave airmen during the

⁹⁰ Mario Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete: occupazioni ricreative per gli alunni che hanno frquentato la classe quinta* (Didattica: Scuole Elementari, 1937), 4-7. Istituto Storico Parri. http://parridigit.istitutoparri.eu/fondi.aspx?key=dettaglio&fondo=2&cp=16&from=ricerca&rec_id=63.

⁹¹ Mario Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete: occupazioni ricreative per gli alunni che hanno frquentato la classe quinta* (Didattica: Scuole Elementari, 1937), 4-7. http://parridigit.istitutoparri.eu/fondi.aspx?key=dettaglio&fondo=2&cp=16&from=ricerca&rec_id=63.

African enterprises” and described how the pilots who proved themselves were greatly rewarded when they returned home.⁹² Passages like this were read by both boys and girls yet it only highlighted men’s bravery. The predominant theme of masculinity and heroism was lauded. Exploration, discovery, and risk-taking were praised but these characteristics were reserved specifically for men but no sections described the heroism of women.

The theme of duty also ran throughout the textbook. In a poem by E. de Amicis, students were urged, “to work with all your soul, with all your nerve! All work that will make me rest sweet... the work that will restore the good smile to the face of your teacher and the kiss bless by your father.”⁹³ Children not only worked for their families but they had to work for the country. The teacher, often seen as a representative of the state, embodied the blessing of their regime. The text feverishly insisted that each child’s duty was to work as hard as he did or she could for the country, regardless of the cost.

The Fascist regime used textbooks in their effort to integrate the individual with the state. The section “La Famiglia, Sue Caratteristiche e Suoi Valori Spirituali ed Economici: I Rapporti della Famiglia con lo Stato” in the middle school textbook *Croso di Cultura Fascista ad Uso delle Scuole Medie* discussed the role of families and the Italy. Nino Sammartano, the textbook’s author, was a professor of pedagogy at the University of Rome and a true believer in Fascism until the regime collapsed. The textbook stated, “the hierarchy of the family mirrors the hierarchy of the State, as if in a

⁹² Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete*, 8-10.

⁹³ Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete: occupazioni ricreative per gli alunni che hanno frequentato la classe quinta*, 16.

microcosm of the world. He who obeys the head of the family will obey the Head of State and the laws of the State.” This declared that the family’s role was to raise well-behaved children who will become good citizens. Since this was so important, it claimed that “the State, therefore, cannot be indifferent to the condition, health, and protection of the family. Today our State has many ways in which it protects the family. Above all the various institutions, the O.N.B. (*Balilla*), and the schools are in charge of teaching the young.”⁹⁴ It later discussed the various charitable governmental organizations and incentives. Prizes and loans were given out to newlyweds and large families were eligible to tax exemptions. The regime hoped that governmental assistance justified the invasive nature of the state and the family but many Italians did not see it that way.

Mussolini created pronatalist policies to increase the Italian population and consolidate his dictatorship. These policies were meant to restore gender norms after WWI by returning working women to the home so they can have families and create a new generation of Italians.⁹⁵ Despite the regimes push, many still practiced family planning, and often for the same reasons they did before Fascism. Families worried about their economic insecurity and what kind of lives their children would live. Women also resisted the state’s attempt to control their bodies and resented their forced role.⁹⁶

The family was a hot topic in the propagandized textbooks. *Croso di Cultura Fascista ad Uso delle Scuole Medie*’s next section was entitled “The Duties of the

⁹⁴ Nick Sammartano, “La Famiglia, Sue Caratteristiche e Suoi Valori Spirituali ed Economici: I Rapporti della Famiglia con lo Stato,” *Croso di Cultura Fascista ad Uso delle Scuole Medie*, 3rd ed. (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1937), 109-110.

⁹⁵ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 42-43.

⁹⁶ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, 51.

Citizen.” The textbook clearly stated that the “State is greater than the individual, and the individual has duties toward the Fatherland and the State” and these duties could not be ignored, in times of peace or war. Once again, the family has its roles spelt out for itself: “if the Family, as we have said, is the central nucleus of the life in the State, the citizen, the Father of the Family, has the duty to raise and educate his children” in the particular fashion the regime desires.⁹⁷ According to the text, children should grow up as law-abiding citizens with a deep respect for the Duce and the state and self-sacrificing enough to happily serve in the military when called upon.

Schools became responsible for remembrance parks for their towns’ men who died in war. Children were in charge of keeping the parks tidy and guarded them on days when Fascist held parades or national celebrations.⁹⁸ Children also learned the national hymns by heart, the Italian constitution, the country’s political organization, and the elements of citizenship, along with the history of religion and the local saints as they progressed through school. Despite the fact that girls participated in political activity and patriotically did their duty by preserving the parks alongside the boys, the regime expected them to learn their traditional, domestic gender role. It was compulsory for girls, but not boys, to learn needlework. Instead, boys’ studies entirely focused on the duties of a good, active citizen. Girls were taught a conflicting education of domestic skills and political activism. They were given the same political education as boys while

⁹⁷ Nick Sammartano, “I Doveri del Cittadino,” *Croso di Cultura Fascista ad Uso delle Scuole Medie*, 3rd ed., 111.

