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War and Words: A Comparative Study of Public Opinion and
Diplomacy in Italy and the United States through the Ethiopian
Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

On the 2nd of October 1935, the sound of church bells echoed across Italian cities, calling people into the streets. Benito Mussolini, the *duce* of Fascism, as he stood before the crowds and declared war on Ethiopia, framed the decision as the inevitable end of a twofold long and patient wait, thirteen years since the rise of Fascism, forty years since Italy's humiliation at the Battle of Adwa. *A posteriori*, it appears vastly clear that this was a carefully orchestrated moment of national unity, or, at least, this is the essence that Mussolini wanted it to project. However, the extent of these declarations was not limited to the mere military enterprise: the speech pronounced by Mussolini was directed at enhancing prospects of pride, power, and, ultimately, to an utter rewriting of the story of a nation outcasted from the great imperial club of European countries. This thesis was born out of a sheer fascination with that historical era. During the analysis of this precise historical moment, several questions stood in my mind: the first, and probably most logical, regarded Ethiopia itself. Why had the Fascist regime precisely chosen an African country, which bore no specific advantage in terms of raw materials and geographical strategy? Indeed, a parallelly logical answer was to be found in the aforementioned Battle of Adwa, in 1896, where the Italian army suffered one of the most excruciating defeats of its entire history. Nonetheless, a *revanchist* sentiment, towards a backwards and wretched nation of the African continent, appeared, to me, as solely a partial justification to such action. Therefore, the answering of this question required a mandatory passage through the historical context which preceded this specific decision.

Consequently, within the investigation of this very same context, another doubt, closely tied to the previous, emerged: in a context where the international community had already denounced the brutalities and the injustices of war, properly banishing the warfare act from the geopolitical framework, how did the great powers of the world, especially the United States, react and respond to such an international effort by Fascist Italy? The initial answers that were presented to me, which I deemed incomplete and unsatisfactory, fuelled my intention to uncover such historically distant and complex details, ultimately pushing me towards a broader analysis concerning not only the intrinsic reasons, but also the direct consequences of the Ethiopian War on the international scenario. Amongst the countries investigated, the most interesting findings emerged from the United States themselves, most likely for the massive presence of Italian emigrates in the country, but also for the particular diplomatic intertwining between the two nations. Thus, after a brief evaluation of advantages and disadvantages of such choice, the decision was made: the United States would have been the deuteragonist of the entire dissertation.

The following acknowledgement of previously unknown and unfathomable information about such bilateral relations reinforced the conviction with which I was approaching this work, and, after a brief

collection and analysis of initial data, a precise issue was presented to me: the Ethiopian conflict probably marked a fundamental crossroads in the bilateral relations, and it drastically influenced both the immediate future of the two countries and the international relations which, in some years' time, would have witnessed the outburst of a second global conflict.

Thus, once my analysis reached this point, I arrived at the understanding that, if I desired to achieve a proper in-depth investigation of the intrinsic motives and consequences of such event, my dissertation required an amplification of its spectrum. Therefore, having clarified the diplomatic positions and the historical consecution of events around the conflict itself, which I depict as the "surface" of the entire thesis, I believed it adequate to shift the focus of my research to uncovering the underneath features that generated, *ab origine*, the entire context I aspired to discuss. To pursue such task, I asked myself whether the positions of the public opinion of both countries, coupled with the activity of the media networks within and between the two actors, had performed a noticeable influence over the whole context.

The successive findings, although fatiguing and complex due to the temporal wedge between that epoch and the present day, enlightened me to the point of incentivising me to plunge even more within that specific context. However, at a certain point, I perceived the urge to stop myself from further deepening, in order to avert building my dissertation on a heap of unanswered questions. Therefore, I tasked myself with the necessity to identify a single and all-encompassing core question, from which to derive a plethora of sub-questions to tackle all the offshoots aforementioned. Finally, after several options consecutively discarded, the pursuit of said question generated the following one: how did the diplomatic narratives and public opinion, both in Italy and in the United States, influence and represent the political dynamics surrounding the Ethiopian conflict?

Pleased with the crystallisation of my research into a proper academic question, I fathomed the successive steps to undertake concerning an investigation within the existing related literature, in order to propose a unique and original insight into a largely debated issue. Therefore, drawing on pieces of academic and historical literature, ranging from the most renowned to the least visible, I realised that the dissertation I desired to construct could have been considered as a conjuncture of the most significant findings and insights, which, differently from the previous ones, would have encompassed (or at least attempted to) the totality of related issues and questions.

Thus, alongside the crucial focus on the aforementioned literature sources, I cemented my dissertation upon diplomatic documents, official speeches, newspaper articles, and statistic data, in order to ultimately build a comparative picture of how a single conflict intertwined numerous, and seemingly un-related, contexts. Overall, I decided to lay out the entire discussion following the linearity with which the different questions revealed themselves to me, such that the outline was designed as follows.

The first chapter delves the Italian historical context, which constructed the central framework for the war waged against Ethiopia, and the episodes that characterised the war itself. The second chapter is centred upon the relationship between Italy and the United States, not only from a diplomatic standpoint, but also

throughout the depiction of the Fascist regime (especially of Mussolini) within the American soil. Finally, the third chapter focuses on the essence of both public opinion and press outlets concerning the regime, considering solely the positions of Italian citizens, whether residing within the peninsula's borders or outside them, in the United States.

What I hope to show, through this work, is that this conflict shall not be confined to territorial or military concepts, but, instead, it must be enlarged to questions of perception, image, and overall narrative. Mussolini's war against Ethiopia was waged as much in the editorials and the diplomatic halls as it was in the Abyssinian desolated lands, and, in the United States, responses to the war tell us as much about American identity and foreign policy as they do about Italy's actions.

This dissertation aims to be not only an analysis of words and war, two concepts that, illogically, often proceed parallelly, but also a reflection on the narratives constructed by certain nations, which possess the capability of shaping the course of history.

I believe that the argument of this thesis represents a narrative that, in many ways, shaped the course of our own history, raising questions that, either way, still echo today.

1. THE CONFLICT AND THE TIES WITH THE US

1.1 The Italian historical context: from the Defeat of Adwa to the advent of Fascism

In order to properly understand the reasons and the necessities behind the War of Ethiopia, we must backdate our timeline to the end of the previous century. In fact, in 1896, Italy suffered one of the greatest and most brutal military defeats of its history: the debacle of Adwa, at the hands of the Abyssinian troops led by Negus Menelik II. This defeat, which declared the end of the expansionistic intentions of Francesco Crispi's government, paved the way for the commencement of the liberal governments of Giovanni Giolitti, who maintained a strong grip on the governmental seat for an entire decade. At the end of Giolitti's almost undisputed presidency, although his intention had always been to avoid any Italian participation in a large-scale European conflict, the newly elected government of Antonio Salandra (backed by Giolitti himself) decided to go through with the Italian accession into the European conflict which had deflagrated that same year, 1914. At the outburst of the conflict, Italy was bound by several treaties and agreements to side with Germany and Austria-Hungary, in what had been called the Triple Alliance, in case of military attacks being carried against one of the three contracting parties; however, due to the historical tensions with the Austrian neighbour, mostly concerning border issues in the areas of Trento and Trieste, the internal public opinion started to realise that a proper conflict against Austria could have been the ultimate chance to gain the last territories for the completion of the Italian path to independence. Therefore, although the Parliament was mostly inclined to neutrality, King Vittorio Emanuele III and the government led by Antonio Salandra and Sidney Sonnino (as Foreign Minister) reached out to the Triple Entente, formed by England, France, and Russia, and signed, on the 26th of April 1915, the secret pact known as "London Treaty". This Treaty obliged Italy to enter into war within a month time, against the former allies of the Triple Alliance, and it granted the peninsula several territorial concessions, ranging from the northern areas disputed with Austria, to parts of Dalmatia, Albania, Libya and the Dodecanese.

Once the sides were picked, Italy declared war against Austria-Hungary on the 23rd of May 1915, but not against Germany (this declaration would come only a year later, on the 27th of August 1916), in an attempt to preserve, at least partially, the positive relationship with Berlin. At first, Italy, and almost everyone else, believed that the hostilities would have lasted only for some months, but it was soon demonstrated that this belief was entirely wrong: the entire conflict became a "trench war", characterised by heavy combats with little to absent territorial gains.

For the entire duration of 1916 and for the majority of 1917, neither side was able to breach the enemy lines, but the breakthrough came in October 1917, when the Austrian military, now backed by the German troops, smashed the Italian lines at the battle of Caporetto, and disbanded the entire defensive front, forced to a subitaneous and disorganised retreat. This terrible defeat, which cost the Italians huge losses in terms of territory, men and equipment, shook the entire chain of command, which was totally reorganised, from the government (which passed from Boselli to Vittorio Emanuele Orlando) to the military, which witnessed the removal of general Cadorna and the advent of general Armando Diaz.

The renovated decisional elite, paired with a growing sentiment of recoupment, enabled Italy to reorganise the military action plan: in a year-time, the Italian army was able to counter-attack from the Piave river, supported by the replenishment of the troop ranks (both the 1899-born Italian conscripts and the thousands of troops sent by France and Britain) and by a thoroughly organised offensive scheme.

By November 1918, Austria-Hungary was forced to sign the Villa Giusti armistice, which was followed, a year later, by the Saint-Germain Treaty, which clarified the territorial gains of Italy in the northern part of the peninsula.

Despite the obvious victory, the aftermath of what is referred to as “First World War” did not unfold as Italy expected: the Versailles meetings, alongside the winning parties of France, Britain, and the United States, were characterised by tensions and heated discussions about the territorial gains to be conceded to Italy, and they ultimately resulted in the abandonment of the Italian delegation. Due to this decision, the final draft of the Versailles Treaty did not grant the peninsula the entirety of the demands it had put forward, and it contributed to generate a strong narrative, mostly voiced by the nationalist part of the government, which would be called *vittoria mutilata* (a mutilated victory). This narrative immediately gained traction amongst many ranks of the military, unsatisfied with the outcome of a war they had fought for 3 years, and it generated one of the greatest diplomatic incidents of the Italian history: the seize of the city of Fiume, at the hands of Gabriele D’Annunzio and a handpiece of soldiers, referred to as *irredenti* (irredentism). The incident was eventually overcome once Giolitti decided to intervene militarily against D’Annunzio and force him and his soldiers out of the city, but the resonance of this event goes well beyond this mere incident. It is at this precise moment in time, with this precise sentiment flowing through the public opinion, that the Fascist Movement was born. With the formation of this movement, in 1919, by Benito Mussolini, a former socialist, all of the *irredenti* had now found the perfect sublimation of their nationalist ideals. The following years were characterised by high levels of violence and turmoil, between the fascists and the socialists, the Catholics and the democrats. By 1922, although the party of Mussolini had gathered small support, compared to the historical parties against which they were physically and politically fighting, the King decided to concede the seat of government to Mussolini himself, in an attempt to avoid the outburst of a large-scale civil war, which had become more probable than ever after the March on Rome organised by the fascists in the same year.

Once Mussolini gained the sceptre of power, despite the shared belief that such hold would have been temporary, and that he could have been easily dethronized, he never loosened his tight grip on it. The extent of this tight grip was never fully grasped by Mussolini's adversaries, at least not until 1925: even though he had been indicated as the orchestrator of the capture and subsequent murder of a socialist MP, Giacomo Matteotti, the "duce" was still able to maintain his position of power and to "fascistize" the entire country through the abolition of freedoms and the repressions.

As of 1925, the Fascist regime, more specifically Benito Mussolini, was the undisputed ruler of the country, considered to be above the King, the Parliament, and everything else.

1.2 The Fascist colonial policy through the 20s

Mussolini and the entire fascist movement exuded a bellicose and aggressive ideology, both inside the national borders and outside of them: this characteristic was transposed into proper foreign policy in the initial years of the fascist regime through committed efforts towards a revision of the international agreements, starting with the Versailles Treaty. It has to be noted, indeed, that, during the 20s, it became clear that the outcome of the first global conflict had been massively favourable for Italy and its international position.¹

With the dissolution of the four major empires of the old continent (Germany, Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman empire), now turned to national states with severe internal woes and difficulties, Italy had suddenly surged to the top of the charts in terms of national strength and status. Although severely damaged as well by the conflict, the peninsula had secured control over several colonial domains, it had gained the trust and the friendship of the greatest powers of the world (despite the discussions and tensions aforementioned), and, overall, it had achieved a victory in a major conflict, which has historically always put countries in favourable positions.

Many scholars, Labanca amongst all², stated that the most efficient mean to cope with this renovated role would have been to sit back and consolidate the position, in order to gradually improve the country's evergreen weaknesses and, mostly, remain buckled up to the "table of winners", without any thought of hindering the hardly built European peaceful scenario. However, the sentiment of first-hour fascists, strongly supported by the elites of the party and a discrete portion of the public opinion, was at the antipodes of this strain of thought. Within this aggressive and offensive approach to foreign policy, many strenuous nationalists and irredents believed that Italy had suffered too heavily and too long for the disgraces of its past, specifically for the most recent one: the defeat at Adwa in 1896.

¹ Labanca Nicola, *La Guerra d'Etiopia 1935-1941*, Società editrice Il Mulino, 2015, p. 26

² Labanca N., *op. cit.* p. 27.

We have to underline that, by the time this sentiment gained traction over the clubs and the party members, the dramatic loss at the hands of Ethiopia was still very recent, and, encompassed within the bigger narrative of the “vittoria mutilata”, it transformed into the historical event of the Italian past that, above all else, was calling for a proper payback. With respect to this, the strategy of the fascist regime rested essentially on a gradual preparation of such vengeance, to be carried out whenever times would have been deemed ripe and whenever the conditions of the Italian state could endure another conflict, although much smaller than the previous one.

Therefore, the regime committed its initial efforts to the strengthening and the consolidation of both its internal and colonial situation: while the regime, within the national borders, applied several restrictions and authoritarian tactics, in order to maintain the level of protest and discontent to the lowest possible, it also needed to secure its control over the colonial dominions, especially in Africa. Thus, territories like Somalia, Eritrea, and Libya became objects of modernisation plans, in the attempt to transform these colonies in producing and efficient segments of the Italian kingdom.

Through the 20s and the 30s, under the supervision of the most trusted men of Mussolini himself, these three colonies experienced important socio-economic advancements, also due to the substantial inflow of Italian citizens. However, there were also occasions where the improved conditions generated by the Italian control were not reciprocated with satisfaction by the indigenous population: amongst all, it shall be underlined that, during the entire duration of the 20s, several military operations were carried out by the fascist regime in the Tripolitania and Cyrenaica region, the two macro-regions comprising Libya, against the Senussi resistance³.

These belligerent actions, similarly to many other events thoroughly narrated by the fascist regime, covered a twofold purpose: at first, there was, indeed, the necessity to pacificate the colonial areas, in order to avoid turmoil and proceed with the modernisation plans aforementioned; however, there was also the necessity to boost the credibility and the appeal of the regime itself towards the entire Italian population. The actions of the fascist hierarchs and soldiers against the African enemy were often narrated as epic tales of triumph in wartime, such that they were constantly compared to the ancient deeds performed by the Roman heroes, generals and soldiers. Through this propagandistic strategy, the regime could force the population to perceive their own country, at the present time, as a direct prosecutor and successor of the legendary Roman Empire and all of its characteristics, from the *mos maiorum* (customs of the ancestors)⁴ to the *vis militari* (military strength).⁵

It shall be underlined, though, that, notwithstanding this propagandistic machine and the military efforts of the regime, this precise phase of the fascist regime was characterised by several setbacks in the strategy of

³ Virgillii Filippo, *Le Colonie Italiane*, Editore Ulrico Hoepli Milano, 1935, p. 81.

⁴The *mos maiorum* represents the core of the traditional morality of Roman civilization.

⁵ Marcuzzi S. & Breccia G., *Le guerre di Libia. Un secolo di conquiste e rivoluzioni*, Il Mulino, 2021.

the party: in fact, although emerging as a winner out of World War I, Italy had to cope with the scarcity of resources, both economic and military, and the necessity to distend internal tensions and to pacificate the colonies themselves. Therefore, we can identify the 20s as the preparatory stage of what would have come in the 30s, not so much due to the absence of willingness towards the colonial enterprise, but mainly due to the logistical incapability of properly waging any of these enterprises.

Still, the end of the decade and the beginning of the following one, marked the commencement of a period of delicate and sensible issues for the fascist regime, especially considering the conjunctural consequences of the international economic crisis of 1929, which struck the entire continental Europe but also the United States.

1.3 The Fascist regime during the 1930s: from the recession to the idea of the conflict

In order to understand the broad reach of the 1929 crisis, we need to briefly summarise the *casus belli* of such crisis, renamed “Great Depression”, which went down in history as the first major economic global crisis of the modern age. In the aftermath of World War I, the United States clearly affirmed themselves as the most powerful country, economically and politically, in the world: untouched on its soil by the wreckage of the conflict, which, instead, devastated Europe altogether, Washington emerged as the new global powerhouse in several domains. Amongst these domains, the one which mostly regards our field of analysis is the financial one.

In fact, after the war, the centre of financial affairs shifted from London to New York, which became the host of the largest stock exchange of the world: Wall Street. This shift was marked by a massive inflow of investments coming not only from the foreign markets, but also from the same American citizens, who witnessed a chance to get wealthier through investing in rapidly growing markets. Moreover, this process was facilitated by the expansive monetary policy of the Federal Reserve, which, from 1927 onwards, started to pump in the market massive quantities of liquidity, to be used to purchase shares in Wall Street.

To put this into perspective, the investments tripled their value from 1920 to 1929, and the exchange indexes witnessed a rise, in the same period, from 100 to 216. This very economic growth had been driven by two main factors: at first, the exploits of the automotive sector fuelled by the technological inventions and breakthroughs of the time; secondly, the spread of an original model for the organization of labour, later called Taylorism, which introduced the concept of “assembly line”.⁶

The coupling of these two factors produced successful and incredibly high-production realities such as the Ford industries, which became the symbol of the American “roaring twenties”. However, although this seemingly perfect growth, the growth of the market was not parallelly followed by the growth of wages and

⁶ *Crisi del '29: Cause e conseguenze della Grande Depressione*, Borsa Italiana.

purchasing power of the citizens, which created a situation of excessive supply, fuelled by the intensive goods production, and receding demand, ultimately generating over-capacity and a rising quantity of unsold goods. The increase of industrial shares' values, not followed by the increase of production, is basically what is referred to as "speculation", and it is deemed to be the greatest motive of the entire crisis.

Therefore, once this speculative spree became unbearable, the excess of supply and the lack of demand were followed by a drastic decrease of prices, which constrained companies to cut costs and personnel, ultimately leading consumers with less and less purchasing power and producers with less and less profits. This vicious cycle, which, from this time on, would have been repeated a countless number of times in several economies of the world, produced widespread bankruptcies and poverty, and it explicitly manifested itself, in the United States first, and then in the entire European continent, within the 24th of October 1929 and the 29th of October 1929, respectively referred to as "black Thursday" and "black Tuesday".

The inter-dependence set in motion by the post-war scenario of economic cooperation and exchange permitted the crisis to "export" itself towards the old continent: taking as comparison a value of "100" for the industrial production in 1929, before the crisis, in 1933 the major world economies still witnessed their aggregate production to values of 63 in the US, 68 in Germany, 74 in France and 77 in Italy (the only exception was Britain, which stood at 95 points of value)⁷. These data testify the resonance and the scope of the crisis itself, and they aid us in understanding the width of the destabilisation ongoing at the time within the international order.

In the previous decade, there had been several initiatives aimed at strengthening the international peaceful *status quo*, mostly captained by the United States: the 1925 Locarno Conference, the 1928 signature of the Kellogg-Briand pact (quieting down the tensions between Germany and France and implicitly banishing war from the international order), and, mostly, the Dawes and Young Plans (which cut the German debt for war reparations and supported the country in its rebuilding efforts). However, all of these efforts produced minor results, and they managed to simply postpone the advent of another continental crisis. In fact, whilst the liberal democracies of the "West" poured money and effort into these stabilisation attempts, the destabilisation forces proved more successful and influential over the international order.

Alongside the 1929 crisis, the main de-stabilising actor of the decade was Adolf Hitler, and his rise to power in 1933 as German chancellor, which commenced to heavily threaten the already crumbling system of protection endorsed by the Western powers, specifically the weakening League of Nations, the alliance of countries formed to guarantee peace after World War I.

In this complex scenario, we have to get back to the protagonist of our chapter, the Fascist regime, which, sensing the openings that the destabilisation was generating in the international *status quo*, enhanced its efforts to increase its international prestige and influence. In fact, Mussolini initially centred his attention towards Hitler, and, most specifically, towards the consequences that his rise to power could generate

⁷ *Ibid.*

concerning Italy. Despite the obvious ideological and behavioural affinities, Mussolini and the fascists despised the *Fuhrer* and his movement, since they believed that Nazism was nothing more than a pale imitation of their own Fascism. Moreover, the objectives of Hitler, such as his aims towards Austria and South Tyrol, constituted a strategical complexity to be addressed thoroughly.

For these reasons, and, minimally, due to the poor results of a first meeting between the two leaders, Mussolini redirected his endeavours towards securing the Italian position through policies of cooperation with the European counterparts. Examples of such intention are represented by the proposal of a “four powers” agreement, with Britain, France and Germany itself, aimed at a modification of the “Versailles system”, and by the agreements with France and Britain, from the Mussolini-Laval (related to colonies and to the containment of Germany) to the Stresa Front, a meeting that reiterated the necessity to uphold the Locarno Accords and the independence of Austria, already massively threatened by the German intentions of rebuilding a *Großdeutschland* (Great Germany). However, notwithstanding the entirety of these commitments, the Nazi front was rising gradually stronger as time went by, and such simple declarations of intents did not worry Hitler at all. Thus, given that such operations, projected to be the springboard for the Italian international rise, generated poor results, Mussolini and the fascist party necessitated stronger and more successful achievements to even fathom to compete with the rising and unfazed Nazi movement, now clearly perceived as an opponent.

Still, the question remained for the *duce* and his lieutenants: to which direction should their efforts be pointed at, in order to obtain a proper and resonating success on the foreign scenario, and, consequently, to accomplish a more powerful and influencing position? The answer was quite rapidly identified in the colonial deeds, and, logically, the specific choice fell upon Ethiopia.

1.4 The road towards Addis Abeba: barriers and challenges

We cannot know exactly where and when the decision was taken and communicated to the hierarchs of the party, but it appears quite logical that such a resolution could not be implemented without a thorough analysis of its advantages and consequences, especially considering the aforementioned efforts towards the preservation of an international peaceful *status quo*. Therefore, the complexity of the scenario required several preparatory measures and talks, to avoid a strenuous objection to the endeavour in Africa by Britain and France, both deeply invested in and careful of the colonial framework. The fascist hierarchs were fond of the possibility that these two European democracies could go as far as engaging in a military opposition with Italy, even though this possibility was, indeed, really remote and improbable. Still, a mere political and diplomatic neglect about the feasibility of the Ethiopian campaign would have meant the utter impossibility to pursue it.

Thus, the most impellent need, for Mussolini and the fascists' hopes of engaging in a war of conquest, was to convince the European counterparts of the latter's feasibility and un-dangerous nature. To this extent, it is compelling to underline that the main factor that incentivised Paris and London to satisfy the Italian requests was the most destabilising force that the 20th century has met: Adolf Hitler.

The first years of the 30s had, indeed, depicted an international scenario of alliances that could be identified quite easily, but, at the same time, a scenario of rivalries and oppositions which presented several complexities and ambiguities, the principal of which being the relationship between Mussolini and Hitler. As previously mentioned, the two leaders had not engaged in friendly behaviours since the rise of the latter to power in 1933, and, especially, the former had already signalled his intention to contain the *Fuhrer's* expansionistic desires through a cooperation with the very same French and Britain allies. Furthermore, after the 1934 attempt of *Anschluss* (seize of Austria) by Hitler, which resulted in the assassination of chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, Mussolini decided to mobilise a discrete number of troops towards the Italo-Austria border, to manifest the unwavering support to the independence of Vienna (for the reasons already mentioned) and, mostly, to clarify that Italy would have intervened to secure the maintaining of peace close to its borders.

Nonetheless, the ideological affinity and the several similarities in the management of their countries manifested a probability, although initially scarce, that Italy and Germany could decide to embark together in a military and political alliance to expand their far-right precepts throughout the old continent. The mere existence of this probability was more than enough to concern the hypothetical enemies of this Italo-German contingent, France and Britain themselves, the evergreen equalisers and protectors of the European equilibria. For this very reason, in the end, these two liberal democracies, keen on following a recent doctrine renamed "appeasement", decided to indulge in conceding Mussolini *carte blanche*, more or less, in the conquest of Ethiopia.

However, in order to set in motion the entire process of diplomatic talks and concessions, of which I narrated the conclusion in advance, a clear and undeniable *casus belli* had to be presented. The latter was handed to Mussolini on a silver platter, on the 5th of December 1934, on the border between the Italian Somalia and the Ethiopian Empire, precisely at the fortress of Wal Wal.

In that area, the borders between the two countries were not thoroughly defined, although the stationing of Italian troops in the area was not justified under the existing treaties. The constant replenishing of Italian military ranks forced the Abyssinians to respond with the dispatch of contingents of 600 men, which fuelled the possibility of reaching a military confrontation around the fortress. However, the scenario manifested more than just a military skirmish on the border: Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia, intended to delegitimise the presence of the Italians in the area, through a contestation before the League of Nations; Mussolini, instead, reaffirmed the Italian rightful claim over the area, willing to go as far as threatening a military intervention for the resolution of the *impasse*. Consequently, the Ethiopian *negus*, having received advises from the British supervisory contingent in the area, filed a claim before the League.

To this claim, Rome responded on a two-fold diplomatic manner: on one side, he reaffirmed the status of Italy as an “aggrieved”, and not “aggressor” nation, against Ethiopia, simultaneously branding the regime of Addis Abeba as a barbarian and enslaver country⁸; on the other, he employed all its diplomatic efforts to request, in consecutive meetings from December 1934 to October 1935, a non-response on the matter by the League of Nations.

Indeed, the major concern of Mussolini was that, in compliance with its Covenant, the League could impose sanctions on Italy for an attack which was not of a self-defending nature, ultimately hindering the Italian capacity to wage war on Ethiopia. The principal effort of the fascist leader, therefore, was projected at convincing the governments of London and Paris that the military resolution of the situation was the *extrema ratio* for Italy. Nonetheless, in a memorandum put forward on the 30th of December, Mussolini had reaffirmed the necessity to expedite the preparations and the commencement of the conflict, thus certifying that the “decision of this war” had already been made.⁹

Simultaneously to the actions of neutralisation of the League, Mussolini needed to confront himself diplomatically with Paris and London, in order to ensure a plain support over the self-defending enterprise in Ethiopia. As mentioned above, Mussolini entered into several agreements with France and Britain over 1935. On the 7th of January, the signature of the Mussolini-Laval agreement certified, nonetheless, the bestowal of the Aozou and Raheita strips from the French African colonies to the Italian territories (alongside certain shares of the Railway between Djibouti and Addis Abeba). However, it has to be underlined that Paris demanded that Italy renounced to the “privileged status” that Italian citizens possessed in Tunisia, which allowed them to stay in the French colony in large amounts. It is clear that Mussolini did not want to betray the Italians present in Tunisia, but he deeply necessitated the *placet* of France in the Ethiopian matter, and this exchange of concessions appears to be the symbolic certification that Paris would have not manifested any complaint on the subject.¹⁰

The manifest support of Paris, coupled with the temporary contribute of Britain, enabled Italy to convince Addis Abeba to refrain from filing an arbitration complaint to the League of Nations, which would have triggered a process of analysis and review bearing a high probability of hindering the Italian strive towards the conflict.

Once acknowledged that France implicitly adhered to the project of Mussolini, the final impediment to overcome was the diplomatic position of London. Although, as mentioned priorly, London was eventually keen on granting Italy free un-interfered access to Abyssinia, there was a pending issue concerning the secret negotiations that Britain had woven with the Abyssinian regime since the beginning of 1934.

⁸ Labanca Nicola, *La Guerra d'Etiopia 1935-1941*, Società editrice Il Mulino, 2015, p. 42.

⁹ Marzari Frank. *La questione etiopica*. Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali, 39(3), 393–438, p. 402.

¹⁰ Strang Bruce G., “*Imperial Dreams: The Mussolini-Laval Accords of January 1935*”, in *The Historical Journal*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 799-809.

These talks regarded the possibility of obtaining from the Emperor the concession of the area of Ogaden, comprising Uardair and Wal Wal itself, alongside a modification of the borders with Kenya and Sudan and the subscription of a new Treaty to facilitate the protection and the commerce of Brits in the country. In exchange, Ethiopia would have received the concession of the Zeila harbour, fundamental for strategic and economic motives, and a strip of land connecting this area to the Abyssinian hinterland.¹¹ The secrecy of these talks, the object of which constituted a clear threat to the relations between Britain and Italy, could have not lasted for much longer, and the British Foreign Office, led by Samuel Hoare, was logically fond of it.

Therefore, once understood that Rome was aware of such talks, and that they had pre-emptively signed an agreement with France in this matter, the Office decided to unplug the entire operation, although, in December 1934, Selassie adhered totally to the requests of London aforementioned.

The breakthrough came in March 1935, when the government of Addis Abeba petitioned the League of Nations concerning the massive deployment of troops and artillery operated by Italy: Selassie sought to obtain not only the declaration of an arbitrate around the Wal Wal incident and its consequences, but also the appeal to Article 10 of the League's Covenant, which referred to the territorial integrity and independence of a country being threatened by another. This petition would have generated further arrangements, if it had not come exactly the day after Adolf Hitler had unilaterally declared the inapplicability of the Versailles Treaty's clauses around disarmament. To this, it also followed a restoration of the mandatory conscription for the army and the rebuild of the aerial force, then renamed *Luftwaffe*.¹²

This declaration manifested the clear intention to rebuild a powerful and solid *Wehrmacht*, which symbolised a clear and dangerous threat to the peaceful order propelled by the League of Nations. Following this threat, the urgency of bridging a divide between Berlin and Rome became heavier than before for London and Paris: this is the main motive behind the proposition of a Conference, in Stresa (Italy), on the 11th of April 1935, between Laval, MacDonald (British prime minister) and Mussolini himself. At Stresa, there were, indeed, declarations for the reaffirmation of the Versailles principles questioned by Hitler, within the so-called "Locarno spirit", but the applicability of these was relegated solely to Europe (where the Austrian situation, endangered by Hitler himself, resonated to the Europeans more strongly than the independence of Abyssinia), under Mussolini's strategic suggestion, and not extended to Africa. Acknowledged the essence of this declaration, Mussolini understood it as an implicit green light to the Ethiopian campaign.

Achieved this final purpose, Mussolini believed that the times were ripe to properly accelerate the preparations for the campaign, in order to fulfil his objective of commencing the military operations by October 1935.

¹¹ Marzari F., *op. cit.*, p. 397.

¹² Marzari F., *op. cit.*, pp. 407-410.

1.5 The military preparations and the beginning of the conflict

During the entire diplomatic efforts conducted until this time by Mussolini and his Foreign Office, the regime perpetuated the efforts for the military build-up necessary to the war being waged. From the beginning of 1935, the Italian army dispatched almost 200.000 men in Eritrea and 23.000 men in Somalia¹³, under the supervision of Emilio de Bono, one of the *quadrumviri*¹⁴.

From the initial prospects of two infantry divisions, the military plans were re-formulated as far as including four army corps, six infantry and six militia divisions, with 200.000 additional askars¹⁵. A portion of these troops, under the direct command of De Bono, would have waged war from the northern front, in the Ethiopian Tigray, whereas the rest of the forces would have attacked from the southern front, under the direct command of general Rodolfo Graziani.

Graziani, formally subordinated to De Bono, but practically equal in grade, had led the Italian forces in the re-conquest efforts towards Libya, and, having done so in a peculiar manner, he was chosen by Mussolini to lead the army on the southern front, even though the latter was the furthest from the capital, and, therefore, the least probable to make the headlines of the conflict. In fact, the strategic of the Fascist establishment was laid out as follows: the northern areas of Ethiopia would have been entirely invaded, in order to direct the forces towards the capital through the passages of Adwa, Macallè or Amba Alagi; simultaneously, Graziani and his meridional forces would have needed to merely act as decoys, given, as mentioned above, the distance from Addis Abeba and the desertic conditions of such areas, which rendered the movement of troops and vehicles incredibly tiring and complex. Therefore, the “Fezzan butcher”, the moniker attributed to Graziani after the Libyan campaign, was tasked with the immobilisation of a discrete number of Abyssinian forces, mostly through defensive tactics and positions.

However, the logistical difficulties encountered by the Italian army, concerning the geographical conditions of the soon-to-be-invaded country, were not relegated to the southern part. Even in the north, the principal preoccupation of the Italian establishment regarded the utter geographical and technical unknowledge of their troops. In fact, not only the backwardness of Ethiopia (lack of streets and passages) disabled most of the military discoveries and innovations, but also, since the Boer Wars, no European army had stepped foot in Africa with such weight and numbers, which meant that there was no reliable comparison to make with the current situation. Therefore, the methods of engagement and the combat tactics, well-known to the Italian army but adaptable solely to the European front (concerning the geography and the enemy itself)

¹³ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁴ The term “*quadrumvir*” was borrowed, by the Fascists, from the Roman Empire tradition, where it referred to, literally, “four men” who possessed judicial and military prerogatives, for a mandate of 5 years. These prerogatives, during the Fascist era, had been appointed to De Bono, Italo Balbo, Michele Bianchi, and Cesare Maria de Vecchi. These “*quadrumviri*” led the preparations and the conduction of the 1922 March on Rome.

¹⁵ An army corp is usually composed by 40.000-80.000 men, whilst the divisions comprise 10.00-30.000 men. The Askars, instead, were militaries recruited from the colonies: in Arab language, “*askar*” literally means “soldier”.

would have not provided efficient results in such a different context. Moreover, there was also a high degree of uncertainty and worry around the effective number of troops that Addis Abeba was capable of deploying. Some experts ventured the possibility of encountering as far as several hundreds of thousands of men, fully fond of the combat ground and experienced in war tactics which completely clashed with the modern European war doctrine.

Overall, the concerns of the Fascist regime, although completely hidden from public knowledge, regarded pivotal aspects of the war, and, furthermore, were also amplified by the complex chain of command installed by Mussolini. In fact, un-commonly, the *duce* intervened quite often within situations which should have been directly managed by the Ministry of War or the military Chief of Staff, as far as holding personal correspondences with both De Bono and Graziani (formally, these needed to be entertained with the Chief of Staff).¹⁶ Thus, the ambiguous composition of the chain of command, coupled with the worrying uncertainties regarding the conflict itself, rendered the enterprise severely tougher than initially fathomed, and less easily feasible than what had been advertised to the public opinion.

