

Kody Allen Moore

*Forming Fascists:
Psychological Manipulation in Italy (1922-1945)*

ABSTRACT: *Italian fascism cultivated the ability to alter any situation based on its necessity for growth, namely, to find, sway, and transform others to join its ranks. Analyzing the contemporary writings of Herbert W. Schneider, Shepard B. Clough, and Herman Finer, this article argues that Italian fascism used radical physicality programs, symbolic expressionism, and religiously framed rituals to manipulate civilians into becoming Party members.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Italy; Benito Mussolini; Herbert W. Schneider; Shepard B. Clough; Herman Finer; fascism; physicality; symbolism; political religion*

Introduction

On May 3, 1938, Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler met for a fascist-styled celebration on Rome's cobblestoned streets. Both were beaming with delight as they witnessed one of the most extensive military parades the city had ever seen.¹ Side by side, wearing their respective military dress uniforms, the two leaders represented their millions of followers in celebrating their fascist ideologies. Those in attendance, as well as those watching the news footage later, saw a spectacle of synchronized units of men, women, and youth dressed in military fatigues, marching under Italy's *tricolore* and Germany's swastika. Through its combination of national and fascist symbols, Roman architecture, and, above all, throngs of human bodies—parading, waving, and shouting fascist solemnities—the event emotionally charged its spectators with a sensation of devout patriotism.

Italian fascism had an acute sense of self-perception. It cultivated the ability to alter any situation based on its necessity for growth, namely, to find, sway, and transform others to join its ranks. Fascist functionaries like Galeazzo Ciano, Odoardo Dino Alfieri, and Alessandro Pavolini devised physical conditioning programs, subconscious manipulation practices, and collective ritual celebrations to transform their nation into an authoritarian Party system. With their support, Mussolini pursued his most romantic aspiration, namely, the return of the Roman Empire.² The *Duce* recruited Italy's youth, fogging their consciousness with a sense of national rebirth.³ Adults, both men and women, were also targeted to join the

¹ British Pathé, "Italians Goosestep For Hitler" (Version A), May 12, 1938, video (Film ID 965.12), [online](#), accessed June 15, 2022.

² Ottorino Guerrieri, "La Razza al Rinascimento," *La Difesa Della Razza* 2, no. 5 (January 5, 1939): 17-19, [online](#), accessed June 15, 2022.

³ Roger Griffin, *Fascism: An Introduction to Comparative Fascist Studies* (Medford: Polity Press, 2018), 50. Griffin considers "palingenetic ultranationalism" the key psychological driver behind fascist violence; it propagated, from the top down, the myth of a national rebirth. To Griffin, fascist collaborators purposefully designed and manufactured an enemy that its national members could view as an antagonist to their nation's economic, social, and racial progress.

revolution. Thus, to reach deep into the subconscious of all Italians, fascism had to appeal to multiple personalities, social classes, genders, and age groups.

Each generation of scholars pursues the study of fascism on its own terms and in accordance with its particular interests. While the key motivations and inhumane practices of fascists once occupied center stage in scholarly debates, some scholars now take contemporary political movements as their point of departure to compare and contrast them with those of the interwar years, affording readers the opportunity to discover why someone might have belonged—or might belong today—to a certain Party, organization, or interest group.⁴ This article builds on the research of German American historian George L. Mosse (1918-1999) who spent decades of his life studying the complex anxieties that plagued the people of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. According to his interpretation, they sought to return to romanticism but adopted the ideologies of nationalism as the only attainable political alternative.⁵ Thus, to better understand the historical context, rise, and culmination of Italian fascism, this article relies on the works of those who observed it as contemporaries, albeit from the requisite critical distance, namely, the German American philosopher Herbert W. Schneider (1892-1984), the American historian Shepard B. Clough (1901-1990), and the Romanian British political scientist Herman Finer (1898-1969).⁶ Their ability to “capture the fascist moment” is truly remarkable.

