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**Bad Latins:
Fascist Italy's Visual
Representations of France**

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**Bad Latins:
Fascist Italy's Visual Representations of France**

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Abstract

If the French Revolution represented a definitive moment for the birth of modernity, Italy might be considered the Revolution's bastard stepchild. The latter's nationalist pangs, born of French invasion, gave birth to the Risorgimento, whose heroes undoubtedly looked to France as a guide for unification under the banner of liberalism. Nearly a half century later, Italy, transformed from a weak democracy to a Fascist state, continued the awkward embrace with its 'Latin sister.' Early depictions of France in a positive light progressively gave way to negative portrayals of the Third Republic with Fascism depicting Paris as a center of snobbery and bourgeois decadence. France's election of the Popular Front only widened the breach as Italy moved closer to Hitler's Germany. Fascist periodicals thus soon came to adopt the rhetoric and imagery of Nazism following the Racial Laws of 1938. Not only was France now a 'Jewish puppet' but a land where blacks would outnumber 'Aryans,' a supposed vivid consequence of France's earlier gluttonous colonial enterprises that denied Italy its deserved 'place in the sun.' Fascism's visual representations of race and population in France over the course of the 1930s thus represented an inversion of historical events from the early nineteenth century. As can be seen in the depictions of Napoleon, however, such projects to refashion the past served only to magnify the vicissitudes of Fascist 'ideology,' and the psychological crisis of 'Italian' identity.

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In a 1931 article in Benito Mussolini's Fascist daily, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, under the headline 'Bligny,' the anonymous journalist relayed the events of a day before, when French and Italian veterans from The Great War came together to commemorate their fallen brethren. 'Brilliant officers, superb model soldiers, they fell gloriously with the visions of Victory, showing Italian valor on the field of battle in the service of France and the cause of liberty against the barbaric enemy.'¹ Pictures showed the raising of the Italian flag at the ceremony in addition to the graveyard where lay more than 5,000 dead Italian soldiers. In a cartoon published just four years later in another Fascist periodical *Ottobre*, one finds the battle portrayed in a more cynical light.² (Under the title 'old friends,' a swarthy, conniving diplomat of the *plutodemocrazie* ('always the man in the middle') attempts to introduce an Italian WWI veteran, now wearing the Fascist blackshirt to his fellow French veteran. 'Thank you,' the former responds, 'but we already know each other from Bligny.'

While one remains hesitant to make generalizations regarding the changing relationship between France and Italy over the course of a whole decade, the contrast above nonetheless points to a shift in visual culture on the part of Mussolini's regime during this period. France would henceforth remain a country to pillory, not only as an aforementioned culprit in the 'mutilated victory,' but a center of *snobismo* and bourgeois decadence, a hackneyed culture whose blood and heroes originated from Italy, and finally, a racial bastard, controlled by a vast 'Jewish-Masonic' conspiracy. In understanding the evolution of selected visual imagery from 1930s Italy, however, Fascism would ultimately reveal more about its own insecurities than any truths regarding her 'Latin Sister,' demonstrating, in turn, a deep psychological crisis concerning questions of nationhood and collective identity for the peoples of the Apennine Peninsula.

Watching Luce newsreels of the early Thirties, one would hardly get the impression that Italy would go to war with its neighbor Northwest of the Alps ten years later. For the state agency of cinematic propaganda, France foremost remained a land of pleasure and fun.³ Paris, moreover, remained Europe's capital of culture, Italian travelogues documenting how the 'City of Lights' acted as '...the fulcrum to lift the world...[the center of]...powerful creative individuality...'⁴ True, Fascist newspapers regularly excoriated France for its 'imperial' demeanor in the Mediterranean or its diplomatic machinations in the Balkans but the only battlefields depicted on film or in print concerning the two continental powers remained those in a football match or the aforementioned solemn ceremonies commemorating World War I. Fascism likewise depicted Mussolini's Four-Power Pact, which included France, as the opportunity for a lasting peace in Europe, despite its real aim of increasing Italian influence among its more powerful neighbors.

¹Gianturco, Luigi E. (1931). 'Bligny.' *Il Popolo d'Italia*, November 12, 3.

²Cartoon (1935). 'Vecchie Conoscenze.' *Ottobre*, April 20, 1.

³*Giornale Luce*, n. A0506, Archivio Luce, Rome, Cinecitta, 1930.

⁴Comisso, Giovanni (1931). *This is Paris*. Milano: Casa Editrice Ceschina. [In Italian].