Indeed, Ethiopia did not represent a proper military threat, given its largely backwards framework and its weak economy; nonetheless, its imperialistic system and its rooted history posed several threats to the Fascist regime, especially considering that, having the matter being largely publicised throughout the international framework, the entire world was analytically watching every single movement of the Italian kingdom.

During the 19th century, the successive leaders, from Teodoro II to Menelik II, embarked in several expansionary campaigns (especially against the *scioane* populations) to enlarge the possessions of the empire, simultaneously being threatened by the colonial aspirations of the European powers (including Italy, which dramatically failed in 1896 at Adwa). Therefore, at the end of the 1800s, the Abyssinians had not only experienced a vast enlargement of their territory and a strong acquisition of military capabilities, but they had also inaugurated policies of modernisation, though limited. These very same modernisations, ranging from economic openness to power centralisation and military professionalization, clashed with the intrinsic aspects of what, despite these attempted modernisations, still remained a traditionalist African country of the 20th century: indeed, the vast Ethiopian territory was inhabited by several different ethnicities, from the numerous but weak *Oromo* to the smaller and subordinated *scioane* or *tigrine*. These ethnic groups were historically all subordinated to another group, the *amhara*, which composed the ruling political and military class of the country¹⁷. To this ethnicity, despite some interruptions, belonged the Ethiopian elites

¹⁶ The entire chain of command, at the time, was shook by the personal and political ambiguities between the different members: De Bono had been directly appointed by Mussolini, and not by the Chief of Staff (Pietro Badoglio), which caused the former to negate the demands of the latter, although formally subordinate to him. This "shadow war" between two of the highest-ranking generals of the Army did not constitute a positive factor for the regime, especially during preparations for an all-out war. Moreover, Graziani attempted, through the personal correspondence with Mussolini, to personally gain more space for action in the relegated southern front, through a meticulous deed of discreditation towards both De Bono and Badoglio.

¹⁷ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

that ruled the country for centuries, including the person of the *negus neghesti* (“king of kings”) of this time, Haile Selassie. However, it must be underlined that the seemingly undisputed power of the *amhara* was not entirely in control of Abyssinia at the time of the war.

Given the aforementioned ethnicity diversifications, during the centuries there had always been internal fights for the command, and they had not always produced a total *amhara*’s triumph, or, if they had, the victory of the ethnic group appeared extremely pyrrhic. Indeed, the *amhara* seized control of the country, but their capabilities and their subordinating ability over the other ethnicities resulted to be limited and weak, forcing the current leader to embark in several compromising missions with the provincial *ras* and the other populations.

Thus, the resulting Ethiopian context presented several uncompleted and dangerous frameworks: the army was largely traditional, since only a swarm of army corps had been trained under European doctrines; the leadership of the emperor was fragile enough to hypothesize that direct orders could eventually not be followed by regional chiefs and *ras*, ultimately risking disbanding the entire army.

Be that as it may, at the end of the preparations, the size of the Italian army amounted to the following numbers, according to the “*Relazione sull'attività svolta per l'esigenza AO*” published by the Ministry of War. The size of the army, deployed between Eritrea, Somalia, and Libya, amounted to 464.000 troops, supported by 100.000 civilian workers and 82.000 horses. To this number, there was the addition of colonial troops in Africa, in a total amount of 100.000 additional men (60.000 askars from Eritrea, 30.000 “*White turbans*” from Somalia, and 7.800 askars from Libya), alongside enormous amounts of materials and commodities to sustain the troops¹⁸.

Against this unprecedented showdown of force (no European power had dispatched such an amount of troops to pursue a colonial conquest), the empire of Addis Abeba dispatched roughly 250.000 troops, some of which most likely undisposed of weapons, under the direct command of regional leaders: all of these men, due to their aforementioned traditional understanding of war, contemplated the necessity of fighting a single enormous pitched battle against the Italians, where, benefitting from their knowledge of the combat ground and their sheer number, they could have had the chance to defeat the enemy once and for all. In the following lines, the narration of the crucial military events of the war will testify that this idea, projected by the Ethiopians, could not be further from the truth.

¹⁸ Ministero della Guerra, *Relazione sull'attività svolta per l'esigenza A.O.*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Roma, 1936.

1.6 The crucial fights and the resolution of the conflict: an Italian triumph?

Although we know, *a posteriori*, that Italy conquered Abyssinia in the span of only seven months (May 1936 marked the end of the conflict), the strategic and political ambiguities of the fascist regime did, indeed, produce several setbacks in the war. This is the reason why the campaign can be subdivided into three main phases.¹⁹

The first one, under direct command of De Bono, was characterised by the slow-moving captures of Adwa and Axum in October and of Macallè in November, although the seize of such bastions was planned to happen within a week. Despite the massiveness of the army and the military capabilities, the war-plan and its actuation proved to be not entirely adequate to the context, most likely due to De Bono's incapacity to acknowledge the different offshoots of such a complex environment. Furthermore, it must be noted that, in the same November 1935, the League of Nations approved and authorised the sanctions against Italy, due to the condemnation of the latter's attack against Ethiopia (war had been outlawed after World War I): 50 member States favoured the proposition of economic sanctions, which prohibited Italy from exporting products and importing military means. However, several States did not implement, although they had voted in favour, such sanctions, and most of them continued to supply Italy and entertain cordial relations with Rome over the entire duration of the conflict.

Indeed, Mussolini had been indisposed by such international decision, considering that this happened to be the first time that the League declared sanctions against one of its own members, but he also exploited such framework to expedite the military action and galvanise both the troops and the public opinion.

As a consequence to this plethora of factors, Mussolini opted for the replacement of De Bono with Badoglio, who had already been pre-emptively called at the war front. With Badoglio, the second phase of the conflict commenced: the Chief of Staff reorganised both the troops and the war-plan, but, at least in this precise section of the conflict, he did not pursue major offensives (which indisposed Mussolini). During this phase, indeed, there occurred some minor bombardments, even with the use of chemical gases, although these were prohibited in war by the 1925 Geneva Conventions, against the backline of the Ethiopian army. Still, in this second phase, the discontent and the surprise for a slow start and an ambiguous period of rebuild heavily concerned Mussolini and the fascist elite, although this very same preoccupation was somehow mitigated by the landslide victory of the Italian troops led by Graziani on the Somalian front: in fact, in January 1936, the "Fezzan butcher" had managed not only to disband the enemy troops at river Ganale Doria, but also to engage a pursuit of the disbanded troops for more than 200 kilometres, up to the city of Neghelli.²⁰

¹⁹ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²⁰ Once Neghelli was seized by Graziani, the general was appointed the rank of Marquis of Neghelli directly from King Vittorio Emanuele III.

Nonetheless, up to this point, Mussolini could not declare to have achieved major victories in the conflict, contrarily to the fierce propagandisation of the latter he had produced in the months prior. The *duce* had to wait until the end of January 1936 to witness the monumental wins he had advertised: in fact, due to the efficient and patient reorganisation of the army, Badoglio inaugurated a winning streak which would have led the Italian army directly to Addis Abeba. Chronologically, Badoglio won the Tembien battle, between 20th and 21st January, and, a month later, the Endertà battle²¹, which, testifying explicitly the military superiority of a modern European army against a traditional African army, galvanised the Italian troops and enabled them to achieve consecutive and decisive victories. Then, after the Scirè defeat and consecutive pursuit of the Ethiopians, the second Tembien offensive projected the conflict to a single *redde rationem*: indeed, the *negus* realised that, as mentioned above, the only possibility left for the Abyssinians was to directly face the Italians in an open-field battle, which occurred, from 29th to 31st March, at the plain of Mai Ceu.

With respect to strategy, this choice, by Selassie, appeared excessive and unnecessary: commentators and experts noted that, given the proximity of the rainy season (which would have rendered the impervious Ethiopian territory even more dangerous and complex for the Italian troops) the most intelligent decision would have been to cautiously retreat and operate guerrilla tactics, waiting for the rain and gradually tiring the enemy²². Contrarily, Selassie, most likely in an attempt to gain full support and recognition from the local leaders and the population, decided to embark on an enterprise similar to those carried out by his predecessors, such as Teodoro or Menelik II: the main difference between Selassie's situation and the precedent leaders' was that the latter could count on a massive amount of men and on a significantly smaller technological gap. For example, during the 1896 defeat of the Italian army at Adwa, Menelik II disposed of 100.000 men, opposed to the almost 20.000 Italian troops brought in Africa, weakly equipped and poorly supported from other departments.

Instead, the present conflict presented not only a numerical inferiority to the Italian army, but also a conspicuous technological inferiority: in fact, the advent of Badoglio coincided with the completion of the equipment delivery to the military front, which enabled the Italian army to dispose of aeronautic vehicles, heavy artillery, gases for bombardments, and radio connections.²³ Consequently, at the battle of Mai Ceu, the Ethiopian troops were rapidly disbanded and the road to Addis Abeba was cleared: throughout the month of April, the remaining Abyssinians were heavily bombarded from the air and from the ground up to Lake Ascianghi. Finally, Badoglio and the bulk of the Italian army entered triumphantly into Addis Abeba on the 5h May 1936 (Graziani was still at Harrar, 500 kilometres due East, due to logistical and organizational

²¹ Also referred to as Amba Aradam battle, which, due to its utterly chaotic development, and also due to the local troops constantly switching sides during the confrontation, became a proper word, used currently in the Italian language: "ambaradan", indeed, refers to a confused or chaotic situation generated by a complex purpose.

²² Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 128.

²³ It is significant to underline that, due to the advanced equipment of radio transmission and interception, Badoglio was capable of interrupting the delivery of messages to and from the emperor: thus, the Italian general precisely knew the Ethiopian situation, its war plans and the future intentions.

problems) and he declared the end of the conflict. Selassie, by this day, had already fled the country, on 1st May, seeking refuge in London, leaving the entirety of Abyssinia in Italian and fascist hands. Now, with the capital secured and the recognition of utter victory, the Fascist regime could finally declare the rebirth of the “empire”: Mussolini, on 9th May 1936, stood at the infamous balcony in Piazza Venezia and announced that Italy had reached the status of imperial power. These were his exact words:

Ufficiali! Sottufficiali! Gregari di tutte le Forze Armate dello Stato, in Africa e in Italia! Camicie nere della rivoluzione! Italiani e italiane in patria e nel mondo! Ascoltate!

Con le decisioni che fra pochi istanti conoscerete e che furono acclamate dal Gran Consiglio del Fascismo, un grande evento si compie: viene suggellato il destino dell’Etiopia, oggi, 9 maggio, quattordicesimo anno dell’era fascista.

Tutti i nodi furono tagliati dalla nostra spada lucente e la Vittoria africana resta nella storia della Patria, integra e pura, come i Legionari caduti e superstiti la sognavano e la volevano. L’Italia ha finalmente il suo Impero!

Impero Fascista, perché porta i segni indistruttibili della volontà e della potenza del Littorio Romano, perché questa è la meta verso la quale durante quattordici anni furono sollecitate le energie prorompenti e disciplinate delle giovani, gagliarde generazioni italiane. Impero di pace, perché l’Italia vuole la pace per sé e per tutti e si decide alla guerra soltanto quando vi è forzata da imperiose, incoercibili necessità di vita. Impero di civiltà e di umanità per tutte le popolazioni dell’Etiopia.

Questo è nella tradizione di Roma, che, dopo aver vinto, associava i popoli al suo destino.

Ecco la legge, o italiani, che chiude un periodo della nostra storia e ne apre un altro come un immenso varco aperto su tutte le possibilità del futuro:

1 – I territori e le genti che appartenevano all’impero di Etiopia sono posti sotto la sovranità piena e intera del Regno d’Italia.

2 – Il titolo di Imperatore d’Etiopia viene assunto per sé e per i suoi successori dal Re d’Italia.

Ufficiali! Sottufficiali! Gregari di tutte le forze Armate dello Stato, in Africa e in Italia! Camicie nere! Italiani e italiane!

Il popolo italiano ha creato col suo sangue l’Impero. Lo feconderà col suo lavoro e lo difenderà contro chiunque con le sue armi.

In questa certezza suprema, levate in alto, o Legionari, le insegne, il ferro e i cuori, a salutare, dopo quindici secoli, la riapparizione dell’Impero sui colli fatali di Roma.

Ne sarete voi degni?

Questo grido è come un giuramento sacro, che vi impegna dinanzi a Dio e dinanzi agli uomini, per la vita e per la morte!

Camicie nere! Legionari! Saluto al Re!²⁴

²⁴ 9 maggio 1936, Discorso di proclamazione dell’Impero – Vittorio Emanuele III Imperatore d’Etiopia.

(Officers! Non-commissioned officers! Soldiers of all the Armed Forces of the State, in Africa and in Italy!
Black shirts of the revolution! Italians and Italians in their homeland and in the world! Listen!

With the decisions that you will know in a few moments and that were acclaimed by the Great Council of Fascism, a great event is accomplished: the fate of Ethiopia is sealed today, May 9, the fourteenth year of the fascist era.

All the knots were cut by our shining sword, and the African victory remains in the history of the Fatherland, intact and pure, as the fallen Legionaries and survivors dreamed of it and wanted it. Italy finally has its Empire.

A Fascist Empire, because it bears the indestructible signs of the will and power of the Roman *Littorio*, because this is the goal towards which for fourteen years were urged the vigorous and disciplined energies of the young, gallant Italian generations. An empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all, and decides to war only when it is forced by imperious, incoercible necessities of life. An empire of civilization and humanity for all the peoples of Ethiopia.

This is in the tradition of Rome, which, after having won, associated the peoples with its destiny.

Here is the law, o Italians, that closes one period of our history and opens another as an immense open passage over all the possibilities of the future:

1 - The territories and peoples that belonged to the empire of Ethiopia are placed under the full and entire sovereignty of the Kingdom of Italy.

2 - The title of Emperor of Ethiopia is assumed for himself and his successors by the King of Italy.

Officers! Non-commissioned officers! Soldiers of all the Armed Forces of the State, in Africa and in Italy!
Black shirts! Italians and Italians!

The Italian people created the Empire with their blood. They will fertilize it with their work and defend it against anyone with their weapons.

In this supreme certainty, raise up, o Legionaries, the insignia, iron and hearts, to salute, after fifteen centuries, the reappearance of the Empire on the fateful hills of Rome.

Are you worthy?

This cry is like a sacred oath, which commits you before God and men for life and death!

Black shirts! Legionaries! Greetings to the King!)

Once the borders had been secured, Mussolini declared the creation of the *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian Oriental Africa, AOI), which comprised all the African colonies and comprised six different governorates, with a general governor renamed as *vicere* (viceroy). Moreover, the regime could praise the efficiency of the military campaign through the counting of the casualties: the Italians had, overall, lost less than 5.000 men, with almost 10.000 wounded, but the Ethiopians' casualties ranged from roughly 65.000 (according to the Italian balances) up to almost 300.000, including the civilians (according to Ethiopian balances).

At this precise point in history, it could appear that the Fascist regime had finally obtained the military victory required to enhance its international status and prestige, but there are some considerations to forward, which most likely infringe the aura of triumph and invincibility around the war on Ethiopia, concerning aspects carefully hidden by the regime for propagandistic purposes.

Indeed, the enterprise had resulted in a landslide victory over the Abyssinians, but it also presented some criticalities and aspects that require a brief consideration. At first, there must be an analysis of costs: the Fascist regime poured substantial amounts of money into the conflict, from the enlarged preparation to the effective expenses during the conflict. To indicate a comparison, the European powers that had pursued similar operations in the past had never provided such enormous quantities of money for a single expedition, no matter how extended, and, as a measure for significant cost-savings, they usually employed indigenous troops.²⁵ Mussolini, instead, for the reasons listed above and for ideological ones, decided to employ mostly Italian troops, basically leaving the balance sheet open for the expenses in such matter. Therefore, although the estimates are most likely inferior to the amount effectively spent²⁶, the expenses for the sole expedition peaked at 12 billion lire in 1936, not including mobilisation and training of troops, logistic costs and civilian personnel costs. Overall, as stated by Del Boca, the most probable amount spent for the enterprise reached 40 billion lire, well beyond the initial prevision of 2 billion.²⁷

As usually happens in such cases, the government required additional loans and money supply to sustain such an effort: particularly, this enormous display of money was funded through loans and printing of currency, which rapidly become economically unbearable for the state budget due to inflationary rises and debt heightening. The consequences of such an “open budget” operation would have influenced the course of the entire Italian history from this point onwards: indeed, the efforts for the rearmament pursued by Mussolini in earlier years had to be halted, in order to recalibrate the expenses and the budgetary balances. Therefore, the provisions of acquiring a fully modernised, equipped and trained army, capable of high results even on the European front, within the beginning of the new decade (1940s) was now a total chimera.²⁸

Alongside the financial considerations, it must also be noted that the propagandisation of such victory galvanised the Fascist establishment and military chiefs to the point of believing that the Italian army was completely fit and prepared for a hypothetical confrontation with other modern powers. At this point in time, the shadow of another global conflict appeared far more intense than before, and, with respect to this,

²⁵ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 93.

²⁶ The drafters of several balances of the time excluded the expenses for the war from current sheets, and diluted them throughout successive ones, in order to give the balances a resemblance of order and break-even, such that there would be no concern, from the outside, on the excessive expenses for the war. Through this modality, a balanced budget could be maintained and reported to the investors and the public opinion, to avoid both cessation of investments (and loans) and a loss of consensus.

²⁷ Del Boca Angelo, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale*, Mondadori, 2014.

²⁸ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 145.

every power was re-adapting its military and economic capabilities to meet the requirements of this technology-intensive new scenario.

Therefore, for the Fascist regime, it appeared central, long before the war on Ethiopia was waged, to divert several monetary and logistical efforts towards such rearmament and preparation. However, both the expenses of the conflict and the fallacious belief of a military capability, comparable to the other European powers', generated consequential strategic error and misinterpretations, that ultimately led the country on the verge of collapse during the second global conflict.

Furthermore, the Fascist resort to chemical weapons and brutal extra-military methods, ranging from abuses to rapes, not only generated profound hatred against the Italians, but also exposed the regime to critical accusations within the international organizations. Indeed, the behaviour of such international gatherings had been largely condescending towards the Italian actions and manners in this context, but such explicit violations of binding and widely respected international treaties threatened the tenure of the regime, with respect to its reputation.

Finally, it must be underlined that, although Mussolini did declare the birth of the Italian Empire, the total grip over Ethiopia was never reached. The bulk of the army was, indeed, dispatched back to Rome, but several contingents remained for the pacification of the colony and its administration. Since May, the month of the final battle of Mai Ceu, Graziani, now viceroy for the colony, had confronted himself with the necessity to push back the strenuous Ethiopian resistance, led by some *ras* and the new generations, all eager to fight for the liberation of their homeland. Therefore, Graziani, under direct orders of Mussolini, dedicated his administrative role to the elimination of the remaining groups of armed Ethiopians, which were, indeed, quite numerous.

From the summer of 1936 to the spring of the following year, the Italian troops (now around 250.000 men, with 100.000 additional askars)²⁹ perused the majority of the country to unearth the rebels and execute (or imprison) their leaders. Graziani himself, although highly protected and residing in the capital, which witnessed a very low number of incidents and fights, suffered a dangerous terroristic attack in February, during a celebration for the birth of prince Umberto: bombs were hurled in the air, by anti-Italian rebels, towards the stage where Graziani stood, but the viceroy managed to survive the attack.

Although the plot had not been entirely successful, several people were killed or wounded, and, mostly, the morale of the Ethiopian rebels skyrocketed: the resistance had managed to almost kill the representation of the imperialistic repressive power of the invader. However, to such moment of contentment, followed a highly brutal reaction. The fascist regime ordered to scour the capital and the surroundings to find and execute the perpetrators, but this order was interpreted as condescendence towards brutality and ruthlessness.³⁰ Graziani was enraged to the point of demanding the raze of Addis Abeba to Mussolini. The brutal repression that followed this attack lasted for four months, and it accounted for thousands of victims,

²⁹ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 156.

³⁰ Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 157.

including the majority of the orthodox clergy³¹, deemed as part of the Abyssinian ruling elite, and the storytellers of the empire, who spread the news which the regime wanted to hide.

Graziani was eventually replaced at the end of 1937, with duke Amedeo of Savoia-Aosta, a member of the royal family, but the disorders and the clashes with the rebels continued, although with minor intensity, until the outbreak of the second global conflict. Indeed, by 1939, the Ethiopian resistance exerted minor pressure on the Italian colonial administration, due to the continued repressive actions of the latter; however, the advent of the war, initially waged solely by Germany but explicitly including also Italy, allowed the Ethiopians to understand that the commitment of the invader would have shortly commenced to fade, in order to divert more resources and energies towards the European front. This calculation was correct. Once Mussolini declared war against the Allied powers, siding with Hitler, it was clear that the African colony would have been rapidly lost, given the bordering with British colonies (Kenya, Sudan, Egypt) and the incapability of properly controlling the country.³²

By 1941, the Commonwealth had defeated the Italians in Ethiopia, and, by 1943, it forced them out of Libya as well, striking a terrible blow to the Fascist regime's reputation and position. Haile Selassie, the defeated *negus*, returned to Ethiopia and was handed back the sceptre of power. The loss of the *Africa Orientale Italiana* marked the beginning of the end for the regime: Mussolini was deposed and arrested by July 1943, after the arrival of the American forces in southern Italy, and the entire system which had ruled the country for two decades collapsed in the blink of an eye.

1.7 The relationship with the United States: Washington's domestic context

During this dissertation, up until now, I have often mentioned the majority of the powerful countries of the world, but, intentionally, there has been an actor which, although ever-present and supervising the development of the historical contingencies, has been mentioned quite rarely. I am referring, as the title of this thesis might suggest, to the United States of America. The reason behind this narrative relegation is two-fold: on one hand, this actor of our screenplay had to be presented *in medias res*, having already set out the ground for its appearance.

On the other hand, besides the logistical and theatrical necessities, it has to be underlined that, after the signature of the Versailles Treaty, the United States refrained from participating to the complex set of defensive assurances they had contributed to build, headed by the League of Nations. They had, indeed, invested deeply in the European economics, especially with respect to the monetary aid flowing from

³¹ The most famous event concerning the clergy was the slaughter of Debra Libanos, where the contingent of general Pietro Maletti exterminated the religious elite, amounting to five hundred victims (later estimates suggested higher numbers).

³² Labanca N., *op. cit.*, p. 202.

Washington to the shattered European powers (mostly Germany), but it must also underline that the US Senate voted, on the 19th of March 1920, for the non-ratification of the Versailles Treaty, which had been strongly enhanced by President Woodrow Wilson.

There are several reasons behind this historic action of the American establishment, and they range from the sociological to the political and economic ones. In the following lines, we will analyse the most prominent and influencing motives of this American withdraw.

After the war they heavily contributed to win, the United States witnessed a resurgence of the so-called “Red scare”, a diffused fear that the events unfolded in Russia in 1917, with the overthrown of Zar Nicola II at the hands of Lenin’s Bolsheviks, could be replicated on the very American soil. This terror was fuelled also by the influence that these eastern European events had produced on the central European countries, which experienced their own “biennio rosso”.

The consequences of this widespread influenced both sides of the debate: the supporters of such leftist ideologies, mostly Italian anarchists under the guidance of Luigi Galleani (renamed *Galleanists*), grouped themselves to organize anarchist attacks throughout America, whereas the government responded with severe measures of repression. After the 1919 bomb attacks (occurred or only planned), between April and June, aimed at several members of the establishment, like Attorney General Palmer and several senators and governors, Palmer himself decided to actuate strong repressive methodologies, renamed as “Palmer raids”: between November 1919 and January 1920 Palmer ordered the arrest of around 10.000 people, 556 of which were extradited, under the accusations for the violation of the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act, emanated in 1918.³³

Afterwards, the anarchist sentiment heavily tuned down its voice and actions, with the consequent decrease of the level of attention and caution against them with respect to the public opinion. Although this public turmoil has nonetheless influenced the American decision-makers in their strategic talks about whether the country should participate in or distance itself from the European internal and political issues, it has not been the only factor which led the US Senate to veto the ratification of the Versailles Treaty.

A prominent role in this decision by the US establishment has been played by the Versailles peace talks themselves, and, specifically, by particular propositions and articles of the League of Nations’ Covenant. In fact, many American politicians, supported by a discrete electorate basis, heavily criticised Article 10 of the Covenant itself³⁴, which was regarded as an automatic military intervention in case of further warfare being waged against one another by the European countries. With respect to this, the opposition side split itself into two factions of senators: similarly to the internal division of the Italian Socialist Party into

³³ Avakov Aleksandr V., *Plato’s Dreams Realized: Surveillance and Citizen Rights from KGB to FBI*, Algora Publishing, New York, 2006, p. 36.

³⁴ “The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled”.

“maximalists” and “reformists”, some US senators decided to staunchly oppose the Treaty altogether (then renamed “Irreconcilables”), and others decided that the treaty itself needed to be modified and reserved. This same group, renamed “Reservationist”, led by Senator Lodge, proposed to modify the Treaty, on the grounds that the provisions contained in Article 10 could hinder the sovereignty and the independence of the United States, which, in case of activation of this very article, would have been, in their opinion, dragged without possibility of rebuttal into a war in Europe.

Coincidentally, the reservations proposed by the Reservationists were fourteen, and they encountered a rigid opposition by President Wilson, who had given indication to his fellow democratic senators to reject any version of the Treaty which was not the one already proposed. This opposition was widely foreseeable by Lodge, and it was most likely part of a bigger strategy aimed at avoiding the ratification of the Treaty altogether.

On the other side of the barricade, the “Irreconcilables”, captained by senator Borah (a staunch isolationist), reaffirmed their complete rejection of the treaty, leaving no room for negotiation. Borah himself, in his two-hours speech, underlined the necessity to stick to the policy of “no entangling alliances”, an explicit reference to the precepts championed by US president James Monroe in the homonymous doctrine. Ultimately, the Treaty was not ratified, but it must be noted that the opposition of these Irreconcilables could have been overcome with a compromising effort by Wilson, since the *quorum* needed for the ratification would have been reached with the addition of the Reservationists’ votes, basically nullifying altogether the negation of the Irreconcilables.³⁵

1.8 The Versailles’ framework: frictions and negotiations

The outcome of these different but entangled features was the one already mentioned in the beginning of this paragraph: the United States did not ratify the Versailles Treaty, and they inaugurated an era of full-fledged isolationism, specifically towards Europe, broken exclusively by the economic aid of plans Dawes and Young.

The narration of the previous lines introduces some concepts and considerations that are deeply related to the matter of this analysis. In fact, the behaviour of Wilson in this matter can be transposed to the analysis of the relationship between the American democracy and the Italian Kingdom in this precise section of history. Indeed, the tensions undergoing between Wilson and Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Italian prime minister at the time of the Conference, have to be analysed once again in light of the staunchness manifested by the former, with respect to the issue, at home.

³⁵ *Wilson's Failure? The Treaty of Versailles*, from Teaching American History, Eder Rusty, 2022.

The territorial demands forwarded by Rome, specifically those concerning the port city of Fiume (or Rijeka) on the Adriatic, were met with utter opposition by the American leader, who was deeply convinced that the “fourteen points” he had drafted, centred upon the principle of self-determination of nations, were the best strategy to prevent the reoccurring of a similar conflict. Wilson, indeed, was convinced that the claims forwarded by Orlando would have generated a militaristic degeneration of the territorial disputes, which, consequently, would have benefited solely the reactionary and nationalistic factions residing in Italy.

The ultimate goal of Wilson’s presidency was noticeably clear: the American establishment enhanced the necessity to avoid that European countries, like Italy, could witness the rise of such factions as supportive of the Bolshevik example. Specifically, the administration desired to reduce to a minimum probability the possibility of Italy shifting towards a classic “social revolution”, inspired by the events in Russia some years before. In fact, Italy experienced, within the European framework, the most compelling and challenging threat to its national and political order, due to the radicalisation of the trade unions and the grip that leftist anti-war parties possessed on the electorate and the public opinion. The political weight of such factions implemented immediately after the war, since, given the infamous “vittoria mutilata”, these movements started to strongly demand a thorough modification of domestic and foreign policies.

Consequently, this implied that, if a social revolution were to, indeed, occur in Italy, it could have become the starting spark of a much broader wildfire, all under the doctrine of “socialism”. As noted by an inquiry produced by the US State Department and Colonel Edward House, “in regard to Italy, there is the obvious danger of social revolution and disorganization”, and, moreover, that “if we are not careful, we will have a second Russia on our hands.”³⁶ President Wilson, within this context, found himself in the ambiguity of believing that the real threat for the Italian *status quo* was the ultra-nationalistic right, and not the Soviet-leaning left, but, simultaneously, being compelled to shy Italy away from a possible social revolution.

Ultimately, the unmovable stance of Wilson concerning the peace plan for Europe, laid out in his “fourteen points”, generated a general opposition, by the Italian government, to such arrangement. Specifically, the matter stood with respect to point “nine”, which stated that “a readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognised lines of nationality”: this meant that the territorial concessions promised to Rome in the London Treaty, signed in 1915, could not be respected, generating serious concerns about the Italian national security *vis-à-vis* Austria-Hungary.

These specific concerns were justified also by the American secretary of State Robert Lansing, who attempted to readjust Wilson’s position on the matter. Still, the American president, utterly convinced of the treacherous nature of the imperialistic aims projected by Rome, which could have neutralised his peace propositions, reiterated that the London Treaty was not a binding agreement for Washington, given the latter’s absence from the list of contracting parties.

³⁶ Schmitz David F., *The United States and Fascist Italy*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 14.

Therefore, the decision was set, at least on the American unilateral side: Fiume was to be assigned to Yugoslavia, not only to avoid further tensions on the Adriatic and the Balkans, but also to supply the eastern European countries with a central maritime infrastructure for their development. Specifically, the reasoning of “population” forwarded by Italy, which deemed necessary to include the Italian population (or of Italian origins) of Fiume into the native country, was considered to be excessively narrow, in terms of numbers and proportions. Moreover, it must be considered the geographical position of Fiume was considered to be pivotal and unique for the outlets of commerce of the soon-to-be Yugoslavia.³⁷

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that president Wilson carried out such diplomatic strategy not only justified by his belief that the Italian political unrest had been generated by the right (and not the left, as the majority of his cabinet believed), but also by the fact that he had concluded that Italy was not to be regarded as a top-tier country, but, contrarily, a developing country with a weak and un-decisive government. This second belief, specifically, encountered its confirmation, according to Wilson, at the beginning of the Versailles Conference, when it became crystal clear that Orlando and the Italian delegation were concerned solely with the territorial aggrandizements, and not with the construction of a solid and long-lasting peace deterrence in the old continent. Therefore, merging the two separate beliefs, he assumed that the Italian left, which his advisors feared to be the descendant of the Bolsheviks in central Europe, was not revolutionary as it was portrayed, and that, consequently, it would have strongly supported his initiative for peace.

Thus, the negotiating objectives and overall tactics were, at this point in time, quite obvious to each of the Versailles Conference participants. Orlando, specifically, in order to avoid a non-confidence vote for the incapacity of his cabinet to obtain the aforementioned concessions, prospected a “waiting game” with Wilson, hoping that the American president would be forced, by the urgency to terminate the negotiations and achieve a proper manifestation of his propagandized peace plan, to capitulate to Italian requests on Fiume. Moreover, it must be noted that the American delegation was severely divided on this matter, and one precise member of such delegation, colonel House, had entertained secret meetings with the Italian prime minister, to whom he had reiterated the conviction that he could succeed in changing Wilson’s idea concerning the matter. In fact, House himself had been attempting to do such thing since the beginning of the negotiations, going as far as suggesting to Wilson that even the American experts believed in the necessity to grant Rome its claims. This “pushing” action, enhanced by House and several members of the State Department, was countered by a “pulling” force, projected by Baker, Tumulty and others.

Ultimately, Wilson, during the negotiations, downsized his intransigence over Fiume, as far as suggesting that the port was to be assigned to neither nation, such that it could become a “free port”, which seemed to be a moderately positive compromise for both parties. However, although Wilson had reduced the

³⁷ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 16.

immobility of his positions, Orlando was not eager to behave equally: the Italian prime minister dismissed as un-feasible any type of compromise which did not include the Italian control over the area.

Faced with an inevitable *redde rationem*, Wilson, advised by the “pulling” section of his delegation, and moved by the perceived urgency to “save and rescue Europe” considered appropriate to resort to a desperate and dramatic move: the public appeal to the Italian population.³⁸ Wilson believed to entertain a massively positive relationship with such population, since his visit to Rome, occurred 4 months priorly, where he was welcomed and saluted as a heroic saviour: this consideration was central in convincing him of the enterprise, which inevitably provided grounds for a dangerous diplomatic incident between the two nations. Notwithstanding the possible disadvantages of such decision, Wilson published his appeal on 23 April 1919, calling directly to the Italian people to oppose themselves to the governmental and diplomatic strategy of their representatives, ultimately joining him into the construction of a new era for the old continent, led by a liberal and peaceful framework of protection and governance.

Although Wilson believed that this political move would have been the breakthrough in the negotiations’ *impasse*, he committed a tactical misinterpretation, or, more precisely, he lacked the capacity to understand both the complexity of the domestic situation of Italy and the psyche of its population. In fact, the president’s reputation had suffered a steady decline from his initial visit in January, and the Italian people had become disappointed with the seemingly endless spiral of discussions and negotiations set in motion by Wilson himself.

Thus, given that this wager had been lost by the American president, the nature of its consequences was entirely directed towards the latter: Orlando publicly denounced the presidential appeal, condemning its intentions and its contents, reaffirming the “high degree of civilisation” and the status of “great nation” assigned to Italy³⁹. Such a vivid and patriotic statement enabled Orlando to gather massive support around him, both from the population and the government, which confirmed his position with a confidence vote urgently called in Rome. Consequently, the US State Department strengthened its efforts to convince President Wilson to capitulate on the issue, not only emphasizing the issue of a possible socialist revolution stemming from Italy and spreading to the entire continent, but also underlining the fact that the United States had already loaned 600 million dollars to Rome, since the armistice of 1918.

These two arguments were closely related, since the refusal of Wilson to agree to a compromise on the issue generated the possibility of entirely straining the already tense relations between Washington and Rome, ultimately leading not only to a loss of political credibility, authority and influence, but also, and especially, to a damaging waste of money and possible future investments in the country. The political *impasse*, thus, did not encounter its resolution in this temporal line, even though the government of Orlando, despite the praise received by the electorate after his harsh response to Wilson’s appeal, had been replaced in June 1919 by the new cabinet formed by Francesco Nitti.

³⁸ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, pp. 23.-24.

³⁹ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 25.