This article also utilizes period footage available from the newsreel producer *British Pathé*.⁷ Watching a short-film reel covering the parade of May 3, 1938, for example, one recognizes how fascist structures, tunes, and nationalistic tones might have drawn in a community of people longing for a return to dominion. This would have been especially true after World War I when global powers were increasingly taking control of international programs, trade, and military-industrial complexes. In addition, newspaper articles from the historical *New York Times* which offer the perspective of international print-media correspondents on Italian fascism during the interwar years are also considered here.⁸ Reading the

⁴ For further reading, see Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

⁵ George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig Publishing, 1980).

⁶ For example, Herbert W. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928); Herbert W. Schneider and Shepard B. Clough, *Making Fascists* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1929); Herman Finer, *Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935).

⁷ See, for instance, British Pathé, “Italians Goosestep For Hitler” (Version A), May 12, 1938.

⁸ See Arnaldo Cortesi, “Press Hails Hitler to Rally Italians,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1938; Anne O’Hare McCormick, “Europe: Der Fuehrer to Meet Il Duce in a More Wary Rome,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1938; N.a., “Hitler Will Get a Ride Behind Horses in Rome,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1938; Frederick T. Birchall, “Mussolini Greets Hitler in a Resplendent Rome,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1938; Frederick T. Birchall, “Italo-Reich Military Pact Foreseen in Hitler’s Visit,” *New York Times*,

works of several journalists who were covering the same event, one can appreciate how the fascists' psychological strategies attempted to control various segments of the populace.

Mussolini's association with fascism dated back to the World-War-I era. Prior to becoming a political Party, Mussolini's fascists started as a fighting organization. Small *fasci di combattimento* (battle units) rallied in the streets, held nationalistic protests, and went around "clubbing down political opposition."⁹ Fascist battle units soon attracted more members, turned into larger squads, and eventually transformed from a domestic disturbance into a major political Party, yet they maintained the battle units to intimidate opponents and attract those who found uniformed discipline appealing. Fascist men in *arditi* uniforms patrolled *piazze*, train stations, and communities, and the black uniforms of the Party's paramilitary units soon became a common sight all around the country.¹⁰ Yet, why did so many people see vicious acts of clubbing, street-fighting, castor-oil "therapy," and killings as a suitable alternative to their current state?

Italian historian Emilio Gentile suggests that the formation and institutionalization of the "fascist religion was born out of a collectivized cult which sought the assimilation of the entire Italian population through the works of myths and rituals."¹¹ He indicates that fascism used a two-pronged approach: consolidating its monopoly of power and introducing its symbols and rituals into the state. Building on Gentile's insights, A. James Gregor has analyzed the origins of fascist intellectualism and shown how it generated a national political cult.¹² Gregor suggests that the "fascist religion" derived from ideas put forward by Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, whose revolutionary proclamations in favor of self-emancipation gradually replaced the Italians' belief in God's sovereignty with a belief in their nation's sovereignty. From this, fascists envisioned themselves as sacralized members and developed

May 5, 1938; N.a., "Dictators Pledge Lasting Friendship: Border 'Inviolable,'" *New York Times*, May 8, 1938.

⁹ Kurt London, *Backgrounds of Conflict: Ideas and Forms in World Politics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), 161.

¹⁰ Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1939* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 48. The *arditi* were Mussolini's "shock troops," but prior to this, they had been specialized units in World War I. Many shock troops in the *fasci di combattimento* were World-War-I veterans.

¹¹ Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34. According to Gentile, the cult of the nation and the myth of war created fascist mythology, and those who subsequently sacrificed themselves for the fascist cause as "martyrs" endowed the nation with both modernity and the "spirit and greatness of old Rome."

¹² A. James Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion: An Intellectual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012). Gregor argues that, as twentieth-century people became disenchanted with traditional religion, they found faith in politics, which became a new religion to them that offered change, affected them physically and emotionally, and was less mystical.

mythical and symbolic representations of their sacred history in a tangible “Messianic mission.”¹³

Using insights from psychology, anthropology, sociology, and cultural history, it is possible to discern the strategic themes of fascist recruitment. Fascist manipulation programs initially targeted individuals who were longing to return to “old” Rome. Yet these idealists were not the only ones who jumped on board. Both non-conformists and devout Catholics found themselves crossing Party lines toward the fascists, setting aside the Christian prospect of peace and glory in the hereafter for a political religion that promised change by all means necessary to attain them in the here-and-now. This article argues that Italian fascism used radical physicality programs, symbolic expressionism, and religiously framed rituals to manipulate civilians into becoming Party members.