By the mid-Thirties, however, the printed press ever-more regularly depicted France in a negative light. Fascism progressively envisioned in the 'high-culture' of Third Republic France *lo snobismo*, '...An epidemic and dangerous contagion for those who are weak of spirit, of intelligence, and good sense.'¹ Cartoons cruelly mocked Italian women obsessed with the newest fashions from France as frivolous, decadent, and simply put, ugly. Moreover, combined with *esteromania*, the love for all things foreign, Fascism sensed a threat to its projects of autarchy, from which it would free itself from the chains of foreign economic influence.

Hence, the literal association of French *snobismo* and *esteromania* with 'imborghesito' or 'bourgeois-ization.' Fashion became part and parcel of the middle-class mind obsessed with 'the Parisian life,' 'foie gras,' and 'cocktails.'² Dealing with the epidemic appeared simple enough to many Italians. 'Kill this evil, or neutralize it with a strong and unfailing care, healing the sick with injections of patriotism...'³ wrote Livia, 'Lord of the Column' to her predominantly female readers in *La Stampa*. And so the attacks on the supposed French bourgeoisie became ever stronger as clothing and fashion would become metaphors for the ever-present threat to Italian Fascism in France's tumultuous politics of the late-1930's.⁴ (see pg. 9)

This nightmare scenario of the triumph of a united Left in France, however, became a reality with the victory of the Popular Front in the 1936 legislative elections. While Blum's government did not provide direct aid to the Republicans fighting in the now-raging Spanish Civil War, he did adamantly oppose any recognition of Italy's conquest of Abyssinia, leaving the post at Palazzo Farnese vacant for almost two years.⁵ Moreover, the inclusion of Communists in Blum's coalition only vindicated the anti-French press in Italy. Where once they had portrayed Marianne mired in 'the democratic morass'⁶ they could now transform her into both an innocent stool pigeon for Moscow's more insidious designs for a red-Europe, but also a willing participant in the destruction of peace on the continent.

With this new, more radical vision of France that accompanied Mussolini's grand designs for *spazio vitale* in the Mediterranean and East Africa, however, came the need to engage with the realities of history. In this matter Napoleon often became a figure of complexity in Fascist cartoons. Ethnically Corsican, Napoleon nonetheless became master of France and the continent at the beginning of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Napoleon's era of dominance arguably inaugurated the first stirrings of Italian nationalism, despite the nepotism he fostered on the Peninsula. In one sense, then, Fascist dailies could borrow Nazi cartoons associating Bonaparte with

¹Livia (1933). 'La rubrica delle Signore: Che cos'è lo snobismo?' *La Stampa*, September 16, 3.

²Illustration (1934). "Frenologia dell'imborghesito." *Ottobre*, April 11, 1.

³Livia (1933). 'La rubrica delle Signore: Che cos'è lo snobismo?' *La Stampa*, September 16, 3.

⁴Illustration (1937). *Il Popolo di Roma*, February 29, 3.

⁵Shorrock, William I. (1988). *From Ally to Enemy: The Enigma of Fascist Italy in French Diplomacy*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988, 192.

⁶Sorel, Georges (1908) *Reflections on Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 78.

Third Republic imperialism.¹ (see pg. 10) On the other hand, in Napoleon, Fascist propaganda found a positive role model whose conquests and legacy of ‘surveillance bodies’ in Italy proved a natural precursor to Mussolini’s own ambitions for totalitarianism.² Hence, the propaganda drive to transform Napoleon from a Frenchman into a real ‘Italian,’ who confessed his true nationality ‘when all hope was lost at St. Helena.’³

Following the racial laws of 1938, such rhetoric not only became more fantastic. Pseudo-biologists now claimed Corsican blood as Italian, transforming Napoleon, his homeland, and greater parts of France into Italian domain. Such a reversal allowed Italian propaganda in the late-Thirties to re-imagine history. Napoleon’s campaigns which stirred the forces of nascent nationalism in the Italian states now seemed a proper precursor to Fascism since half the country supposedly derived from Gallic heritage.⁴

As for the Frenchmen living during the ‘era of Fascism,’ culture and demography portended ominous horizons. Concerning the former, Fascism saw in France a second-rate Latin culture that only ‘assimilated’ and ‘transformed’ Italian values.⁵ With regard to the latter, ‘numbers are power,’ went the saying in numerous newsreels and writings,⁶ as Fascist racial propaganda honed in on problems of French demography. Fascism spoke of the decline of France’s population, leaving it with an army of geriatrics in the coming decades, or more dangerous, a military wholly composed of members of the French empire.⁷ Not only would this present a danger given the growing nationalist aspirations of France’s North African colonies, in particular, but the growing presence of Africans in the *métropole* would undoubtedly leave France a ‘negritized bastard’ in contrast to the growing Fascist empire who prided itself on its policy of ‘racial purity.’⁸