The political figure of Nitti, a liberal who had always professed his opposition to the Italian involvement in the war, was deemed appropriate to reconstruct the relations with Washington, given that he had not been involved directly in the tensions with Wilson, and, consequently, he could represent a “fresh start” to the negotiations concerning the Versailles Treaty and Fiume. Indeed, Nitti was well aware that, in order to obtain confidence from the electorate and from the national and international public opinion, he needed to consolidate the influx of economic aid from the United States, pivotal in supplying the input of Italian industries. Moreover, Nitti’s appointment was positively welcomed by Wilson and the American diplomacy, since the liberal politician immediately informed the American president of his utter personal disinterest for the annexation of Fiume.

Overall, the preconditions laid out by this new Italian executive seemed to convince the American State Department that, finally, an agreement could be reached on this matter. Despite this initial positive interaction, there was no final agreement reached on Fiume between Nitti and Wilson, at the time of the latter’s return to Washington, and this generated a chain of events which contributed to the prolongment of the *impasse*. In fact, in August, Nitti was able to mediate with the governments of France and Britain in order to concede Italy the control of Fiume, with the condition that the territory surrounding the port would be left to Yugoslavia. The delegations of Paris and London perceived this to be a moderately adequate and equal understanding, and, mostly, they wanted this dispute to terminate as strongly as the Italians and the Americans.

However, once this proposal was forwarded to Wilson, notwithstanding the clarification, by Nitti himself, that he would have not pushed such request if it were not for the compelling demands of the Italian public opinion, the American president reiterated, once again, his total refusal of the proposition. Furthermore, Wilson underlined his surprise concerning the approval of such arrangement by Lloyd George and Clemenceau, the prime ministers of respectively Britain and France, who had supported the American position throughout the negotiations. This further demonstration of utter neglect by Washington represented, for the nationalistic factions of the country, the “tipping point”, after which action should have been taken in order to secure Italy its righteously deserved territorial concessions.

Thus, fuelled by months of failed negotiations and un-respected promises, a branch of the nationalist and fascist side of the country decided to take matter in their own hands, and, under the charismatic leadership of poet Gabriele D’Annunzio, they launched an all-out attack towards Fiume itself. The city was immediately seized, and the fascists installed a temporary government led by the *vate* himself, called Italian Regency of Carnaro, who asked for an undeniable recognition, by the Italian government, of sovereignty over the city-port.⁴⁰ Questioned with this heavy dilemma, and likely embarrassed by the action itself, which made his position sound weaker than before, Nitti was called to respond, and do it as rapidly and as strongly as possible.

⁴⁰ Alatri Paolo, *Nitti, D’Annunzio e la questione adriatica*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1959.

Indeed, the dilemma was trifold: the government could either substantiate the claim already explicated by D'Annunzio, blatantly oppose itself to it and request the retreat of the swarm of fascists in Fiume, or, finally, stall the dialogue with all the parties in the dispute and patiently wait for an unarmful solution for everybody. In the end, Nitti opted for the safest route, in order to avoid misunderstandings and further disputes with Washington: he contacted Wilson, once again requesting to grant Italy sovereignty over Fiume, such that the seed of a possible revolution, inherently planted by the actions of D'Annunzio, could be rooted out before it became critical for the nation.

To this further request on the issue, coherently with the previous responses, Wilson stood his ground, since he became aware, at this point, that, even in the case of a proper revolution bursting in Italy, this would have not been as dramatic as advertised by the State Department. Consequently, the president believed that the entire claim, forwarded both by Nitti and by a fraction of the American delegation, concerning the need to avoid a social revolution in Italy, was ill-founded, and that, with respect to the Italians, it rested solely on the necessity to disguise the sovereignty claim over Fiume as the *conditio sine qua non* the equilibrium in Italy could have maintained. Wilson, regarding what he believed to be a fallacious claim, constructed solely to hide the Italian selfish and imperialistic interests behind the emergency of a probable collapse of the *status quo*, did not yield to any compromise, even after having suffered a stroke which left him unfit to properly fulfil his duties. To this extent, Wilson reiterated that he was willing to compromise solely on the status of Fiume as a free-port or put under a trusteeship of the League of Nations, in case of the impossibility of placing it under Yugoslavian sovereignty, which clearly represented Wilson's primary choice.

In conclusion of the entire matter, the solution was provided by a direct bilateral agreement signed between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, i.e. Yugoslavia, concerning the territorial division in the area. On 12th November 1920, Bonomi, Giolitti and Sforza signed, on behalf of Italy (Nitti had resigned in June 1920, and Giolitti had been called back to lead the executive), the Treaty of Rapallo, which guaranteed Italy portions of Istria and Dalmatia (Trieste, Gorizia, Udine, Zara) and which regulated that the city of Fiume would have been declared a "free port".⁴¹

Four months later, on 4th March 1921, Wilson left his office of President of the United States, being replaced by republican Warren G. Harding, nine months after his negotiating antagonist for several months, Nitti, had done the same. Now, with Giolitti once again at the reins of the peninsula, and a renovated executive in Washington, the bilateral relations were ripe to flourish once more, and the most effective and appeasing instrument for such flourishing was, indeed, the economic sector.

In fact, during the harsh negotiations in the post-Versailles period, the Italian economic infrastructures and productive systems had been negatively influenced by the constantly inter-changing executives and the growing instability generated by both the international scenario and the competition between different political and social forces. With the return of Giolitti, many experts projected a return to a somewhat stable

⁴¹ The Treaty of Rapallo, 12th November 1920, Istituto Storico Grossetano della Resistenza e dell'Età Contemporanea.

framework of governance: the prime minister, indeed, reached out to Washington to re-establish a policy of foreign direct investments towards Rome, the flow of which had been halted some months before, due to the republican party's decision to introduce limitations of such loans to foreign nations. In particular, contrarily to Wilson's presidency, the loans could not have been requested anymore directly to the Treasury Department, which used to dispatch loans to foreign countries from its own ministerial framework.⁴²

Consequently, and this is what the State Department led by Hughes suggested to Rome, the only solution to the reopening of American aid flux into Italy was to properly tackle all the domestic challenges and havoc-wrecking protests led by the left and the trade unions.

This period of the Italian post-war era has been renamed "biennio rosso", and it spread out throughout the peninsula from 1919 to 1920, especially in the northern areas of the country, which hosted the majority of industrial facilities and factories. During this time of widespread turmoil, several general strikes were called, within a larger contestation against the central government of Rome for the harsh economic and social conditions generated by the war. The vicious spiral of protests and unrest which was generated led to further deteriorations of the overall economic conditions, which fuelled tougher protests and strikes, ultimately leading to proper occupations of several factories.

The tense atmosphere and the rising concern of several political forces that this widespread protest was dangerously leaning towards becoming a proper social revolution, led by the leftist forces and aimed at achieving the often declaimed "revolution of the masses", prospected by the principal socialist theorists and actors throughout Europe. However, during the crucial meetings between the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and the leaders of the unions, the prospect of a wider socialist uprising was abandoned, in favour of its watered-down version, which called for a deeper role for the trade unions within the factories' structures. Consequently, the factories were soon relinquished by the occupying workers to the industrial owners, and the general strike ceased.

Still, the consequences of such uprising were thorough: prime minister Giolitti resigned in July, and he was replaced by Ivanoe Bonomi, a member of the socialist party; on the social aspect, instead, a wave of "red terror" spread throughout the country, violent skirmishes and deadly clashes between the left and the new-born Fascist movement erupted, and they lasted for consecutive months, up to 1922. During this unwavering phase of turmoil and instability, the international reputation of Italy, especially with respect to Washington, suffered a heavy toll, since the country became to be perceived as completely unfit for the implementation of investments and direct loans: five different coalition governments had fallen from 1920 to 1922, gradually signalling a deeper and more manifest instability of the political system, and the American State Department, specifically, necessitated a strong central government in Rome to carry out the investments requested by Italy.

⁴² Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Thus, the sole political force perceived to be adequate to this role, with respect to the American diplomats, appeared to be the Fascist party, which had bolstered its ability to counter the leftist uprising, mostly with brutal and violent physical actions carried out by the so-called “squadristi” (squads of former militaries sent to intimidate the socialist and unionist principal members). During the summer of 1922, after the announcement of further general strikes by unions, the atmosphere became tense once again, similarly to two years priorly, and the government was anew compelled to properly respond to such upheavals. However, the *deus ex machina* of this second period of general strikes was not the government, but the Fascist party itself, which enacted several intimidating expeditions against leaders and representatives of the socio-political forces supporting the uprising.

Via these means, the larger social mobilisation was halted before it could dangerously hinder the economic process of the country, as occurred in 1919-1920: this specific protagonist role played by Mussolini and his “camicie nere” was not overlooked by the American State Department, which realised that the fascist movement had grown stronger than the central government itself. Once the hierarchs of the party itself parallelly realised their renovated capabilities and potentialities, they commenced to organize their own uprising, aimed at seizing control of the whole governmental apparatus based in Rome.

In fact, they, as the Americans, understood that the only way through which the weak liberal governments could be dethroned concerned the use of sheer force, and it was through sheer force itself that, as already narrated, Mussolini and his swarm of fascists, as of 31st October 1922, became the new leaders of the Kingdom of Italy.

1.9 The Italo-American relations during Fascism

After the advent of Mussolini, the relations between the two countries definitely improved, partially due to the positive impact that the *duce*’s personality and role imprinted on the American press and, consequently, its public opinion. The city of New York, for example, hosted numerous Italian communities, shifting thus the focus on the deeds carried out by Mussolini in their homeland. Moreover, many journalists posted in Italy supported the fascist movement and, mostly, praised the actions of its leader. Alongside the massive framework of the press in New York, there were several others informative means, throughout America, that narrated the chain of events that brought Mussolini to power: many of these means, with some exceptions, favoured the *coup* perpetrated by the *camicie nere* (“black shirts”, a characterisation of the fascists), although, as infused with the doctrine and precepts of democracy as they were, many Americans (writers and readers) were slightly concerned by the authoritarian and nationalistic tendencies of the new Italian regime.

This positive reception, by the public opinion, was mostly replicated by the institutions and the diplomatic elites: after the March on Rome, the fascists had ascended to the role of “upholders of traditional authority and a force for strong, effective government”,⁴³ leaving to the relics of the past their characterisation as a mere violent force with no true capability of ruling a country. Moreover, the ambiguity of the illegal and brutal actions carried out by the fascists during the first post-war years was clearly overlooked, superseded by the importance of its role as a bulwark against Bolshevism, the major terror of the American establishment after World War I.

Furthermore, the United States had been massively concerned by the turmoil and disorder reigning over Italy through the years of the war, and, coupled with their renewed interest for international economics relations and opportunities, this framework generated the willingness to immediately recognize, and embrace, the leadership of Mussolini.

As mentioned before, some concerns remained. The fascist party, as reported by ambassador Child, was intrinsically divided into two different souls: a “moderate” faction, led by Mussolini himself, who realised the necessity to shift the character of its leadership from brutality and blind aggressiveness to calculated and cynical offensiveness, and an “extremist” faction, composed by the so-called “first-hour” fascists, irredents who had not renounced to their utterly destabilising and destroying attitude.⁴⁴ This internal division, and its consequences, became one of the greatest and most brutal headaches that Mussolini had to experience in the internal domain: for several years, the extremist faction committed illegalities and atrocities well beyond the concessions made to them by the regime, generating massive purges and subdivisions of the movement. Logically, the institutionalisation of the fascist party had not pleased those members that perceived the necessity to perpetuate violence and brutality against their enemies, and who did not realise the imperative of formalising the appeal of the movement into a more state-adapted enterprise. Nevertheless, by March 1923, the American diplomats recognised that Mussolini had gained total control of the party, despite the continuance of these internal divisions. Moreover, they voiced their approval and astonishment towards the ability of the *duce* in pursuing and obtaining such control, as far as incentivising further investments in the newly stabilised Kingdom of Italy, which prospected several opportunities of profit.

Such prospects were actively supported by the American Secretary of Treasury, Andrew Mellon, who not only orchestrated a project of favourable debt settlements towards Italy, but also personally diverted a discrete amount of his personal money into the Italian industrial framework. This stance was supported consistently by president Harding, at first, and President Coolidge, from 1923 onwards, who allegedly witnessed “no serious problem in the rise of fascist governments in Italy”⁴⁵.

⁴³ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Furthermore, it has to be underlined that this renewed interest towards Italy was intrinsically related to the geopolitical equilibria of post-war Europe: the American State Department enforced the necessity to strengthen the ties with and the support to Italy, alongside all of the aforementioned purposes, in order to minimise the possibility that Italy could insert itself into the sphere of influence dominated by the French. In fact, the US State Department itself fell in disagreement with Paris on the matter of German reparations, which, according to the Americans, should have been more lenient and inclined to reaching a distention in Europe: such opinion was not shared by the French establishment, which pushed for, and obtained, the issuing of grave sanctions and war reparations over Germany⁴⁶.

This disagreement impelled a minimal diplomatic rupture between Paris and Washington, the result of which being the latter most likely desiring for a new equilibrium in the old continent, possibly centred upon Italy itself. In addition, it must be noted that the American establishment intended to penetrate into the framework of Mediterranean and Baltic trade, within which Italy was amongst the largest and most central actors, mostly due to its geographic position.

With respect to this, Herbert Hoover, Secretary to Commerce at Washington, incentivised president Coolidge to supply Italy with the raw materials and goods needed to carry out such commercial trade, in order to gain dividends by it: in order to do so, after the resignation of ambassador Child, Hoover proposed to appoint a new ambassador who possessed a “large industrial, financial, and commercial vision”. The choice, thus, fell upon Henry Fletcher, already experienced in the diplomatic framework due to his previous missions in China and southern America.⁴⁷

Fletcher, after solely two years in the office of ambassador to Italy, witnessed the greatest crisis that Mussolini and fascist Italy had to confront: the Matteotti homicide. In fact, by 1924, the staunch opposition perpetrated by the Liberals and the socialists, captained by Giovanni Amendola and Giacomo Matteotti, stepped up its criticism and accusation stances against Mussolini and his regime, allegedly guilty of attempting to destroy the most basic democratic institutions of the state.

This renovated clash between the fascist government and the opposition forces culminated in the abduction of Matteotti himself, on 10 June 1924, after which the socialist MP was assassinated. It was never clarified whether the initial order stemmed from Mussolini or from one of the most extremist hierarchs, as it was never clarified whether the order, if directly stemmed from Mussolini himself, was to solely abduct Matteotti, or to ultimately kill him to silence his fierce criticisms.

In fact, Matteotti had succeeded in obtaining classified information concerning the alleged fraudulency of several regional and local elections, in favour of the fascist party: such accusation, if confirmed and substantiated by factual evidence, would have generated massive havoc throughout the entire Italian

⁴⁶ This aggressive stance perpetrated by Paris can be traced back to the *revanche* sentiment caused by the 1870 loss, in the Franco-Prussian war, against the army led by Otto von Bismarck.

⁴⁷ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 66.

political system, as far as challenging the legitimacy of Mussolini and his *black shirts* and hypothetically forcing the King to demand the resignation of Mussolini himself.

The entire issue generated utter turmoil throughout the fascist party: four ministers (Gentile, De Stefani, Federzoni and Oviglio) resigned from their positions, and the administrative secretary of the party, Giovanni Marinelli, was arrested. Nonetheless, the Parliament called for a confidence vote on Mussolini's government, which, despite such contestation and turmoil, resulted in a confirmation of the *duce* and his executive. This confidence vote represented, for the opposition in the Parliament, the clear evidence of the corrupted and authoritarian scheme reigning over Montecitorio, and, more generally, over the country: this reinforced awareness generated the so-called "Aventinian secession"⁴⁸, namely the abstention from all Parliamentary works, by the opposition, as a form of protest against the injustice perpetrated within the Matteotti homicide.

Paradoxically, this very absence from the Parliament granted Mussolini the opportunity to recollect his thoughts on the matter and to reorganise his government, without any meaningful contrasting force: thus, he ordered the expulsion of several extremist fascists, mostly those who had, both privately and publicly, questioned his ability as a leader and his fitness to rule the party and the country.

These political moves played by Mussolini also enabled him to convince the US State Department that the scandal, although extended to the highest ranks of the party, had not directly implicated him. Consequently, given the importance attributed to Mussolini's restoring and pacifying government, without which the extremist factions of the party would have emerged, the State Department strengthened its concerns against the opposing forces of the Italian scenario, labelled without distinction as "enemies of fascism", and it also projected more thorough support to Mussolini himself and to his regime. Ultimately, this support proved to be decisive in the Italian two-way struggle, especially considering the erroneous calculations and decisions of the opposition itself, which, with their "Aventinian" protest, cleared the way for Mussolini and his renovated government to reassure their positions and their hold over the country.

Overall, the Matteotti scandal produced several benefits for Mussolini, especially with respect to its consideration within the corridors of the White House: in fact, the State Department concluded that the figure of Mussolini, although his governing methods were "not by any means American methods", was essential for the stabilisation and the reconstruction of Italy. In doing so, the American diplomacy enhanced its unwavering support for the *duce*, supporting his decision to ostracize former central political figures, like Giolitti and Nitti, and going as far as criticising the very same American who opposed to the fascist regime, like reporter George Seldes, who was expelled from Italy, in full compliance with the US State Department, due to his harsh critics of the regime.

⁴⁸ Named after the *secessio plebis* (secession of the plebs) which occurred in Ancient Rome: the clash between the plebeians and the patricians was motivated by the demand, forwarded by the former, to obtain equal representation and rights as the latter. This event witnessed the plebeians abandoning the city and every type of social activity, and retreating on Aventine hill, from where they voiced their concerns and demands.

As described at the beginning of this section, the American press played a crucial role in the construction of the figure of Mussolini, such that the American establishment commenced to influence the press itself, in order to make it lean more heavily towards supporting the fascist regime. However, it must be noted that, despite such efforts pursued by the State Department and the US Administrations in favour of Mussolini, which could suggest that the figure of the Fascist leader required strong propagandisation in order to be positively welcomed, the factual opposition to the latter was already to an all-time low. The *duce*, by virtue of the fascist propagandistic machine and the staunch support of the American establishment, was already perceived, in the States, as a fierce and resolute leader, as far as being regarded as a popular celebrity, who would have been the sole upholder of the Italian social and economic renovation.

Overall, this is the framework which appeared on the international scenario as of 1925: Washington had already devoted its resources to the construction and consolidation of the fascist regime in Italy, bearing in mind the necessity to project an impenetrable barrier against the treacherous Bolshevik wave, which had already influenced the socialist movements and uprisings of 1919 in Hungary, Germany, and Austria. In order to cast a large protective shadow over this “red terror”, the American establishment condescended to the despicable and deplorable methods of the fascists, since it understood that its foreign policy necessities and prospects superseded its willingness to uphold the democratic principles in Italy. To this precise moment, it was already too late for Washington to plug out its support to Mussolini and his regime, and, consequently, the sole possibility was to “welcome Mussolini and Fascism as acceptable members of the world community”.⁴⁹

1.10 Washington and Rome between Matteotti and Addis Abeba

Once the relationships between Rome and Washington were officially stabilised, and once the political and strategical questions had been somewhat resolved, Mussolini was in a favourable position to commence the negotiations concerning the economic intertwining between the two countries. Indeed, the Italian economy was experiencing several setbacks since the end of the war, with a debt to GDP ratio peaking at 180% and the value of the lira falling by almost 300% between 1913 and 1921, with several external debts owed to Britain and America.

Therefore, one of the most crucial necessities, for the fascist executive, was to stabilise the monetary and fiscal framework of the country, and such purpose required to entertain talks with London and Washington, mostly with the latter, to achieve favourable debt settlements and payment deferrals. On the domestic front, Mussolini implemented several tax cuts and social services eliminations, overall decreasing the massive amount of government expenditure and, consequently, freeing up large space of manoeuvre for reducing

⁴⁹ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, pp. 78-84.

the monetary supply and reduce inflation. Moreover, the fascist regime enforced large privatizations, mostly on matches and life insurance companies, but also telephone networks and energetical industries.

As a consequence, during the 1920s the economic performance of the country slightly improved: the public debt halted its growth, causing the debt to GDP ratio to decrease, also due to the discrete GDP growth itself⁵⁰. However, this represented just a minor enhancement, and there was a limit to the effects of such domestic policies: indeed, the majority of benefits and ameliorations would have been generated solely by the settlement of Italian debt condition with foreign countries. Thus, it appears clear that these two frameworks were largely intertwined, as declared by finance minister De Stefani in May 1923:

The settlement of Italy's international debt will constitute, when reached, a new factor in the stabilization of economic relations with foreign countries and consequently of the internal economic life. For the first time the Italian Government succeeded, during the conference in London, in linking the problem of German reparations with that of inter-Allied indebtedness. These two problems now appear more and more to be interdependent. It is obvious that Italy can only lighten the burden of Germany in the proportion in which her burden is, in turn, lightened by her creditors. Italy expects from a general European settlement the settlement of her debt to Great Britain. With regard to the United States, Italy declares emphatically that she intends to honour her obligations; she only asks that the powerful American Republic will grant her facilities proportionate to those granted to Great Britain, taking into account the great difference between the economic and financial positions of the two countries and bearing in mind the important contribution made by Italy towards the common victory.⁵¹

To this extent, Mussolini dispatched his new finance minister, count Giuseppe Volpi to Washington, in order to entertain a proper negotiation of the Italian debt to the States and to the UK. The mission itself proved extremely successful: by 1926, Mussolini declared that agreements with Washington and London, on the matter of debts, had been reached, respectively in December 1925 and January 1926, which enabled Rome to re-open the influx of foreign loans and investments to boost the lira and the overall economy. Moreover, an institution operating outside of the governmental budgetary space was created, tasked with the proper resolution of the remaining debts to the United States and Britain: the *Cassa Autonoma di Ammortamento dei Debiti di Guerra*.

The creation of this institution included the possibility to repay debts to creditors in an extended timeframe of 62 years, largely feasible and advantageous to Rome also due to the decision of indicating Italy as a

⁵⁰ Marinkov Marina, *Chapter 5: Conquering the Debt Mountain: Financial Repression and Italian Debt in the Interwar Period*, in *Debt and Entanglements between the Wars*, International Monetary Fund, 2019, p. 174.

⁵¹ League of Nations 1923, *Public Finance*, Geneva, 1922, cit. in Marinkov M, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-187.

receiver of several reparation payments from the defeated powers of the war. Specifically, Italy would have received 10% of the payments owed by Germany and 40% of those owed by Austria-Hungary⁵². Additionally, Mussolini enforced a large issuing of bonds to replenish the state budget.

Shortly after the signature of such arrangements, the American enterprises embraced the moment, and a discrete amount of investments started to flow into the Italian economic framework: a clear example of such renewed engagement was testified by the decision, by JP Morgan, one of the greatest investment banking companies in the United States, to allocate a 100 million dollars loan to the Italian government, with the precise purpose of helping the latter stabilise its currency.

The wave of investments surged to a point where, from the approximately absent values of investment in 1925, the American firms were investing and loaning a sum of almost half a billion dollars towards Italy. This proactivity testifies the perception that Americans matured about Mussolini and his executive power: before the *duce*'s stabilising action, Washington had manifested a solid reluctance in investing in such an unstable and revolution-prone country. Now, with the new course brought by the fascist regime, despite clear ambiguities concerning the disapproval of Mussolini's approach to domestic freedoms and rights, the American establishment incentivised its own companies to follow on its footsteps, and heavily embark in this very same new course of Italy.

Entering in the new decade, the American direct investments towards Italy peaked at 121 million dollars, whereas proper portfolio investments reached the amount of 280 million dollars, with a sum of almost 100 million dollars invested in the sector of public utilities, especially in the energetic sector.⁵³ By the advent of the Great Depression, in 1929, the total investments coming from the United States, summing the direct loans and the money moved by Wall Street, amounted to 860 million dollars⁵⁴.

The vastity of such engagement by the American scenery could be justified on a two-fold reasoning: although the most explicit purpose of this engagement was to both reinforce the relations with Italy and boost the American profits in such context, the most crucial aim of Washington concerned the geopolitical sphere. Indeed, the American State Department, and the succeeding presidents, fully understood the extent of Mussolini's ambitions on the international scheme: the highly nationalistic and revisionist doctrine of foreign policy forwarded by the fascist party, which was already discussed during this dissertation, constituted a serious menace to the desirable *status quo* of post-war Europe, the very same fragile equilibrium which Mussolini sought to exploit in order to gain territories and concessions for Italy. For the entirety of these concepts, the American State Department considered that it would have been largely functional and strategic to possess leverage over these same destabilising ambitions forwarded by the fascists.

⁵² Marinkov M., *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁵³ Standard Oil, City Oil, and Texaco companies operated several refineries in Italy, with overall investments amounting to 25.9 million dollars, thus making Italy the second highest receiver of American overseas oil investments, after Germany.

⁵⁴ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, pp. 96-99.

Indeed, with such an economic dependence on the American money, any given foreign action which could have caused disarray and disappointment in the White House would have been calculated more thoroughly than before by the Italian executive, which would have most likely felt the necessity to consult Washington on the matter itself. The concerns present in the American State Department witnessed their concretisation firstly in 1923, when Mussolini ordered a campaign of bombardments in Corfu, part of Greece⁵⁵, and then in 1924, when the fascist leader ultimately annexed Fiume through the Treaty of Rome, signed with Yugoslavia⁵⁶. The gravity of such events was aggrandised by the declarations of Mussolini in 1926, once the consequences of the Matteotti scandal had already worn out, who sought to project Italy on a broader framework of aggressiveness concerning territorial acquisitions. As testified by a conversation held between Henry Fletcher, the American ambassador to Italy, and Frank Kellogg, then Secretary of State: “Fascism, having conquered the State, is now looking abroad and teaching Italy to think imperially, and her neighbours to think seriously.”⁵⁷

Still, Mussolini, during the mid-1920s, demonstrated lesser assertiveness than what he proclaimed, and, mostly, he committed himself to a discrete degree of cooperativeness with the international powers in the exercise of the peacekeeping in Europe: immediately after his advent to power, the *duce* participated to the signature of the Washington Naval Limitation Treaty of 1922, sided with Washington on the matter of reparations and disarmament with respect to Germany, disapproving of the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923⁵⁸, and, ultimately, manifested support for the concretisation of the Dawes Plan, aimed at aiding the Germans in their reparation payments and in their economic reconstruction.

Therefore, the American State Department believed that the imperialist stance forwarded by Mussolini represented more of a propagandistic effort than a proper “call for action”, intended to appease the demands of both the same fascists and the electorate, to whom Mussolini himself had promised the recreation of a colonial empire.

Furthermore, ambassador Fletcher reiterated that “Italy is counting on our financial assistance in her economic expansion, and Mussolini knows that ‘Imperialism’ will scare away capital as quickly as it will arouse local enthusiasm”.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ The crisis lies within the framework of territorial concessions’ agreements: in July 1919, Italy and Greece signed the Venizelos-Tittoni agreement, which contemplated the cession of the Dodecanese Islands to Greece, in exchange for a Greek recognition of the Italian claims over the territories of Turkey. However, after the Turkish National Movement seized control of Anatolia, such claims became void, and Italy refused to cede the Dodecanese to Athens. The tense context was exacerbated by Mussolini, who launched bombardments towards Corfu after the killing of Italian general Enrico Tellini, who had been nominated chairperson of the League of Nations’ commission tasked with the resolution of the matter.

⁵⁶ The Treaty, signed on 27th January 1924, modified the pre-existing framework established with the Treaty of Rapallo (1920), granting Yugoslavia sovereignty over seaport of Susak, in exchange for the Italian full sovereignty over the city-port of Fiume, with the addition of a corridor connecting it to the mainland.

⁵⁷ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁵⁸ The German highly industrialised region was seized by France and Belgium in January 1923, as a response to the insolvency of Berlin with respect to the reparations’ payments; the occupation ceased in August 1925.

⁵⁹ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 106.

The factualisation of such claim was manifested once again in 1927, when border skirmishes exploded between Albania, over which Italy exerted a considerable influence and control, and Yugoslavia. With respect to such clash, Mussolini stated that he would have defended Albania in the matter, given the interests of economic and geopolitical nature: ultimately, the litigation was resolved with the intervention of the British, which convinced Mussolini to let them handle negotiations and distend tensions.⁶⁰

Overall, the American State Department was convinced that Mussolini would have not projected sufficient aggressiveness and destabilisation to hinder the peaceful European *status quo*, which fortified the positive opinion that Washington held on the leader of Fascism. Indeed, the American establishment reiterated that Mussolini was following the influence of London over such international matters, and, indirectly, the influence of Washington itself.

For this reason, towards the end of the twenties, the State Department was entirely convinced that Italy, which had fixed its internal quarrels and was now stabilised under the rule of Mussolini, could be rendered a strong vector of American influence, in both domestic and foreign policy. This influence passed through the financial loans and the soft power diplomacy that the former produced on the peninsula, and, for it to persist through the years, the presence and the attitude of Mussolini were much needed. The positive understanding that Washington held towards the *duce* and his political creed was solid enough to withstand even the first global economic crisis, namely the Great Depression of 1929.

A posteriori, the crisis itself can be defined as turning point for modern history (and, for several reasons, it was), but, specifically concerning the relations between Rome and Washington, the Great Depression simply marked the reiteration of the supportive and cooperative stance held until then.

In fact, seven months before the financial crash, in March, Herbert Hoover had been sworn in as president of the United States, after having been secretary of commerce under two precedent presidents. During these years spent at the White House, Hoover, as already mentioned, supported the economic engagement towards Rome and praised the presence of Fascism in Italy as a stabilising force, considering Mussolini a “sound and useful leader”⁶¹.

The new course in Washington did not modify the considerations held by different ranks of the American diplomacy towards Italy, from the newly appointed ambassador, John Garrett, to the Secretary of State, Henry Stimson: indeed, the new political elite confirmed the necessity to maintain friendly and safe relations with Rome and Mussolini, minimising grounds for disagreement and tensions.⁶² This effort produced highly positive results, as testified by the staunch support provided by Rome to the moratorium

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, pp. 110-112.

⁶² An exemplification of such efforts stands in a controversy emerged in 1931: a marine general named Smedley Butler referred to the journal *Philadelphia Record* a story about Mussolini running over a child during a car ride, and not stopping to aid the child. Once the story spread, Mussolini demanded to the American State Department an apology and a righteous punishment for the wild accusations of the general. The presidency entirely supported Mussolini and ordered to put the general under martial trial, after having provided a retreat of statement and proper apologies to the *duce*.

proposed by Washington, to alleviate economic pressure in Europe due to the Great Depression, or by the almost complete agreement on several international topics between the two administrations. Particularly, both the United States and Italy shared the concern for the Communist-Bolshevist threat coming from Russia, which had heightened its appeal in Europe during the crisis, due to which a solid and cooperative friendship was more desirable than ever.

The solidity and availability of such friendship were demonstrated during the European summer trip held by Stimson in 1931, within which the secretary of State visited Rome and met with Dino Grandi, the new Italian Foreign Minister, and Mussolini himself. After such meetings, Stimson landed in Paris, first, and Berlin, then, to discuss the same matters mentioned in Rome, and he reiterated the positive reception of American intentions by Mussolini, praising the latter's role and attitude towards peace.

After the entirety of such meetings, returning to Washington, Stimson realised that the only country which had shared both the American optimistic views concerning the economic crisis and the considerations towards disarmament and peace (especially concerning Germany), was indeed Italy. This acknowledgement projected the bilateral relations towards a stronger consolidation, especially on the American side: Washington heightened its efforts to depict Italy as a stable nation, politically and economically, going as far as suggesting that the peninsula had suffered noticeably light consequences from the Great Depression (which was entirely false)^{63 64}.

Overall, by 1933, when Hoover was replaced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the relations between Washington and Rome most likely stood at the highest level of cordiality and friendship. With the arrival of Roosevelt to the presidency, and considering the parallel advent to power of Hitler in Germany, the bilateral relations were set to be dramatically modified: in fact, at least initially, the considerations over Mussolini and Fascism remained coherent with the previous administrations, such that Mussolini himself was identified as an adequate fit for the role of equaliser and mediator in Europe, specifically towards Hitler's expansionism and destabilising force. This latter view was confirmed in 1934, when Mussolini stepped up to confront Hitler, as mentioned priorly in this dissertation, once acknowledged of the *coup* in Austria, after which the *duce* implemented his efforts in the implementation of peaceful resolutions and agreements.

However, certain scenarios did, indeed, project the possibility that the bilateral relations would have not been as idyllically friendly as before the advent of Roosevelt: not only the commercial disagreements, stemmed from the contrasting views on free trade, but also, and especially, from the question of Ethiopia. Overall, by the end of the Ethiopian campaign, the relationship between Washington and Rome had suffered crucial modifications. Although the opinions on Mussolini and his movement remained mostly positive, the aspects that had been (knowingly) overlooked for several years commenced to heavily influence the

⁶³ By 1933, Italy had experienced a drop in its exports by two thirds, and unemployment peaked at 1.1 million workers.

⁶⁴ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 128.

transatlantic ties, and, consequently, they convinced Washington that its approach needed several modifications.

2. ROOSEVELT, ROME AND THE ITALIAN DIASPORA

2.1 Franklin Delano Roosevelt takes over the White House

In March 1933, democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president of the United States, succeeding President Hoover and bringing back the Democratic Party to the White House after more than a decade of Republican dominance. At the 1933 elections, Roosevelt crushed the polls for the presidential race against Hoover himself, obtaining a landslide victory in 42 out of 48 American states, overall gaining 57.4% of votes (22.821.277 single votes): this result marked the beginning of the “New Deal”⁶⁵ era, which would have dominated the political life of the States for two decades.

Roosevelt nominated Cordell Hull, a former judge and diplomat, as new Secretary of State, but, despite the political and administrative thorough reshuffle, the intentions and purposes towards Rome remained identical to the ones pursued by the precedent administrations. Roosevelt and Hull aimed at strengthening the bilateral relations, and, specifically, at supporting the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, in order to maintain a heavy influence on the Old Continent. Therefore, as a policy plan, Italy was to be included in the entire plethora of proposals and discussions centred upon key issues regarding Washington and Europe, especially considering that Mussolini was perceived as the only European leader who could interlocuter with Hitler and influence his decisions in terms of foreign policy.

The first international matter addressed by the new American administration concerned the economic sphere, perceived to be one of the most dividing and dangerous context within Europe: Hull, especially, believed that economic rivalries had generated several crises and disruptions in the continent, and, for this reason, he deemed necessary the achievement of an enhanced economic inter-dependence.⁶⁶

Therefore, Roosevelt immediately undertook two important decisions concerning this framework, which explicitly manifested the opening of a new era for the American international relations: the isolationist period had come to an end, and Washington was now heavily committed towards a greater economic engagement with the rest of the world.

⁶⁵ The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was enacted in 1935, creating the National Recovery Administration, which aimed at fuelling the recovery of America after the Great Depression. Specifically, the Act intended to predispose codes of “fair competition” among industries, to fix prices and wages

⁶⁶ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 135.