⁹⁸ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 63.

they were didactically taught their duty to the state was to raise and care for their future families.⁹⁹

Rosetta Loy remembered how her school changed in 1937 in her memoir *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*. She enrolled in the first grade while her brother moved on to secondary school. She described her teacher as “a fervent Fascist,” like the “virile but not masculine” female teachers trained at the Party Academy at Orvieto. Her curriculum revolved around the glory of Rome and Mussolini. She recalled the first poem she learned, “On his mother’s knee Benito sat reading” by Luigi Nason. Her textbooks were the epitome of Fascist propaganda: King Emmanuel III and Mussolini graced the cover and the inside contained pictures of the Duce on horseback or skiing shirtless, which Loy found even at the time to be silly.¹⁰⁰

With textbooks like those discussed above, teachers struggled with the limited freedom given to them in their classrooms. Elementary school teachers had the most freedom to choose what they espoused but elementary education was still based on the Christian doctrine in the Roman Catholic tradition. The only small exception was for students whose parents felt they should be in charge of their children’s religious education, namely Jews.¹⁰¹

The atmosphere of the school system was authoritarian and hierarchical since the Gentile Reform and even teachers’ home life was eventually fair game for governmental regulation. They were meant to purvey Fascist culture and those who rebelled faced dangerous consequences. Any teacher who vocalized anti-Fascist

⁹⁹ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ Rosetta Loy, *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*, 30-31.

¹⁰¹ Mineo-Paluello, *Education in Fascist Italy*, 95-97.

ideas, even in private, was subject to deportation. A law passed in December 1925 purged the teaching corps on a large scale of any teachers who did not fit the Fascist model. In 1929, all teachers in primary and secondary schools were forced to take the Fascist oath of allegiance and university professors were forced to do the following year. The pressure was so compelling that only a dozen refused out of 1,225 professors.¹⁰²

Political allegiance and commitment were considered routinely in salary and promotions. By the late 1920s, teachers, particularly those that taught primary school, were coerced to lead fascist youth organizations. In rural areas, the schools were run by the ONB and it was nearly impossible to find teachers who did not participate in youth groups. The Party believed this would blur the lines between the regime and the school and associate the authority of the teacher with the authority of the state. The restrictions tightened with each mandate. First, the state required all teachers in 1926 to do the *fascisti* salute. By 1933, it mandated that all teachers (and all state administrative employees) join the PNF and attend meetings, whether they wished to be card-carrying members or not.¹⁰³ A year later, all elementary teachers had to wear the PNF or Fascist militia uniform during school hours to show students he or she was “an officer, educator, commandant of students...who prepares them in and out of the school for service to the fascist fatherland.”¹⁰⁴ Those who were not enthusiastic lost their party card and were fired. Female teachers fell under the most scrutiny at this time. Their numbers drastically dropped as their activities became more closely regulated. Those who remained were given bonuses for marrying or having children as Mussolini’s

¹⁰² Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 65.

¹⁰³ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ “MEN,” *Bollettino dell’Opera Nazionale Balilla*, November 15, 1934.

campaign to raise the birthrate went into full-force.¹⁰⁵ Even though they were teachers, the state valued their role as women and demographic producers first and foremost.

Teachers were forced into professional organizations by the PNF so the Party could disseminate the latest declarations of the ministry and periodically release statements echoing the party line. Teaching organizations were not new. They had existed in Italian academia for decades so teachers could voice concerns about the educational policy. They were formerly viewed as suspicious because most were controlled by socialist or democratic elements. Gentile even refused to meet with the old associations because he was convinced they would ruin his reforms. These organizations were not a safe place to discuss educational policy. It was an empty construction meant to ensure teachers were acting according to Fascist standards.¹⁰⁶

The regime did not successfully organize teachers until the creation of the *Associazione Fascista della Scuola* (AFS) in 1931. The association was incredibly far-reaching, organized, and published prolifically. The group was divided into five sections corresponding to the various levels and types of schools. This division ensured the message sent to each child or young adult suited their age, education level, and affluence. They held annual meetings in Rome that focused almost entirely on political propaganda and devoted very little time to pedagogical problems. The AFS published two journals, *La Scuola fascista* and *La Cultura fascista*, which published very little of their own original ideas and mainly emphasized the importance of following the prescribed educational structure and curriculum. The AFS came under PNF control in

¹⁰⁵ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 65.

¹⁰⁶ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight* 67.

November 1932, along with all other public employee associations. Membership was not compulsory until 1937 but not joining was paramount to open opposition so naturally enrollment skyrocketed.¹⁰⁷

All AFS members were also required to be active in in the *Instituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista*. The INCF focused on creating the uniquely Italian fascist culture envisioned by Gentile. It concentrated on promoting Fascist studies at home for both the students and their parents. They published books, pamphlets, and the journal *Civilita fascist*, and they established libraries so the material was easily accessible. The materials published were similar to the educational textbooks. They lauded the glories of Italy and the Duce, and described heroic feats of masculinity. When women or girls were mentioned, it was in a subsequent role as mother or sister. By 1941, membership reached almost 200,000 members and had branches in all major towns and university campuses. The majority of its members were teachers who were strongly encouraged to join by their superiors so they could remain politically aligned with the PNF. The AFS and INCF are examples of the PNF consciously obscuring of the line between of the educational purpose of school and the political purpose of the party.¹⁰⁸

Gentile's attempt to compromise between former liberal and Catholic values with the new Fascist ideology in schools pleased few in the end. Gentile's educational reformation lost its appeal among Fascists and non-fascists alike. Mussolini, despite his previous praise, extracted himself of any blame when he told his Council of Ministries in 1931 that Gentile's reform had been "a mistake due to the times and to the frame of

¹⁰⁷ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 67-68.