With purity, of course, came the more insidious racial hierarchical philosophies from the North. This is not to suggest, however, that Italian racism with regard to France had not found fertile soil in Italy’s long history as the center of Catholicism or in its colonial wars pre-dating 1938.⁹ Cartoons from the mid-30s already showed conspiracy theories regarding the influence of Masonry, parliamentarianism, and high-finance as the ‘usual impediments’ holding back France from embracing an accord with Fascism. Following

¹Illustration (1934). *Il Tevere*. July 4, 2.

²Riall, Lucy (1994). *The Italian Risorgimento: State, society and national unification*. London and New York: Routledge, 17.

³(1939). ‘Napoleone e la Corsica.’ *La Volonta’ d’Italia*, January 30, 1.

⁴Illustration (1939). *La difesa della razza*, January 5, 1.

⁵Puglionise, Carmello (1939). ‘Genio Italiano e ‘genio’ Francese.’ *Il Mediterraneo*, March 18, 7.

⁶*Giornale Luce*, n. D044703, Archivio Luce, Rome, Cinecitta, 1930.

⁷Saitta, Achille (1939). ‘Gli effetti della crisi demografica sulla potenza militare francese.’ *Il Mediterraneo*, April 14, 15.

⁸Saitta, Achille (1939). ‘L’esercito di colore al servizio della Francia.’ *Il Mediterraneo*, March 11, 12-13; (1942) *La difesa della razza*, July 20, 1.

⁹De Grande, Alexander (2004). ‘Mussolini’s Follies: Fascism in Its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940.’ *Contemporary European History* 13(2): 127-147, 142.

Italy's entry into the war on the side of Nazi Germany, however, the associations became undoubtedly more explicit.

In the notorious pages of *La difesa della razza*, Jews assumed a place of almost demonic proportions as the '*i padroni*,' or bosses, who controlled all aspects of the French economy. Moreover, Jews now became the lens through which Fascism sought to understand French history. In this task, however, racist writers sought to appeal to the widest audience possible as a means to obtain the full totalitarianism which had theretofore remained elusive for Mussolini's regime. Devout Catholics were, thus, told of the way in which Jews supposedly pillaged Churches during the Reign of Terror while sympathizers for ideas of monarchy and empire were told of Jews' scavenging among the remains of dead troops after the battle of Waterloo.¹ Attempts by Fascism to demonize Jews as a means to reach a full 'consensus' with the Italian people ultimately proved a failure, however.² The general antipathy on the part of Italians toward the Nordic-brand of racism combined with the Italian military failures in France during World War II showed the reality behind a decade's-worth of steadily increasing anti-French propaganda.

In sum, Fascist visual propaganda towards France reflected what Erich Fromm noted as '...The desperate attempt to gain secondary strength where genuine strength is lacking.'³ Having long been the 'least of the great powers' who felt cheated at Versailles, outshined culturally for centuries by its rival to the Northwest, and struggling with its own fears of 'subalternity' Mussolini's regime reflected a deep-seated insecurity concerning national identity.⁴ Thus, be it the early contradictory images regarding the First World War, France as a center of high-culture, or the latter vitriol conceiving her neighbor as a racial bastard, Italy '...projected negative versions of precisely those qualities that it perceived to be lacking or inadequate in itself.'⁵

¹Barduzzi, Carlo (1939). 'Come i guidei sono divenuti i padroni della Francia.' *La difesa della razza*, March 5, 31.

²For issues relating to "consensus" see Renzo de Felice, (1974) *Il duce I: Gli anni del consenso 1929-1936*; and (1975) *Intervista sul fascismo*.

³Fromm, Erich (1942) *The Fear of Freedom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 139.

⁴Bosworth, R. J. B. (2005) *Italy the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy Before the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2006) 'Modernity is Just Over There: Colonialism and Italian National Identity.' *interventions* 8(3): 380-393, 386.

⁵Nolan, Michael E. (2000). 'The inverted mirror: Mythologizing the enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914.' Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University.

Figure 1. *Bligny Memorial*



Figure 2. 'Old Friends'



Figure 3. *Luce's Vision of France*



Figure 4. *'Fashion, 1937'*



Figure 7. 'I am Europe!'



Figure 6. 'Italian Racial Map'



Figure 7. *The Descent into Racism*