I. Physicality

Throughout life, joyous celebrations, emotional tragedies, and societal changes impact the personalities, relationships, and consciousness of those involved. Consider, for example, the new members of an organization, sports team, gang, military squad, or political Party: once they adopt a certain group’s uniform or emblem and engage in its programs, their respective persona, morality, mentality, and consciousness become redeveloped to fit the group’s body politic.

In the mid-1920s, Herbert W. Schneider and Shepard B. Clough became interested in one of the growing phenomena of their era, namely, Italian fascism. Fascism was still in its infancy and had yet to develop into a totalitarian system of governance. Schneider and Clough decided to visit Italy to gain some firsthand knowledge, and they discovered that, after the March on Rome in October 1922, the *Duce’s* fascists were facing the task of molding their future generations, beginning with their youngest recruits, the *Balilla*.¹⁴

How to maintain governmental control rather than legitimate representation became paramount to fascist indoctrination. In a 1929 speech to Italy’s Chamber of Deputies, Mussolini remarked that “children must be educated in our religious faith, but we have the duty of integrating this education, we need to give these youngsters the sense of virility, of power, of conquest; and above all, we need to inspire them with our faith, and to inflame them with our hopes.”¹⁵ Thus, at the

¹³ Gearóid Barry, “Political Religion: A User’s Guide,” *Contemporary European History*, 24, no. 4 (2015): 623-638. In political religion, according to Barry, the will of the collective identity supersedes the will of the self; every individual is bound by the same obligations (as defined by the state, party, or nation); there is the vision of a utopia; and political liturgy worships an idealized “new man.”

¹⁴ Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 179. The *Balilla* (*Opera Nazionale Balilla*) was an all-boys fascist club. Not unlike the Boy Scouts, the *Balilla* found ways to impress the youth through physical activities. In addition, the *Balilla* offered fascist indoctrination.

¹⁵ Quoted in Finer, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 428.

age of eight, boys received their first taste of juvenile fascist military education.¹⁶ The fascist state designed these programs to ensure the constant transition of bodies into their Party's ranks. Since the boys' leaders were active militiamen, fascist Party members, and adamant about teaching them nationalism, the boys' primary curriculum consisted of military drill and ceremony, modern warfare tactics and training, and behavioral instruction.¹⁷ It had all the trappings of a patriotic education, but it manipulated the consciousness of these youth so that they would be ready to take up arms for the Party's nationalistic aspirations.

In his monograph *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (1996), Emilio Gentile notes that the youth organizations' members were the ones most susceptible and exposed to fascist propaganda.¹⁸ These young minds found themselves easily persuaded, especially since their schoolyard friends, neighborhood pals, church community peers, and fellow kin were toeing the line next to them. Scott Selisker has described what scholars of torture note as the "break" or "breaking point;" it is the psychological moment when a victim's sense of reality and agency seem to disappear. Torture chambers place victims into closed-off social spaces, similar to totalitarian states, which Selisker considers "prerequisites for coercive persuasion."¹⁹ While being water-boarded in confined spaces is more extreme than practicing drills outside, young minds are much more susceptible to persuasion when their social spaces have been manipulated.

The boys who had joined the *Balilla* youth program at the age of eight were encouraged to continue their education once they reached the age of eighteen in the ranks of the *Avanguardia*. In an initiation ceremony that mirrored the symbolic rituals of military units for their new comrades, these young men were given rifles and swore an oath of allegiance to this stricter and militarily structured organization: "I swear to obey the orders of the *Duce* without question, and to serve the cause of the fascist revolution with all my strength and, if necessary, with my blood."²⁰ The *Avanguardia* watched over its young recruits until they reached the age of twenty-one. At that time, the Party accepted them into its ranks, and they receive the full privileges that came with membership.²¹

In his 1973 monograph, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1939*, Adrian Lyttelton points out that the *Duce's* goal of creating "the new fascist man" could not rely for its execution on Italy's schools and their teachers. Thus, Lyttelton

¹⁶ Michael Arthur Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928-1936* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972), 10.

¹⁷ Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 112.

¹⁸ Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 98.