¹⁰⁸ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 67-68.

mind of the former Minister.” The goal to build an educated Fascist elite became a class-oriented endeavor that funneled students through narrow historical and philosophical studies in secondary schools that were not accessible to the majority of Italians. The lower classes were largely ignored in this system with little thought given to professional and technical training. The Fascists also did not approve of the concessions given to the Catholic Church and wanted more control over the religious private schools’ programs. Hardline secularists resented the continued existence of such schools and felt their existence contested Fascism’s control over Italian youth.¹⁰⁹

Without Gentile, the education system, now truly under the thumb of the Fascist Party, continued to reform curriculum and teachers to better fascistize students. His successors continued to push a masculine platform upon students and teachers. Cesar Maria De Vecchi became the Minister of National Education in January 1935 but only lasted until November 1936. He was different from the previous ministers who came from the ranks of upper-level teachers or the liberal *fiancheggiatori*. Gentile was chagrined at his appointment and remarked, “I begin to worry about the new minister who is in good faith but an ass and a fanatic with a hard head.”¹¹⁰

De Vecchi had a long political history before he accepted the position. He had been a *quadrumvir* during the March on Rome, was a lifetime member of the Fascist Grand Council, and a senator since 1924.¹¹¹ He was a strict Catholic and served as the first ambassador of the Holy See in 1929 and wholeheartedly supported the

¹⁰⁹ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 70

¹¹¹ The *quadrumvir* was a group of four leaders that led Mussolini’s March on Rome. They were all actively involved in the early formation of the Fascist Party. Pugliese, ed., *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy*, 318.

monarchy.¹¹² Though De Vecchi was rude and unintelligent, Mussolini chose him for the position because he wanted to purge the unfaithful and questioning teachers and administrators from the educational system by demanding complete loyalty to the regime. De Vecchi wanted to be the man who created a strict, martial, Fascist school system and end what he saw as “lack of discipline” in students. He believed that teachers were the key to ending disobedience and creating the characteristics of martial conformity. The critics of the Gentile reform argued that the schools system was not totalitarian enough, despite the reinforced hierarchical and pyramidal character and tight academic standards. De Vecchi’s reforms removed Gentile’s thirty-five students to a classroom cap, increased the number of state schools, and deprived funding to private schools.¹¹³

By the time De Vecchi had entered the educational system debate, Gentile’s school system had been altered by the various ministers before him but De Vecchi ultimately made the most significant changes. Most notably, De Vecchi reunited the school system with the Catholic Church. The regime signed the Concordat with the Vatican in 1929 to settle the “Roman Question.” It recognized the sovereignty of Vatican City and the special rights of the Church. The Concordat, a section of the treaty, dealt with the Church’s ecclesiastical relationship with the Italian government. The Fascist government agreed in Article 36 of the Concordat that:

Italy, considering the teaching of Christian doctrine according to the form received by Catholic tradition as the foundation and the crown of public instruction, agrees that religious instruction imparted in the public elementary schools shall have a further development in the secondary schools according to

¹¹² Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 69

¹¹³ Cesare Maria De Vecchi, *Bonifica Fascista Della Cultura* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1937), 187-190.

a programme to be established by an accord between the Holy See and the State.¹¹⁴

This expanded the presence of Catholicism from the primary school level into the secondary schools. It was taught by priests using church-approved textbooks. The textbook *Vacanze liete* opened with a “Prayer for the Italian Child,” which asks God to “guard and protect the King Emperor and the Duce, who keep watch on the fortunes of the Fatherland” and the “brave soldiers intent to increase the earth, the sea, and the size of Italy with their heroism.” It ended by asking God to “grant us children to always be devoted to our duty and to the family and the school and to the nation.” This is exemplary of the compromise between the state and the Catholic Church. Catholicism and the state agreed to coexist in education. In fact, religion was used to impress additional moral pressure on students so they would recognize their debt to the state. Catholicism was also used to enforce traditional gender roles and excluded women and girls from the narrative of heroism. The brave soldiers discussed in the textbook did not include women. The young boys had exciting and patriotic role models to emulate while girls were left in the cold. As many children would do when they hear exciting stories, girls oftentimes looked up to these heroic characters anyway.¹¹⁵

In *Vacanze liete*, various stories are told about holy men and the need to respect the Catholic Church. A reading exercise reverently tells the story of Saint Carolo Borromeo, a cardinal and archbishop of Milan in the late 16th century. When a terrible plague struck Milan, he knew “that the duty of a pastor was to sacrifice his life for his flock” and he comforted the sick at great personal risk. He was “stripped of his riches,

¹¹⁴ “The Lateran Pacts, February 11, 1929” in Marla Stone, ed. *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents*, 69.

¹¹⁵ Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete*, 3.

and he gave his own clothes in order to help the needy...he had not even a loaf of bread to eat, nor a bed to rest, because this too had been sent to the hospital.” He was only forty-six years old when he died; and according to the text, he passed away from self-sacrifice.¹¹⁶ This story works twofold: first, it consoles the Catholic Church by including religion in the schools. Second, the story’s theme of duty and sacrifice was important to the Fascist regime and coincided well with the militaristic themes. Borromeo sacrificed himself for his congregation much like the students could be asked to risk themselves for their patria.

This was very different from Gentile’s anti-clerical reform. Gentile introduced religious education in primary schools to aid students in their moral development but he never envisioned it in other grades. Gentile’s emphasis on philosophy in secondary schools was meant to build active, Fascist citizens with a sense of responsibility to the future. This expansion shifted the emphasis from philosophy to religion in secondary schools and upset Gentile, who believed philosophy was a necessary component to education.¹¹⁷

In addition to the inclusion of Catholicism in secondary education, De Vecchi changed the grievance procedure in the schools by investing the minister with full disciplinary authority and reorganized the *Consiglio superior*. The *Consiglio superior* consisted of thirty-five members who were nominated by the minister. It was minister’s sole decision if he headed their advice, which effectively made the advisors yes-men. Later provisions gave the minister total control over the school curricula, class

¹¹⁶ Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete*, 7-8.