The first major decision was the creation of the Export-Import Bank, intended to act as the economic arm of the United States for international trade. Originally, there were two different banks created by Roosevelt: the first was focused on the trade exchange with the Soviet Union, whereas the second would have woven economic relations with neighbouring Cuba. By 1935, the two banks were unified and the emerging institution, still named Export-Import Bank, was granted larger capitals and authorities to deal with all countries in the world, not solely the two mentioned above. In the following years, the institution mostly diluted money and efforts towards the Latin American countries, in pursuance of the declared “Good neighbour policy” launched by Roosevelt⁶⁷, but large credits were also extended to countries like Italy, indeed, or even China.

The second fundamental decision undertaken by Roosevelt concerned the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act (RTAA): this Act was enacted on 12th June 1934, and it granted the President the power to “negotiate trade agreements based upon reciprocal tariff reductions with other countries”, namely modifying the amount of tariffs (up to 50%), in order to enlarge the amount of free trade between the states. Differently from the past, such tariff reductions (or, more rarely, increases) were now meant to be enacted through executive orders, and not through treaties requiring the approval by the Congress. This decision streamlined and facilitated the process of closing trade agreements with foreign countries, and it enabled the United States to conclude nineteen trade agreements between 1934 and 1939 (the agreement with Italy was among the first concluded). In the future, this program would have become the yardstick for the drafting of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), then renamed World Trade Organization (WTO).⁶⁸

Both these breakthrough decisions, indeed, favoured the commercial relations between Italy and the United States, not only reinforcing the economic inter-relationships of the two countries, but also constructing a greater departure point for all of the other foreign policy issues central to the American establishment. In fact, as mentioned in previous paragraphs, the State Department believed that, through a tighter relationship on the economic field, the Fascist regime would have been less inclined towards destabilising actions on the international scenario, worried about antagonising Washington itself.

Furthermore, the positive depiction of Mussolini, within the American administration, witnessed a steep rise, especially after the usual diplomatic visit by the newly nominated American ambassador to Italy, Breckinridge Long, which described a stable and flourishing framework in the peninsula. The several reports submitted to Roosevelt by Long provided a detailed description of the various governmental programs, implemented by the corporatist institutions of Rome, through different departments, and they

⁶⁷ A key topic of American foreign policy from the 30s onwards, which envisioned a behaviour of non-intervention and non-interference in the affairs of southern American countries, where Washington had intervened heavily during the century: Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, Panama, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua all suffered direct military intervention from the United States in the 1910s.

⁶⁸ Office of the Historian, *New Deal Trade Policy: The Export-Import Bank & the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act*, 1934.

ultimately were intended to function as interesting suggestions to the very same American governmental departments. Indeed, the corporativist system of Italy and the framework proposed by Roosevelt, through the National Industry Recovery Act (NIRA), presented similar precepts and propositions, since they had been both prospected to further enhance the governmental control of the internal affairs: both countries, in fact, in Roosevelt's view, necessitated a thorough reassessment of their infrastructures and institutions, and such reassessment could only pass through the hands of the State.⁶⁹

Mussolini himself boasted that the American establishment had shaped its grand strategy on the example of the system enacted by the Fascist regime in the twenties, although this correlation proved to be inexact. However, these similarities in internal policy, and the positive relationship woven between the two administrations, generated a ripe framework of cooperation and reciprocal support, as demonstrated by the case of the Japanese invasion of Chinese Manchuria. In fact, Roosevelt desired to utilise the peace-driving and mediating presence of Mussolini to exert pressure onto Japan to resolve the crisis. Although this effort did not produce the desired efforts, it represents an adequate exemplification of the role that Mussolini acquired in Washington's view, a role which, in some years' time, would have been once again assigned to the *duce* concerning the Nazi German expansionist drive.

With respect to this, it must be noted that the State Department used parallel criteria to analyse the rise of Fascism in Italy and the advent of Nazism in Germany: the situation generated by the coming to power of Hitler prospected the same possibilities of pushing back the pressure of the socialist Soviet-inspired left that had been envisioned in Italy. Similarly to Fascism, the Nazi party was dissected into two different souls, an extremist and a moderate one, led by Hitler himself, who was deemed the favoured actor in this internal struggle. The prospect of the moderate faction achieving full control over the country presented a favourable occasion, for Washington, to exploit the German economic output and geopolitical presence: the former president of the German National Bank (*Reichsbank*), Hjalmar Schacht, now undisputed leader of the economic section of the country, had already promised that "the American businesses in Germany had nothing to fear"⁷⁰, despite the overly nationalistic and aggressive declarations concerning foreign policy and expansionism. The core opinion, within the American State Department, was that Hitler and Goering, leaders of the moderate faction of the party, would have implemented policies parallel to the ones enacted by Mussolini and his fascists: this possibility, if manifested, could have generated, for Washington, the same benefits and advantages priorly bore by the new course of Italy, namely a stronger influence over the continent and an economic foothold in the country. *A posteriori*, this consideration proved to be wrongful, but it appears as a logical consideration given the explicit commonalities between the situation in Italy and Germany.

Afar from the German chapter, the relations between Mussolini and Roosevelt proceeded on a flourishing path for the entire duration of 1934, especially due to the extremely positive consequences of the decisions

⁶⁹ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁷⁰ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 140.

undertook by Mussolini with respect to the aforementioned German chapter. In fact, as narrated priorly in this dissertation, the Fascist leader had strongly opposed the *Anschluss* attempt by Hitler, deploying military contingents on the border with Austria and explicitly condemning the action itself. Moreover, Mussolini had decided to launch a four-powers Conference, which resulted in the signature of the Four-Powers Pact in 1933, between Italy, Germany, France and Britain, centred upon the necessity to distend the heavy line of tensions undergoing between these major powers (especially France and Germany). The development of this conference was constantly forwarded, by Rome, to the United States, not only to adequately maintain an updated position concerning the European framework and equilibria, but also to reassure Washington, which had initially received insinuations that the four-way pact could become a fully operating anti-American alliance, that the Pact would have produced all-around benefits. This initial antagonistic conception, by the American State Department, concerning the Four-Powers Pact, was mentioned directly by Dino Grandi, ambassador to London in 1933, who reported to Mussolini that, in response to the worries forwarded by ambassador Norman Davis, he had said that:

Niente era più lontano dal pensiero di V. E. che un blocco europeo contro gli Stati Uniti. V. E. aveva sempre condotto una politica di collaborazione con gli Stati Uniti e aveva dato al Governo di Washington le prove più concrete di amicizia accettando nel 1931 la moratoria, nel 1932 il piano Hoover per il disarmo, ed il dicembre scorso prendendo, prima dell'Inghilterra, la decisione di pagare la quota del debito. Ero autorizzato a dichiarargli formalmente che l'Italia era ostile ad ogni idea di fronte unico antiamericano.⁷¹

(Nothing was further from the thought of V. E. than a European blockade against the United States. V. E. had always conducted a policy of collaboration with the United States and had given to the most concrete proof of friendship, by accepting, in 1931, the moratorium, in 1932, Hoover's plan for disarmament, and, last December, taking, before England, the decision to pay the debt share. I was authorized to tell him formally that Italy was hostile to any idea of an anti-American united front.)

Logically, the prospect of such arrangement generating a proper distention throughout Europe appeared extremely positive to Washington, since it would have produced, as argued by ambassador Long, "peace in Europe for the next ten years, and by that time, the depression would be over".⁷² Such peaceful context in Europe would have implemented the possibilities for economic investments, political influence and, overall, as much distance as possible from the shadow of war, which, at this time, did not seem as impossible as hoped.

Therefore, the Four-Powers Conference generated a homonymous pact, which received a public praise from President Roosevelt, who perceived it as a direct and logical continuance of the so-called "Locarno spirit"

⁷¹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Settima Serie, Vol. XIII, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, p. 360.

⁷² Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 142.

inaugurated some years prior. Moreover, the arrangement clarified to the American State Department and to the president himself that the presence of Mussolini on the international stage had produced a highly favourable outcome, which, consequently, convinced Washington that, by this time, Italy had properly become a major and influent power on the European scenario: one of the many summaries forwarded by the internal departments to the State Department stated that “Italy has come to occupy a key position in the European concert. Italy not infrequently holds and aims to keep the balance of power”.⁷³

This clear conviction concerning Italy persisted throughout the following times, especially after the central role held by Rome at the Geneva Conference for Disarmament: indeed, the initial call for a thorough discussion about the issue and the necessity to arrange an international agreement on the elimination of all aggressive weapons originated from Roosevelt himself, but Mussolini had already declared that Italy would have immediately followed on the American effort. Roosevelt himself, within the numerous exchanges he had with ambassador Long, stated that in Mussolini rested the highest chance of finally obtaining concrete decisions and actions from the Geneva talks.

However, the situation at Geneva produced unexpected developments: the mediation between France, which desired a strong limitation of the German military capabilities, and Germany, which aspired, under Hitler, to re-gain their military might and capacity, failed even with the enhanced presence of Italy.

This failure produced the German abandonment of the conference and an Italian change of *modus operandi*, shying away from the American behaviour. Mussolini, understood that the Geneva talks would have generated no true result on the geopolitical scenario, reiterated the centrality of the Four-Powers Pact, which was deemed the sole feasible instrument to contain the tensions in Europe (namely, to appease Hitler and his expansionist drive)⁷⁴, and, simultaneously, signalled his intention to abandon the inconsequential and sterile Geneva talks. The conference, as envisioned, failed in the span of some months, in 1934, and, although several efforts were redirected towards the Four-Powers framework, even this prospected system of peacekeeping did not provide a concrete response to the European issues.

By the time it had become clear that the disarmament and distension talks had not produced the desired outcome, the behaviour of Italy had undergone a slight modification in terms of foreign policy alignment to Washington. Although the commercial framework had been forwarded as a central matter between the two shores of the Atlantic, the strategic talks between Washington and Rome encountered several setbacks. The disagreements that emerged with respect to this matter represented the first proper unalignment between the two countries, and they manifested that certain considerations about the Fascist state had been overlooked or underestimated.

Discussions on a trade agreement with Italy begun in September 1934, bearing promising prospects, considering the level of cordiality and friendship between the two nations, but they were immediately met

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Quartararo Rosaria, *I rapporti italo-americani durante il fascismo (1922-1941)*, Edizione Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli, 1999, p. 99.

with ambiguities and differences. These discussions would have been the incipit of several similar discussions with other European powers, in order to construct a widely shared system of liberalised trade which could tackle the harsh consequences of the Great Depression. Indeed, as clarified by Italian ambassador to Washington, Augusto Rosso, although the trade agreement represented the correct decision to undertake, the Italian commercial framework was facing serious problems concerning the country's trade deficit with other states, and this weakness urged for the conclusion of bilateral trade. This necessity represented an obvious incompatibility with the American project, but both diplomatic branches believed that such incompatibility could have been overcome with thorough negotiations.⁷⁵

The initial talks were met with slight but impeding disagreements, specifically on the matter of the balance of trade being tipped in favour of the United States. Washington, focused on its project of an international free trade framework, believed that this vision, centred upon bilateral trade imbalances, was producing nothing but disadvantages to the project itself, being perceived as a "narrow nationalistic point of view", as declared by Francis Sayre, assistant secretary of State.⁷⁶

Nonetheless, by May 1935, formal negotiations should have begun, after having agreed that the Italian position on bilateral trade would have not been overlooked. Indeed, although the American economic presence in Italy had sharply diminished after the Great Depression, Roosevelt and Hull believed that, once one European country had been convinced of the liberalised trade model, all other countries would have understood the significance of the latter and pushed to participate. This conviction, from the American establishment, rapidly lost its consistence when, in February 1935, Italy declared a trade embargo, covering almost the entirety of items traded with Washington, in order to drastically level the trade imbalance of the country. With respect to this, in the same month, Breckenridge Long, the American ambassador in Rome, wrote to the Secretary of State, Hull, about the prospects of such decision by the Fascist regime:

While retaliation is not one of the nobler impulses, sometimes events seem to justify it. Italy has taken the drastic step of preventing practically all imports, which affects America more than any other country because we were the biggest exporter to Italy. Italy intends to achieve an absolute parity of trade balance as composed of visible items with each individual country and this would result in discrimination against the United States. [...] Italy practically has disavowed in spirit the most favoured nation clause, and so is not in a position to appeal to it for protection. She now hopes to arrange bartering agreements to circumvent labour leaders and trade barriers.

Under these circumstances, I recommend to your immediate and careful consideration the emplacement of restrictions, limitations or delays on credits moving to Italy, including the discouragement of American

⁷⁵ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

passengers and freight moving on Italian lines, or, if this proves not to be feasible, the raising of our tariffs on Italian products.⁷⁷

It must be noted, though, that, despite such effective threat on the prevision of trade liberalisation, the State Department enhanced the necessity to commence negotiating talks with Rome, basically superseding the Italian implicit efforts to undermine them. The State Department was, indeed, convinced that the measures undertaken by the Fascist government were necessary to resolve the several issues faced by the Italian economy (which was suffering from an inflationary surge and its correlated effects of growing debt and unemployment), but, simultaneously, it was clear that “an effective restoration of [Italy’s] economic equilibrium awaits in large measure a gradual resumption of world trade on a higher level”, as stated by the Department’s thirteen-pages February report⁷⁸.

Nonetheless, by May, it had become clear that the initial conviction concerning Italy being entirely aligned with Washington on economic policy, amongst other contexts, was not completely true: after the failure of the disarmament talks and the four-powers drive, this consecutive failure, although on a different matter, signalled that the behaviour of Mussolini was not wholly coinciding with the perception that run through the White House.

Once all of these attempts intrinsically failed, Mussolini, knowingly or not, seriously tested the tenure of European and trans-Atlantic relations concerning the absolutes of war and peace: the time had become ripe for the launch of the conquest of Ethiopia and the propagandised rebirth of the Empire.

2.2 The Ethiopian crisis: a wedge between Washington and Rome

Having already narrated the chronology of the Ethiopian conflict, it would be superfluous to describe the plethora of diplomatic relations between Italy and Western powers: therefore, this paragraph will be centred upon the international consequences that such conflict generated, specifically with respect to the United States.

Before the beginning of the hostilities, although there were already enough information and communications signalling the future endeavours of Italy in Africa, the diplomatic contacts between Rome and Washington were largely intense, specifically concerning the real intentions of the Fascist regime towards Ethiopia. In fact, in a conversation, which was successively directly reported to Mussolini, between

⁷⁷ Office of the Historian, *The Ambassador in Italy (Long) to the Secretary of State*, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1935.

⁷⁸ Schmitz D., *op. cit.*, p. 148.

Italian Undersecretary of State to the Foreign Ministry, Fulvio Suvich, and the American ambassador in Rome, Breckinridge Long, the following position was forwarded by the Italian side:

A proposito dei rapporti italo-etioptici, dico all'Ambasciatore che noi dobbiamo liquidare ora definitivamente tale questione. Per avere mano libera in Europa non dobbiamo avere preoccupazioni dalla parte dell'Africa. Tali preoccupazioni esistono effettivamente. Ogni qualvolta noi siamo stati impegnati, sia in Libia che nella grande guerra, gli abissini hanno cercato di attaccarci per toglierci le nostre colonie. Li abbiamo tenuti in freno relativamente con poche forze. Oggi però le cose sono cambiate. Gli abissini sono istruiti da ufficiali europei; sono armati di armi moderne e il loro spirito xenofobo e soprattutto antitaliano è notevolmente rafforzato. In queste condizioni noi, non solo non possiamo ritirare le truppe dall'Africa Orientale, ma dovremo mandarne delle altre.⁷⁹

(Regarding the Italian Ethiopian relations, I say to the Ambassador that we must now definitively settle this issue. To have free hand in Europe we must not have concerns on the African side. Such concerns do exist. Whenever we have been engaged, both in Libya and in the Great War, the Abyssinians tried to attack us to remove our colonies. We have kept them at bay with relatively few forces. Today, however, things have changed. The Abyssinians are instructed by European officers; they are armed with modern weapons and their xenophobic, especially anti-Italian, spirit is considerably strengthened. In these conditions, not only we cannot withdraw our troops from East Africa, but we'll have to dispatch more.)

Notwithstanding this blatant declarations, the American diplomacy attempted to convince Italy to desist from such enterprise: specifically, as reported by the same conversation transcribed above, ambassador Long “asks whether Great Britain is willing to cede (to Italy) certain parts of its colonies, in order to make us abandon the African deed”. To this proposal, clearly without any foundation neither from the British side nor from the Italian one, Suvich responded that “this was never discussed. Anyhow, this possibility is not in our calculations”.⁸⁰

In Washington, the commencement of the African conflict signalled a surprising awareness, concerning Mussolini and Fascist Italy: the declaimed aggressiveness in the Italian foreign policy, that had often been labelled as mere propaganda, was now manifesting itself on a concrete and dangerous basis. Consequently, the American State Department did, indeed, voice moderate concerns towards the Italian executive, despite it was already well-known that the Italian regime would have acted in such manners, stating that “a war erupted in any place in the world could potentially be extremely dangerous for everyone”, but, ultimately, even after a direct appeal forwarded by Abyssinian *negus* Selassie himself, it was decided that Washington would have not sided with either parties in the conflict. After all, “Abyssinia is very far from the United

⁷⁹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. I, p. 311.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

States”⁸¹, as declared from a State Department’s official. Therefore, the problem should have been forwarded to the League of Nations, closer to the problem and, consequently, more adequately equipped to face it. With respect to this, it must be underlined that, although the events narrated in the previous pages could suggest that Washington had finally emerged out of its isolationist stance, Roosevelt and his “New Deal” clearly intended to remain detached from the majority of problems on the other shore of the Atlantic. Roosevelt and the entire American diplomatic system were totally aware that the Italian cooperation was too precious to be lost in a colonial matter, considering the impending question of the German rearmament and the aggressive stances manifested by Hitler (the attempted annexation of Austria had just happened), but the Ethiopian crisis simultaneously presented a far more dangerous threat: the relationship with Britain. Indeed, it rapidly became clear that the real obstacle to the Italian conquest of Ethiopia was not Addis Abeba, or Paris, but London. As already narrated in the previous chapter, the British diplomacy attempted to relieve the pressure from the crisis as much as possible, and, additionally, it also conducted secret negotiations with Selassie to achieve strategic territorial exchanges. This entire scenario, ultimately, produced an implicit confrontation between Rome and London, and, with respect to Washington, it now became considerably harder to decide whether to side with the former or the latter.

On the other side of the ocean, Mussolini was largely confident that, in compliance with the aforementioned isolationistic stance, the Americans would have not confirmed the official condemnation of the League of Nations, which had concluded that Italy had performed a proper aggression on Abyssinia: indeed, although Roosevelt and Hull performed every possible diplomatic effort to appease and halt the African campaign, the American neutrality stood firmly, as projected by the *duce*. Roosevelt himself was extremely convinced that the conflict could have been stopped, but the American leader most likely overlooked a fundamental component of Mussolini’s power: the Fascist leader reserved to the military prestige a quite high position, believing that he had to demonstrate to the world that his leadership was not limited to the diplomatic and cooperative sphere. Mussolini wanted to become a *duce* in its entire significance. Once the campaign commenced, it was clear that Roosevelt had miscalculated the force and effectiveness of diplomacy with respect to Italy.

Immediately after the invasion commenced, Roosevelt enacted a congressional law, labelled Neutrality Act, which issued an arms embargo towards both countries involved in the conflict, but Roosevelt did not fully extend the reach of these sanctions, in order to avoid a proper rupture of relationships. The raw materials which Italy received from the United States, such as iron, cotton, and, mostly, oil⁸², were not included in the sanctioned items, whereas Ethiopia, which resupplied itself almost exclusively from the Washington, suffered a heavy toll from this Neutrality Act. This action followed precedent declarations, by President

⁸¹ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110.

⁸² Mussolini himself, before the Monaco Conference in 1938, affirmed that, had sanctions been extended to the oil supply, Italy would have been forced to abandon the Ethiopian campaign in a week’s time. (Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, p, 117).

Roosevelt, concerning the behaviour of the United States concerning such issue. Indeed, as reported in September 1935 by the Italian ambassador to Washington, Rosso, to Mussolini:

Il Presidente degli Stati Uniti ha precisato ieri, in intervista stampa, che il Governo degli Stati Uniti si regolerà unicamente secondo la legge sulla neutralità, votata recentemente dal Congresso. Tale dichiarazione sembra doversi interpretare nel senso che gli Stati Uniti non (dico non) prenderanno iniziativa per invocare formalmente patto di Parigi, e non (dico non) interverranno per applicazione di sanzioni che fossero eventualmente decise dalla Società delle Nazioni (S.d.N.), se non entro i limiti della legge per la neutralità, cioè mediante embargo materiale di guerra applicato ad entrambi i belligeranti ed altre misure minori.⁸³

The President of the United States specified yesterday, in a press interview, that the US Government will behave exclusively based on the law on neutrality, recently voted by Congress. This statement seems to have to be interpreted as meaning that the US will not (I say not) take the initiative to formally invoke the Paris Pact, and they will not (I say not) intervene for the application of sanctions which may be eventually decided by the League of Nations (LON), except within the limits of the Law on Neutrality, that is, through a material embargo of war, applied to both belligerents, and other minor measures.

Overall, despite the moral condemnations and the military embargo, this decision heavily favoured Italy, and, furthermore, it basically emptied the League of Nations' sanctions, which would have been forwarded in some weeks' time, of their intrinsic values.

Indeed, Roosevelt believed that Italy had to be obstructed in its colonial and aggressive quest, which violated several international agreements, but, at the same time, he was fond of the necessity to prevent excessive deteriorations in Europe: the power and influence of Hitler had been steeply growing for the last two years, and the shadow of war appeared heavier than ever. To this, Roosevelt decided to moderate his opposition towards Italy, still deemed as an ally against the dangerousness of the *Fuhrer*, mostly because a hypothetic victory of Italy in the African conflict would have strengthened the latter's international position and prestige, and, consequently, it would have provided a more powerful deterrent against German expansionism. However, this conflict also signalled that war had not been banished, as initially declared with the Kellogg-Briand agreement or the similar international treaties signed in the 1920s, and, mostly, that Europe could once again be touched by war.

Be that as it may, despite the glaring opposition to the conflict manifested by the American press, and, consequently, public opinion, during the course of the conflict, the oil importation from the United States sharply increased, as did the importation of trucks from Ford (in spite of the embargo). Despite the embargo, practical or moral, several American companies continued to trade materials, which could be indirectly utilised in the African conflict, with Italy, and, ultimately, the very same State Department, through the

⁸³ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. II, p.98.

words of the Under Secretary of State William Phillips, believed that “compared to the ten major American enterprises willing to follow the governmental directives, abstaining from exporting oil, there surely are other 120 companies which would not do such thing, [...], we are certain that Germany, Romania, Hungary and Japan will not apply sanctions. Therefore, we wonder whether it would be just to penalise the American trade”⁸⁴. From such statements, it appears clear that Washington understood the intrinsic uselessness of the sanctions, which would have been easily circumvented, and, consequently, decided to uphold their economic and diplomatic interests, in spite of the very same embargo they had declared.

This ambiguity was reflected in the diplomatic exchanges between the two countries: secretary of State Hull referred to ambassador Rosso that Mussolini had violated the Kellogg-Briand pact, alongside several international arrangements, and that “still, he expects that the United States continue to resupply Italy with military equipment, while he carries on with his *ad libitum* war”⁸⁵. This declaration testifies the double-track utilised by the American establishment in the entire scenario, especially after the pressure exerted on Washington by the public opinion and the international pacifist forums, Geneva amongst all. Moreover, the data on exportation towards Italy testified that the American oil had played a crucial role in the hostilities in Abyssinia, since the oil companies which traded with Italy covered the entire needs of the latter for the campaign.

Overall, the main consideration undertaken by the State Department concerned the possibility that, faced with a total opposition from both the United States and the European powers, through the League of Nations and the sanctions, Mussolini could finally decide to reach out to Hitler and precipitate the events into another global war. This, above all others, was the option to absolutely prevent from happening. Thus, once the Neutrality Act expired, faced with the necessity to enact a new one, Roosevelt could do nothing but re-confirm the provisions of the previous Act, extending the duration of the latter altogether. There was, indeed, the possibility of apposing the presidential veto over the bill itself, but this chance faded when the Congress voted the law with the so-called “super majority” of two-thirds of both chambers. This decision definitively casted a shadow over the League of Nations and its role as international mediator and supervisor, demonstrating its intrinsic incapacabilities and inadequacies.

The weakening of the League of Nations, coupled with the dilution of the British leadership in Europe, after the Hoare-Laval Pact scandal erupted⁸⁶, not only permitted Mussolini to proceed his conquest campaign (almost) without preoccupations, but, most especially, it also manifested that the European and international

⁸⁴ Damiani Claudia, *Mussolini e gli Stati Uniti (1922-1935)*, Cappelli, Bologna, 1980, p. 305.

⁸⁵ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁸⁶ In December 1935, the British Foreign Minister Samuel Hoare, supported by French premier Pierre Laval, proposed to Mussolini a peaceful resolution of the conflict, through the concession of two-thirds of Ethiopia to Italy, and of a strip of Eritrea and the port of Assab to Ethiopia. This arrangement, once forwarded to Mussolini, was welcomed with favour by the Fascist leader, but, before the settlement could be properly enacted, the plan was leaked to the public and the British press violently rejected it, since it appeared unrighteous that the country labelled as “aggressor” would receive more territories than the ones effectively conquered until then. This caused the resignation of Hoare and a surprised reaction of Roosevelt, who did not expect such erroneous calculation from the British allies.

system of protection from warlike events was in shambles, and that the *deus ex machina* of the previous global conflict, namely the United States, had no intention to intervene in the old continent, had war erupted. The entirety of these considerations was fully acknowledged by all the political leaders of the time, but, specifically, it was borne in Hitler's mind, who would have utilised it all to re-militarise Germany and, in some years' time, to wage war on several European countries.⁸⁷

2.3. Repercussions and strained alliances: Rome and Washington after the War

From the very beginning of the hostilities, it could be already analysed that the American public and political opinion towards Italy and Mussolini was encountering a phase of transition. The United States utterly condemned the actions of the Fascist regime in Africa, but the opposition did not regard solely the diplomatic sphere: Wall Street and, more generally, the entire American economic framework, were concerned by the possible instability generated by such conflict, especially considering the chance of another global conflict erupting from the seeds of this very same African campaign. Mussolini did, indeed, reassure Washington that the war in Ethiopia was not the "first of many" conflicts, but it represented a pure civilisation act towards a nation which "had lived for hundreds of years at the mercy of greedy and predatory leaders"⁸⁸. Logically, the *duce* was obliged to entertain such reassurance, to maintain both his international prestige and the friendly relationship with the United States, essential, in such time, for the economic advantages it generated (apart from the obvious diplomatic and political ones).

However, a crucial role, within the American soil, was held by the Italo-American community, which had grown gradually stronger and more central in the electorate of the Democratic Party: the community personally perceived the patriotism stemming from the Ethiopian War to the point that some Italo-American citizens (although in a very small number) decided to set off and directly participate to the conflict.

The Italian ambassador, Rosso, himself, participated to rallies and manifestations which favoured the Italian actions in Africa, in order to heavily propagandise the opinion of the Italo-American community and, ultimately, to pressure Roosevelt's administration into signing a favourable Act for Italy itself. Moreover, many efforts were redirected towards supporting those organs of the public opinion which strongly endorsed the isolationist stances: the combined pressure, onto the executive, from both these factions, generated what we already described, namely a more lenient legislative provision concerning the conflict. The ultimate manifestation of the success of such efforts stands in the American decision to withdraw the

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Mussolini Benito, *Scritti e Discorsi*, vol. X, pp.63-64.

sanctions against Italy, on 21st of June 1936, two weeks before the League of Nations decided to act parallelly (4th of July), due to the positive efforts conducted by France and Britain.⁸⁹

Despite the prospect of the lifting of sanctions (which, indeed, had never been harsh enough to utterly hinder the bilateral relations), in the months prior to the official decision, several tensions persisted in such relations: Washington did not recognise the “empire” allegedly generated from Italy after the war was over, but Rome insisted on presenting its king as both “King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia”. To recognise such terminology, by the American establishment, would have declared a blatant recognition of the Italian actions in Africa, and, despite such recognition would have generated a rapprochement of the Italo-American electorate, it would have equally produced a detachment of a significant portion of the American population, which harshly condemned the Fascist actions. Overall, as reported to Mussolini by ambassador Rosso, concerning a meeting with Undersecretary of State Phillips, “President Roosevelt does not believe he could pursue an act (the recognition of the Italian empire) which would have signified, politically, a formal recognition of the Italian sovereignty, even before of the decisions made by the most interests European powers.”⁹⁰. Nonetheless, during previous talks with the American Department of State, in May 1936, represented by Deputy Secretary of State John Moore, the same ambassador Rosso referred the following:

Chiesi quale fondamento avessero notizie pubblicate dai giornali circa l'applicazione della cosiddetta ‘dottrina di Stimson’. Signor Moore rispose osservando che, se l'Italia avesse creato in Etiopia un ‘deliberato fantoccio’, tipo Manchukuo, Stati Uniti sarebbero stati costretti dall'analogia stessa dei due casi, a negare riconoscimento. Aggiunse poi testualmente: ‘Caso sarebbe diverso, se si trattasse di annessione’. [...] Credetti utile sollecitare io stesso quesito interpretativo allo scopo di fare meglio precisare pensiero del mio interlocutore. Questi rispose indirettamente osservando che ‘la dottrina di Stimson⁹¹ è cosa molto vaga, la quale consiste, del resto, in una semplice dichiarazione fatta dal Segretario di Stato di una Amministrazione che non è più al potere.’ [...] Assistente Segretario di Stato aggiunse, infine, che gli Stati Uniti non sono direttamente interessati allo Statuto territoriale dell'Etiopia e, quindi, accetterebbero senza difficoltà ‘soluzione che venisse concordata fra Potenze europee più interessate’.⁹²

(I asked what basis had published news about the application of the so-called ‘Stimson doctrine’. Mr. Moore replied observing that, had Italy created in Ethiopia a ‘deliberate puppet’, like Manchukuo, the United States would have been forced, by the very analogy of the two cases, to deny recognition. He then added: ‘Case would be different, were it annexation’. [...] I thought it useful to ask an interpretative question, in order to

⁸⁹ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 126-129.

⁹⁰ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. IV, p.207.

⁹¹ The Stimson doctrine consisted of a policy design, forwarded by then Secretary of State Henry L. Stimson, during the Hoover presidency. This terminology was generated by an official note, delivered to China and Japan in January 1932, which affirmed that the United States would have denied recognition of any territory annexed with the use of military force.

⁹² Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. III, p. 911.

make my interlocutor's thoughts more precise. He replied indirectly by observing that 'Stimson's doctrine is a very vague thing, which consists, after all, of a simple statement made by the Secretary of State of an Administration that is no longer in power.' [...] Assistant Secretary of State added, finally, that the United States is not directly interested in the territorial Statute of Ethiopia and, therefore, would accept without difficulty 'a solution to be agreed between the most interested European powers'.)

Nonetheless, in the end, Roosevelt and his administration decided to persist with the non-recognition of the Italian actions in Ethiopia: this diplomatic stance contributed to escalate the already tense relations between the two countries, and, fundamentally, it negated the declaration reported above, ultimately applying, to Italy, the Stimson doctrine itself. Although the relations remained moderately cordial and apparently smooth as before, there appeared to be a veneer of discord beneath the surface, which, *a posteriori*, permits to state that the deterioration of bilateral relations effectively commenced in this precise period.

From this point onwards, a sort of light "cold war" underwent between Washington and Rome: in March 1937, Galeazzo Ciano, acting as Foreign Minister, referred to the Italian ambassador in Washington, Suvich, that the American State Department was intended to remove the American consul in Ethiopia. Specifically, he reported that:

Questo ambasciatore degli Stati Uniti mi ha dato partecipazione del seguente comunicato che il suo governo intendeva dare alla stampa: 'Il signor Cornelio van Engert, ministro americano e console generale ad Addis Abeba, sta per lasciare il suo posto per congedo. Alla partenza del signor Engert il signor Morris Hughes, console americano, assumerà la tutela degli interessi americani fino alla fine di marzo, epoca in cui l'ufficio sarà chiuso. L'azione del Dipartimento a questo riguardo è in concordanza con la pratica d'uso di porre termine alle attività consolari in ogni distretto dove gli interessi americani non richiedono più tali servizi'. Ho detto a questo ambasciatore degli Stati Uniti che l'astensionismo degli Stati Uniti in Etiopia mi sembrava un provvedimento in netto contrasto con la realtà; nonché con i provvedimenti che in materia hanno adottato la maggior parte degli Stati, sia col riconoscere esplicitamente *de jure* l'Impero, sia col riconoscerlo *de facto* con misure di vario ordine e carattere. L'ambasciatore ha portato le mie conversazioni a conoscenza di codesto governo e mi ha fatto conoscere che questo ha sospeso per ora l'emanazione del comunicato.⁹³

(This United States ambassador has given me the following communication, that his government intended to give to the press: 'Mr. Cornelio van Engert, American minister and consul general in Addis Ababa, is about to leave his place for dismissal. After the departure of Mr. Engert, Mr. Morris Hughes, American consul, will be taking over the protection of American interests until the end of March, date when the office will be closed. The action of the Department in this regard is consistent with the practice of terminating consular activities in each district where US interests no longer require such services.' I told this ambassador that the United

⁹³ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. VI, p. 300.

States' abstention in Ethiopia seemed, to me, a measure in stark contrast with reality; as well as with the measures adopted in this field by most of the States, whether explicitly recognizing *de jure* the Empire or recognizing it *de facto* with various measures. The Ambassador has brought my conversations to the attention of this government and has informed me that it has suspended, for the time being, the issuing of the communiqué.)

This decision, by the American establishment, to remove the diplomatic representation from Addis Abeba, signalled a harsh critique of the Italian actions in the region, and, additionally, it bore the capacity of undeniably enhance the rupture between Washington and Rome. After all, both in the past and in the present times, whenever a foreign country decides to terminate its diplomatic deeds in a specific nation, this arrangement fundamentally suggests a strong setback in the bilateral relations (except for situations of warfare, both internal or external, which force the foreign countries to temporarily shut down embassies and consulates, once their citizens are evacuated from the areas).

Moreover, the inaugural speech delivered by Roosevelt on 1st of December 1936, after his re-election had been confirmed in November, implicitly manifested an accusation towards Italy, and also Germany, concerning their non-democratic behaviours and intentions. Indeed, in the previous months, both European leaders had openly accused the democratic governments of the world (mostly Europe) which, in their views, had been mistreating Rome and Berlin for years. This concatenation of events demonstrated the occurrence of the very same concerns voiced by the democratic countries, especially France, Britain, and the United States, which feared a rapprochement between the two right-wing leaders.