¹⁹ Scott Selisker, *Human Programming: Brainwashing, Automaton, and American Unfreedom* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 131.

²⁰ Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 179. While they were given a rifle and swore an oath of allegiance to their *Duce*, these young men were not yet conscripted into the army.

²¹ Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, 367.

explains, the *Avanguardia* became a cornerstone for the “totalitarian regimentation of youth” because it “embodied the true spirit of fascist education and practiced a new ‘pedagogy’.”²² Emilio Gentile adds to this that “training for a ‘collective harmony’ [was built] on the supposition that conversion to the common faith of the fascist religion would morally—beyond disparities in social conditions, economic opportunities, and differences in gender and age—unite all Italians.”²³ Thus, scholars have found that the bombardment with fascist indoctrination throughout the youth’s “educational training” played a vital role in the total submission of their subconsciousness. The fascist Party used brainwashing to increase the membership of their *fascio*. However, beyond Italy’s youth, fascist society also needed a welfare program to recruit those in the blue-collar communities who kept the country’s trains running.²⁴

The fascist after-work program, *Dopolavoro*, controlled by Party Secretary Augusto Turati, was a social-welfare institution that encouraged those in the labor force to interact with their fellow Italians. Middle-aged Italians enjoyed free admission to cafés and wine shops where flirtatious gesturing, local gossiping, and political chitter-chatter filled the air.²⁵ In Herman Finer’s opinion, the primary reason for creating this and other welfare programs was to increase Party membership. By 1933, approximately two million Italians were members of the *Dopolavoro*, a staggering increase from its 280,000 members in 1926.²⁶

According to Adrian Lyttelton, the after-work program was the “most effective instrument of the regime for penetrating the working class.”²⁷ It served to pull those toward the Party who found themselves between the youth and the older, retired generation. Especially in Italy’s south, where farmers had little or no money to spend on leisure activities, the *Dopolavoro* provided affordable theatre tickets, historical sightseeing tours, and recreational adventures, all of which provided great opportunities for Party propaganda.²⁸ As they walked away from these events, fascism would have left a lasting impression on the minds of these poor farmers that Italy’s fascist Party and government were generous and supportive of the working class. While fascism certainly looked out for the country’s corporate elite, the *Dopolavoro* enabled the Party to enroll blue-collar workers into its ranks on a grand scale. Most fascist programs, especially those for the youth, had a strong physical component. Meanwhile, fascism’s symbolic expressions further encouraged national cohesiveness through its manipulative undertones.

²² Lyttelton, *Seizure of Power*, 409.

²³ Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 101.

²⁴ London, *Backgrounds of Conflict*, 163.

²⁵ See Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 184; and Finer, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 486.

²⁶ Finer, *Mussolini’s Italy*, 487; and Lyttelton, *Seizure of Power*, 401.

²⁷ Lyttelton, *Seizure of Power*, 401.

²⁸ Lyttelton, *Seizure of Power*, 402.

II. Symbolism

There is ample historical precedent for the use of symbolism to manipulate individuals' minds. The ancient pharaohs of Egypt forced their people, as well as slaves, to create the architectural wonders along the Nile that symbolized their god-like status, thereby elevating themselves above everyone else both domestically and, by reputation, abroad. Similarly, albeit on a much smaller scale, Caesar Augustus commissioned larger-than-life statues of himself for the purpose of psychological manipulation. However, symbols do not have to come in the form of marble, plaster, or limestone. Symbolism can also be traced in physical acts, language, and spirituality.

For instance, the *Giovinezza*, the fascist Party anthem, was sung at public ceremonies, exhibitions, and parades,²⁹ and its lyrics symbolized an intense spirituality: *Il valor dei tuoi guerrieri / la virtù dei pionieri / la vision de l'Alighieri / oggi brilla in tutti i cuor* ("The valor of your warriors / the virtue of the pioneers / the vision of Alighieri [i.e., Dante] / shines today in every heart").³⁰ When those in attendance sang these words together at the top of their lungs, they symbolically joined themselves to the twentieth-century martyrs of the fascist revolution (*guerrieri*), but also to those associated in any form or fashion with Italian greatness throughout history (*pionieri*), represented by that famous poet, Dante (*Alighieri*) (1265-1321), whose works had ushered in the widespread use of the Italian vernacular. Thus, according to the *Giovinezza*, the fascist revolution was the culmination of Italian history – the culmination of valor, virtue, and vision. The logical conclusion was that Party members should be just as willing as those who had died for Italy in the past, as well as – more recently – for the fascist cause, to give their lives, if needed. Fascist organizers were aware that the *Giovinezza's* symbolism would encourage individuals to feel both anticipation and uncertainty, and the fascist Party cast itself as the patriotic answer to both.³¹

