

Mussolini and Ukraine, 1933-1941

**Outline of the paper presented by
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In late July 1933, Benito Mussolini turned 50-year-old. At age 39, in 1922, he had been the youngest Italian ever to have become Prime minister. It is well known that Mussolini started his political career as a Socialist: in 1904, he participated to a rally in Zurich with Russian émigrés, including Lenin, but most probably the two did not meet in person. Ten years later, in 1914, Mussolini – who then was the editor-in-chief of the daily *Avanti!* - was expelled from the Socialist party for his support of Italy's intervention in the First World War. He enrolled as a volunteer in 1915 and was wounded in 1917, spending some time in hospital, then returned to politics and founded his own party, the Fascist, on March 19, 1919 – rather interestingly, two days before the foundation by Lenin of the Komintern in Moscow. A British journalist, Arthur Ransome, who interviewed Lenin for the “Manchester Guardian” of 8 November 1922, wrote that when asked about Mussolini having just become the head of the Italian government, the Bolshevik leader laughed and said: “a funny story”!

In the weeks prior to the March on Rome and his appointment, the future “Duce” had written about the need to establish relations with Russia irrespective of the ideological differences, and had also gone as far as saying that in implementing the NEP, Lenin had done like him (i.e. had abandoned revolutionary ideas). At that time, and before the creation of the USSR on 30 December, Italy, along with Austria and Czechoslovakia, maintained only “official” (i.e. semi-diplomatic) relations with Ukraine: only Germany, Poland and Turkey had full diplomatic relations with Kyiv. Official diplomatic relations between Rome and Moscow were only established after Lenin’s death, in February 1924: Italy was the seventh power to recognize the USSR after the three Baltics, Finland (all in 1920), Poland (1921) and the UK (which had concluded the agreement two days earlier).

The first Soviet Ambassador to Italy was called Konstantin Jurenev, and he became famous for having invited Mussolini to lunch shortly after the Matteotti murder, in July 1924, and on November 7th, the anniversary of the October revolution, thus earning the bitter criticism of Gramsci who then was the head of the Italian Communist Party. Among Jurenev’s successors there was Lev Kamenev, during whose presence in Rome (1926-27) Mussolini’s dictatorship became well established and, among others, outlawed all other parties except the Fascist and had Gramsci and several other Italian Komintern leaders arrested: nevertheless, relations with Moscow remained friendly even when, in 1927, Italy ratified the treaty that attributed Bessarabia to Romania. It was the following year, 1928, that Mussolini began to mention the need of further improving the Italo-Soviet relations through a bilateral pact, an intention that received further impulse

by the common vote of Italy, Germany and the USSR at the disarmament meeting in Geneva.

It is in such a general diplomatic context that the first five-year plan and the collectivization drive began in the USSR, which would have quickly caused the consequences we all are familiar with, including the Holodomor. It is also well known that, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1924, Italy had a total of three diplomatic missions in Ukraine: two general consulates (in Kyïv and Odesa) and one vice-consulate in Har'kiv (consulate as of 1932), from which very precise and accurate, at times appropriately indignant reports were sent first to Bernardo Attolico (Italian Ambassador to the USSR in 1930-35), then forwarded to Rome. As we were told by Andrea Graziosi, who published them in the 1980's in various languages, they were almost always personally read by Mussolini also during the three years (1929-1932) in which he left the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Dino Grandi, and then stored in the Ministry's archive: not a word ever leaked through to reach the press, let alone the public opinion. Let me just remind those of you, especially students, who are not familiar with them, that such reports, ever since their discovery in the late 1970's, have become one of the most important first-hand accounts of the tragedy that hit the peasantry in Ukraine and the Northern Caucasus (Italy also had a vice-consulate in Novorossijsk): several of them, forty-eight, were included in the Report to the US Congress by the Commission on the Ukrainian famine which was directed by our late friend and colleague, James E. Mace, and played an important role in the reassessment of the Holodomor that happened in Ukraine during the late 1980's.

Most unfortunately, those reports couldn't reach their destination in a more unfavorable moment. In a famous interview with the journalist and writer Emil Ludwig, conducted in 1932 – that is, at a moment when diplomatic reports were already hammering the news of the impending famine - Mussolini was reminded that in 1919 or 1920 he wrote that Lenin had freed Russia from autocracy, and prophesized that one day Russia would have become one of the most productive powers on earth: “Ain't it on the way?”, asked Mussolini in reply. One cannot but stress the contradiction between this statement and the one made in 1922, in which Lenin was being praised for inaugurating the NEP. Even though we don't have elements to say what the real feelings of the “Duce” were vis-à-vis the news of the famine, we can certainly affirm that his absolute priority was to seize the opportunity of a weakening of the Anglo-Soviet and Franco-Soviet relations in order to conclude an agreement with Moscow that would have considerably strengthened Italy's position, and that made him indifferent towards the starving peasantry in Ukraine.