¹¹⁷ Rhiannon Eves, “Divergent Fascisms: Gentile, Bottai, De Vecchi and the 1935 Debate Over Italian Education” (master’s thesis, University of Georgia, 2006), 32-33.

programs, and scheduling. De Vecchi's control was so strict would brag to anybody who would listen that he knew what was being taught in every classroom across the country.¹¹⁸

De Vecchi's Catholic sympathies and brusque manner earned his dismissal after less than two years and he was sent to govern Rhodes. Teachers and administrators were not sorry to see him go. They thought he was an unintelligent megalomaniac who engaged in cronyism. Some had even taken to calling him Caligula behind his back.¹¹⁹ He was replaced by Giuseppe Bottai, whose notable contribution to Italian education was the 1939 *Carta della Scuola*, which advocated manual labor in schools. He also passed the prejudicial 1938 Racial Laws, which excluded Jews and other minorities from schools.¹²⁰

The Racial Laws were part of the racial system implemented in the fall of 1938 that forced Jews out of the Italian public sphere and divided the Italian population into "true" Italians and "others." It was similar to the Nuremberg Laws passed in Germany in the 1930s. It restricted Jewish public employment, forbade employers from hiring Jews, and removed Jewish from the public schools.¹²¹

The "Measures for the Defense of the Race in Fascist Schools, passed on September 5, 1938" limited who would reap the benefits and indoctrination of the Fascist regime. The measure defined a Jew as a person who is born to two Jewish parents, regardless of whether or not they converted to Christianity. Article 1 stated

¹¹⁸ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 68-69.

¹¹⁹ Koon, *Believe, Obey Fight*, 70.

¹²⁰ Eves, "Divergent Fascisms," 7.

¹²¹ "Measures for the Defense of the Race in Fascist Schools, passed on September 5, 1938" in Stone, trans, *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History in Documents*, 98-99.

that a “teacher in state or state-controlled schools of any order or degree and in the non-state schools, of which the studies are legally recognized, cannot be granted to people of the Jewish race, even if they won the position through a competitive state examination prior to the present decree” and outlawed them from teaching at the universities. Jews were not trusted to disseminate the Fascist message to the youth. In the same suit, Jewish children were not welcome to hear the message. Article 2 did not allow Jewish students to enroll in any schools controlled by the state, which were all of them by 1938.¹²²

This measure and the Racial Laws of 1938 signified that not all Italians were considered Italian. The Fascist Party never considered the followers of Judaism capable of being good Fascist citizens but Jews were not openly persecuted in Italy until Mussolini and Hitler formalized their relationship. Similar to women, Jews were left out of the equation because the regime believed they could not muster the masculine characteristics desired in a good Fascist. The Jewish stereotype of being feminine, cowardly, manipulative, and greedy was not compatible with the virile, self-sacrificing Italian man. Because of this anti-Semitic image, Jews were excluded from the public sphere. Their association with femininity placed them even below women in Fascist Italy because they had no true public role to fill. Fascist officials believed they operated outside of traditional gender roles and were not useful to the nation.¹²³

¹²² “Measures for the Defense of the Race in Fascist Schools, passed on September 5, 1938” in Stone, trans, *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History in Documents*, 98-99.

¹²³ Emily Sigalow and Nicole S. Fox, “Perpetuating Stereotypes: A Study of Gender, Family, and Religious Life in Jewish Children’s Books” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 2 (June 2014), 416-431.

The PNF created propaganda was created in an attempt to explain to students why their Jewish classmates and friends were no longer in schools. Rosetta Loy recounts reading the anti-semitic *Euro, ragazzo aviatore* (Euro, Boy Aviator) by Gino Chelazzi in elementary school. It told the tale of a young boy who flew a plane for Italy in a contest against other countries. He successfully survived perilous obstacles as underhanded enemies, such as the Jew Jacob Manussai, who was described as a “lurid old man with a long chock of hair and a dirty white goatee, hooked nose, bushy eyebrows, sharp eyes peering out from behind a pair of glasses, flabby lips that part to reveal his yellowing fangs.” Manussai tried to undermine Euro but, in the end, Euro is helped by a reformed Italian American gangster, Giorgione Pascal. Despite the exciting adventures and danger, Euro did not connect with Loy and her schoolmates. Euro, the ideal Fascist child, was “boring and stupid,” according to Loy, and she argued that children preferred to read about more interesting characters.¹²⁴

On January 19, 1939, the Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, attempted to reorganize the school system at a Fascist Grand Council meeting. He created the *Carta della Scuola* (School Charter) and launched Italian Fascism’s most purposeful effort to ‘fascistise’ the school system. It was never fully implemented because of Italy’s involvement in World War II but its twenty-nine clauses clearly stated the Fascistic approach to education: strict, authoritarian control over the school aged population to create patriotic Italians. The attempt was quite similar to Gentile’s

¹²⁴ Rosetta Loy, *First Words: A Childhood in Fascist Italy*, 36-37.

previous attempt, but with the country's entrance into World War II on the horizon, it emphasized even more militarism in the school systems.¹²⁵

Girls were at an interesting intersection of gender education in school. Military and political training curriculum was taught with cultural and moral development and girls participated in all subjects while learning domestic sciences. Schools enforced a new, stricter hierarchy that placed women and "different" Italians on the bottom rung. Jews were required to attend separate schools and women continued to have a secondary status. Bottai proposed a clear distinction between male and female education so women would be better prepared to perform the roles of wives and mothers.¹²⁶ Clause 21 of the Charter stated:

The destiny and social mission of women, distinct in Fascist life, are based on different and special institutions of education. The transformation of mixed schools is to be carried out according to the definition of the new 'work of women' in the co-operative order. The feminine order consists of a feminine institution, [with courses lasting] for three years, which receives girls from junior high schools, and a teacher-training course for all girls who graduate from the feminine institutions. These institutions spiritually prepare females for managing households and teaching in pre-school institutions.¹²⁷

While these ideas were consistent with the Fascist party's platform, they were difficult to enforce. These very clear roles for women and girls were never implemented because of the onslaught of World War II. Without enough money or the manpower, the *Carta della Scuola* and its idealistic roles for women and girls was never fully actualized. Instead, girls continued to go to school with boys and did many of the same activities

¹²⁵ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Body*, 95.