When people take an oath of allegiance, they promise to themselves, to the people around them, and to the spirit of the cause – for example, to God or to the nation – that their commitment to the cause will be eternal. In fascist Italy, the oath of allegiance sounded like this: "In the name of God and of Italy, I swear to execute the orders of the *Duce* and to serve with all my powers, and, if necessary, with my blood, the cause of the fascist revolution." Thus, the *Duce* (and not, for example, Christ) was considered the source of authority and redemption,³² and those who took the oath declared their willingness – both individually and collectively – to conform to their leader's bidding. A. James Gregor has suggested that human

²⁹ Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, 396.

³⁰ Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 193.

³¹ Birchall, "Mussolini Greets Hitler;" Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 195.

³² Roger Eatwell, "Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism," in *The Fascism Reader*, ed. Aristotle A. Kallis (New York: Routledge, 2003), 78; and Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, 377. According to the *Führerprinzip* ("leader principle"), all authority emanates from the leader.

history is a process of individuals conforming to laws without reason—a *subconscious* act—which is something the fascists understood perfectly.³³ Party members anticipated—*consciously*—a better future, but they were manipulated—*subconsciously*—to conform to whatever might be necessary to attain this better future. In the collective, as Party members, it became easier for them to support radical policies and practices because they viewed them as necessary, which meant that they no longer felt any need to subject these policies and practices to *conscious* reflection. This started a spiral of desensitization in which a sucker-punch turned into a stabbing, a stabbing into a shooting, and a shooting into a public execution or, eventually, into marching to the front of World War II. Thus, by gradually building on the oath they had taken, Party members were manipulated into subscribing to anything and everything that suited the Party's purposes. Meanwhile, most Party members probably still believed that they were acting—*consciously*—of their own free will when, in reality, they were being controlled by an authoritarian Party-state that decided for them.

Complementing the fascist anthem and the fascist oath was a physical gesture that allowed Party members to express their devotion to the *fascio* and witness the devotion of others. The fascist salute, or what Martin Winkler calls the *Roman salute*, had been popularized by the Italian nationalist Gabriele d'Annunzio in 1919 when he used it for propagandistic purposes in his short-lived independent state of Fiume.³⁴ A physical gesture where the entire arm was stretched forward in a slight upward angle, with the palm facing downward and the fingers stretched out and touching each other, the fascist salute became the customary greeting among members of the *fascio*.³⁵ This physical gesture says even more about the subconscious state of an individual when we compare the salute from one person to another. While Party leadership (including Hitler and Mussolini) occasionally offered an almost casual version of the salute, as if they were just “going through the motions,” fascist youth were expected to—and dutifully did—present the salute with precision and rigor to show their devotion to the cause.

The anthem, the oath, and the salute were three significant components of Italian fascism's symbolic arsenal. They served to unite Party members to draw strength from the past (the anthem), commit fully to the future (the oath), and physically express their alignment with one another and the cause (the salute). None of these symbols were individual; they were meant to be executed as part of the collective. In addition, they built on each other: from sung poetry, via a solemn spoken commitment, to an energetic “forward” gesture. They were also integral elements of fascism's manipulative rituals to which we now turn.

³³ Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, 93.

³⁴ Martin M. Winkler, *The Roman Salute: Cinema, History, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 4.

³⁵ Schneider and Clough, *Making Fascists*, 192.