Indeed, Rome and Berlin had significantly improved their bilateral relations since 1934, when Mussolini strongarmed Hitler into abandoning his bellicose intentions towards Austria: after the Ethiopian conflict, faced with the ambiguous behaviour of the Western powers, Mussolini turned his attention to the German chancellor, prosecuting a double-track strategy which had been inaugurated years before. The *duce* was convinced that both sides, the British-led democratic one and the Nazi-led destabilising one, required to be explored by Fascist Italy: the main purpose was, indeed, to achieve closer ties with Britain and maintain the diplomatic channel open, but, simultaneously, to avoid a total rejection of an alliance with Germany, given the favourable opinion held by Hitler with respect to the Italian leader. As noted by several historians, mostly Quartararo, the objective of Mussolini was to increment the Italian geopolitical weight through threatening a full alliance with Germany, feared by all Europe, in order to strongarm the other powers into recognising Italy a more significant role in the continental affairs. Specifically, this strategy aimed at pressuring the European powers into a full pacification with Italy, which would have projected the peninsula to the same level as Britain and France. Once the British government of Anthony Eden refused, similarly to Roosevelt's United States, to recognise the Italian Empire in Ethiopia, Mussolini, in the urge to avoid isolationism, now dangerously more probable than before the war, decided to politically turn towards Hitler,

who, strategically, had already implicitly declared that Germany was largely eager to recognise the Italian empire. Indeed, in September 1936, the chargé of affairs in Berlin, Magistrati, telegraphed to Ciano that:

Conosco anch'io come von Hassell e Frank abbiano sempre dichiarato che la Germania era pronta al riconoscimento al momento da noi desiderato. Ma resta il dubbio in che cosa debba consistere il riconoscimento stesso, dato che la Germania ha già formalmente e praticamente ridotto la sua legazione ad Addis Abeba a consolato generale e che qui a Berlino non esiste una legazione di Etiopia alla quale negare un diritto di rappresentanza diplomatica. In tali condizioni quale atto formale potrebbe ora essere compiuto secondo i nostri desideri dalla Germania?⁹⁴

(I also know how von Hassell and Frank have always stated that Germany was ready for recognition at the moment we desired it. But the question remains in what should be the recognition itself, since Germany has already formally and practically reduced its legation in Addis Abeba to a general consulate, and there is no Ethiopian legation, here in Berlin, to which deny the right of diplomatic representation. Under these conditions, which formal act could be enacted, according to our desires, by Germany?)

Following this geopolitical shift operated by Mussolini, the relations between Washington and Rome suffered another heavy hit: after the rapprochement with Germany, in November 1936, Mussolini declared that a “Rome-Berlin Axis” was in place, which, although not yet a proper alignment, manifested a further distancing of Italy from the Western democracies. The confirmation of such ideological and strategical separation occurred within the events that shook Europe in 1936, namely the commencement of the Spanish Civil War.⁹⁵

Once the hostilities between the Spanish republican forces and the Fascist militias of Francisco Franco begun, Italy and Germany declared their support towards the Francoist forces, both diplomatically and militarily, whereas the European powers manifested their concerns for such decision, to the point that the Soviet Union decided to intervene alongside the Republican forces. This internal conflict, although not perceived as a war of aggression as the Ethiopian war, was still deemed extremely dangerous for the European stability and peace, since there was always the conviction that any conflict, internal or trans-national, which erupted in Europe in such time, would have the possibility of degenerating beyond its initial borders. Therefore, the United States, parallelly to the decision undertook concerning the Ethiopian crisis, decided to enact a declaration of neutrality and the consequent arms embargo on both sides.

This decision was positively welcomed by the Italian establishment, which, still indisposed by the declarations of Roosevelt and the implicit unavailability of the latter to restore the precedent cordiality of bilateral relations, understood such provision as an attempt to distend tensions. Indeed, this very same decision, undertaken during the Italian campaign in Abyssinia, had produced favourable outcomes to the

⁹⁴ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op.cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. V, p. 133.

⁹⁵ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 134-135.

peninsula, despite its moral condemnations: therefore, Mussolini perceived this movement as a *laissez-faire*, once again, concerning the European businesses. Consequently, it was directly communicated to ambassador Phillips, who had replaced ambassador Long within the American Embassy in Rome, that Italy was mobilising almost 100.000 men towards Spain, in a broader attempt to ideologically halt the “communist advance” in the Mediterranean.⁹⁶

This geopolitical event convinced London to enter into a “Gentleman’s Agreement” with Italy, signed on 2nd of January 1937: this arrangement reaffirmed the reciprocal respect for the respective interests in the Mediterranean, especially after the seize of Ethiopia the previous year, and it also provided the foundations for a closer and more cooperative relationship between the two countries. This agreement, thus, recognised the equilibria of the Mediterranean territories after the Abyssinian War, basically implying that the Ethiopian crisis had not precipitated the events in the area, and, especially, that Italy was basically recognised as an important player in the continent. However, Mussolini wanted to expand this friendly arrangement even further, in order to achieve a stronger recognition between the governments of Rome and London, and, ultimately, include Italy into the scheme of great European powers. Within these intentions, mostly, resides the hesitation manifested by Mussolini in wholly tying himself to Hitler and to Nazi Germany.

Despite this rapprochement with Britain, Mussolini’s image within the United States continued to deteriorate, especially due to the numerous offensive statements of both the Italian government and press, directed towards the very same United States. The bellicosity and aggressiveness exerted from such speeches and articles heavily concerned the American public opinion, as far as making the latter believe that Italy had already decided to side with Nazi Germany in a hypothetical future war. To the accusations of being an overly offensive and destabilising leader, Mussolini responded, privately, with reassurances concerning his intentions, both foreign and domestic: not only the *duce* suggested a possible cooperation of Italy with the Non-Intervention Committee⁹⁷, but he also declared that the Italian population was already satisfied with the outcomes of the Abyssinian war, thus signalling that there were no intentions towards further expansionism. Mussolini himself declared that “a period of peace which could provide serenity for several years”⁹⁸ was highly desirable. Simultaneously, Hitler himself, within a meeting with British Labour leader, George Lansbury, affirmed that he sincerely hoped for a world conference on peace with all global leaders, most likely held under the American supervision and authority.⁹⁹

Both these declarations, from the European dictators, shall not be interpreted solely based on their explicit significance: it must be considered that the main interests of both leaders regarded the desire to reinvigorate

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ This Committee was created after the Non-Intervention Agreement, signed in August 1936 by European Powers, concerning neutrality in the Spanish Civil War: it aimed at avoiding a proxy war erupting in Europe, and it ultimately gained support from 27 States, not solely from Europe.

⁹⁸ Mussolini B., *op. cit.*, Vol. IX, pp. 43-45.

⁹⁹ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 135-140.

the international prestige of their respective countries, and, in this precise period, the most adequate tool to achieve such objective was to not being left outside of the geopolitical exchequer. In order to avoid such isolation, the Fascist leaders required not only support from the United States, clearly the strongest actor of the scenario, but also, within the European doors, a certain degree of recognition and cooperation with Britain. Some historians suggest that both Mussolini and Hitler understood the importance of a similar efforts towards peace, as it could have generated the aforementioned grand conference amongst great powers, to which Britain could have not refused to participate. Therefore, through the surprising support of such efforts, and, whether directly or indirectly, of such conference, Mussolini and Hitler attempted to strongarm the British government into a conference, called by the United States, within which London would have been forced to reach a compromise with the two totalitarian leaders. Therefore, it does not surprise to acknowledge that Anthony Eden, British Foreign Minister, had already voiced his opposition, towards Roosevelt, concerning a similar conference being held.¹⁰⁰

Be that as it may, Mussolini and the new Foreign Minister, the latter's son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano, believed that the British influence on the United States had produced unfavourable outcomes for Italy: especially after the Ethiopian War, London had repeatedly forwarded to Washington its concerns and considerations concerning Italy and its Fascist leader, negatively influencing, according to the two statesmen, the behaviour of the United States towards Italy. Such declarations were substantiated, in the Italian diplomat's view, by the fourth Neutrality Law enacted by the American Congress, on 1st May 1937: this new Law, differently from the previous three, issued an obligation, for the president, not only to declare an arms embargo in situations of war, but also to adopt the clause of the so-called "cash and carry"¹⁰¹, for all other products, within the trade with the belligerents.

Through a long and thorough relation, the Italian General Director for the Trans-Oceanic Affairs, Grazzi, referred to Ciano his insight on the recent Neutrality Law enacted in Capitol Hill:

Con questa legge, pertanto, gli Stati Uniti sono venuti a solidarizzarsi inevitabilmente con un gruppo di Potenze a danno di altre, fra le quali ultime, per forza di cose, viene a trovarsi il nostro Paese, al quale, per di più in caso di guerra con una grande Potenza marittima, sarebbe anche molto gravemente ostacolato ogni rifornimento attraverso le altre due porte di casa nostra, il Canale di Suez e i Dardanelli.¹⁰²

(With this law, therefore, the United States has inevitably come to sympathize with a group of Powers to the detriment of others, among which the latter, by force of things, comes to find our country, to which, especially in case of war with a great maritime Power, would also be very seriously hindered any supply through the other two doors of our house, the Suez Canal and the Dardanelles.)

¹⁰⁰ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, p 141.

¹⁰¹ This clause provided that belligerent countries could, at their own expenses, purchase items from the United States (paying in "cash") and transport such items directly on their own ships, such that the United States should not participate directly in the commerce.

¹⁰² Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. VI, p. 991.

Ciano convened with Grazzi that this precise clause was intended to effectively support the wartime efforts of countries with powerful navies, like Britain itself, had they been included in larger conflicts.

Logically, the fear of both Washington and London was that, considering the rapprochement between Berlin and Rome and their consequent ideological alignment against the democracies of Europe (although still incomplete at this point), Britain could be dragged into a conflict with either countries. With respect to this, Ciano believed that the recently passed clause signalled the availability of the United States to support Britain, specifically, as strongly as possible without directly intervening.

Despite such considerations, Ciano voiced the propensity of Italy towards the reopening of a thorough economic exchange with Washington, highly functional especially for the peninsula, as far as the American establishment committed itself to abandon the fallacious rhetoric concerning the Fascist regime, influenced by the Brits. Implicitly, this statement referred not only to the necessity to re-acquire a certain degree of cordiality and cooperation with Washington, comparable to the years prior to Roosevelt, but also to the desire of witnessing a formal recognition of the Italian dominance over Ethiopia.

In order to provide an adequate number of assurances to Roosevelt, the Italian foreign office attempted to clarify that both the rapprochement with Germany and the participation in the Spanish Civil conflict were entirely moved by moral and ideological principles, and that these events did not hinder peace and cooperation throughout Europe and the Atlantic. Concerning the first matter, Ciano specified that the “Axis” between Rome and Berlin was not (yet) a military alliance, but the pure product of “true sentiments of collaboration between all peoples”¹⁰³, which did not constitute a threat to the European *status quo*. Regarding Spain, instead, Ciano reiterated that the civil war had become inevitable, after the allegedly hawkish and repressive behaviour of the Bolshevism-inspired government, such that the intervention of general Franco had become of utmost necessity.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, the recognition of Franco’s newly declared government, by November 1936, appeared nothing more than a logical consequence of the Italian support to the anti-Bolshevist drive in Europe, which had always been an explicit interest of Washington itself.

These justifications were clearly aimed at convincing the European powers, and the United States, that the recent geopolitical events participated by Italy were not moved by an utter desire to destabilise the continent and oppose other countries, but, instead, that they were intended to achieve a greater degree of cooperation with Italy. As mentioned before, this behaviour stemmed from the heavy concern of Mussolini and the Italian diplomacy regarding a possible isolation from other powers: indeed, as of this precise moment, the rapprochement with Hitler had not produced concrete advantages yet, whereas it had, actually, generated several preoccupations throughout Europe.

¹⁰³ Ciano, Galeazzo, *Discorso pronunciato da S. E. il conte Galeazzo Ciano, ministro per gli Affari esteri : Camera dei deputati, seduta del 13 maggio 1937*. Roma, 1937, Tipografia riservata del ministero degli Affari esteri.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Following on the Italian necessity to reinstall a closer cooperation with the United States, Mussolini suggested Roosevelt to convene an international conference on disarmament, and he performed such suggestion through a non-official channel, namely an interview with William Simms, the editor of several American newspapers. The interview was forwarded to the State Department, in Washington, but, here, the proposal was met with utter rigidity from the establishment: Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles responded that, since the proposal had not been formally submitted to the American executive, the latter could not issue a proper response. This cold response indisposed Mussolini and the Italian diplomacy, but, once it was clarified to Welles that the interview constituted, indeed, a formal proposal forwarded to Roosevelt, the matter was somewhat clarified. Consequently, Roosevelt positively commented the content of such proposal, in a private letter to Mussolini himself, on the day of the latter's birthday, but, simultaneously, the American president refused to publish such positive comment, in order to avoid indisposing the American public opinion and press, alongside the British ally. Indeed, the acknowledgement of such understanding between the two leaders, coupled with the fact that they themselves had convened to finally organise a bilateral meeting, in the future, would have most likely produced a negative effect on those portions of American population which harshly criticised the Italian dictator.¹⁰⁵

Nonetheless, faced with the hesitation of Roosevelt concerning this international conference, which would have generated discrete benefits for Italy, as explained above, and faced with the total absence of response from Britain and France, Mussolini decided to withdraw all of his proposals on the matter, and, ultimately, he declared that Italy would have continued his rearming process.

At this point, the rupture between Washington and Rome reached dangerous levels of depth: several weeks after the aforementioned failure of Mussolini, the latter and Hitler decided to withdraw from the Non-Intervention Committee, with a consequent augmentation of the military forces deployed in Spain. Simultaneously, the American press enhanced its criticisms against Mussolini and the Italian engagement in the Spanish Civil War, producing gradually tougher responses from the *duce*. It must be noted, though, that the efforts for a diplomatic reconciliation persisted: Mussolini, notwithstanding the extremely cautious response forwarded to him by Roosevelt, on the matter of the international conference, continued to reaffirm the availability of Italy to support a hypothetical meeting, if and when the White House decided to demand it.

It appears almost illogical, given the character demonstrated by Mussolini and the chronology of his foreign policy actions, that the Fascist leader still pressured the Western democracies to cooperate with Italy on crucial international matters, especially considering that, as of now, the rapprochement between him and Hitler was sharply increasing its width. However, this consistent effort towards a closer collaboration with the same democracies that Fascism and Mussolini himself despised, being at the ideological antipodes of the political spectrum, finds a broader explication through the private considerations of both the *duce* and

¹⁰⁵ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 142-144.

his closest lieutenants, Ciano amongst all. From the private diary of the latter, indeed, we acknowledge that Mussolini intrinsically disliked both the United States and Britain: on the former, Mussolini stated that “America is a country made of negroes and jews, thus incapable of dominating the new global order”, whereas, on the latter, Mussolini explained that “the Brits do not want a clash with us, since [...], to 22 millions of men, there were 24 millions of women, with 12 million citizens above 50 years of age: the static masses dominate over the dynamic masses”¹⁰⁶. Still, although these lapidary declarations would signal an utter indisposition to the cooperation with these two countries, Mussolini did not want to entirely antagonise the Western democracies and wholly shifting to the other side of the barricade, alongside Hitler: the *duce* understood the necessity of maintaining at least cordial relations with said nations, not only for purely economic benefits, but also for finally receive recognition of the newborn Italian Empire, and, ultimately, being awarded an equal seat to the table of great powers.

Still, the events of this precise period suggest that Mussolini was leaning more towards Nazi Germany than democratic West: on 28th September 1937, Mussolini visited Germany, where he was welcomed with pompous and flamboyant celebrations, to meet with Hitler. In the words of French ambassador to Berlin, André François-Poncet, “Hitler celebrated his guest as if he was one of those special individuals, with superior intellectual capabilities, one of those men that are not shaped by history, but that shape history themselves”¹⁰⁷. In Berlin, Mussolini reiterated that “Italy and Germany are the greatest and most pure democracies in today’s world, whereas world politics is dominated by the capitalist powers, secret organizations and political groups, that antagonise each other under the pretext of the inalienable human rights”¹⁰⁸.

Consequently, in manifestation of the coldness of the relations between Roosevelt and Mussolini, the former, at a public gathering in Chicago, implicitly attacked the Rome-Berlin axis and all the powers linked to it (like Japan or Spain), which constituted a “reign of terror and international lawlessness”. Moreover, Roosevelt declared, concerning to this, that “when an epidemic of physical disease starts to spread, the community approves and joins in a quarantine of the patients, in order to protect the health of the community against the spread of the disease”¹⁰⁹. This speech went down in history as the infamous “Quarantine speech”, which was favourably welcomed by the French and British governments as it projected a future deeper involvement of the United States in the international affairs, especially in Europe.

Almost simultaneously with this back-and-forth of public speeches, an international conference was, indeed, convoked, in Brussels, but it did not concern the Spanish war or the question of disarmament: the matter at stake was the reignited war between China and Japan, which had erupted after the latter’s seize of Chinese

¹⁰⁶ Ciano Galeazzo, *Diario, 1937-1943*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 1994, pp. 32-33.

¹⁰⁷ Poncet A. François, *The fateful years: Memoirs of a French ambassador in Berlin, 1931-1938*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1949, pp. 245-246.

¹⁰⁸ Gantenbein James, *Documentary background of World War II, 1931 to 1941*, Octagon Books, 1975, pp. 804-806.

¹⁰⁹ Roosevelt D. Franklin, *Public papers and addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Random House, 1937, pp. 406-411.

Manchuria in 1931. Lately considered as the very first conflict of the broader Second World War, the war posed serious issues concerning the precepts adopted in the 1922 Nine-Power Treaty, which had affirmed the territorial sovereignty of the Chinese Republic, in pursuance of the American “Open Door” policy. These integrity precepts had already been broken by Japan in 1931, with the offensive in Manchuria and the subsequent creation of the “Manchukuo” puppet government, and the international community had the ability of merely imposing sanctions and issuing condemnations for the act. Six years later, despite the Brussels Conference being convened, the situation remained mostly the same: Germany and Japan, already blatantly aligned, refused to dispatch representatives, on the grounds that this issue fell outside of the purview of the Treaty, and the negotiations encountered several stalemates and halts, ultimately hindering its possible effectiveness.

Mussolini, within this framework, did, indeed, dispatch Italian representatives, but, contrarily to the past, he did not thoroughly engage in the negotiations, basically demonstrating his utter disinterest in a hypothetical success of the conference itself. The focus of the *duce*, in fact, was redirected towards the signature, on 6th November 1937, of the Anti-Comintern Pact, already valid between Germany and Japan: this Pact, as suggested by the name (“Comintern” referred to the Communist International), served to oppose the Communist drive forwarded by Stalin’s Soviet Union¹¹⁰.

This opposition to the Communist action is precisely summarised by the preface of the protocol signed between the three countries, which was drafted as follows:

Il Governo italiano, il Governo del Reich germanico e il Governo imperiale del Giappone.

Considerando che l'Internazionale Comunista continua a mettere costantemente in pericolo il mondo civile in Occidente e in Oriente turbandovi e distruggendovi la pace e l'ordine;

Convinti che soltanto una stretta collaborazione fra tutti gli Stati interessati al mantenimento della pace e dell'ordine può limitare e rimuovere tale pericolo:

Considerando che l'Italia - che coll'avvento del Regime Fascista ha combattuto con inflessibile determinazione tale pericolo ed ha eliminato l'Internazionale Comunista dal suo territorio - ha deciso di schierarsi contro il nemico comune insieme con la Germania e col Giappone, che da parte loro sono animati dalla stessa volontà di difendersi contro l'Internazionale Comunista.¹¹¹

(The Italian Government, the Government of the German Reich and the Imperial Government of Japan.

Understanding that the Communist International continues to constantly endanger the civilized world in the West and in the East by upsetting and destroying peace and order.

Convinced that only close cooperation between all the States involved in the maintenance of peace and order can limit and eliminate this danger:

¹¹⁰ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 150-155.

¹¹¹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *op. cit.*, Ottava Serie, Vol. VII, p. 622.

Considering that Italy - which with the advent of the Fascist Regime has fought with unyielding determination this danger and eliminated the Communist International from his own territory - decided to side against the common enemy, together with Germany and Japan, which are animated by the same will to defend themselves against the Communist International.)

This decision represented a further enlargement of the rupture between Washington and Rome: although Ciano reassured Washington, as previously done concerning the Spanish conflict, justifying the strengthening of ties with Japan as a purely anti-Bolshevist stance, several American officials voiced serious concerns about this further rapprochement. Similarly to the concerns generated in the White House by the Italo-German “axis, the Italian vicinity to Japan, already aligned with Hitler and utterly against the United States, was perceived as a dangerous geopolitical shift, since it positioned Italy even more decisively on the “reign of terror” side of the world. Therefore, Washington, despite seemingly maintain cordial relations with Italy, had concluded that a reconsolidation of the previous cordial ties with Rome was not feasible nor desirable: the commercial deal, which had to be concluded between the two countries after the reciprocally agreed termination of the 1871 Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation¹¹², was not anymore on the table, since secretary Hull believed that the geopolitical shifts of the period had driven too large of a wedge between the two countries. Indeed, Hull and Roosevelt believed that, given the aforementioned rapprochement between the two fascist leaders, and the probable expansionist plans projected by both in Europe, at some point in the future Italy would have become a natural enemy of the United States.¹¹³

Therefore, in accordance with the principle of refusing bilateral trade agreements (deemed harmful to a closer cooperation between states), the United States did not push forward the negotiations with Italy, especially after the latter firmly clarified that an indispensable precondition of such agreement would have been the American recognition of the Italian empire. Since such recognition, for all the reasons listed above, would have not generated benefits for the United States, the complete set of negotiations derailed. Moreover, as stated by ambassador Phillips, in a private correspondence with Secretary Hull, “Mussolini meets solely with the German ambassador, and he has clearly declared that he does not desire to meet with Americans, as important as they are”¹¹⁴.

This further isolation from the American shore ultimately testified that the initial strategy of Mussolini (to pressure the West into including Italy into the “table of great powers”) had entirely failed: the relations with the United States were as cold as they could become, the rapprochement with Britain had clashed with the latter’s total unavailability to compromise with Mussolini, and the friendship with Hitler was, indeed, yielding some benefits, but it also triggered serious concerns about the disadvantages of such friendship.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ciano and Phillips signed, on 15th December 1936, the formal denunciation of the Treaty, which did “not correspond anymore to the present needs”.

¹¹³ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, p. 137.

¹¹⁴ De Felice Renzo, *Mussolini il duce. Lo stato totalitario*, Volume II, Einaudi, Torino, 1981, p. 446.

¹¹⁵ Quartararo R., *op. cit.*, pp. 155-160.

The *duce* of Fascism was now at the crossroads of his political reign.

2.4 The force of the public opinion: Fascism in America through the 1920s

During this thesis, there have been some citations of the public opinion throughout the years narrated, but there has not been a proper analysis of the intrinsic thoughts of the respective populations, between the two protagonist countries of this dissertation. Therefore, throughout the following paragraph, there will be a more thorough analysis of the American public opinion towards Fascism and the historical occurrences related to it, starting from the initial years of Mussolini's regime to the Ethiopian crisis and the latter's offshoots. This focus, coupled with the parallel spotlight, provided in the following chapter, concerning the Italian and Italo-American sentiment towards the same matter, will enable this dissertation to further grasp the intrinsic reasons behind the historical events narrated above.

There has already been, through this work, an analysis of the crucial events that shaped the matter at discussion, from Mussolini's coming to power to the initial American reception of such event. However, in order to investigate the intensity and the modifications of such reception throughout the 1920s and the 1930s, a more detailed investigation of the American public opinion is needed. The following part of such investigation will concentrate on the first decade of Fascist power, from the 1922 March on Rome until the arrival of Roosevelt, and it will be essentially centred upon the media and newspaper framework, as well as the surveys and findings pursued through the American citizens.

The opening of the new era of the 20th century, inaugurated by the end of the First World War, presented Italy, to the Americans, as a deeply poor and devastated country, struck by political inadequacies and consequent social chaos. The rise of Fascism as a political movement, commenced in 1919, and its actions throughout the Italian framework were initially welcomed, by certain organs of the American press, with critical views: the *New York World*, a liberal newspaper, reported that the Fascists had not only repeatedly attacked offices of anti-Fascist journals in northern Italy, but also attacked an American journalist who was also an official of the American consulate, Lincoln Eyre. Eyre himself reported to his journal's editor that this attack constituted "one of a long series committed by these bandits, Fascisti as they call themselves, who pretend to be inspired with patriotic devotion to Italian ideals" which translated in "systematic oppression by the most brutal and cowardly means, of all who venture to disagree with them."¹¹⁶

Once the Fascists utterly modified the fragile *status quo* reigning over the country, the American people were mostly unaware of the Fascist ideological positions and intentions: an American journalist, Vincent Sheean, wrote, in 1920, that the movement had "some kind of idea about government, but I don't know

¹¹⁶ Seldes George, *Sawdust Caesar: The untold story of Mussolini and Fascism*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1935, pp. 97-98.

what that is”¹¹⁷, complementing the initial considerations towards Fascists being “eccentric nationalists, a little rowdy [...] but not especially dangerous to Italian parliamentary institutions.”¹¹⁸ A more informed grasp of the intrinsic essence of the Fascist movement and his leader reached the United States in 1921, when a correspondent for the *New York Times*, Anne McCormick, attended a parliamentary session in Italy. To this extent, the correspondent wrote that “more interesting than the speech of the King, was the emergency of the new party of the Extreme Right – the small group of Fascisti”, and she underlined that the speech forwarded by the leader of this new party, Mussolini, was “one of the best political speeches I have ever heard, a little swaggering, but caustic, powerful, and telling.”¹¹⁹

Notwithstanding these considerations, up until the 1922 March on Rome the Fascist movement had not been invested by a thorough media coverage from the United States: indeed, several analysts perceived such movement as a volatile experience, as a “gang of hooligans”¹²⁰, and its leader was barely known as a former socialist editor who had been expelled from his party due to disagreements on the war. The unseriousness with which the Fascist party and Mussolini had been taken, from the March onwards, was replaced by a thorough attention and interest: the *Cincinnati Times-Star* asserted that “the Fascisti are patriots” from whom “may come a new order, which will carry that historic land to the greatest destiny of which Mazzini and Garibaldi and Cavour dreamed”¹²¹. The enthusiastic salute directed towards the Fascist rise was shared also by bigger and broader journals, such as the *New York Herald* or the *New Republic*, a Washington-based weekly newspaper, which asserted that “Mussolini is a Caesar, whether for the moment or longer depends on whether he has the vision of a Caesar or that of the ringleader of a common mutiny”¹²².

Nonetheless, several journals remained sceptical about the characteristics and consequent behaviour of the movement born in 1919: indeed, the party represented nothing more than a minority force in the Parliament, largely inferior in numbers and propositions than the affirmed Italian parties of the time, composed by a “polyglot group of nationalist, labour syndicalist, ex-soldiers and peasants”, which “would never stay together long enough to accomplish anything worthwhile.”¹²³ Overall, the widespread sentiment concerning Fascism and its rise produced a “wait and see” attitude, such that the American opinion mostly awaited for concrete results upon which generate a definitive judgement on the matter.

It must be noted, furthermore, that, until the rise of Mussolini, the American newspapers had covered the events occurring especially in London, Paris, and Berlin: the geopolitical framework of 19th century Europe was mostly centred around these three capitals and their respective countries, leaving Italy out of the heated picture of international affairs. As soon as the Fascists gained the sceptre of power in the peninsula, the

¹¹⁷ Sheean Vincent, *Personal History*, Lyle Stuart, 1986, p. 34.

¹¹⁸ Jordan Layton W., *The American image of Mussolini: Public Opinion and the Press in Italian American relations, 1922-1930*, William and Mary, 1967, p. 29.

¹¹⁹ Berger Mayer, *The Story of the New York Times, 1851-1951*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1951, p. 327.

¹²⁰ Miller Webb, *I found no peace*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1936, pp. 132-133.

¹²¹ *Literary Digest*, LXXV, Funk & Wagnalls Company, New York, 1922, p. 17.

¹²² *New Republic*, XXXIII, University of Michigan, 1922, p. 2.

¹²³ Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 35.

American press commenced to enhance its efforts of coverage in the country, severely interested in the revolution brought by the *duce* and in the latter's personality and manners.

The figure of Mussolini was intended to be propagandised as a magnetic and charismatic one by the leader himself, who desired to achieve a solid favourable press abroad, which would depict him and his movement as a strong and righteous force of the European political spectrum. Consequently, the *duce* often allured the foreign correspondents, behaving courteously and politely whenever there was the chance to do so, especially considering that, after the advent of Fascism, the number of foreign journalists present in Rome sharply increased. Therefore, by mid-1920s, Mussolini resulted to be the "most accessible of European heads of State", granting free-of-charge services to foreign correspondents, such as governmental facilities or telephone and telegraph services: Mussolini probably understood the value of the "propaganda value of personal interviews with members of the corps of foreign reporters".¹²⁴

These well-behaved manners and the charismatic magnetism of the Fascist leader not only enabled his political reputation to steeply rise, both at home and abroad, but also convinced many foreign journalists of the advantages of the Fascist ideology: some reporters started to effectively sympathise with Fascism, specifically with Mussolini's figure, and such sympathy was inevitably poured into their journal productions. It must be noted, with regard to this, that, by 1925, the sole source of information that foreign reporters could rely on was the Fascist party itself, considering the practical banishment of all political parties and independent sources. Therefore, as testified by a correspondent from the *Fellowship Forum* (a KKK-linked journal which reached one million readers by 1927), John Bond, "no foreign correspondent can last 24 hours in Italy if he does not colour his news to suit the Mussolinian demands"¹²⁵.

Nonetheless, had one of these reporters complained about the Fascist movement publicly, or had he (or she) refused to comply with the *duce*'s narration and censorship requests, this person would have automatically become *persona non grata*, consequently being expelled or even arrested and detained. With respect to this, Gaetano Salvemini, Harvard professor who fled from Italy after the advent of Fascism due to his dissenting opinions, affirmed that:

The difficulty of understanding the present situation of the Italian people is increased by the fact that French, English or American journalists, as soon as they arrive in Italy, are immediately surrounded by agents of Fascist propaganda and are introduced into aristocratic and high Fascist bourgeois circles; here they are flattered by every possible kindness and loaded down with statistics, information, interpretations, explanations *ad usum delphini*.

Often, they are salaried for translating and sending to their papers articles and news concocted in the offices of Fascist propaganda. A few intelligent and honest foreign journalists succeed little by little in seeing the

¹²⁴ Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹²⁵ Bond John, *Mussolini, the Wild Man of Europe*, Independent Publishing Company, Washington D.C., 1929, p. 67, cit. in Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 43.

light, but their letters must omit much that they know and if they wire their papers accurate information, their telegrams are intercepted: they themselves are expelled from Italy.

The most enthusiastic are forced to send unsigned articles to their papers and magazines, resorting to a thousand expediciencies in order not to be discovered. Telegraphed news, which is most likely to impress the reading public, is ruthlessly controlled by the government censorship if it does not coincide with the taste of the Mussolini government.¹²⁶

As suggested by a 1929 US Senate investigation, Mussolini employed such propagandistic tactics also beyond the Italian soil: through this investigation, it was suggested that Mussolini not only subsidized several Italian-language papers in the United States, but also utilised the consular office to forward precisely organised info and data to the foreign presses.

This strategy, adopted by the Fascist leader, generated several benefits, mostly due to the intrinsically conservative and anti-communist nature of the American press of the 1920s. As already explained throughout this dissertation, the anti-Bolshevist sentiment in the United States basically superseded the entirety of possible concerns generated by the Fascist manners and behaviour: once a concrete victory of an anti-Communist force, namely Fascism, occurred in Europe, the credit for such triumph generated a widely positive opinion on the leader of such victorious movement.¹²⁷

Therefore, by 1924, there were already numerous journals which praised the leadership and the character of the *duce*: in November, the very same *New York Times* published an article which recited that “Mussolini’s idea of power and authority has many points in common with that of the men who inspired our own constitution – John Adams, Hamilton and Washington”¹²⁸. The list of magazines and newspapers which, in the 1920s, published favourable works towards Mussolini and Fascism included not only general and political journals, but also financial and economic enterprises: several businessmen and entrepreneurs positively welcomed the rise to power of the *duce*, who gathered large consensus around his politico-economical ideology due to the latter’s focus on the corporativist nature of the State. In the Italian leader’s mind, the State needed to centralise power in its own hands, thus enabling markets and businesses to operate on a solid and certain basis. This idea was greeted with enthusiasm, since many actors of the economic world perceived that, as reported by business magazine *Fortune*, “in the world depression, marked by governmental wandering and uncertainty, Mussolini remains direct [...] he presents, too, the virtue of force and centralized government acting without conflict for the whole nation at once.”¹²⁹

Overall, the American population, indeed influenced by the press, was divided in three different groups, concerning the reception of Mussolini and Fascism: there was a conspicuous number of Americans who

¹²⁶ Seldes George, *You can’t print that!* Payson & Clarke Ltd, New York, 1929, p. 13.

¹²⁷ Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹²⁸ Weber Mark, *America’s Changing View of Mussolini and Italian Fascism*, from *The Journal of Historical Review*, May-June 1995 (Vol. 15 No. 3), pp. 6-7.

¹²⁹ Luce Henry R., *Fortune*, Vol. V No. 5, Time Inc., New York, May 1932.

believed that the *duce* was the “greatest statesman in Europe” and that he had enabled Italy to “find her soul”; others harshly criticised Fascist actions and methods, which, according to them, “has slain democracy and emasculated human rights”; finally, there was a third faction, posed in the middle of these two extremes, which perceived Mussolini as an overly positive figure for Italy, but pointed out that several means adopted by Fascism were highly contrary to the American line of thought¹³⁰.

It must be noted that the generally positive reception was severely influenced by the political establishment’s position on Mussolini: there has already been mention, in previous sections, of ambassador Child, dispatched to Rome on behalf of Washington, who strongly supported the Fascist enterprise both within the Oval Office and beyond. The American ambassador, occasional writer of *The Saturday Evening Post*, published several articles concerning Fascism, which can be summarised as such:

The Fascist regime has crystallised a unified national spirit, rescued the country from Bolshevism and mere corruption, chaos, and flabby liberalism, and successfully assaulted illiteracy, moral complacency, political apathy, and defeatism.

The tourists who find the country cleaner, who see a revolution in agriculture, who observe modern agricultural machinery ploughing soil which never felt the push of gasoline before, who note that trains run on time and that all demonstrations have ceased, and who find the country more efficient and less picturesque, usually conclude their review by saying “the Duce, whatever you may say, has done something”.¹³¹

Logically, the statements of Child must be analysed through a subjective lens, since the ambassador himself facilitated the publication of Mussolini’s autobiography, to which he also produced a foreword, which suggests that his opinion of the *duce* and Fascism was most likely biased: from the historical sources and data gathered throughout the years, it appears that several of these seemingly beneficial actions perpetrated by Mussolini and Fascism represented nothing more than propaganda. Nonetheless, such considerations are crucial in the analysis of the American public opinion: although similar declarations, coming from diplomats, who, due to their very role, often are incapacitated (or unwilling) to voice their true personal opinions, should not be deemed definitive and utterly sincere, the American population relied on such considerations quite largely, when drafting its opinion over Fascism.