¹²⁶ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Body*, 95.

¹²⁷ Giuseppe Bottai, *La Carta della Scuola* (Milan: Mondadori, 1939). Marco Valerio. <http://antologia.marcovalerio.com/programmi/1939.html>.

alongside boys, while simultaneously being told by their teachers, textbooks, and party officials that they should follow their traditional gender role.

Physical education in schools served as an outlet for girls to act outside their prescribed gender role to exercise such characteristics like strength, competitiveness, and aggression. Physical education reform originated with Daneo's Law of 1909, in response to the fear of World War I. The law attempted to modernize physical education by introducing more modern activities, but it did not originally work because many conservative teachers were unwilling to implement any of the changes. Once Italy entered World War I, it was put on the backburner amidst the social and economic problems brought on by war. Ironically, women comprised 42% of physical education teachers in 1921 (a dramatic increase from 6% in 1911) as male gym teachers were drafted to fight. Despite the fact that the student bodies at physical teacher-training institutes were composed mostly of women, prejudices continued to exist about women's mental and physical capabilities, as shown in the laws on education, school curriculum, and the activities chosen for girls. The *Carta della Scuola* almost repeated history. Physical prowess was endorsed in schools in preparation for war but the need for fighting men depleted the school systems of young, able men, leaving women to replace them.¹²⁸

Like in physical education, girls experienced traditional gender roles differently in rural schools. Rural schools received significantly less attention than schools in urban centers. Gentile's reform offered privileged (and often urban) students a rigorous education that pushed them towards universities and created a strong elite while

¹²⁸ Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 50.

students from poor families were abandoned in dead-end schools with no access to higher education. Gentile had little interest in rural schools and assumed the future of the government would not be found in the provincial children. The curriculum of the rural schools fell to the wayside and agricultural instruction was no longer compulsory training in the teachers' colleges.¹²⁹

Rural schools were categorized as nonclassified schools because they had fewer than forty students. They were handed over to the youth groups under Gentile, despite many educators' argument that these rural schools needed more governmental assistance, not less. In July 1928, the nonclassified and adult schools in Calabria and Sicily, Sicily followed in September 1929, and all the rest were given to the ONB in 1935. The ONB took over the planning, staffing, and organization of all regular five-year elementary schools in close cooperation with the ministry and party. PNF representatives and local state bureaucrats regularly checked in and asserted input about whether or not the content being taught was Fascist enough. By the end of the 1930s, the ONB controlled a major percentage of Italy's students.

Academic Year	No. of Schools	No. of Students
1928-1929	1,178	41,771
1929-30	1,457	55,542
1930-31	1,538	60,135
1931-32	1,508	60,646
1932-33	1,550	62,737
1933-34	2,398	90,909
1934-35	2,015	71,460
1935-36	7,894	244,898
1936-37	9,139	265,915

¹²⁹ Perry Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali* (London: Routledge, 2002), 30-31.

All the teachers were required to be PNF members and actively involved in ONB, and all the students enrolled in the ONB-controlled schools were a part of the youth groups.¹³⁰

The ONB also controlled of the scholastic welfare program that organized scholarships for needy students in 1930 must have a colonial spirit.” The *patronati scolastici* were organized in nearly every commune and helped fund child-care centers, nursery schools, shoes, paper supplies, school lunches, and school books. This support system kept poor students in school but the aid came with a price. The money tended to follow political considerations and active participation in the *Avanguardisti* and *Balilla* yielded better rewards. The school principals awarded “Benito Mussolini Scholarships” to students based on political and scholastic merit. The applicants had to write short essays on assigned topics such as “the Duce: tender as a mother and strong as a diamond,” “How we won the war,” and “Italy must have a colonial spirit.” In addition to scholarship funding, the ONB also managed an accident and health insurance program, named after Mussolini’s brother, Arnaldo. It paid for medical exams, medicines, physical therapy, and rehab to ONB needy members and was the only healthcare available to many children.”¹³¹

Provincial life in Italy was bleak. The PNF tried to enact many agricultural reforms in the 1930s, especially after the Great Depression, but they never devoted enough money and resources for these programs to work. However, wheat grew exceptionally well in Italy and eventually allowed Italy to become self-sufficient in

¹³⁰ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 102-103.

¹³¹ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 103-104.

cereals. The Battle of the Grain meant the regime heavily protected the growth of wheat and made it more profitable to grow wheat instead of any other crops. Peasants grew wheat to until it became clear that the country was becoming dangerously close to a monoculture agricultural system. The regime then switched gears and tried to convince the peasantry to utilize other agricultural crops and methods.¹³²

Agricultural education was emphasized by the education system after Gentile's was removed from power. The Fascist regime's then began to emphasize the importance of agriculture in a bid to create a strong, self-sufficient, partially agrarian economy. Schools tried to get children excited about agriculture through a glorified description of the necessity of farming. The textbook, *Vacanze liete*, urged children to memorize a poem that described the importance of an everyday item, bread. The style of the poem is fit for a ballad between lovers, saying, "Bread, you shatter the humble of everyday" and describes it as "golden at the table unadorned, so between vessels of gold; in you thickens all wealth" and "son of the sun, you will bring a ray in every house."¹³³ Bread, and therefore wheat, was an important part of the Italian economy and a food staple for every Italian. The regime promoted agricultural education was necessary to ensure a continuous supply that could support the nation.

This new emphasis on scientific and practical education was a response to Italy's economic decline and the migration of farmers leaving their fields for industrial work. The PNF also worried that agricultural techniques had become stagnant and could not cope with new agricultural challenges, such as the new poultry disease that

¹³² Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy*, 218-219.