III. Rituals

According to Thomas Luckmann's theory of religion in modern society, Italian fascism had to compete with other "ultimate" sources of imagination and feared losing the attention of "'autonomous' individuals who [were] [...] potential consumers of their 'product'."³⁶ As Philip Morgan has argued, fascist strategists adopted a social and political alternative because they feared the "ultimate other" of a Bolshevik revolution.³⁷ To strengthen their fascist alternative, they utilized the trappings of political religion—reminiscent of the forms and rituals of traditional faiths like Catholicism, yet with distinct military undertones—that permeated the public and private lives of Italians with a transcendental flair.³⁸

According to Francesca Billiani and Laura Pennacchietti, the architecture of fascist Italy propagated a new *arte di stato*, ("art of the state") which celebrated an "anthropological revolution."³⁹ This anthropological revolution was also evident in the regime's parades and celebratory rituals which used Rome's Colosseum, triumphal arches, and other ancient buildings as backdrops, as seen during Hitler's visit to the Eternal City in 1938. All of this was intended to showcase fascism's transformative community.⁴⁰ It was remarkable to watch, in these parades, the entire spectrum of recruits, including women in military garb.⁴¹ Fascism valued women in particular, for, as mothers, they were the ones giving life to future Party members. Thus, fascists created programs that celebrated women as essential members of the militant state in order to entice them to join. As Perry Wilson has remarked, "fascism should be considered an innovator, and the interwar period a watershed in Italian women's history."⁴² Fascists took the traditional role of the mother, modernized it by portraying the mother as a militant woman, and thereby altered the psychological state of society's female members. The 1938 parade featured women alongside both their male counterparts and steel tanks, thus integrating women (and, by extension, mothers) into the militant state—and all this in the context of a very public celebration that seemed to transcend traditional gender roles. In effect, though, fascists reduced women's aspirations for modernity to those roles deemed essential for the militant state.

In Italy, the Catholic Church was a major competitor for people's imagination, which is why fascists needed to find a way to assert their dominance without

³⁶ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Modern Society* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1967), 108.

³⁷ Philip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe: 1919-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.

³⁸ Luckmann, *Invisible Religion*, 109.

³⁹ Francesca Billiani and Laura Pennacchietti, *Architecture and the Novel under the Italian Fascist Regime* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 201.

⁴⁰ Birchall, "Italo-Reich Military Pact."

⁴¹ British Pathé, "Italians Goosestep For Hitler" (Version A), May 12, 1938.

⁴² Cited in Richard Bessel, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 80.

completely antagonizing the country's devout Catholics. Thus, when the Catholic Church celebrated the 800th anniversary of Saint Francis's death in October 1926, Mussolini followed up with a two-day spectacle. On the first day, he paid appropriate attention to the famous Italian saint, but on the second day, he focused almost entirely on the rebirth of Imperial Rome under his leadership, lecturing personally on Imperial Rome's maritime power and arranging for bands, parades, illuminated streets, and rows of banners along the entire *piazza*. It was a systematic effort to recruit Catholics to the fascist cause.⁴³

In their early years, Mussolini and his henchmen, among them Giuseppe Bottai, had devised a plan for the consolidation and monopoly of fascist power,⁴⁴ and their idea for a new social order was built directly on some of the teachings of Catholic morality. For example, fascism propagated a sense of religious duty by emphasizing mission (i.e., recruitment) and charity (i.e., social responsibility and self-sacrifice in the context of the fascist state) in order to appeal to practicing Christians.⁴⁵ To encourage the transition from the Catholic liturgical community into their own emotionally charged—and charging—community, fascists promoted a vision of imminent earthly change as their alternative to Catholicism's prospect of change in the “life to come” (i.e., only after death). As we have seen, fascism—as a modern civil or political religion—provided alternatives to many of the features of traditional religion: its own anthem (instead of hymns and liturgy), its own oath (instead of the Creed), its own salute (instead of the sign of the Cross), its own public parades (instead of church services and processions), its own architecture (instead of churches and religious monuments), and so forth—all this to “evoke, maintain, and renew a sense of collective identity.”⁴⁶

Concerned that fascism's religious experience might not be emotionally compelling enough to rally all Italians to one nationalist cause, Mussolini's propaganda minister, Odoardo Dino Alfieri, devised a religiously framed exhibition that used the Party's revolutionary heroes as an alternative to the Christian saints. To Italian fascists, those who had died for their cause—as martyrs—had prepared the way for the ultimate, glorious chapter in their nation's history because they believed in a law that came from their aspirations and not from already established institutions.⁴⁷ What was needed now was a religious ritual to celebrate these martyrs and simultaneously reach all of Italian society.⁴⁸ The *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (“Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution”) opened in Rome on October 28, 1932, on the tenth anniversary of the revolution.⁴⁹

⁴³ Schneider, *Making the Fascist State*, 226.