Moreover, considering the growing support of the American press throughout the years, it appears consequential that the population parallelly followed this path. Amongst the population, certain intellectuals supported the rise of Fascism quite strongly: philosophers and poets, like Steffens, Santayana, or Ezra Pound, had approached the rise of Fascism through the information that spilled from that same biased and coerced mechanism described above, ultimately presenting to them a situation, in Italy, which was largely further from the truth. Some of them, especially Santayana and Pound, became simultaneously so

¹³⁰ Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹³¹ Mussolini Now (1928), *The Saturday Evening Post*, p. 137, cit. in Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 56.

drastically discontent with America and so instinctively enthusiast about Italy that they decided to abandon the former and flee to the latter.

In the peninsula, which the two intellectuals touched for the first time in the mid-1920s, they basically undertook the role of “un-official foreign propagandist of Fascism”, although with different means: Pound, contrarily to Santayana’s discretely voiced support of the Fascist regime, blatantly and publicly vouched for Fascism and, particularly, for its *duce*, of whom he believed that “any estimate will not be valid unless it starts from his passion for construction. Treat him as *Artifex* [maker] and all the details fall into place.” Pound went as far as stating that “if one compares Mussolini to American presidents (the last three) or British premiers, etc..., in fact one can NOT without insulting him.”¹³², and, when dating his letters and notebooks, the intellectual started to utilise the wording employed by the Fascists, which framed the year of the March on Rome, 1922, as the first year of the Fascist era, thus labelling all following years departing from 1922 itself (1930 would be year “IX”, i.e. “nine”).

Both the American intellectual world, under the influence of these figures, and the diplomatic sphere, which, also after ambassador Child’s replacement, continued to support Fascism, incentivised the population to replicate such positive stances. Several prominent figures of the United States’s social and political landscape praised Mussolini and his movement: mayors and local politicians, like the mayors of New York City and Boston, Jimmy Walker and James Curley, described the *duce* as a “brilliant practical economist” and “profoundly interested in the welfare of his country”¹³³; moreover, financiers and bankers, such as James Logan, depicted Mussolini as “Italy’s great son and leader”, and both humourists and novelists equated the Fascist leader to the greatest charismatic leaders of the past, like Napoleon, Cromwell, or Caesar himself.

Moreover, the largely positive depictions of and opinions on Mussolini and his Fascist regime came also from several prominent figures of the American financial and clerical world. Starting from the former, a distinctive praise came from banker Otto H. Kahn who, in 1923, speaking to the Wesleyan University, described the deeds of Mussolini and his party in the following words:

The merit of having caused this great change in Italy without shedding blood belongs to a great man, loved and revered in his country, a man who has made himself, and who has imposed himself with the only genius of his own mind. To him not only the country, but the whole world owes much gratitude. [...] Mussolini particularly wants a close and intense collaboration with the United States. I am sure that American capital invested in Italy will find security, encouragement, good opportunities and reward.¹³⁴

¹³² Norman Charles, *Ezra Pound*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1960, pp. 287-329.

¹³³ Bond J., *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹³⁴ Gaetano Salvemini, *L'Italia vista dall'America*, Feltrinelli, 1969, p. 223.

With respect to the clerical world, notwithstanding the anti-clerical positions manifested by Mussolini in his political past, when he stood within the Socialist ranks, the Fascist regime was able to gather large consensus, especially in America. Indeed, this rapprochement, which would then have led to the 1929 Lateran Treaty, was motivated by the Fascist efforts towards a renovated engagement with the Catholic Church and, specifically, the Vatican. Within the American clerical world, the openness demonstrated by the Fascist party towards the Church generated widespread support and praise for the party itself: cardinals O'Connell, from Boston, and Hayes, from New York, alongside Philadelphia's archbishop Daugherty, mentioned the *duce* in several speeches, intensely commending Mussolini's role and successes. O'Connell, for example, in two separate declarations, said that:

Italy is directed towards a marvellous transformation, since Benito Mussolini took the reins of government. I have never witnessed, in my life, such an impressive transformation.¹³⁵ [...] Mussolini is a genius in the political field, sent to Italy by God to help the nation in rapidly ascending towards the most glorious fates.¹³⁶

To such statements, echoed similar ones from the other cardinals and bishops: it appeared clear that the clerical world of the United States had developed a profound support for the Fascist movement and, specifically, for its leader. As the 1920s proceeded, an analogous process occurred within the Italian clergy, reinforced mostly by the Lateran Treaty, but also by the decision of Mussolini to dispatch military forces in Spain, depicted as a crusade of the Catholic world against the anti-clerical and pagan one, represented by the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, contrasting opinions persisted concerning the reputation of Mussolini and Fascism: journals like the *Nation*, liberal-oriented, voiced concerns over the overly optimistic reception of the majority of Americans towards Fascism. The editor of this same journal, Oswald Villard, affirmed:

I am little interested in what returning Americans tell me about the great improvement in outward conditions in Italy, that the trains are running on time, that the country has been cleaned up, that people are working, that there is law and order.

Any tyrant can accomplish that. I question what price Italy will pay for Mussolini about twenty-five or thirty years from now.¹³⁷

Whilst the opposition to the largely positive opinion of the American was represented by editorials like the *Nation*, the opposition to the aforementioned support of certain intellectuals was forwarded by writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald or Cummings, who portrayed Mussolini as "the biggest bluff in Europe", who,

¹³⁵ *Progresso Italo-Americano*, 3 Gennaio 1924, cit. in Salvemini G., *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹³⁶ *Il Carroccio*, XXXIV, p. 553, cit. in Salvemini G., p. 227.

¹³⁷ *Nation*, CXXII, The Nation Company, New York, 1926, pp. 503-504.

indeed, was perceived as “no fool and a great organizer”, was “no Napoleon”¹³⁸. The echo of such opposition to Fascism permeated several environments of discussion within the American framework: the American Federation of Labour, through the voice of its chief, William F. Green, blatantly criticised “Mussolini and his common hooligans” as representatives of “repression and denial of freedom and democracy [...] and any movement which is seeking to deny natural expression to the human race is an enemy to society.”¹³⁹. Moreover, several critics of Fascism equated the movement with Communism, underlining the intrinsic similarity between the two political ideologies: Felix Adler, head of the American Ethical Culture Society, affirmed that:

Democracy is challenged today on two sides: by the Soviet minority which rules Russia, and by the Italian dictator, who would substitute discipline for liberty, the control of the economic forces of a nation for self-government, and dangerous imperialist ambition as the motive for consolidating and subordinating the nation. The poignant challenge comes from these two directions, and, with the exception of a few recommendable utterances, there seems to be no pronounced reaction in the United States. Have we no publicists potent enough to take up the challenge?¹⁴⁰

These discretely critic opinions were mostly generated by a difference of priorities: the portion of the American press and diplomacy which praised Mussolini’s actions and accomplishments blatantly overlooked the violent and repressive side of the Fascist regime, whereas another ensemble of journalists and writers were not willing to supersede the necessity to respect human rights and personal freedoms. It must be noted that this latter argument, namely the strenuous defence of morality and democratic values, did not conceal the factual reality of the Fascist accomplishments: Mussolini and his party had, indeed, ameliorated a discrete amount of living conditions within Italy, but, in these intellectuals’ view, there was no improvement or overall betterment significant enough to subdue human rights and liberties. Gaetano Salvemini, with respect to this, pointed out that casual American visitors to Italy, when they discovered that trains ran on time and thanked God for *Il Duce*, failed to notice the “great moral tragedy” behind such apparent advantages:

They do not ask themselves if justice also runs on time, if liberty also runs on time, if human dignity also runs on time. Justice, liberty, the guaranty of human dignity; these are also public services in civilised countries. Perhaps the casual visitor who pays attention only to the punctual arrival of the trains thinks that the Italian people is so degraded that it is not worthy of having good public services of a moral nature.

¹³⁸ Brooks Van Wyck, *The Dream of Arcadia: American writers and artists in Italy, 1760-1915*, E.P. Dutton & Co., New York, 1958. (Retrieved from Internet Archive)

¹³⁹ Seldes G., *op. cit.*, p.99.

¹⁴⁰ Seldes G., *op. cit.*, p. 100.

Or else he himself is so degraded as to be able to appreciate only public services of a material nature.¹⁴¹

Overall, it appears that the image of Mussolini and Fascism, throughout the United States, encountered these two distinct opinions, severely opposed to each other and represented by equally prominent figures. However, in the middle of these two *aut aut* opinions and receptions, stood a somewhat discrete faction of undecided and uncertain figures, who were “torn between two systems of values – humane and material” and who “never made up their minds about Mussolini” and Fascism¹⁴². Louis Untermeyer, poet and editor, spoke in the following manner about the perception of Mussolini during those times:

At that time Mussolini was at the height of popularity; my feeling about him was decidedly mixed. I remembered his early membership in the Socialist Party, his belief that the only commendable war was the class war, his insistence on neutrality during the First World War, and his imperialistic belligerence when he assumed power. He had become *Il Duce*, an enemy of all forms of democracy.¹⁴³

This third faction, ensnared between a total praise of Mussolini and Fascism and utter despise for the Italian regime, maintained two different approaches: there were certain intellectuals and journalists that perpetrated an undecided approach mostly for an intrinsic unwillingness to side with either strain of thought concerning Fascism and its offshoots; simultaneously, there were other writers and figures of the *intelligentsia* that were essentially unable to develop a thorough consideration on the matter. Indeed, the actions and declarations of Mussolini were perceived as ambiguous and mostly obscure, with respect to his real intentions and desires, and the consequent impossibility to identify a straight line of thought in the *duce*’s international purposes utterly complicated the positioning of a portion of the American public opinion.

Nonetheless, as will be underlined in the following paragraphs of this dissertation, centred on the evolution of the American public opinion in the 1930s, the outburst of the Ethiopian War and the Italian rapprochement with Hitler’s Germany generated a framework in which this partially neutral and partially undecided faction mostly defined their opinions on Mussolini and Fascism. Logically, such events clearly enlightened a large portion of the American press and public opinion concerning the “real nature” of Mussolini: all those intellectuals and reporters who had been, indeed, positively convinced by the Fascist achievements during the 1920s, but had also been seriously concerned about the human rights violations and repressions, witnessed the unfolding of the mid-1930s events as the feature that tipped the scale in

¹⁴¹ That Man Mussolini!, *Nation’s Business*, Chamber of Commerce of the United States, 1927, p. 62, cit. in Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p.93.

¹⁴² Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p.79.

¹⁴³ Untermeyer Louis, *Bygones*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Houston, 1933, p. 499.

favour of the humanitarian concerns, ultimately leading to a general overlook of the Fascist accomplishments and victories.¹⁴⁴

Be that as it may, at the end of the 1920s, opposed to a majority of Americans who positively perceived the tenure of Mussolini and his Fascist regime, there was a less numerous but equally voicing minority of Americans who blatantly opposed the Italian new era. Between these two poles, the presence of the aforementioned indecisive faction confirms that Italy, at the end of the 1920s, was to the American framework what Russia appeared to Winston Churchill, “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma”¹⁴⁵.

2.5 The apex of Fascism within the United States: the 1930s before the Ethiopian crisis

By the end of the 1920s, Mussolini, and, consequently, the Fascist movement, was amongst the most debated and discussed figures within the American landscape. The *duce* was mentioned more than 1.000 times in articles of magazine *Time*, from 1923 to 1935, severely more than other prominent leaders of this time, like Stalin or Hitler himself, and he also appeared on the cover eight times, without ever being nominated “Man of the Year”. Overall, by the end of the decade, Mussolini and Fascism appeared as controversial as they resulted efficient, and the American press, although continuously split between convincement and scepticism, generally respected and praised the Italian regime and its polyhedric leader.¹⁴⁶ At this point, indeed, it had become quite difficult to question the results and progresses of the peninsula, especially considering the intrinsic interest that the American business world reserved to the Italian economic recovery, which, as explained in previous paragraphs, rendered Italy a flourishing land for investments and a solid promise for war debt repayments.

Be that as it may, the fame of Mussolini, by 1930, fluctuated between a mostly positive reception and a mocking and critical stance, from the American press. Events such as the Corfu incident or the Matteotti *affair* seriously damaged the reputation of the *duce*, not to mention his numerous seemingly aggressive and war-wagering speeches, which often casted heavy concerns and backlash within the United States. However, the implicit pro-Fascist stances of big journals, like *The Saturday Evening Post* or the *Collier's*, toned down the wave of criticism that, every now and then, struck the figure of Mussolini and his party (at this point, the two were basically the same thing). The accomplishments of Mussolini, throughout the first decade of Fascist rule, were, according to this portion of Americans, highly satisfactory: although its methods and manners would have never been accepted and adhered to in America, Mussolini's dictatorship, while restrictive and tyrannical, resulted to be mostly appropriate for Italy, at the time.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p. 80.

¹⁴⁵ Mayo Bernard, *Myths and Men*, Harper & Row, New York, 1959, p. 14, cit. in Jordan Layton W., *op. cit.*, p.80.

¹⁴⁶ Ambrogi Anthony F., *The marketing of Mussolini: American magazines and Mussolini, 1922-1935*, University of Richmond, 2006, p. 51-70.

¹⁴⁷ Ambrogi A., *op. cit.*, p. 74.

Nonetheless, by the beginning of the new decade, it appeared that the overly nationalistic and aggressive stances of the Fascist leader had been discretely watered down, at least in the practical reality. The speeches and the declarations forwarded by Mussolini had produced, until then, heavy threats to the *status quo* of a mostly pacified Europe, but it resulted utterly clear, especially to the American press and public opinion, that these statements were mostly moved by propagandistic reasons. The new dialectic utilised by Mussolini from the end of the 1920s, comprising invitations to international peace, disarmament and reorganization, simultaneously surprised and rejoiced several portions of the American press. This change of tone demonstrated two things to the Americans: not only Mussolini was severely less to be feared than initially fathomed, but, mostly, this testified that the Fascist leader was endowed with a superior political and strategic acumen, since he understood the necessary steps to undertake to achieve an unwavering support from both the moderate and extremist factions of the country and the party. The historical event that, more than others, showed to the Americans that the *duce* had reached a more profound and mature stance on specific issues was the signature of the Lateran Accords, on 11th February 1929.

The schism between Italy and the Holy See was begotten by the seize of Rome, which allowed the newborn Kingdom of Italy to complete the seize of all the territories possessed by the Roman Church in the peninsula.¹⁴⁸ Once Rome was conquered, the exercise of Papal secular power terminated. The Italian government attempted to reach an agreement with the Papal power, represented by Pius IX, at the time, through the Law of Guarantees (*Legge delle Guarentigie*), but the Pope entirely refused the terms of the arrangement, which would have granted the Pope the use of the Vatican and Lateran palaces, but not their sovereignty. The schism generated by this refusal further deepened after the publication of the Papal encyclic *Respicientes ea* (literally “considering such events”), which denounced the Italian actions as “unjust, violent, null and invalid”: following such denunciation, the Pope, in 1874, through the *Non expedit* encyclic (literally “it is not appropriate”) con forbode all Catholics from participating to the political life of the newborn Kingdom of Italy. The rupture was gradually remedied through the following decades, but the encyclics remained valid until the 1929 Accords.

Mussolini not only granted to Pope Pius IX the sovereignty of the new entity, called Vatican City, entirely under the supervision of the Pope and his successors, exempted from taxes and tariffs, but he also recognised Catholicism as the State religion, overthrowing the precedent laic principle of “free Church in free State”. The entire arrangement passed through a monetary payment, from the Fascist regime to the new Vatican entity, of 750 million liras, and it produced crucial consequences on the social life of the peninsula, from the principles of marriage and divorce to the academic education.¹⁴⁹

The completion of this arrangement signalled, to the Americans, a promising shift in the Fascist leader’s rhetoric, since it significantly watered down the bellicose attitude forwarded, through both actions and

¹⁴⁸ In 1860, the Kingdom, under the leadership of the Savoia family and count Cavour, managed to strip the Papal power of the Romagna region. Therefore, the ultimate bastion of Papal power was represented by the Lazio region, utterly significant for the presence of Rome.

¹⁴⁹ Jemolo Arturo C., *Chiesa e Stato in Italia negli ultimi cento anni*, Einaudi, 1948.

declarations, in the previous years. This positive turnaround was strengthened by a direct broadcast issued by Mussolini, in English language, through an American radio, in January 1931:

I fought in the War as a soldier in the ranks. I know what war means. Terrible memories of those years when whole generations of the youth of so many countries were laid low by the hail of lead have not been cancelled from my mind. I myself was seriously wounded. In the years that have since elapsed and at the present time, both as man and as head of the government, I have had before me a panorama of political, economic and moral consequences of the War, and not in Italy alone.

How can anyone suppose that with this two-fold experience I would consider with anything but horror the prospect of another war? Even if it were to arise between two countries only, a war nowadays would inevitably become a general war. Civilization itself would be endangered. New discoveries of science would make a future war even more dreadful than the last. The danger of death would not be reserved for fighters, but whole populations would be imperilled without the possibility of effective protection. Italy, let me repeat it – will never take the initiative of starting a war. Italy needs peace. Fascism desires to secure for the Italian people in co-operation with all other peoples of the world a future of prosperity and peace.¹⁵⁰

The timing of this change of narrative, from the *duce*, contributed to the effectiveness of the latter. Indeed, the world was facing the dangerous consequences of the 1929 Great Depression, which utterly worsened the American concerns towards the rise of Bolshevism throughout Europe. The international stance of Mussolini, coupled with the force of the Fascist corporativist infrastructure, acted as a solid bastion against the pressing Communist influence. Although, as specified before, the American press and public opinion occasionally equated Mussolini's Fascism with Stalin's Communism, the level of preoccupation and dangerousness generated by the two dictators was largely different: the *Time* wrote, in 1930, that "if peace is menaced by Benito Mussolini, at least, like an honest rattlesnake, he jangles his sword. Stalin acts without warning. Compared to Stalin and Communism, Mussolini and Fascism are negligible forces."¹⁵¹

Therefore, a large portion of the American press, sustained by the official position of the State Department, endowed Mussolini with a greater role in the quest for international disarmament and distension. The *duce* was now considered a crucial actor in the general debate over such questions, and the American establishment perceived that he could act as a reliable ally for Washington's positioning on the matter.

Nonetheless, the animosity and aggressiveness of Mussolini's international positioning did not entirely placate: the Fascist leader, as already mentioned in this dissertation, was pursuing a "double track" strategy, attempting to achieve not only international prestige, but also favourable conditions for Italy on the geopolitical scheme, especially within the military and territorial framework. These two purposes had to be served through an enlargement of Italian possessions, to be pursued in Africa, and a severe enhancement of the country's military capabilities. Such questions, indeed, collided with the pacifist attitude displayed by

¹⁵⁰ Benito in English (1931), *Time*.

¹⁵¹ Everybody's Red Business (1930), *Time*.

Mussolini, but they arose from the necessity to prevent that Italy found itself embattled between the rising might of France, Britain, and, in some years' time, also Germany, without the adequate defensive (and offensive) capabilities. After all, "Italy is disposed to accept the lowest figure of armaments... provided no other nation has more"¹⁵² Thus, the American press started questioning itself the real extent of Mussolini's peace-directed declarations and actions: within the columns of *The New Republic*, Paquino Ianchi wrote: "how real is Mussolini's pacifism? How sincere is he in now advocating peace at all costs?"¹⁵³, ¹⁵⁴

By the first half of the 1930s, it became clear that a partial *redde rationem* of all these doubts and ambiguities would have occurred at Geneva, with the call for an international disarmament conference, strongly endorsed by the United States. The low effectiveness and controversies of this conference were already discussed throughout this dissertation, but the international gathering yielded important benefits for Mussolini: the *duce* had posed himself as one of the few political leaders who could effectively mediate between the opposing sides of the political spectrum of the time, namely Western democracies and Nazi Germany. Indeed, although the proper rapprochement with Hitler had not occurred yet, the Fascist leader managed to maintain cordial relations with the *Fuhrer*, without altering, for this very reason, the friendship with the major European powers and the United States. Still, concerning this aspect, a portion of the public opinion witnessed a somewhat historical resurgence of the Triple Alliance, where Italy and Germany cooperated despite the antagonistic relations between Rome and Vienna.

The events of 1934, with the assassination of Austrian chancellor Dollfuss and the attempted *Anschluss* pursued by Hitler, marked another crucial signal of Mussolini's disposal for peace and distension. Indeed, when the *duce* intervened against his seemingly closer ideological peer, in order to defend the Austrian independence and sovereignty (and the Italian borders themselves), the entire world recognised the fundamental role played by the Fascist leader. In the weeks after the dispatch of military contingents to the Italo-Austrian border, issued by Mussolini to deter Hitler from concluding the coup d'état, the global prestige of the charismatic leader surged sharply. Many of the dubious and undecided factions, especially within the American press, started to lean towards favourable positions concerning Fascism and its leader. These favourable receptions were further intensified by Mussolini's continued strive for peace and cooperation, through the Italian participation to the Four-Power Pact negotiations and the following seemingly solid rapprochement with both France and Britain. By 1935, only a few months before the launch of the Ethiopian War, Mussolini was described as the "only European leader willing to make a public stand against Germany's aggressiveness", and, thus, the most reliable and valuable ally for all peace-seeking states.¹⁵⁵

Alongside the geopolitical and strategical benefits that Mussolini seemingly generated through his presence, the American press also underlined the importance of the economic advantages of the Fascist state: in July

¹⁵² Mussolini's War Dare (1930), *The Literary Digest*.

¹⁵³ Mussolini in Sheep's Clothing (1932), *The New Republic*.

¹⁵⁴ Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, pp. 84-88.

¹⁵⁵ Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 90.

1934, the editorial *Fortune*, openly favourable towards Mussolini and his party, published a thorough report of the “Corporate experiment” perpetrated by the Fascists in Italy. Within the article, the journal noted the affinity between the Corporativist centralisation of action in the governmental hands and the New Deal framework, which, although presenting some differences, presented remarkably similar features. The *Fortune* pointed out that, contrarily to the common tradition of liberalism and absence of state intervention, that had penetrated the American framework during the first two decades of the century, the Fascist method generated a landscape where the “individual cannot be divorced from the state and vice versa” and where “it is the government’s duty to direct the efforts of the people to the common welfare of the state”.

Basically, *Fortune* favourably underlined the fact that “in this new kind of autocratic state, the autocrat actually seeks the consent of his people”¹⁵⁶. Moreover, the majority of the praises for such innovative system, which had allegedly produced massive benefits for the Italian economy, were to be attributed to Mussolini:

Fortune saw him as the dynamo at the heart of Italy's noble revolution. His energy almost leaps off the page, especially in an almost comical montage of photographs of Il Duce during one of his many vigorous speeches. The writers admired him for his refusal to back down from his beliefs, first as a young Socialist and later as the rising star of Fascism. They applauded him from rebounding from the Matteotti scandal after taking responsibility for it as the head of the party (even though they went out of their way to avoid any intimation that Mussolini was directly involved). They extolled his recent diplomatic achievements, especially the Lateran treaties. The only blight they saw on his record was Italy's "moth-eaten, scrubby, parched, fourth rate"¹⁵⁷ colonies in Libya and the horn of Africa, but they congratulated his efforts in turning them into a commercial conquest without taking new land.¹⁵⁸

Although the positive perception of Mussolini stood solid throughout the initial years of the 1930s, even the staunchest supporters of the Fascist experiment pointed out several discrepancies and dangers within Mussolini’s regime: the economic data of the country demonstrated that, indeed, the gigantic milestones declared by Fascism were not effectively true. Due to the effects of the 1929 crisis, mostly, Italy was experiencing some treacherous setbacks: 54% of the workforce was employed in the agricultural sector, whilst the employed population diminished, from 1929 to 1932, by 8% (returning at pre-crisis levels only by 1940, eleven years apart from the crisis). Moreover, wealthiness was majorly not distributed, the GDP surpassed the 1929 levels only in 1936, after a continuous growth of yearly 5% from 1921, and the so-called “Battle of the Birthrate”, namely Mussolini’s intent to maximise the fertility rate, had not produced the expected benefits. The *Fortune* itself admitted that “Italy has a grievous unemployment problem; in Italy there are many who are poor and some who approach starvation”, due to the fact that certain features

¹⁵⁶The State: Fascist and Total (1934), *Fortune*, pp. 47-57, cit. in Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁷ Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini (1934), *Fortune*, pp. 102-125, cit. in Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁵⁸ Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 94.

of Mussolini's economic doctrine primarily intended to construct a reliable and numerous army for Italy, and then, and only then, to reconstruct a solid economy for the country.¹⁵⁹

The economic woes of Italy became shortly well-known to the American press: Isaac Marcossan, a journalist from *The Saturday Evening Post*, blatantly favouring the Fascist regime, admitted that "in Italians' faces was etched unmistakable resentment", concerning which, once again utilising the Fascism-Communism and Italy-Russia parallel, he added that "it is almost precisely the same kind of look that I found everywhere in Russia. It is the face that reveals acquiescence to intolerant rule that must be tolerated"¹⁶⁰.

One of the most crucial questions posed by history, concerning Mussolini and Fascist Italy, concerned the maximum length to which Italians would have been willing and desiring to follow their leader. Indeed, the *Fortune* pointed out that:

Il Duce looks forward to *Der Tag*, a crucial day when the Italians will be obliged to fight against their own destruction... Il Duce is not getting his maximum birthrate. But he is getting millions of lusty young soldiers. And he is regimenting his people - whether they are soldiers or not - by propaganda of the most persuasive sort. He has his people solidly behind him now.¹⁶¹

This assertion seemingly demonstrated that, notwithstanding the suffering and sacrifices to experience, the Italian population would have always entirely trusted and followed the *duce* in each of his enterprises, at home and abroad. After all, Mussolini had not deceived his intentions of bringing back to ancient glory the Roman Empire, mostly through the Mediterranean, and such powerful intentions, although mostly unrealisable and, thus, purely propagandistic, sincerely satisfied the population. However, it was logically understood that there is no dream or purpose brilliant enough to cover the primary human necessities, which, once gradually scarcer, generally bring all leaders down, sooner or later. Therefore, the question remained: "to what lengths would his people follow Mussolini? And to what lengths would the powers of Europe and America allow him to go?"¹⁶².

Partial answers to such questions, especially the second one, were soon to be delivered to the world, and the deliverer resulted to be the Ethiopian crisis.

2.6 The demise of Fascism in America: the last glimmer of Mussolini's reputation

¹⁵⁹ La Società Italiana e le grandi crisi economiche 1929-2016, *ISTAT*, pp. 83-87.

¹⁶⁰ The Dictator Business (1930), *The Saturday Evening Post*, pp. 3-4, cit. in Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁶¹ Body and Soul for Italy (1934), *Fortune*, from *The Reader's Digest*, 1934, pp. 49-51, cit. in Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 96.

¹⁶² Ambrogio A., *op. cit.*, p. 96.

The background preparations and administration of the Ethiopian conflict has already been analysed throughout this dissertation, but, for the sake of the narration, I believe it would be functional to reiterate that Mussolini had already let his intentions known, concerning Africa. The arms race had begun, Germany had announced massive reconstruction of its military might, and both France and Britain perceived the necessity to counter this rearmament within Europe. As of 1935, although there would have been, before the global war erupted in 1939, several attempts to broker a universal peace (which, at some point, seemed almost feasible) it became largely clear that the European countries were rushing altogether towards a future direct confrontation. Given all of these considerations, Mussolini, who had been laying out projects for the African campaign since 1932, perceived that time was calling the Fascist regime to action, as to avoid being marginalised by the major powers.

Therefore, it was widespread knowledge that Mussolini desired to obtain larger territorial possessions in Africa, specifically in Ethiopia, bordering with the two Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia, but, at the same time, encircled by British and French dominions. This awareness, concerning the *duce*'s intentions, although it figured dangerous prospects, was not perceived as an impellent urge to be tackled by the American public opinion. As explained above, the public statements of Mussolini were often directed towards a propagandistic objective, and, despite being mostly true and real, they were usually considered less dangerous than they appeared at first blush.

Considering the entirety of this propositions, it must not surprise to acknowledge that, once the invasion effectively commenced, it did not astonish the America press. Indeed, numerous condemnations and harsh criticisms stemmed from multiple journals and magazines, manifesting the utter disappointment of the entire population. It must be noted that several reporters and citizens realised that there was no intrinsic difference neither between the recent Italian actions and the enterprises of other European powers, mostly France and Britain, in the African continent, nor between the Abyssinian invasion and the extermination of the Native Americans perpetrated by their own ancestors. However, such awareness did not halt the wave of profound disappointment and condemnation stemming from the American public opinion.

In the days following the invasion, the American press suffered a thorough division of its deployment concerning Fascism: the magazines and journals which had largely sided with the Italian regime and its leader heavily toned down their support, whether to respond to the vehement requests of their readers or to effectively declare their change of position on the matter.

However, there were other publications that continued to support and positively consider the Fascist actions: while the often-mentioned *Fortune* declared its utter neutrality over the issue, other journals, such as the *Business Week*, pointed out the justified nature of the conflict. Indeed, the journal wrote, Italy desperately needed raw materials and commodities from the African colonies, equally to the French and to the British, in order to pursue its modernisation and industrialisation goals. Therefore, according to the reporters of this journal, the African campaign, although tragic and dangerous for the entire European continent, served precise purposes for the Italian regime.

With respect to this, Frank Simonds, a reporter for *The Saturday Evening Post*, posed a simple but important question: “what could he [Mussolini] do? His armies were already poised to strike. And why, again, were the British, who had refused to lift a hand to arrest Japan in Manchuria, ready to go so far to stop Italy in Ethiopia?”¹⁶³. Simonds shifted the focus of the attention to the other European powers, especially Britain, which had gathered all of its possessions in Africa with the same exact means utilised by the Fascist regime in Ethiopia. Indeed, Simonds pointed out, Italy was carrying out such attack in a particularly fragile period of history, and no less than against a state party to the League of Nations, but this feature alone could not distance this enterprise from the ones of the past, carried out by the French and the British.

Overall, there were very few newspapers that issued similar stances on the matter: the majority of the American press had already declared its solid condemnation of the Italian actions, blamed as the aggressor against a poor and backwards country. Even *Time*, who largely mentioned Mussolini and produced numerous praises to his accomplishments, supported Italy solely until the hostilities effectively begun. Actually, the magazine even decided to nominate Haile Selassie, Ethiopian emperor and direct opponent of Mussolini, as “Man of the Year”, which probably indisposed (a lot) the Fascist leader.

Other editorials, like *The New Republic* or *Collier's*, adopted no refrain from harsh criticisms. The former wrote that:

This is not war; it is murder. The spectacle of half-naked, practically unarmed, semi savages, men, women, and children, being mowed down by machine-guns, tanks, and aerial bombardment has shocked and sickened the civilised world, and the repercussions will cost Italy dear for a long time to come.¹⁶⁴

To this, echoed the *Collier's* stances, which, pairing Mussolini with Stalin and Hitler, depicted the Fascist leader as one of the three “foes of liberty”, pointing out that “dictators are efficient, but their efficiency is directed too often to evil ends”¹⁶⁵.

However, throughout these slightly different opinions, there was a factuality which the entire American press and public opinion agreed to: “we cannot take up the case of native people versus Europeans in all parts of the world”¹⁶⁶. This statement, contained in a 1935 publication of *The Saturday Evening Post*, the most pro-Fascist American journal, summarises the widespread opinion on the issue. The intrinsic isolationistic stances forwarded by the American establishment since World War I were deeply rooted in the culture of the country, being also exacerbated by Roosevelt’s presidency, which renders this declaration a representation of the line of thought of the entire United States’ population of the 1930s.

Be that as it may, the ultimate outcome of this wave of criticism towards Mussolini was a scorching defeat for the Fascist leader’s reputation: the international prestige that the *duce* had cautiously constructed,

¹⁶³ Another War to End War? (1935), *The Saturday Evening Post*, pp. 5-7, cit. in Ambrogi A., *op. cit.*, p, 102.

¹⁶⁴ The Week (1935), *The New Republic*, p. 253, cit. in Ambrogi A., *op. cit.*, p, 104.

¹⁶⁵ Tyrants are Popular (1935), *Collier's*, p. 20, cit. in Ambrogi A., *op. cit.*, p, 103.

¹⁶⁶ European Wars for Europeans (1935), *The Saturday Evening Post*, p. 26, cit. in Ambrogi A., *op. cit.*, p, 101.

through coercion and propaganda, paired with his charismatic and magnetic character, was rapidly unravelling before his own eyes. From this point onwards, Mussolini would have found sharper difficulties in speaking to the heart of American citizens and journalists, and, consequently, he would have witnessed the already fragile degree of cordiality between the two administrations gradually dwindle.

As summarised by Ambroggi:

Mussolini's image in America never recovered from the Ethiopian war. His mercurial career had made him the centrepiece of the American foreign press and had brought him fame throughout the world.

Now, his most resolute devotees were suddenly quiet. His most scornful critics were louder than ever. The American press no longer viewed him as the practical, realist, hard-nosed leader that had saved Italy, but rather as a violent, imperialist, war-hungry tyrant threatening the stability of Europe.

As the press went, so went public opinion, and later, governmental policy. In a matter of months, Mussolini's popularity plummeted in the United States and around throughout Europe. Soon, only one major political leader would be willing to work with him, and the price of friendship with Adolf Hitler would prove to be terrible. Benito Mussolini had no idea that, by invading Ethiopia, he had signed his own death warrant.¹⁶⁷

The American sentiment described hitherto remained generally the same during the prosecution of the hostilities, occasionally increasing or decreasing depending on the succession of events of the African campaign. Once Addis Abeba fell, Mussolini waited for the dust to settle, but, ultimately, the *duce* realised that the consequences of the war would expand to every aspect of international politics.

The channel with Washington remained open, indeed, as per Mussolini, mostly for maintaining a resemblance of cordiality and to possibly reach a rapprochement with Roosevelt. However, the American president had already declared that Mussolini was to be considered as a "blood brother" to Stalin, and he had implicitly manifested that the Fascist leader could not be trusted anymore to act as the tiebreaker of peace in Europe.¹⁶⁸ Roosevelt, and many other Americans, had understood that many of the considerations and opinions concerning Mussolini had been wrongful, partially or totally, such that, after what had happened in Ethiopia, the United States should distance itself from any excessively friendly tie with Fascism and its leader.