¹³³ Zanchetti, *Vacanze liete*, 12.

was being spread by increased commerce. The new *scuole secondary di avviamento al lavoro* specialized in agriculture and opened for both male and female students aged eleven and fourteen, though they primarily tried to enroll boys. The practical schools were residential and girls were only admitted as “external students.”¹³⁴

These agrarian schools promoted the binary gender division when they emphasized the importance of feminine roles on the farm. Advocates of girls’ agricultural education wholeheartedly accepted this separation because they wanted to have separate institutions for female farm education that focused on women’s roles. They wanted the curriculum to be tailored to the lighter side of farming and the domestic sciences. In the minds of the reformers, this would enhance women’s economic roles in the home, without disrupting the gender roles of the private sphere. The reformers thought middle-class and upper class women would train the countrywomen, despite the fact that they have almost no experience themselves. They believed these girls and women were ignorant bumpkins who needed to be trained to learn the necessary skills to survive.¹³⁵

The agricultural schools for girls constantly faced problems. The Antia School, founded in 1921, typified other schools in its lack of funding, students, and staff. Competent teachers were neither recruited nor maintained because no one wanted to live in such an isolated area. The school also received irregular funding that could not provide job security to teachers. The local peasantry did not want to send their daughters and those who did attend returned home to work in the fields in the spring.

¹³⁴ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 30-33.

¹³⁵ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 30-33.

This meant most students were from the local petty bourgeois, and they were only interested in part of the curriculum. Eventually the farming training was eliminated and only the domestic science courses taught by nuns remained.¹³⁶

The agricultural schools never gained the popularity among the peasantry like the reformers hoped. In 1923-1924, the agricultural secondary schools had 757 pupils nationwide, which only rose to 1,000 by 1929-1930. This was in stark contrast to the 223,840 pupils in public secondary schools. There are several reasons for their unpopularity. First, when the schools were transferred to the Education Ministry in 1927, they stopped offering a path to university and admission to degree courses for rural students. Studying agriculture in universities was reserved for students who went to classical and scientific grammar schools. Critics (rightly) thought this discouraged agricultural enrollment and the rule was reversed in the 1930s, and access higher education was available for provincial students.¹³⁷

However, the mindset of the peasantry was a greater opposition to overcome. Many peasants did not think they needed to learn how to farm. After all, they had been doing it all their lives, as had their parents, their grandparents, and so on. Farming was learned by imitation. Agricultural education occurred when children copied and worked alongside adults, with the threat of corporal punishment if they made a mistake. Parents were not going to pay money to send their children to school to learn how to farm. Parents were especially unlikely to pay for specialized farming and domestic education for daughters. Instead, orphan girls were more likely to be sent to these

¹³⁶ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 35.

¹³⁷ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 31.-32.

schools by the state because they were not able to learn the skills at home. Fascists hoped to involve everyone who lived in the country, despite their economic class but middle-class and upper class girls were especially unlikely to find the prospect of attending agricultural schools thrilling, despite the Fascist rhetoric that agriculture was great for female Fascists.¹³⁸

The disconnect between the education reformers and the peasantry spelt failure from the beginning. The reformers were the urban elite who had spent very little time in the country and gained most of their agricultural education through textbooks. They were ignorant of how peasants actually lived and instead created programs to suit their version of the peasantry. This failed everyone, particularly girls, whose parents were unwilling to spend the money on their education.¹³⁹

An alternate program, the *Cattedre Ambulanti di Agricoltura* (Traveling Agricultural Lectureships), reached a far greater audience than the permanent schools. It was a part-time program designed to educate those who already worked the land. The program dated back to the end of the 19th century, before the Fascist Party's seizure of power, but by the 1920s it received funding from state and provincial administrations. It never became a part of the state education system but the state did gain better control over it. The state took over the agricultural lectureships in 1935 and renamed *Ispettorati Provinciali d'Agricoltura* and the staff became state employees. It became a part of the Fascist Party's ruralization program and a Fascist tool in the Battle for Grain. In theory, there was supposed to be one in every rural commune but in reality

¹³⁸ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 35.

¹³⁹ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 32.

they were concentrated in the North and Center. The program lectured on technical subjects and produced publications on farming techniques. They spread new cultivation methods by maintaining demonstration fields and running practical farm training courses on various generalized or specialized. These courses were primarily for men aged fourteen to seventeen but it was later expanded to twenty-five years old.¹⁴⁰

State funding helped them expand, growing from 350 lectures in 1919, to 843 in 1927, and 1,072 in 1934. The lectures were free to attend and offered enticements such as a chance to win prizes like books and tools. Their popularity meant that in 1933-1934, 144,786 people attended their 3,495 courses. While this is only a fraction of the millions of peasants, it signified an existing interest in education without the high price of education and the addition of an incentive system.¹⁴¹

The Fascist's control over schools tightened so the regime could emphasize the primacy of masculinity within Italian culture to students. Schools became vehicles of political education that emphasized binary gender roles. Teachers had little authority over what they taught and had to operate according to Fascist values. They embodied the authority of the state and taught teaching traditional gender roles and the student's duty to the state. The curriculum revolved around the cult of Ancient Rome, the glory of Italy, and militarism. Students became responsible for remembrance parks, performed military drills, and learned military history. Textbooks described the heroic deeds of soldiers and the bravery of Mussolini. Girls were simultaneously taught that their roles

¹⁴⁰ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 32.

¹⁴¹ Wilson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy*, 32.

were in the home as mothers while they participated in the political education alongside boys.