The chronological coincidence between the height of the famine and the signing of the “Italo-Soviet treaty of friendship, non-aggression and neutrality” is startling. From May 31, 1933 until a year later the Royal Consulate of Italy in Har'kiv, held by Sergio Gradenigo, sent dispatches every second week, signaling the devastation and the terror that hit Ukraine. His reports were at times strongly anti-Semitic, which did not correspond to the official policies of Fascism, given that openly racist policies only began in 1938: yet, those reports were pervaded by deep and sincere sympathy towards the sufferings of the Ukrainians, and the

political analyses were sophisticated and illuminating. Gradenigo, born 1886 in Habsburg Trieste, was a WWI veteran and a militant Fascist: he was going to face a bitter disappointment. In mid-July 1933, negotiations began between Italy and the USSR, with the participation of the Soviet Ambassador to Berlin, Khinchuk, and on September 2nd the treaty was signed in Rome by Mussolini and the new Soviet Ambassador Vladimir Potemkin; on December 3rd, the NarKomInDel Maxim Litvinov came to Rome and held “long and cordial” conversations with Mussolini; finally, on December 15 the exchange of “ratifications” took place in Moscow. Diplomats are often thought not to have feelings because they can’t afford them, yet – one wonders – how did Ambassador Attolico and Consul Gradenigo feel about the treaty? Unfortunately, the former died in 1942 without having the time to write his memoirs, while the latter’s traces were lost after WWII, even though no one has done a systematic search yet: hopes to find some of his descendants and, why not? a diary, haven’t been completely lost.

To celebrate the pact, another quite unusual – to say the least – initiative took place, this time having a cultural character. Fascism had tried to develop an economic doctrine of its own, called “corporatism”, inspired by philosopher Ugo Spirito and animated by Giuseppe Bottai, one of the closest collaborators of Mussolini. In 1934, a first publication of the “School of Corporatist Sciences” came out, carrying no less than the Italian translation of the proceedings of the XVII Congress of the Bolshevik party, the famous “Congress of the Winners” which celebrated the “victory” over the kulaks: the introductory reports by Stalin and Molotov, the economic reports by Grinko and Kuybishev. On top of it –

probably due to the overzealous translator – Stalin’s initial word “Tovarishi” was not translated with “compagni”, as the communists called each other, but with “camerati”, which was the fascist version! This development had certainly an ideological relevance, which went alongside with the political and diplomatic one. As stated in Etienne Thevenin’s paper, which I read this morning, we still have to assess the extent to which the three dictators (or four, including Lenin) influenced one another, and particularly how much Mussolini and especially Hitler drew from Stalin’s lack of scruples in annihilating millions of people (or “ethnographic material”, as they were called) on behalf of an evil experiment in social engineering.

By 1934, Ukraine was laid to rest, at least for the time being: yet, the OUN in exile would not give up and not only continued the battle for survival, but expressed on numerous occasions sympathy towards Fascism and Italy, which was only very partly returned as some of its representatives were given permission to carry on their religious and cultural activities, provided they did not spill over into the political sphere. Italy and the USSR were increasingly at odds by 1936-37, particularly over the invasion of Ethiopia, the Spanish civil war and the anti-Komintern pact: but their methods remained very similar, as was shown by the murder of the antifascist Rosselli brothers in France (1937) and of OUN’s leader Evhen Konovalts in Holland (1938). As preparations began for the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, which involved silencing the hostile propaganda against each other, Mussolini played maverick: he protested against the disappearance of Poland and sent equipment and troops to the Finns during the 1939 winter war. He also finally

ended his silence on Ukraine, authorizing the publication of *Ucraina, la storia e l'anima di un grande popolo* (The history and soul of a great people) and of a translation of Eugene Lyon's *Assignment in Utopia*, both issued in 1939. Two years later, after Barbarossa, another book would have appeared called *Ucraina, terra del pane* (Land of the Bread) which contained a direct mention of the famine, along with an anthology of Ukrainian writers that included the unfortunate Mykola Khvylovy, the great poet who had committed suicide in 1933. By that time, Ukraine had become the battleground of the final confrontation between Nazi-fascism and Stalinist communism: two (or three) ideologies that, all considered, bear equal responsibility in their cynical indifference towards the tragedy of the Holodomor, the despise of the rights of the Ukrainian people and the attempts to use the country for their own purposes. Not only the famine, but the silence that covered it up and the idleness of the international community of the time towards the attempted destruction of Ukrainian culture and religious identity should be studied and never forgotten as one of the most unforgivable shames of the past century.