The aftermath of the war was tragic for Mussolini: alongside the diplomatic loss of prestige, and the consequent necessity to finalise his rapprochement with Hitler, the Fascist regime lost much of the investments coming from American businesses: despite having supported Mussolini and Fascism for years, the financial branch of Washington decided to follow the lead of both the Oval Office and the American press, sharply reducing the outflow of investments and loans to the Italian economic infrastructures, ultimately inflicting Italy a serious damage.

¹⁶⁷ Ambroggi A., *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

¹⁶⁸ Diggins John, *Mussolini and Fascism: the View from America*, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 278.

Overall, by 1936, the sole group of American population blindly supporting Fascism and Mussolini was the Italo-American portion of the country. However, as explained in the following chapter, even the Italo-American (and utterly Italian) backing of the Fascist regime started to vacillate after the finalisation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. The entire plethora of events that followed this arrangement, from the anti-Semitic decrees of 1938 to the entry into war alongside Germany, ultimately teared down the cautiously built wall of total support for Mussolini and his regime¹⁶⁹. The Fascist elites were obviously not aware of this, at the time, but, as of today, it can be quite surely affirmed that the Ethiopian campaign, initially conceived as the pinnacle of the Fascist foreign policy, represented instead the foreboding of the Fascist ruin: a lethal illusion engraved in the dust of a wannabe empire.

3. THE ITALIAN PUBLIC OPINION ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

3.1 The “Fascistization” of information

Differently from the American framework, within which the analysis of the public opinion and the press appears simpler due to a severely minor restrictiveness, an investigation concerning the sentiments of the public opinion throughout the Italian landscape requires a further element to account for: the Fascist propaganda and the correlated repressive tools. It must be understood that, in a context of such clampdown inspiration, the gatherable information becomes thinner and utterly more complex to dissect, considering that any given piece of information bears a high probability of being doctored or deeply influenced by the Fascist regime.

Therefore, in a broader attempt to shield this dissertation from the danger of biases and misinterpretations, I believe it would be appropriate to surround this entire concluding chapter with an explanation regarding

¹⁶⁹ Ambrogi A., *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121.

the Fascist intentions and methods, coupled with their outcomes, with respect to the public opinion and the media.

The first section of this paragraph will be devoted to the utilisation of the mediatic infrastructures, which played a crucial role, as aforementioned, in the depiction of Mussolini and the Fascist party not only on the international scenario, but also, and especially, within the homeland's borders.

Once the Fascist party gained control of the political life of the country, in 1922, an enterprise that was almost immediately pursued concerned the capillary control of every source of information and mediatic distribution present in the country, ranging from cinemas and newspapers to radios and schools. As of 1923, the entirety of contents published by the means of communication fell under the direct supervision of the Fascist elites, which perceived this sector as a unique possibility, for the regime, to re-organize the public and private life of the country in accordance with their own desires and necessities.¹⁷⁰

The entire process commenced with the most central and participated tool: the Italian press. Between 1923 and 1925, the government promulgated laws directed at annihilating the freedom of the press, which would have harvested two distinct but correlated advantages for the regime: an undisputed control of the press would have permitted the party to easily silence all contrasting voices and opinions, relegated to the peripheries of the Italian media, and, simultaneously, such capillary control allowed the Fascists to practically re-design history in line with their political and ideological beliefs. After all, the absence of counterarguments and oppositions signified that the party was able to portray the historical occurrences through the Fascist lens and interpretation, which, most of the times, did not entirely coincide with the reality of things.

It must be underlined that, until 1925, namely until the scandal derived from the Matteotti scandal, the freedom of expression of the press was, indeed, severely repressed, but not formally: the tools of repression included proper acts of violence, intimidations, and the utter destruction of editorial offices, as to render them unusable and futile, but there were not specific and precise laws concerning the inability to freely manifest opinions and considerations¹⁷¹. An exemplification of such violences can be identified in the brutal attack perpetrated against the journal *Avanti!*, the official newspaper of the Socialist Party¹⁷², in April 1919. The breakthrough occurred, indeed, in 1925: after the turmoil generated by the retrieval of Giacomo Matteotti's lifeless corpse and the consequent accusations against the Fascist establishment, Mussolini perceived necessary to elaborate a proper suppression of the press, not only *de facto*, but also *de jure*: amongst the plethora of enacted laws renamed as *leggi fascistissime*, Mussolini instituted the Professional Order of Journalists. This newly created entity, as per its own statute, permitted the participation of

¹⁷⁰ De Grazia Victoria, *Consenso e cultura di massa nell'Italia fascista*, Editori Laterza Roma, Bari, 1981, p. 191.

¹⁷¹ Castronovo Valerio, *La stampa italiana dall'Unità al fascismo*, Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna, 2000, p. 301.

¹⁷² It is perhaps intriguing to acknowledge that Benito Mussolini, during the years spent within the ranks of the Socialist Party, became director of this very same editorial, on 1st December 1912, replacing Giovanni Bacci. The future *duce* maintained this office until October 1914, when he was expelled from the Party itself due to his support of an Italian participation in the First World War.

journalists insofar as they had “not pursued a public activity in contradiction with the interests of the Nation”, followed by a certification of good behaviour released by the province’s prefect. Implicitly, this Order signalled that every journalist, editor, and publicist that decided not to follow the Fascist guidelines or to manifest opposition to the party, would have not been admitted into the Order itself, being thus incapable of practicing the profession.¹⁷³

Furthermore, several journals experienced a thorough “fascistization” of their columns, in order to properly conform the publication of such journals to the guideline of the party: the most vivid example of such operation is represented by the *Corriere della Sera*. The daily newspaper founded in Milan, in 1876, had represented, from the March on Rome to 1926, the most vocal and dangerous opposition against the regime, amongst the press. Run by the Albertini family, which had managed to capitalise the episodes of Fascist intimidation and violence to their own advantage, the editorial had peaked, after the Matteotti scandal, its publications at almost one million copies per day, rendering it one of the most read sources of information of the country. The opposing efforts of the *Corriere della Sera* indisposed the regime, which responded issuing hundreds of mandates for the seizure of the journal’s copies, throughout the entire country. The arm-wrestling between the Fascist party and the newspaper terminated, in favour of the former, at the end of 1925, when the Milan prefect, Vincenzo Pericoli, submitted a series of formal injunctions to the journal, threatening to shut it down completely: by 1926, director Luigi Albertini resigned from the direction, which generated a domino effect of resignations throughout the offices of the newspaper. Publicists like Luigi Einaudi, Carlo Sforza and Alberto Tarchiani abandoned the journal, signalling the victory of the regime, which, from this moment onwards, regulated the entire organization of the editorial, rigidly following the dispositions of Achille Starace, vice secretary of the party.¹⁷⁴

Alongside the forced conversion of some journals, the Fascist regime pursued its purposes concerning the Italian press in a two-fold manner: not only it boycotted altogether journals like *L’Unità* or the very same *Avanti!*, suspending the distribution of these editorials in 1925, but, following Mussolini’s directives, the party created a new entity, called *Ufficio Stampa*, which fundamentally acted as the Presidency’s press office. This office underwent several transformations in the successive years: at first it was converted into a proper Under-Secretariat of State for press and propaganda, in 1934, before being officially transformed into a Ministry in 1935, at first known as *Ministero per la stampa e la propaganda* (Ministry for press and propaganda) and, by 1937, renamed with the notorious denomination of *Ministero per la Cultura Popolare*, or *MinCulPop* (Ministry for the popular culture).

After having been assigned to the competence of Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini’s son-in-law, at first, and then, once Ciano decided to join the Ethiopian campaign as an aviation captain, to Dino Alfieri, the Ministry centralised upon itself the control over newspapers, published books, radios, cinemas, operations of theatre and tourism: throughout the 20s and 30s, several ministerial circulars redispersed the entire composition of

¹⁷³ Tranfaglia Nicola, *Il fascismo e le guerre mondiali (1914-1945)*, Rusconi Libri, 2019, p. 220.

¹⁷⁴ Licata Glauco, *Storia del Corriere della Sera*, Rizzoli, 1976, p. 206-210.

the Italian press. For example, the maximum number of pages comprising a journal was limited to six: this ambiguous choice was motivated by Arnaldo Mussolini's (the *duce*'s brother) intention to develop a new "press habit", where the editorials would enhance wider sobriety, especially concerning the crime news. Indeed, this focus on the necessity to drastically reduce the publications concerning the "true crime" was motivated by a logical strategic design of Mussolini: through the sharp reduction of the narrative concerning such events on the newspapers, the Fascist leader projected to propagandise his successful fight against the deep-rooted causes of such crimes, in order to depict Italy, both to the Italians and to the foreigners, as sharply more peaceful than before. Therefore, the press was entirely forbidden to publish articles concerning crime news in visually important parts of the newspapers: fundamentally, certain cases, especially if resonating within the population with a certain rapidity, could be, indeed, published, but these were designed to be relegated to the last pages and to the less visible columns of the printed paper.¹⁷⁵

Ultimately, despite the governmental action for the control of the national press reaped largely satisfactory results, the regime understood that such control could not be relegated solely to a *super partes* activity, but that the entire operation of propaganda required a supporting voice within the ranks of the journals themselves: therefore, a choice was made to select the journal *Il Popolo d'Italia*, directed by Arnaldo Mussolini himself, as the voice of the party within the press. This very same newspaper had been founded by Benito Mussolini in 1914, after having abandoned the direction of the official Socialists journal *Avanti!*, and, despite being fundamentally a Socialist journal during the years of the first World War, it modified its publication behaviour following the political shift operated by its founder.

Overall, the Fascist regime, through the 1920s and 1930s, gradually augmented the tightness of the grip held on the national press, which, at a certain point, had become nothing more than another instrument of the totalitarian regime ruled by Benito Mussolini. The *duce* himself spoke, before a gathering of the majority of the Italian principal newspapers, of the importance of the press in the following terms:

In a totalitarian regime, as must necessarily be a regime born of a triumphant revolution, the press is an element of this Regime, a force at the service of this Regime; in a unitary Regime, the press cannot be alien to this unity. That is why all the Italian press is fascist and must feel proud of fighting compact under the banner of the *Littorio*. [...]

What is harmful is avoided and what is useful to the Regime is done. It follows that, above all and, could be said, exclusively in Italy, unlike other countries, journalism, more than a profession or trade, becomes a mission of utmost importance and delicacy; because in the contemporary age, after the school which educates the generations who ride, it is the journalism that circulates amongst the masses and carries out its work of information and training.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Tranfaglia Nicola, *La stampa italiana nell'età fascista*, Laterza, 1980, pp. 65-89.

¹⁷⁶ *Discorso di Roma*, 10 Ottobre 1928, Biblioteca Fascista.

Ultimately, as a complementary manoeuvre to the entirety of these repressive and propagandistic actions, moving away from the world of the press, Mussolini enhanced his efforts to instrumentalize the framework of cinemas as another tool for propaganda. In 1924, the *duce* created the *Istituto Luce*, which was explicitly indicated as an effective medium for the expansion of Fascist propaganda: indeed, Mussolini incentivised several ministries, including the ministry for public instruction and the ministry of economy, to employ the institute as a mechanism to further enlarge the propagandistic machine of the regime within the schools. Following the manifested interest and participation of the regime, between 1926 and 1927 the country witnessed the creation of eight distinct cinematheques, each of which deepened its focus on a particular argument: from agriculture and artistic instruction to military life and tourism, these infrastructures were deeply intertwined with the institute, in order to encompass the entirety of the frameworks participated by the population: schools, patronages, the *Balilla* foundation (a juvenile organization) and even syndicates and recreational clubs became flooded with contents generated from and through the *Istituto Luce*.

In 1927, the institute experienced an expansion of its output, with the creation of the *Giornale Luce*, a newsreel which had to be mandatorily projected in cinemas before the projection of any given film: this newsreel was, fundamentally, another propagandistic vehicle, but it stood out amongst all similar instruments, due to its high popularity. Indeed, the diffusion of such tool reached a considerably high number of citizens, who started to consider it as their primary source of information, given also the availability of locations that allowed its projection: the Fascist regime, as of 1927, had decided that, alongside the numerous cinematographic rooms able of projecting the newsreels, the latter would have been screened also by travelling projectionists, who would have been capable of reaching all those municipalities (almost 5000) that were devoid of adequate locations for the projection.¹⁷⁷

To this renewed interest for the cinema, followed the creation of the Venice Film Festival, in 1932, and of *Cinecittà*, in 1936, a complex of cinematographic studios, which, as of today, represents the largest infrastructure in Europe: both these creations were influenced by the impact of the Hollywoodian film industry, visited in 1932 by a high-ranking Fascist official, Luigi Freddi, and by the 1933 visit of Nazi hierarch Joseph Goebbels, who convinced Freddi himself to follow the German experiment of the *Reichsfilmkammer*, the governmental entity in charge of the cinematographic industry. Therefore, Freddi acquired a commanding position, within the party, concerning the cinematographic industry and politics of the regime, and, consequently, he decided to establish a centralised office for this framework: the *Direzione Generale di Cinematografia* (Central Direction for Cinematography) was born in 1934, and, coupled with the entire plethora of actions undertaken up to this point, it generated, by mid-1930s, a widespread participation of Italian citizens to the cinematographic rooms.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, the action of cinema-going became a proper habit for several portions of the population, although a neat distinction stood between the city-dwellers and the rural residents: whereas the former portion

¹⁷⁷ Argentero Mino, *L'occhio del regime*, Bulzoni Editore, Roma, 2003, pp. 29-73.

¹⁷⁸ Ben-Ghiat Ruth, *La cultura fascista*, Il Mulino, 2004, pp. 143-144.

considered the participation to cinemas as a daily activity, the latter conceived it as a quietly rare event, mostly carried out on Sundays. Films had become one of the most, if not the principal, source of entertainment and distraction for the Italian population.¹⁷⁹

Overall, the actions of the Fascist regime on the means of communication, by half of the 1930s, had managed to construct a framework of capillary control of the information system, ranging from the press and the cinema to radiophonic and artistic milieu. The principal purpose of such strategy was, indeed, the construction of a solid and as enlarged as possible consensus towards the regime itself, and, specifically, towards its leader, Benito Mussolini. In fact, the very same *Ufficio Stampa*, well before being transformed in the MinCulPop aforementioned, launched an official program of propagandisation of the figure of the *duce* himself, called *Culto del Duce*. This program was intended to function as a mass-directed program to solidify the charismatic and heroic representation of the Fascist leader, centred on the necessity to present Mussolini as the *homo novus* of the country, not only endowed with impeccable rhetoric and political capacities, but also extremely close to the masses themselves, as demonstrated by the usual tours of the country perpetrated by Mussolini himself. The mythification of Mussolini's personality and successes passed through concrete and factual actions like this, but also through the entire machine of propaganda described in the lines above: in 1926, a film was published, "Duce", which utterly praised the deeds of the first-hour Fascists both in the war and within the country, culminating with the March on Rome; moreover, the futuristic milieu of the country, led by blatant Fascists like Marinetti, dedicated a series of artworks to Mussolini, captained by Enrico Prampolini's *Sintesi plastica del Duce*. **[insert photo of such artwork]**¹⁸⁰ Logically, the total elimination of opposing voices and parties extremely facilitated the enterprise, but the aura of divinity and heroism that was designed around the Fascist leader affected the population with drastically positive results.

By the commencement of the hostilities in Ethiopia, the Fascist regime had succeeded in building a vast and far-reaching machine of propaganda and consensus, concerning both the party itself and its leader, although, by this time, the two things had become completely merged into a unique entity above politics and politicians. However, notwithstanding the nationwide efforts of the regime against the mere existence of a single demonstration of anti-Fascist opinions, there are examples of such antagonism to the Fascist *status quo* being produced in those same years, both within (although exceedingly rare) and outside the country, specifically throughout Europe and the United States. The following paragraph will offer an analysis concerning the essence and the resistance of such contrasting opinions, which, I believe, will acquire major resonance bearing in mind the capillarity and the intransigence of the Fascist regime with respect to this.

¹⁷⁹ Argentieri M., *op. cit.*, p. 174.

¹⁸⁰ Gentile Emilio, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, Harvard University Press, 1996.

3.2 The cracks in the Fascist propagandistic wall: the Italian framework

A common feature of totalitarian regimes, whether in ancient or modern times, has always been the presence, although severely repressed, of harshly critical opinions and factions of the socio-political spectrum. Indeed, regardless of the extension of the repressive and authoritarian efforts of the regimes, the enterprise of convincing the entirety of the population, through fear or effective persuasion, to follow the precepts and ideologies of the ruling party, has constantly been depicted as an unfeasible deed. Therefore, it appears largely logical that every similar regime necessitated to cope with specific portions of the population producing entirely contrasting opinions and actions: as far as the Fascist regime is concerned, this syllogism stands.

There has already been an explanation of the Italian regime's endeavours towards the construction of a consensus as comprehensive and all-encompassing as possible, but, as per other regimes before and after the Fascist one, several parts of the population and the public opinion resisted the pressure exerted by the party.

It must be noted, though, before commencing a proper analysis of such opposing figures, that the definition of "population" encounters some complexities: the numerous social groups of Italy, at the time, often projected different perceptions of the operations of Fascism, namely the local manifestation of the greater national party: most people praised certain innovations brought by the Fascist rule, such as the creation of *dopolavoro* or the aforementioned cinemas and social activities, simultaneously criticising the most repressive and violent intentions of the party itself, such as the price controls or the lack of socio-political freedoms. Therefore, a partial or total generalisation of the "Fascist experience", in Italy, appears almost undoable: the majority of sources accessible to the public, today, is composed by private diaries or letters, which, although prominent to the mission of unveiling the public opinion's beliefs on Fascism, represent a troubling question of significance. Indeed, the figures writing such memoirs are almost impossible to identify and to pose within a specific historic and social context, which render the composition of a general trend of thought widely complex. Moreover, the same problem posed by individual sources is found in the accounts forwarded to the party by police forces or informers, who, most likely, reported events in an exaggerate fashion to ingratiate themselves with the regime:

The majority of the 'professional' informers were sympathetic to Fascism and were recruited because their political orientation served as some guarantee of the credibility of their reports. Many were

recruited from within the PNF itself, which permitted Bocchini¹⁸¹ and Mussolini to know what was going on inside the party, and many came also from areas of dissident Fascism.¹⁸²

Overall, something of a timeline can be roughly traced concerning the presence of contrasting opinions and figures in the peninsula: during the 1920s, especially after 1925, when it was effectively acknowledged that the Fascist party entirely controlled the life of the country, several anti-fascists or non-fascist dedicated themselves to the absorption of the landslide defeat they suffered, focused on the rebuilding of their political identities and on the *modus operandi* to follow during the Fascist rule. Moreover, it appeared unrecommended to mobilise any degree of opposition and critique against the regime during this decade, which witnessed several Fascist successes, alleged or effective: the party created in 1919 by Benito Mussolini stood at tremendously high levels of consensus, whether forced or spontaneous, and it would have resulted largely unwise to operate a large-scale enterprise of resistance in such a positive period. Furthermore, the aforementioned 1929 Concordat with the Catholic Church represented a massive success of propagandistic extent for the Fascist party, reinforced by the political elections organised for the same year, disposed for renewing the members of the Chamber of Deputies. To present the perspective through which such elections must be analysed, it must be noted that:

Local *fasci* were advised that the voters should be escorted to the polling stations ‘perfectly regimented’ (by the *fasci*), that they should sing as they went, and that efforts should be made to identify those who were thought likely to abstain in order that pressure could be exerted on them: ‘Even the smallest internal dissent must be silenced’. Inside the polling booths, voters were presented with two differently coloured voting slips—one for ‘yes’ and one for ‘no’—and had to place the selected voting slip in one of two urns—again, one for ‘yes’ and one for ‘no’—under the watchful gaze of fascist officials. A ‘no’ vote was immediately identifiable, therefore.¹⁸³

Nonetheless, the Italian population, although allegedly supporting the Fascist party in absolute values, “lost no time in blaming the regime for their troubles”¹⁸⁴ once the Great Depression commenced to project its effects on the country: for example, Fiat, one of the most representative automotive factories of the country, based in Turin, was compelled to sack more than 15.000 workers due to a steep decline in demand, generating a widespread crisis over the city and the region. The Fascist informers reported that “workers protested about the low level of public assistance, feeling that they had little or no protection in time of crisis”.

¹⁸¹ Arturo Bocchini was nominated chief of the police in 1926, and he created a special police apparatus which reported directly to Mussolini, concerning espionage, within and outside the party, and all types of disorders deemed significant for the Fascist party. Bocchini’s role and authority represented such a crucial factor of the Fascist opera of repression that he was nicknamed “vice-duce”.

¹⁸² Corner Paul, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 175.

¹⁸³ Corner P., *op. cit.*, p. 183-187.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

The condition of disarray produced an almost inevitable loss of confidence even among convinced fascists, further demonstrated by the fact that, not only had many ceased to work for the party, but others were trying to hide the fact that they were fascists. The party was doing so little that, among fascists who wore the party button-hole badge, 'some of them take it out, saying that it makes them uneasy'. As a result 'a good number of those fascists who for professional reasons are obliged to work with the public hide their political position'. These would keep the badge in their pocket and bring it out when necessary 'saying that despite their beliefs, they feel uncomfortable because of a very clear form of diffidence directed towards them'. They felt this because, when in public, 'everyone around us goes quiet', as people blamed the regime for the crisis.¹⁸⁵

This rupture, despite confined to the borders of Turin and the limitrophe areas, represents a significant crack in the allegedly roseous relationship between Fascism and its population. Indeed, such rupture represented, almost a necessity, considering the extent and the consequences of the crisis that struck the world in 1929, but, despite being an isolated event, it represents a significant suggestion for a broader reflection: the successes of the party, whether enormous as the Concordat or limited, gathered fragile and momentaneous support in several provinces. This statement is represented by the narration of the events successive to the situation described above: by 1932-1933, the burden of the economic crisis had been partially reabsorbed, although slowly, and several industries, including Fiat, partially recuperated the number of workers previously sacked. However, notwithstanding the consequent steep rise of appreciation levels towards the Fascist regime, by 1936 the informers in the area of Turin reported that:

There are notable levels of public opinion, confined to the working class and the industrial categories who secretly conserve attitudes not entirely favourable to the Regime.

[...] The great majority of the metalworkers who depend on Fiat, although apparently members of the fascist union organization, and although enrolled in the party, have stayed where they were, that is, they are convinced socialists and communists. In the reunions of these workers, anti-fascist 'murmurs' always appear along with criticisms of the *gerarchi*, etc.¹⁸⁶

Overall, the experience of Turin, one of the largest industrial cities and former capital of the country, appears largely significant for the focus of this paragraph, despite being severely different from the smaller provincial centres of the peninsula. This experience enables this analysis to acknowledge a precise information: Fascism was vastly supported as long as the party provided resources and assistance for the population, but, in the case of the party "simply not doing its job", the public opinion would immediately shift towards a more critical and diffident behaviour.¹⁸⁷ This consideration, logically, was well-known

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Corner P., *op. cit.*, pp. 190-193.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

within the highest ranks of the Fascist party, and, most likely, it has represented one of the numerous factors that influenced the regime to pursue the expansionist war in Ethiopia.

The Abyssinian campaign becomes intrinsically central in this analysis for the thorough correlation it entails with the evolution of public opinion in Italy: Mussolini and the Fascist party had witnessed the reports of enrolments to the Fascist local and regional organizations, which were, indeed, very high, but they had also realised that the certitude with which new members adhered to the “Fascist experience” was at all-time lows.

Be that as it may, the Ethiopian war projected a new possibility for the Fascist regime to gather not only coerced consensus, but also utterly convinced adherence to its precepts and purposes. Indeed, during the war, especially after the initial phase of stalemate, the enthusiasm of the public opinion was evident and vehement, considering the potential advantages the African campaign bore for the Italians themselves, both in terms of patriotic prestige and practical benefits, such as the chance of possessing parcels of land or finding new employments. Nonetheless, portions of this allegedly widespread enthusiasm were inherently influenced by the massive propagandistic operations carried out by the regime, which intended to present a united country, which entirely supported the Fascist drives towards war, to the international scenario. Indeed, throughout the weeks precedent to the conflict, when the crisis was already on the verge of finally escalating, the Italian government pressured the newspapers to publish articles on recurring themes: not only the necessity to civilise a backwards country and population, but also, and especially, the journals insisted on depicting the sanctimonious behaviour carried out by France and Britain, which, although having largely conducted similar operations in the past themselves, were harshly criticising and obstructing Italy in its colonial drive.

Although the opera of public opinion manufacturing had been perpetrated with the evergreen capillary force, police summaries and reports present a troubling situation for the Fascist regime.

People were said to be doubtful about the ‘civilizing mission’ of Italy. Phrases such as ‘the Africans are more civilized than we are’ and ‘we are the barbarians’ appear in police summaries of conversations. There were doubts about the real extent of the resources a conquest of Ethiopia would bring to Italy (one man observing cynically that, if the country were really so rich, the English would have moved in long ago). But above all there was a fairly generalized perception of an expensive and unjustified aggression, based on flimsy pretexts, that carried with it great risks of provoking a wider European conflict. The fascist informers were forced to write on many occasions that, at least prior to its declaration, the war was ‘not wanted’ emotively by the population, which had other, and much more pressing, problems nearer home.¹⁸⁸

After all, the population was largely aware of the numerous troubles encountered by the Italian state in similar colonial enterprises: from Libya to Eritrea, an all-encompassing pacification of the over-sea

¹⁸⁸ Corner P., *op. cit.*, p. 195.

possessions never effectively happened, and many citizens believed that the same difficulties faced in the past would have drastically reoccurred in Ethiopia. Despite these discontents and critiques were impossible to manifest in public, the regime received reports of such resentments throughout the population, and, in an attempt to present a practical counter to such troubles, it organized an *adunata generale nazionale* (general national assembly), a public gathering planned to occur on 2nd October 1935. This *adunata*, as several other social and public events during the Fascist *ventennio*, were projected to stimulate the sentiment of national unity across the country, and they constituted an essential feature of the regime: as such, attendance was implicitly mandatory, all activities were required to be immediately halted, at the sound of sirens and church bells, and the entire population was called to form military columns and fundamentally march towards the squares of their cities. This assembly would happen in every municipality of every region throughout the country, but the central manifestation would occur, logically, in Rome, where the elite of the Fascist party would attend in flamboyant military uniforms.

Overall, if the event itself is witnessed from the outside, bearing a neutral and un-informed perspective, the *adunata generale* was, indeed, a major success: attendance ranged from 10 to 20 million people, and, with such number in his hands, Mussolini could boast to the international scenario that Italy and its population were wholly supporting their leader in any given endeavour, especially in the Ethiopian one. However, although several portions of the population did, indeed, support the Fascist regime and the Ethiopian campaign, there are reports of the event being attended fundamentally for coercion, and not for conviction.

I listened to a lot of participants at the *adunata*, among whom [here he gives a list of names], who commented that they were there in observance of party discipline, and certainly not because of adherence to the policies of the Regime, because anyone who has already fought one war certainly could not want another. The same people expressed the opinion that many others thought as they did, and that unfortunately their respect for discipline could be mistaken for, and presented as, an intention that was not there. The crowd at the edges of Piazza Venezia, and beyond, did not show signs of enthusiasm and approval during Mussolini's speech, but listened to it in a composed manner and in silence, almost as if it represented a nightmare rather than an incitement to action. In fact, a lot of people had this impression; yesterday's demonstration and the unusual activity that followed it were not the fruit of enthusiasm but rather of a state of worry and preoccupation. It was good to see the groups of workers from the small building companies and from the small workshops, drawn up as they were alongside the industrial workers. The enthusiasm of these people was limited, however.¹⁸⁹

The same situation described above represented itself, although in slightly minor depth, once the Ethiopian campaign was concluded and the "Italian Empire" had been officially declared. Even in that case, an

¹⁸⁹ Corner P., *op. cit.*, pp. 197-198.

adunata generale was called, and the participation resulted to be extremely successful, but the reality under the surface of coercion and propaganda had remained the same. After the war, the public enthusiasm, whether factual or fictitious, commenced to trail off, and the enormous problems faced by the population returned to the apex of the social worries and discussions. Throughout the end of the 1930s, as the Fascist regime reaped the fruits of its actions in Ethiopia within the international scenario, ultimately completing the shift towards a proper alliance with Hitler and Japan, the support of the population gradually diminished: although there was still no possibility of public uprisings and excessively loud critiques, the reputation of Fascism, privately discussed, suffered heavy blows.

Once Mussolini, by 1943-1944, was deposed, incarcerated and fundamentally relegated to a role of puppet in the hands of Hitler, the damages to the Fascist leader and his party's reputation had become impossible to repair: the fate of Mussolini himself, hanged headfirst in Piazzale Loreto, completely vandalised and desecrated, constitutes a powerful manifestation of a sentiment that had been growing, secretly, for years in the hearts of most Italian citizens.

In conclusion, the relationship between the party and the population appears not as idyllic and rosy as the regime portrayed, notwithstanding the enormous operations of construction of consensus and the capillary propagandistic mechanisms utilised by Mussolini and his government. The public opinion, as it often happens in totalitarian regimes, manifested unshakeable support and satisfaction for the achievements of the regime, given that the entirety of the media outlets were rigidly controlled by the very same regime, but, within streets and squares of provinces and cities, the Italian population of the first half of the 20th century silently manifested its utter discontent for the socio-political situation generated by Fascism.

During this specific paragraph, positive depictions and opinions towards the Fascist regime have been extremely rare, and this has happened due to a precise reason. I sincerely believe that, compared to the previous parts, where both praises and critiques manifested by the foreign presses and public opinions acquired equal importance due to the absence of restrictions, this paragraph required a vaster focus on the negative and critical signals manifested by the Italian population, which happened regardless of the oppressive control and coercion perpetrated by the regime. Indeed, whereas the American positive reception, in most cases, was justified by a proper enthusiasm towards Fascism and its precepts, the numerous positive depictions of the Fascist regime, at home, were often motivated by necessity and coercion, as described above, and not by sheer conviction. Therefore, I assumed that including such specious opinions would have been fundamentally inconsequential, or even harmful, to the broader analysis.

Be that as it may, the present analysis generally portrays an ambiguous and vague situation within the Italian frontiers, during the Fascist *ventennio*: as additionally signalled by the Ethiopian campaign and its toll on the Italian population, the Fascist regime adopted towards the latter a “continuing need for regimentation

and coercion”. As written by an unknown English journalist, in November 1935, the Italian people could be defined as a “nation of prisoners, condemned to enthusiasm”.¹⁹⁰

3.3 The Italian diaspora: a historical context

The emigration of Italian citizens can be identified as a fundamental phenomenon of the country’s history, which witnessed millions of individuals fleeing the peninsula for several reasons. Amongst these determining factors for the emigrations, the principal drives concerned the difficult socio-economic conditions of the country, generated by a mostly agricultural and unindustrialised framework, which, when compared to many other nations in Europe, convinced citizens of the advantages of such emigration towards more prosperous states. A report supported by the Italian Foreign Ministry underlines that “the 1861 census signalled a wage level comparable to the present one of the sub-Saharan countries”: Francesco Nitti, prime minister before the advent of Fascism, speaking of the socio-economic situation of the southern regions of the country, said that the southerners could be “emigrants or brigands”, suggesting an overall defeatist approach, even within the political class of the time.¹⁹¹

Nonetheless, by 1861, the year of the Italian unification, the emigrants amounted to few thousands, mostly in France (77.000), Germany and Switzerland (14.000), given that the transportation and its costs were severely lower than the expenses required to reach the American continent, whether towards the United States, Argentina or Brazil. However, after the unification, the waves of emigration commenced to drastically increase their participants: in the 60s and 70s of the 19th century, the annual average of expatriations amounted to almost 100.000, which more than doubled in the 80s and the 90s. indeed, by 1891, the census had signalled that, solely in the American continent, there were more than 1.3 million Italian emigrants, dislocated between the three aforementioned countries, whereas, within Europe, there were almost half a million expatriated citizens, most of whom resided in France.

Despite the initial waves favoured the emigration towards Latin America, where the national governments highly incentivised the emigrants with financial concessions and initial subsidies, from the end of the 19th century the majority of expatriates directed its oceanic trip towards the land of the “American dream”, namely the United States. To put this statement in perspective, it suffices noting this: between 1869 and 1899, the total number of Italians fleeing the peninsula amounted to almost 6 million (quasi equally distributed between Europe and Americas), whereas, from 1900 to 1920, this number almost doubled,

¹⁹⁰ Corner P., *op. cit.*, p.200.

¹⁹¹ Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, *Gli italiani all'estero: collettività storiche e nuove mobilità*, Affari Sociali Internazionali, 2020, pp. 8-11.

reaching 10 million of total expatriates, amongst whom a drastically higher 59% had decided to reach countries outside of Europe, namely the Americas.¹⁹²

Simultaneously, as the Italian political class enhanced the industrialising drive specifically in the North, leaving the South far behind in terms of progress and advancements (generating the infamous “Southern question”), the northern regions witnessed a drastic reduction of the expatriates’ number, whereas, in the South, the percentage of the population emigrating increased by 900%, between 1876 and 1910 (from 6.6% to 46.6%)¹⁹³. Be that as it may, the advent of Fascism thoroughly influenced this trend: by the beginning of the 1930s, the annual average of expatriations had sharply reduced to 70.000, and, considering the twenty years of proper Fascist government (1922-1942), the repatriations resulted higher than the expatriations, ultimately generating a migratory surplus of 1.2 million people.

The advent of the Fascist regime, moreover, coincided with the commencement of a more cautious and dedicated international framework, with respect to the migratory questions, given that, until then, the exploitations and violences committed against migrants were numerous and unchecked. For example, alongside the propagandistic necessity to reduce expatriations to signal the wellness of the Italian state during Fascism, the regime enacted legislative arrangements which comminated “sentences from 1 to 5 years, plus a fine, to whomever instigated to emigration with false promises or sending the emigrants towards places other than those desired by them”.¹⁹⁴ Nonetheless, emigration was, indeed, incentivised by the Fascist party, but this occurred solely as far as such emigration was directed to the Italian colonies in Africa. In fact, the regime was completely convinced that, through pushing the Italian citizens towards the colonies, not only the homeland could have achieved the long-desired autarchy, but also Italy would have equalled the numbers of France and Britain in terms of colonial populations, considered a pivotal necessity for the international prestige of the country. In terms of data, though, it must be noted that, approximately, the Italians residing in the colonies, namely Eritrea, Libya and Ethiopia (although the latter was acquired in the final years of the regime) amounted to a number comprised between 140 and 213 thousand.