Chapter Four: The Failure of Fascism in the Universities

Fascism placed the burden of Fascism's longevity on a strong youth but the party's inability to incorporate young people into its leadership exposed the difference between Fascist ideology and reality. The youth were supposed to be the next order of Europe: a society led by the spiritually young. Education was restructured so the new generation, who were raised in a "pure" (i.e. Fascist) environment, would be fully equipped to participate in Fascist politics. They would carry on and promised the permanence of the revolution because they were not corrupted by the old ways. Thus the PNF tried to organize the Italian youth, especially the educated Italian youth. However, the PNF organized slowly and unevenly. The political fighting about the role and scope of education created disillusionment in the youth. Mussolini admitted before his death that Fascism had failed to create a lasting impression on the Italian people. It was particularly unsuccessful in the youth because education's "tenacious therapy of twenty years has succeeded in modifying only superficially."¹⁴² Fascism failed to connect with the youth on a fundamental level because it did not provide them with enough opportunities in their adulthood. The celebration of youth was an empty myth that served children and young adults little under the Fascist regime.

Universities were subjected to less ideological control than the primary and secondary schools but were affected nonetheless. Since the Napoleonic Era, the function of universities was to create an educated ruling class. Italy adopted the French system of centralized education with the Casati Law of 1859, which allowed state

¹⁴² Dinale Ottavio, *Quarante'anni di colloqui con lui* (Milan, 1953), 142

control of primary schools and universities in an effort to promote a homogenous and well-crafted body of knowledge throughout the country. Its original function was to strengthen the unification of Italy and create an Italian identity. In a similar suit, the Fascists used this law to create a Fascist identity. The Gentile Law was Fascism's first attempt to create that identity using the political instrument of education. The multiple revisions of Gentile's original work show how important Fascist involvement was to create a new ruling class.¹⁴³

Changes at the university level were gradual and usually only involved adding courses to the curriculum. De Vecchi and Bottai both created new courses for the universities to "fascistize" them. They included courses on "the doctrine of Fascist," "the biology of race," "the policy of race," "military culture," and "colonial science." The universities pushed students towards subjects that would be "useful" to the regime. In other words, philosophers and writers need not apply. The regime wanted students to take classes that would teach them to manage the empire. These classes usually did not lead students to any true leadership position, but impelled them into occupations that ensured the status quo.¹⁴⁴

Colonial sciences courses began in 1885 as Italy tested the waters with small colonial attempts and faced disastrous failures.¹⁴⁵ The courses gained newfound popularity in the late 1920s and into the 1930s after of the conquest of Libya and the

¹⁴³ Valeria Deplano, "Making Italians: Colonial History and the Graduate Education System from the Liberal Era to Fascism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 5 (2013), 580-581.

¹⁴⁴ Deplano, "Making Italians: Colonial History and the Graduate Education System from the Liberal Era to Fascism," 583-584.

¹⁴⁵ Italian colonial disasters were common in the 1890s. An example would be the Battle at Adwa, which occurred in 1896 during the First Italo-Ethiopian War, where an army of 5,000 Italian soldiers were demolished in a single battle against Ethiopian defenders.

occupation of Ethiopia in 1936. Mussolini created the School of Advanced Colonial Studies in 1940 in response to politicians' calls for a university wholly devoted to creating colonial administrators. Meanwhile, other universities continued to include colonial science courses in their broad curriculum. Faculties of Humanities often had courses in Ethnography and Geography of Colonies and some Faculties of Law taught Colonial Jurisprudence, Juridical Ethnography, and Colonial Economy. The colonial science schools and courses were meant to train young men for careers in colonization so they could have careers such as businessmen, colonial officials, or administrators in the Italy's colonies. The schools were never popular amongst Italians though and failed to gain notoriety like the famous French *École Coloniale*.¹⁴⁶

Much to its chagrin, the government had little control over what students chose to study in universities. Many students ignored the wish of the Fascist regime and studied the subjects they found interesting. The liberal arts remained popular amongst students who were more interested in pure learning than contributing to the regime.

The masses in the universities are not yet what the duce wants...Among university students those farthest from us are students of jurisprudence, literature, philosophy: the abstract subjects. Those closest are on the other hand students of medicine and engineering: the exact subjects. I have found among university students a lively sense of autonomy in their relations with the Party, and a spirited disregard of disciplinary and hierarchical bonds.¹⁴⁷

An army of philosophers and artists was not going to help the Fascist Party achieve its goals and aspirations. In addition to a stubborn student body, the regime also worried about the professors. It seemed the universities' most popular professors were

¹⁴⁶ Deplano, "Making Italians: Colonial History and the Graduate Education System from the Liberal Era to Fascism," 583-584.

¹⁴⁷ Carlo Scorza, *Segretaria particolare del Duce, carteggio riservato (1922-1943)*, fasc. 242/R: Riunione del Diretorio del PNF, sottofasc. 2., i8i.

suspected of being antifascist. When these professors were removed (usually on grounds of suspicion, not actual evidence) the students were outraged and the removed professors only grew more popular.¹⁴⁸

The press decried the “youth problem” in the 1930s, and described the children and young people’s political participation as opportunistic and superficial. In many ways, their paranoia was not unfounded. Silence under a totalitarian government should not be confused for consent. As the children grew into young adults, the message of Fascism was no longer convincing for many. However, the regime controlled all outlets of society so it was nearly impossible to voice grievances without being reported. Political dissidence could cause a person to lose his or her job. Those sent to a Special Tribunal faced the possibility of torture or execution. Dissent could be active opposition to the regime, secret determination to personally challenge Fascism, or anything in-between. Youth groups and universities did not create the new Fascist elite like Gentile envisioned.¹⁴⁹

These young adults had lived most of their memorable life under the hand of Fascism. By the 1930s, disillusion had increasingly become critical, and in some cases, criticism grew into antifascism. An underground movement criticized the regime’s closed nature, the repression of debate, and expressed discontent that a true revolution never occurred. They considered the Italian Fascist Revolution a half step that never helped the people and instead only helped the members in the PNF. Vocal opposition

¹⁴⁸ Ledeen, “Italian Fascism and Youth,” 141.