⁴⁴ Nino Tripodi, *I Patti lateranensi e il Fascismo* (Bologna: Capelli, 1959), 200.

⁴⁵ Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 35.

⁴⁶ Gregor, *Totalitarianism and Political Religion*, 3.

⁴⁷ Schneider, *Making the Fascist State*, 252.

⁴⁸ Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 110.

⁴⁹ Gentile, *Sacralization of Politics*, 110.

In this cleverly developed exhibition, the fascist Party's "years of anguish" were portrayed via bloodied uniforms, heroic medals, and, most vividly, a final room known as the *Sacrarium*, a chapel dedicated to fascism's fallen.⁵⁰ Guarded by a militiaman, the small sanctuary featured a Christian cross, the names of the fallen, and a symbolic placement of the words "Present! Present!" and "To Us! To Us!"⁵¹

What was most remarkable about this exhibition was how the regime promoted it. For many Italians, especially farmers and peasants, visiting a historical exhibition in a place that was hours away from home was simply impractical. Thus, the Party cast the trip akin to a religious pilgrimage and offered to assist with transportation, meals, and housing so that all, including the poor, could experience the "cathedral whose very walls speak."⁵² Once in Rome, visitors of the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* found themselves standing before a wall where each name represented a fallen comrade and where the carefully arranged blood-stained uniforms symbolized sacrifice. Engulfed by emotions intentionally triggered to make them feel united with each other and with those who had come—and given their lives—before them, visitors felt regret, sympathy, and patriotism. Some regretted that they were still alive while their brothers had died for the cause. Others sympathized with the mothers who had lost their sons. Together, the hundreds of thousands who visited the exhibition left with a burning desire for patriotic (and, by extension, fascist) action.

Conclusion

During the interwar period, fascist recruitment programs redefined what it meant to be an Italian by fostering physical collectivism, symbolic expressionism, and psychological idealism among all social classes. Based on an appeal to patriotism, youth organizations like the *Balilla* and the *Avanguardia* offered physical conditioning and military education to boys and young men, while the *Dopolavoro* drew in adults after work by combining fascist ideals and leisure activities. Italians expressed their devotion to the Party as a culmination of Italian history when they sang the *Giovinetta*; they expressed their commitment to the *Duce* and his vision for Italy's future when they took the fascist oath; and they expressed their unity and impetus to move forward when they greeted each other with the fascist salute. In doing so, they were no longer individuals but, rather, devoted soldiers who were ready to continue and expand the fascist revolution. This devotion ultimately manifested itself in fascism's various doctrines and rituals of political religion, which included a "modernized" vision of militant motherhood, the appropriation of religious holidays, and the pseudo-pilgrimage to the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*—all designed to unite the masses of Italian individuals in the collective cult of the fascist state.

⁵⁰ Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, 396.

⁵¹ Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, 397.

⁵² Finer, *Mussolini's Italy*, 117.

In 1938, under Rome's blue sky, the people of Europe witnessed the alliance between Mussolini and the *Führer*, marking a turning point in international politics.⁵³ The high-stepping soldiers and historical uniforms projected the image of an Imperial army that had once ruled the Mediterranean world. Italian fascism had attained and expanded its political power by means of psychological manipulation. Yet instead of a new Roman Empire, there was merely another chapter in the history of dictatorships which, by 1945, had reached its conclusion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Kody Allen Moore of Wasilla, Alaska, earned his B.A. in History with a minor in Political Science at Nicholls State University, Thibodaux, Louisiana (2018), and his M.A. in History at California State University, Fullerton, California (CSUF) (2021). His article printed above originated in a graduate seminar on European History offered by CSUF's History Department.*

⁵³ See McCormick, "Europe: Der Fuehrer to Meet Il Duce;" N.a., "Dictators Pledge Lasting Friendship;" Birchall, "Italo-Reich Military Pact."