However, this emigratory push for the colonies, by the Fascist party, was enhanced not only for propagandistic reasons, but also for practical ones: by the end of the 1920s, many traditionally hospital and receiving countries, the United States amongst all, shifted their approaches to migration towards more restrictive behaviours, mostly due to the socio-economic consequences of the Great Depression. Specifically, the United States enacted, in 1921, a temporary law (then made permanent) which regulated the number of new arrivals in the country, based on a quota system which depended on the country of origin. This provision was renamed *Emergency Quota Act* (also *Emergency Immigration Act*) and it fixed the maximum threshold for single countries’ new arrivals to the 3% of the total residents, in the United States, from that specific country, drawing the basis for such calculations from the 1910 census: this formula

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-15.

became known as the *National Origins Formula*, and it not only experienced a restriction from 3% to 2% in 1924, when the bill became permanent, but also a modification of the census to be based upon, which passed from the 1910 census to the 1890 census¹⁹⁵, manifesting the intention to strengthen the restrictions and reduce the overall number of new immigrants.

The outcome of such provision can be largely declared positive, since, from 1921 to 1922, the total number of immigrants decreased from a total of 805.228 to a total of 300.556, although it must be noted that the majority of the decrease was attributable to “new immigration” countries, mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe, like Italy or Poland, rather than Northern and Western European nations, like Germany, Britain or Ireland. The reason for this seemingly unreasoned differentiation stands behind the perception that, considering the fact that the majority of the foreign residents in the United States belonged to the “old immigration” countries, new immigrants coming from these specific countries would have encountered far inferior problematics in being assimilated within the country. After all, Britain, Germany and Ireland, combined, amounted to almost 70% of the foreign residents in the United States, as of 1920, whereas Italy, Poland and Sweden, the most represented amongst the least present in the country, combined to a mere 10%.¹⁹⁶

These legislative provisions enacted in the 1920s, coupled with the severe crisis that struck the world in 1929 after the Great Depression, which forced the United States to severely diminish the influx of migrants due to the economic and social hardships, represent the fundamental motives behind a sharp decrease of outwards migration, from Italy to America, in the 1930s.

3.4 Voices abroad: the Italo-American community

With respect to sociology and ethnography, the Italian population residing in America experienced a profound assimilation with the framework of the United States, both in the basic terminology of names and in the lifestyles. Consequently, in order to cope with this almost automatic assimilation, the Italian embassy and consulates were required to organise several events and activities, using all means of communications, to maintain a thorough control of the population, through the same propagandistic indoctrination pursued at home. The all-encompassing propagandistic efforts of the Fascist regime generated precise consequences on the Italo-American population, which was heavily influenced by the overly positive narrative of Italy as a new and prosperous country, “not anymore that country where they, and their fathers, had been once so unhappy”. As reported by Salvemini:

¹⁹⁵ Beaman Middleton, *Current Legislation: the Immigration Act of 1924*, American Bar Association Journal 10, 1924, p. 490.

¹⁹⁶ US Senate Document n° 259, 70th Congress, 2nd Session, Table A, p. 5.

La propaganda fascista evita accuratamente di mostrare qualunque tendenza antiamericana. Si limita a fornire intorno alle cose d'America informazioni scarse, banali e non di rado denigratorie. Moltissimi immigrati italiani conoscono soltanto la durezza della vita in America, dove sono stati guardati dall'alto in basso e disprezzati come *dagoes* e *wops*. La propaganda fascista li mantiene stranieri al paese che li ospita e riserva tutte le sue lodi per l'Italia di Mussolini.¹⁹⁷

(Fascist propaganda carefully avoids showing any anti-American tendency. It limits itself to providing, around the things of America, scarce, banal and not infrequently denigratory information. Many Italian immigrants only know the harshness of life in America, where they were looked down upon and despised as *dagoes* and *wops*. Fascist propaganda keeps them aliens to the country that hosts them, and reserves all its praises for Mussolini's Italy.)

Similarly to what happened in the homeland, as mentioned above, the control of the Fascist regime on the population and its activities was capillary, even with the spatial difficulties of the oceanic distance: the vast plethora of clubs and organizations, which were cultivated and managed by emigrated Italians largely before the advent of Fascism, witnessed a rapid and thorough invasion of Fascist agents, dispatched by the consulates, under specific directives of the government in Rome. Consequently, almost the entirety of these associations, which ranged from after-work organizations to intellectual and social circles, fell under the direct control and supervision of the Fascist regime, which expanded its opera of propaganda even to the American soil. Indeed, the grand strategy of the Fascist propaganda in the United States regarded the possibility of cultivating a strenuous and widespread framework of "Fascist mentality", which could topple the American more liberal-oriented one, and, ultimately, bring the Fascist precepts and ideology to the highest ranks of the American society.¹⁹⁸

This strategic plan of the Fascist regime was, moreover, reinforced by the presence, within the American soil, of so-called *prominenti* (literally, the "prominent ones"), who acted as informal agents of the Fascist regime, given that they did not belong to the governmental staff or any other official Fascist organization. These individuals were, mostly, wealthy entrepreneurs and political leaders, who shared the Fascist cause and spread it within the American socio-political framework, supported by their connections and their influence over the media and the political life of the country. These *prominenti* were, indeed, instructed by the Fascist party to propagate specific messages and narratives to the community, and, as such, they represented a crucial group of people which facilitated the integration process of Italians in America. Especially after the 1929 restrictions on migration, which fundamentally crystallised the composition of the Italian community in the United States, the *prominenti* witnessed an emphasis of their role, since, with the absence of new influxes of emigrants, the community remained fixed and, as such, it was ready to entertain the proper integration process, without the necessity to re-adapt itself to newcomers. Specifically:

¹⁹⁷ Salvemini Gaetano, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-25.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

They acted as intermediaries, or powerbrokers, using their political influence with fellow Italian Americans to service political machines in the hands of other ethnic groups, and using their wealth and political contacts with the machines to deliver patronage to the community. [...] The *prominenti* encouraged naturalization in order to create an ethnic voting bloc, but it was also in their interests to keep their constituencies tied sentimentally and culturally to Italy, for total integration could spell the end of Italian identity and therefore of their electoral compactness.¹⁹⁹

The maximal sublimation of this role was manifested by Generoso Pope²⁰⁰, an Italian emigrated in America in 1906: after having become extremely wealthy due to the ownership of two important building material firms, Pope, in 1925, created the first Italo-American political clubs in New York, through which he enlarged the spectrum of connections and influence he could project within the American framework. Due to these accomplishments, he was fundamentally instructed by Mussolini to expand his empire to the media: the largest Italian daily, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, was bought by Pope alongside several other editorials, through which the entrepreneur managed to direct the public information towards pro-Fascist narratives. The extent of Pope's control and influence is exemplified by the fact that, by 1931, he controlled, directly or indirectly, 100 out of 300 political clubs in New York: this enabled him to properly steer the political stand of Italians towards the preferred direction, which, in 1933, was represented by Roosevelt himself. However, as pointed out by Philip Cannistraro, one of the most prestigious American professors focused on Fascist studies, the relationship between the Fascist regime and these *prominenti* was mostly founded on opportunism and necessity: this generated a fragile framework, especially once the rupture between Rome and Washington became gradually more evident and profound. Indeed:

The weak point in the Fascist regime's relationship with the *prominenti* was that they had such crucial economic, political, and social ties with American society that, when the crisis came in 1941, the *prominenti* could not do otherwise than sever their connections with Fascism.²⁰¹

Pope himself, after the 1938 anti-Semitic laws enacted by Mussolini, and, especially, after the commencement of the hostilities, which prospected a direct clash between Rome and Washington, decided to distance himself from the Fascist framework. By the beginning of the 1940s, Pope, alongside several other *prominenti*, had entirely severed the ties with Mussolini and the Fascist party, realigning their loyalty and dedication to the American necessities and businesses

¹⁹⁹ Cannistraro Philip V., *The Duce and the Prominenti: Fascism and the Crisis of Italian American leadership*, Calandra Institute, 2005, pp. 76-81.

²⁰⁰ The very surname of this individual testifies another important detail of the Italian experience in America: often, it occurred that Italians would modify their surnames as to render them as American as possible. The birth surname of this person was Generoso Papa, which, translated to English, is, indeed, "Pope".

²⁰¹ Cannistraro P., *op. cit.*, p. 83.

Be that as it may, it must be underlined that, amongst the almost 5 million Italians living in the United States, an approximate compartmentalization could be perpetrated, on the basis of the Fascist or anti-Fascist ideologies:

Direi che il 50% degli italo-americani [...] tende ad occuparsi soltanto dei propri affari. Il 10% è antifascista. Di questi la maggioranza non è organizzata e rimane inattiva. La minoranza politicamente attiva è suddivisa in molti gruppi, tutti in contrasto l'uno con l'altro, fanno quanto più chiasso possono e non combinano molto. [...] Gli italo-americani ultra-fascisti non costituiscono più del 5% della popolazione italiana. [...] Gli agenti fascisti sono fortemente organizzati, attivi e rumorosi quanto possono esserlo gli italiani. Intorno a questo piccolo nucleo si raccoglie il resto della popolazione, circa il 35%, un settore questo le cui convinzioni non sono ancora divenute esattamente fasciste e antidemocratiche, ma sono pronte a cristallizzarsi alla prima crisi.²⁰²

(I would say that 50% of Italo-Americans [...] tend to take care only of their own affairs. 10% are anti-fascist. Of these, the majority is unorganized and inactive. The politically active minority is divided into many groups, all in contrast with each other, they make as much noise as they can and do not get much done. [...] The ultra-fascist Italo-Americans do not constitute more than 5% of the Italian population. [...] The fascist agents are strongly organized, active and noisy as can be the Italians. Around this small nucleus is gathered the rest of the population, about 35%, a sector which convictions have not yet become exactly fascist and anti-democratic, but are ready to crystallize at the first crisis.)

Logically, a precise discernment of the Italian population in America results impossible, due to its vastity and the diversity it bore, but such analysis, portrayed by an Italian living, indeed, in the United States, emphasizes the intrinsic divisions of the Italian population, with respect to the opinion on Fascism.

Moreover, it must be considered that such compartmentalization acquires further complexities with the introduction of another variable: the intrinsic differences between the 1st generation of immigrants and the following ones. Indeed, as clarified by the following paragraphs of this chapter, the 1st generation Italians was “isolated by its self-imposed detachment from exogenous social influences”, which enabled them to “preserve for a while the most significant aspects of its group life”, whereas the Italian Americans of the 2nd generation “occupied a pivotal position in the process of assimilation and acculturation”²⁰³. This insight clarifies that, compared to their parents, who arrived in the United States shortly after the unification of Italy, the young Italo-Americans had properly sought and internalised the *core American culture*, which led them to gradually enlarge their detachment from the motherland (even though the maximisation of such event occurred with the 3rd generations) and towards a mechanism of progressive integration and

²⁰² Salvemini G., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁰³ Crispino James A., *The assimilation of Ethnic groups: the Italian case*, New York, Centre for Migration Studies, 1980, pp. 26-27.

assimilation. During the 1910s and 1920s, the Italo-Americans who had never seen their country of origin (or who had been transplanted to America shortly after their birth) perceived that their affection and sense of belonging towards Italy could not topple the affiliation transmitted by the American framework.

This sociological division probably generated another framework of discernment, concerning the relationship with Fascism. Indeed, the 2nd generation Italians, as well, were part of the compartmentalization operated by Salvemini, and, thus, influenced by the Fascist propaganda and role within the United States, but they experienced less ideological and political internal divisions than their parents. In fact, the assimilation to the American society had not only produced a partial separation from their families (more ideal than physical), but also limited the hold of and the affiliation to Fascism. As such, it could most likely be assumed that these 2nd generation Italians stood in what Salvemini described as the “50% of Italo-Americans” who “tend to take care only of their own affairs”²⁰⁴, who, ultimately, experienced few or absent troubles in wholly supporting the United States, once the war erupted. Nonetheless, it must not be assumed that the Fascist experience had to be removed from the equation, as it could be argued for the following generations of Italian immigrants: the action of the *prominenti*, of the Fascist local organizations in the United States, and the overall influence of the Fascist party throughout the Italian communities did, indeed, severely influence the young Italian immigrants, although with minor significance compared to the previous generation.

A further insight on this matter comes from Cannistraro, who wrote that:

Italian American attitudes cannot be understood, as one scholar has recently put it, by deciding whether Italian immigrants were «Italians living in America or Americans of Italian origin». [...] Ethnic attitudes toward Fascism were principally the result of the fact that, in the 1920s and 1930s, Italian Americans were undergoing a process of transition from Italian to American identity, and that the pro-Fascist sentiments of many were the result of the stresses and difficulties of assimilation and acculturation. For most Italian Americans, the United States – their chosen country of adoption – was a frustrating contradiction, for they found it to be at the same time a land of immense opportunity and a hostile and often frightening environment. Their adjustment was made more difficult and complicated by the fact that the period of their transition coincided with the Fascist era: Mussolini’s agents, together with pro-Fascist Italian American leaders, subjected the immigrant masses to a constant barrage of propaganda. [...] The immigrant susceptibility to Fascist propaganda was strengthened by the fact that they lived for the most part in ethnic ghettos that were isolated from mainstream American society and penetrated by Italian-language media in the hands of pro-Fascist leaders. Fascist propaganda deliberately played up Italian American ethnic identity in order to maintain and reinforce cultural, nostalgic, economic, political, and emotional ties with Italy.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Salvemini G., *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁰⁵ Cannistraro P., *op. cit.*, pp. 76-78.

This insight clarifies that the aforementioned propagandistic efforts of the Fascist party produced profound influence not only for their intensity and capillarity, but also for the attitude of Italians in America: the enormously positive depictions of Italy and its Fascist leader's management, throughout the United States' population and establishment, reinforced the patriotic feeling experienced by the Italian community, which "allowed them to hold up their heads in the American environment"²⁰⁶. Nonetheless, the most crucial necessity, for Italians in the United States, was to integrate into and identify with the American framework, within which, after all, they were still considered as outsiders and aliens: immediately after their arrival in Ellis Island, the most utilised landing place for emigrants, the Italians strived for achieving a proper recognition as citizens of the United States, and not only as aliens living in the country. This effort, which encompassed almost the entirety of the Italian community in America, coincided with a period where Fascist Italy projected an overly positive reputation of itself, and, consequently, it almost hindered the integration efforts of the community, since the native country of Italy projected prosperous and encouraging prospectives.

Be that as it may, the reality of the Italo-American experience underlines that, after the initial periods of sociological enclosure within the cultural and ethnic boundaries (Little Italy and similar frameworks), the entire community enhanced its efforts towards a process of integration and *americanisation*, which could generate benefits within the American soil both in terms of social recognition and economic advantages²⁰⁷. The concretisation of such assimilation would have been manifested, several years later, by the experiences of 2nd or 3rd generation Italo-Americans, who, born within such strive towards integration, "progressively abandoned several features of their original culture, first of all the language"²⁰⁸.

With respect to this, it must be noted that a severe discernment shall be performed between the different demographic portions of Italian immigrants: indeed, the grip and attraction of this process of assimilation bore inferior outcomes on the oldest branches of the population, which perceived a stronger influence from the Fascist propaganda, compared to the youngest branches of the very same population. In fact, in order to properly simplify the process of assimilation, which, as mentioned above, had projected several complications and hardships for the oldest Italian immigrants, the Italo-American youngsters attended American schools, within which they received an entirely American education, ultimately accustoming them to the American lifestyle and traditions²⁰⁹. This process enabled the 2nd and 3rd generation Italians in the United States to deeply integrate within the American framework, consequently facilitating their access and their participation to its political and economic sphere: the solidification of this assimilation ultimately

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Crispino James A., *op. cit.*, cit. in Petrelli Matteo, *Gli Italiani negli Stati Uniti del XX Secolo*, Centro Studi Emigrazione Roma, 2005, p. 191.

²⁰⁸ Petrelli Matteo, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-191.

²⁰⁹ Iorizzo Luciano & Mondello Salvatore, *The Italian Americans*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1971, p. 196, cit. in Petrelli M., *op. cit.*, p. 70.

endowed these Italo-Americans with a preeminent position, towards the United States' government, which was directly pressured, lobbied and influenced by this very same ethnic group.

Moreover, it must be underlined that, as a result of this different trajectory of integration, the younger generations acquired intellectual and cultural capacities far superior to the ones of the older generations, who had not been given the possibility, due to the socio-economic conditions of 19th century Italy, to properly attend school and study. Indeed, the level of illiteracy, amongst the Italian immigrants in the United States, stood at a level of 44%, reaching severely higher percentages in southern Italians: this situation, translated into the American soil, generated a large gap between the performances of Italian students and American ones, demonstrated by the fact that “the Italians had the highest number of children aged 6 to 15 that were not attending school.”²¹⁰

The reasons behind these troubling numbers have to be researched within not only the socio-economic contexts of Italian immigrants, but also the widespread mentality of Italian families concerning education. Several families did not, indeed, possess the economic capability to bear the costs of American schools, but the most deciding factor, concerning the low or even absent performances of Italian students, resides in the belief that an all-American education, within an all-Italian family, would have utterly damaged the integrity of the family itself.²¹¹ This belief was probably supported by the fact that Italian families perceived such participation to American schools as a threat to the Italian identity, which the 1st generation migrants, despite being aware of the impossibility to return to their homeland, regarded as a central value within the familiar network. This central value would have been dramatically eroded, and, finally, replaced by the plethora of American precepts and customs, and such eventuality could not be withstood by extremely prideful and patriotic Italian immigrants. Therefore, Italian families preferred to increase the economic revenue of the family, not only through the avoidance of payments directed towards schools and other educational establishments, but also, and especially, through the use of child labour. Nonetheless, it shall be specified that the hold of this mentality over the Italian immigrants stood solid as long as the 1st immigrants, arrived in America in the past century, remained entirely closed out from the American society.

Indeed, as reported by James Crispino:

The southern Italian peasant family was surrounded in its homeland by a series of protective social circles constating of one's immediate family, the fellow townspeople and those who lived in the surrounding region. The inner circle, composed of one's kin, was accorded the greatest amount of loyalty. [...] AS one moved away from the core of kinfolk, his chances of finding material or emotional help became less certain. Beyond these circles was the outside world, a source of exploitation and deprivation: absentee landowners, government officials, and a corrupt church hierarchy. [...] The kinship structure was a means of preserving

²¹⁰ Foner Nancy, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration*, New Haven, Yale Up, 2000, p. 195, cit. in Petrelli Matteo, *Italian Americans, Education, and Italian Language: 1880 – 1921*, Quaderni d'Italianistica, 2018, p. 64.

²¹¹ Petrelli M., *op. cit.*, p. 66.

one's identity and self-esteem, not through outright opposition to the outside world, but rather through a continuous process of ignoring its manifestations in daily living.²¹²

This insight manifests the deep sociological enclosure projected by Italo-Americans, who, precisely due to these reasons, decided to partially reconstruct the aforementioned dimension through the patterns of what became known as "Little Italies", fundamentally settlements of Italian immigrants within several urban centres, which could manifest, in the minds of 1st generation immigrants, semblances of their home country. All in all, as the number of Italian immigrants in America continued to grow and as the 2nd generation Italo-Americans entered the scene, several features of the outside American world commenced to abruptly influence the Italian bubble. Despite being initially almost impenetrable by such forces, the Italian families experienced profound sociological and behavioural shifts, which were properly manifested by the 2nd generation Italians, who felt the toll of the pressures for Americanisation far larger than their parents.²¹³

The entirety of these considerations is pivotal for understanding the differences not only between the Italo-Americans of the first hour and the successive generations, but also between these immigrants and the intellectual exiles, such as Salvemini himself, who experienced contrasting experiences concerning not only the educational sphere, but also the propagandistic one. Indeed, the severe educational gaps demonstrated by many Italian immigrants reinforced their reliance on specific means of information, which did not require being literate, such as the radio or television programs broadcasted by the Fascist party.

As a direct consequence of this overreliance on similar means of information, the previous categorisation employed by Salvemini acquires a further significance. Specifically, the group to which Salvemini refers as the "sector which convictions have not yet become exactly fascist and anti-democratic, but are ready to crystallize at the first crisis"²¹⁴, corresponding, in his vision, to the 35% of the Italo-Americans, is largely composed by illiterate or poorly literate immigrants, who shape their political and ideological beliefs according to the typology of information and outside environment they are faced with.

Consequently, the stronger reliance on means of information stemming from the Fascist propaganda fundamentally increased the tendency to avoid neglecting, or even silently supporting, the regime itself. Nonetheless, as Salvemini notes, this portion of the Italian immigrants is "ready to crystallise at the first crisis", which manifests the predisposition to either side with the Fascist regime or remain loyal to the country which hosted them, depending on the respective benefits (as testified by the behaviour of several Italians after the Italian entry into war).

Finally, it shall be noted that the essential resort to similar means of information was not a purely Italian habit, as demonstrated by the American experience itself. The broadcasting of messages from the governmental branches resulted largely widespread and influential, such that it was employed, obviously

²¹² Crispino James A., *op. cit.*, pp. 24-27.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Salvemini G., *op. cit.*, p.31.

with different fashions than the Fascist regime, by President Roosevelt himself, who, from 1933 to 1944, periodically addressed the American population through the radio, in what became known as the “fireside chats”. All in all, even the United States experienced some degrees of illiteracy within its population, although inferior to the ones registered throughout the Italian immigrants: as of 1920, the *New York Evening Post* reports that “the army of illiterates in the United States will not fall far short of 6 million or 7 million”²¹⁵, over a population of more than 100 million people, on top of which must be added the large number of severely uneducated citizens. This situation, thus, coupled with the propagandistic efficacy of the measure itself, required the adoption of particular means of information, which could vehiculate the voice of the political establishment directly through the houses of the electorate.

This final consideration, reinvigorated by the previous related ones, permits the dissertation to acquire a final acknowledgement, pertaining this section, which is that there must be employed a discernment between the experiences of intellectual figures, rooted in Italy but forcibly exiled towards the United States, and the majority of the Italian population in America, especially the oldest groups. Indeed, it could be argued that the first category of Italians adopted a biased interpretation concerning the Fascist regime, given the ideological and concrete opposition to its precepts, but, simultaneously, it could not be argued that these two categories were endowed with equal instruments to investigate the Fascist experience. After all, these intellectual figures had been allowed, by their families and their socio-economic conditions, to thoroughly study all the way to universities, which endowed them with cognitive thinking categories that the majority of the population did not possess. This educational barrier generated a consequent and equally fundamental barrier, which pertained the inability of many Italian immigrants to manifest critical thinking concerning the actions of the regime: the majority of these immigrants contemplated the political and societal developments of their time through rational and basic instincts, motivated by their day-to-day necessities, and not through the ideological and historical categories utilised by the intellectual branch. This substantial division does, indeed, further complicate the analysis of this dissertation, but, simultaneously, it allows the latter to understand a crucial and radicalised concept within the Italian society.

Be that as it may, as mentioned above, the integrative process of the Italo-Americans encountered several difficulties. As written by Max Ascoli, an Italian political analyst emigrated in America due to his anti-fascist declarations:

L’America non è una terra per esiliati. Nei paesi europei a struttura rigida e tuttora retti a democrazia, l’emigrato politico può rimanere tale, coi suoi caratteri molte volte penosi, qualche volta eroici. Ma l’America è una terra che assorbe e comanda l’assorbimento: pena è la chiusura degli inassimilabili.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Carson Ryan W., *Illiteracy in 1920*, Journal of Education, 94, p. 433.

²¹⁶ Ascoli Max, *Transatlantica. L’Università in esilio*, from Giustizia e Libertà, 1936, p. 3, cit. in Grippa Davide, *Un antifascista tra Italia e Stati Uniti: democrazia e identità nazionale nel pensiero di Max Ascoli*, FrancoAngeli, 2009, p. 117.

(America is not a land for exiles. In European countries with rigid structures and still governed by democracy, the political emigrant may remain so, with his often painful, sometimes heroic characteristics. But America is a land that absorbs and commands absorption: the penalty is the closure of the unassimilable.)

The very same experience of Ascoli, not only as a political scientist, but also, and especially, as an Italian emigrant in America, underlines a characteristic that was most likely common amongst several Italians: indeed, upon the arrival in the United States, the emigrants were faced with the impossibility of isolating themselves within the American society, and, consequently, they acknowledged the necessity to gather as much knowledge of the American framework and culture as possible. As said before, there were numerous episodes of a quasi-ghettoization of the Italian community, which initially limited the Italian contacts with the American landscape, but, nevertheless, the contacts with the American society were deeper than in any other country. Overall, the average Italian landing in America was presented with two idiosyncratic challenges: not only he had to properly integrate himself and, thus, modify his lifestyle and several features of his character, but he also needed to break the indifference and discrimination wall raised by the United States, which, despite being “a land that commands absorption”, still represented a hostile and standoffish country.

Ascoli himself, for example, concentrated his studies, as a fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation, on the analysis of the modern characteristic and problems of the United States, in order to achieve two separate outcomes: the first was the very deepening of the acquaintance with the society he lived in, and the second, utterly linked to the first, was the solidification of a socio-political influence within the country, which would have almost automatically raised his status and facilitated his role as a scholar. Indeed, from the mid-1930s Ascoli started to disseminate information and insights on the Fascist experience and the reality of Italy under the regime, both within and outside academic circles and universities. Fundamentally, the universal purpose manifested by Ascoli, alongside an almost automatic necessity to integrate within the American culture, was to expand the grip of the anti-fascist ideas and concepts within the American framework, especially towards young students, who would have composed the future ruling class of the country.

Throughout the several conferences and meetings, alongside lessons and interviews, Ascoli managed to gather around his figure a group of professors and intellectuals: specifically, after a conference forwarded by Ascoli himself, named *The Effect of Fascism on Italian culture and Education*, the American professor Mac Avoy created a proper anti-Fascist clique, under the umbrella of the City College. The participation and overall influence of Ascoli within the generation of an anti-Fascist position in America did, logically, highly indispose the regime in Rome: after having received a report concerning Ascoli's actions from the

New York consulate, the Fascist party decided to issue a provision according to which the Italian professor would have been immediately arrested, had he decided to cross the Italian border.²¹⁷

Nonetheless, the studies on Fascism perpetrated by Ascoli represent a largely insightful and profound analysis of the regime itself: the Italian professor referred that, by 1925, namely after the Matteotti scandal, the Fascist movement appeared as a “entirely modern revolution, [which is] not restricted to the members of the leading party, but is the inescapable obligation of every citizen.” Ascoli assessed the Fascist regime as a severely modern political fact, which understood, probably before any other similar regime in contemporary history, that the role of the masses was not limited to the coerced participation and obedience to the state, but, instead, that they needed to go through a deep indoctrination from and insertion into the regime’s dynamics:

The fabricants of mass loyalty not only urge the personal pledge of loyalty, but they want it repeated individually and collectively; they fan the individual’s sentiment until it becomes an obsessing and burning passion, in which personality is consumed.²¹⁸

Indeed, both these operations and the entire founding characteristics of this particular totalitarian state, rested not only upon the opportunities presented by the use of violence and fear, but also, and especially, by the preparation of the future ruling class of the country through schools, the *Balilla* institutions, the after-work organizations and all the other activities endorsed by the party. After all, Ascoli said, “only a handful of people were deprived of life, jobs or prestige, just a few to serve as a warning reminder. [...] in order to have its moments of effectiveness, [the Fascist party] has to be democratic and plebiscitarian”²¹⁹.

Moreover, Ascoli also noted that a game-changing feature of the Fascist regime, which would then be transplanted into other totalitarian regimes, regarded the relationship between the Fascist leader, Mussolini, and the population, which, under specific directives of the Fascist elite, had to be founded upon “the formulation of myths, symbols, and ceremonies”, forming “an indissoluble trinity of Nation, State, and Party embodied in a living God”²²⁰.

Bearing these considerations in mind, the aforementioned ideas pursued by Ascoli, concerning the proper behaviour, or, at least, the advised behaviour, that Italian citizens should operate in America, assume a reinforced significance:

We people from the Fascist countries can make terrible nuisances of ourselves if we indulge in the temptation of reading the American present in History terms of recent European; but we have on the other hand the precise duty, as new American citizens, to foster those among the American traits which are more definitely

²¹⁷ Grippa D., *op. cit.*, pp. 118-121.

²¹⁸ Ascoli M., *Dulce et Decorum pro Dictatore*, in *The American Scholar*, 1938, cit. in Grippa D., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Ascoli M., *Fascism in the making*, *The Atlantic*, 1933, cit. in Grippa D., *op. cit.*, p. 120.

uncongenial to the spirit of European dictatorship. I cannot see any better way to express our gratitude to the country that has offered us the opportunity of a new life.²²¹

This final statement, which bears significant resonance for the very fact that it was pronounced by an Italian who was compelled to leave his homeland, manifests a widespread sentiment amongst the Italian community in America. Indeed, as mentioned above, the gratitude and the sentiment of loyalty to the United States, the land that hosted and fed many Italians during the troubling years of the Fascist regime, strengthened its vehemence gradually, such that, when it came down to a proper *redde rationem* between Fascist Italy and democratic America, many Italo-Americans abandoned the faith that had tied them to the motherland until then, and ultimately joined the American cause, both in the global war and in the future endeavours.

It must be noted, though, that this path was not followed by the entirety of the Italian community in the United States: utilising the somewhat precise compartmentalization operated by Salvemini, it can be deduced with sufficient probability that numerous Italians, similarly to many Americans who were unsure of their opinion towards Fascism and Italy, did not choose a precise side to support, but, instead, reiterated their neutral position. After all, the socio-economic conditions of several Italians were not satisfactory, to speak euphemistically, and the everyday struggle for the retrieve of food and primary commodities fundamentally toppled the philosophical and political clash between Fascist Italy and democratic America. All these Italo-Americans preferred to not endanger their fragile positions at all, parallelly to those numerous Italians, still in their homeland, who had to silently bend the knee to Fascism: fundamentally, had it come down to being forced to pick a side in this ideological and abstract conflict between two parties, these individuals would have probably decided to side with the party that was hosting and feeding them, America in this case, although discrimination and ghettoization remained critical features of the American society (as well as the dictatorship and the repression remained critical features of the Italian society).

²²¹ Ascoli to Greenville Clark, 11 Dicembre 1938, Boston University, Max Ascoli Archive, cit. in Grippa D., *op. cit.*, p. 121.

CONCLUSION

The Italo-Ethiopian War was not merely a colonial conquest: it was a carefully engineered spectacle of national pride, racial hierarchy, and diplomatic manoeuvring. It exposed the machinery of Fascist propaganda and revealed how historical memory, particularly the trauma of Adwa and the myth of the *vittoria mutilata*, could be weaponized to mobilize an entire nation towards war, militarily and ideologically. Mussolini's regime framed the conflict as a necessary act of redemption, masking its aggression in the language of civilization and imperial destiny, yet this war was never waged in isolation: across the Atlantic, at a crossroads of its own, stood the United States, a country torn between isolationism, moral outrage, and its own unresolved tensions around race and empire. The American reaction, fragmented across government, media, and civil society, was as revealing as the war itself, since it showed how foreign conflicts ultimately serve as mirrors for states themselves, which reflect the values, the fears, and the contradictions of those watching from afar.

Indeed, the analysis of the Italo-American relations has proven crucial to this thesis, such that it highlighted particular features of the diplomatic entanglements that strengthened the overall comprehension of the matter at hand. The evolution of public opinion and governmental stances towards Italy and its Fascist leader demonstrated that historical figures and their political decisions are shaped not only by their own ideas and endeavours, but also by the image they project abroad, far from the webs of propaganda and repression. With respect to this, the American behaviour towards Italy and Mussolini probably depicts a parabola which can be transposed to the entire history of the Fascist regime: in fact, the positive reception of the regime and its enterprises within the national borders was parallel to an equally positive reception within Washington and the majority of the 50 states' population (always considering the benefits from propaganda), as well as the reduction of internal consensus for the party matched a demise in approval and support on the other shore of the Atlantic. Nonetheless, it would have been unthinkable to suggest, in the early 1920s, that the relations between these two nations would have reached such a tipping point, but, after all, states, as well as individuals, are what other states think they are. This last concept, though, experiences continuous modifications, as it happens between human beings, such that it could be argued that, in this precise case, the United States did nothing more than merely modify their perceptions towards Italy.

Moreover, this dissertation highlighted the internal contradictions and ambiguities coursing through Fascist Italy and the Fascist regime itself, not only concerning the almost unidentifiable inadequacies of the military and establishment forces, which hindered a seemingly smooth conquest, but also regarding the Fascist ideological strive towards obtaining an international recognition *in toto*, which could lift the veil of shame and defeatism generated by the Italian past history. This intrinsic desire to achieve such recognition

motivated the majority of Fascist decisions both in internal and foreign policy, reshaping the identity of an entire country and its population, which, for decades, would have strongly perceived the necessity to confront itself with its twenty-years-long Fascist experience. Indeed, this necessity of a moral and ideological confrontation with its own past is still present in modern Italy, as manifested by the often-debated positioning of specific portions of the population with respect to the Fascist experience. As a student of political science, I could not exempt myself from diving deeper into the proper events, national and international, that profoundly shaped one of the most controversial historical section of our country, which, still today, casts its toll over political debates and endeavours.

Furthermore, by comparing Italian and American narratives, this thesis has shown that public opinion and diplomatic discourse are not peripheral to war, but they are, indeed, part of its larger strategy. The war against Ethiopia unfolded not only on the battlefields of Africa, but also in newspaper headlines, diplomatic cables, and political speeches. It was a conflict shaped by stories: not only stories of past humiliation, but also of future glory, civilizational missions and, ultimately, of all-encompassing existential threats. Therefore, in my opinion, to investigate such questions and to interrogate ourselves on the entity of these specific events, represents not only a basic academic study of history, but also, as it often occurs with history itself, a fundamental acknowledgement that features like the public opinion or the diplomatic discourse shall not be downgraded or deprecated whenever a conflict takes place.

Looking back nearly a century later, what remains most striking, in my opinion, is not the military outcome, Italy's brief imperial triumph, but the resonance of the language that enabled it. From the justifications offered to the silence of international institutions, from the appeals to history and identity to the delicate equilibria between states: the entirety of these patterns did not end neither with Ethiopia nor with the immediately successive wars, but it echoed across decades, reappearing, indeed, in different forms and in different parts of the world, but always with the same significance bore in the past.

Finally, this thesis has attempted to unveil the patina of misinformation and propaganda generated by the Fascist regime itself, which poured significant efforts into presenting Italy as an aphrodisiac and largely powerful country and its population as a single bloc of Fascist spirit. Testimonies and findings centred on those historical times proved, well before this dissertation was drafted, that several depictions of Italy, not only internally but also abroad, were manufactured or largely manipulated by and through the Fascist party. The goal of this thesis, thus, was to present, to the possible extent, the reality of the Italian experience throughout the Fascist rule, both within and outside of the country's borders, in order to shed light on a complex and often mis-interpreted (and mis-understood) concept.

To study this episode, then, has not been perceived as a mere revisitation of a specific moment of 20th century history, but as a broader mean to engage with enduring questions concerning the narrative of power and its manifestation through the public, which is, logically, deeply influenced by the stories nations tell themselves to shape their world.

In this sense, the war in Ethiopia reminds us that history is not only what happened, but also how we choose to remember it.

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