¹⁴⁹ Ledeen, “Italian Fascism and Youth,” 141.

became widespread in the late 1930s after the second Italo-Ethiopian War and during WWII.¹⁵⁰

A generational problem arose as the ruling class of the PNF failed to connect with the youth by not valuing their input. Fascism promised young people a creative role but that threatened older Fascists who worried they would be replaced by the up-and-comers. The March on Rome in 1922 consisted of young men in their twenties and thirties, many of whom were still active within the party in the 1930s and 1940s. They refused to relinquish their positions to young men who, in their eyes, had not risked as much as they had in the revolution's early days. They also worried that the ideas of young people would distort their original vision of Fascism, and the country would fall into political chaos as the youth tried to renew the revolution.¹⁵¹

A few Fascist officials were open to the ideas of the university students. Bottai thought the growing chasm between the party and the irritated youth could be solved by making the party more inclusive. He argued that young men needed more duties and platforms to voice their opinions, rather than creating more meaningless activities, like parades and youth rallies. He accused the "old-timers" of being a "Bourbonism of the zealots...who are working to make Italy a huge Prussian barracks" in an August 1928 editorial called "*Il regno della noia*," or "The Kingdom of Boredom."¹⁵² Unfortunately, his suggestions, along with his other idea of electing party leadership every year, were ignored or disparaged.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Ledeen, "Italian Fascism and Youth," 141.

¹⁵¹ Ledeen, "Italian Fascism and Youth," 143.

¹⁵² Bottai, "Regno della noia" *Critica fascista*, 15 August, 1928.

¹⁵³ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 220.

Italy's deteriorating economic situation only worsened the disgruntled attitudes of young men. The world plunged into a depression in the 1930s and the unemployment or underemployment of young men was high. Bottai, during his period of Minister of Education, was weary of this connection, and tried to prevent underemployment by limiting the number of men admitted to universities. Young men instead saw this as opportunity to improve their socio-economic status being taken away.¹⁵⁴

For various reasons, almost all university students participated in the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti* (GUF), but like the youth groups, very few were enthusiastic. Many thought the group was uncool and those who enthusiastically participated were mocked by their peers. They thought the leaders were idiotic and incompetent, and did not understand their zealous passion. How active a student was in the GUF was dependent on the student's tolerance for political participation and how much he agreed with the Fascist political system. Very few actually spoke out against the regime for fear of reprisal and instead simply conformed. Open opposition was largely an underground movement so resistance was not a popular notion. Their professors signed an oath of loyalty to the king and church, because opposition could lead to imprisonment, exile, or execution. Moreover, Fascism was the norm. These young adults had grown up in the political system. It took some time for students to realize there were other political options.¹⁵⁵

Camillo Pellizzi, a Fascist political scientist, discussed his concerns about university students in a series of letters to Mino Maccari, the director of the *Selvaggio*, a

¹⁵⁴ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 219.

¹⁵⁵ Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight*, 231-232.

popular newspaper. He thought that young people saw the regime simplistically, as only: "Mussolini, *squadrismo*, and bureaucracy."¹⁵⁶ To students, Fascism was old news. It had not created the true revolution the students had read about in their schoolbooks as children. They knew that the country remained much the same, only with increased taxes and military demands. Pellizzini later said in the same letter series:

Do you know, Maccari, what the secret sympathies of the more intelligent and lively among the younger generations?...they are for communism...They can't read a paper or a journal that doesn't repeat every day the same things; no hierarch opens his mouth without repeating the same refrains; no Fascist book is published that doesn't re-fry another time the same food. Nothing has contributed to developing in these young people the feeling of spiritual autonomy, of freedom.¹⁵⁷

Without an outlet to voice their ideas, the educated youth were tired of Fascism. It was the period of futurism; a time with infatuated with moving forward and discarding the old ways. While the PNF might have been composed of young men in its heyday, the university students saw officials as relics gathering dust. University students wanted fresh blood in the party to lead Italy into the future.

¹⁵⁶ Camillo Pellizzini "Lettera con vari ragionamenti" *Selvaggio*, 30 October 1931

¹⁵⁷ Pellizzini, "Postilla alle lettere: Il fascism come liberta," *Selvaggio*, 1 May 1932.

Conclusion

The Fascist regime in Italy from 1922 to 1939 was supported by the virile image of youthful masculinity. Fascism claimed it would restore Italy to its former glory through its virtues of strength, obedience, heroism, and sacrifice. Instead of saving Italy, the PNF spent two years trying to create a generation of Italians that would preserve Fascism. The regime exerted strict control over schools and youth groups so it could create unified, national, Fascist citizens. The propagandized education system instead created a generation of citizens apathetic towards the regime and its goals.

Fascism's dogged determination to reinforce traditional gender roles failed because the regime inconsistently supported a binary rhetoric that did not fit reality in the inter-war years. The PNF believed education's role was to create the next generation's mothers and soldiers. It advanced a glorified program of masculinity in schools and youth groups and restricted girls to a future as mothers. However, masculinity so overwhelmingly dominated curriculum that girls participated in masculine political education alongside their male classmates.

As children became adults, they realized the differences between Fascism's promises and Italy's reality. They no longer saw the PNF as a revolutionary organization. The young *squadristi* who participated in the March on Rome in 1922 had grown old by the late 1930s and the PNF resisted inducting new members into the ruling elite. Young adults tried to get a voice in the regime but were constantly rebuffed by officials who only wanted them to fall in line. Young Italians consequently began to see the Fascism as a totalitarian government adamant on maintaining the status quo.

The failure to consistently enforce gender norms and the PNF's refusal to incorporate young people in the party created a generation of Italians jaded to Fascist propaganda and goals.

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