

Fateful Bonds: The Secret Italo-German Committee on Racial Questions

by

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This discussion will explore the similarities and differences between the Italian and German forms of racism as elucidated during the first meeting of the secret Italo-German Committee on Racial Questions, held in Germany in December 1938. The committee met under the auspices of the National Socialist Office of Racial Politics and the Italian Office for the Study of Race. The committee was formed in an attempt to mitigate tensions between Italy and Germany over racial ideology. Some of the most important representatives of Italian and German racial policies were involved with this meeting, including Walter Gross, Alfred Rosenberg, Heinrich Himmler, and Rudolf Hess. The Italian representatives were given a tour of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and received the German Red Cross for scientific merit from Hitler. Dr. Guido Landra, the author of a report on the racial committee, concluded from the meeting that German racism was veering toward biological determinism due to the influence of Italian racial ideology. Nevertheless, the two countries would continue to evince radically different racial ideologies (a fact as yet largely unappreciated by scholars) which influenced Mussolini's decision not to aid Germany in its Final Solution.

Many historians have long assumed that Italian racism, as adopted by the fascist party in July 1938, was a sign of the extensive degree to which Mussolini had fallen under the aegis of Nazi Germany. Indeed, Mussolini had been impressed with the displays of German military might that he had witnessed during his visit to Berlin in 1937? It was not long after ? that the Italian army was forced to adopt the goose step, rebaptised the "passo romano;" in 1939 ?, Mussolini agreed to an aggressive military alliance with Hitler that has since become known as the axis? Thus, it seems only natural to assume that the anti-Semitic laws and the decrees announcing the existence of the Aryan Italian race were directly inspired by Nazi models. But such an assumption would be entirely misleading. This paper will focus on one important event in particular that highlighted the often antagonistic relationship between German and Italian racism: the first meeting of the Italo-German Committee on Racial issues, held in Germany in December 1938.

It is my contention (which unfortunately cannot be developed here), that Mussolini adopted racism for entirely domestic reasons. I believe that he sought to create a set of racist myths that would allow him to accelerate the creation of the "new fascist man," one of the as yet unfulfilled core projects of fascism. In this use of myth Mussolini was strongly influenced by the writings of the French political philosopher Georges Sorel. Sorel believed that myths were the surest means for a leader to stir up the passions and direct the energy of the masses. These myths had to be simple, easy to grasp, and connected to the lives of the people. In the irrational minds of the masses, these myths could have the force of reality, and lead them to a degree of commitment and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the group that would otherwise be unimaginable.

Mussolini decided to elevate anti-Semitism and Italian racial identity to the status of Sorelian myths. Through them, he hoped to unify the Italian people and develop in them a new fascist and racist identity. The Jews were set up as the foil against which the "good" Italian would be formed. Mussolini never permanently settled on a racial model for the gentile Italian. In 1938, still enthralled by the seeming invincibility of German martial ardor, Mussolini decided to model the new Italian after his German allies. The modern Germans, Mussolini believed, retained the tough, steely discipline and warrior spirit of the Italians' own ancestors, the Romans. The German or Nordic model, precarious to begin with, would give way to a more nativist, Mediterranean racial identity some months later, by February 1938. Even during the "pro-Nordic" phase of Italian racial identity, from June 1938 to February 1939, the Italians were acutely conscious of German refusal to take the new Italian racial identity seriously. Though both sides sought cooperation on racial issues, German disdain for their Italian partners, rooted in centuries of anti-Italian sentiments, continued to resurface.

Most significant in this regard was Dr. Rudolf Frercks' visit to Rome in October 1938. Frercks was Vice-Director of the Office of Racial Politics of the Nazi Party (Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP). Frercks met informally with a number of the leading government officials who oversaw racial policies, including Dr. Guido Landra, Head of the Office of Racial Studies at the Ministry of Popular Culture, and the Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri. Frercks suggested to Alfieri that further Italo-German cooperation in racial issues was warranted. In fact, such contacts had been approved by Mussolini. But Landra in his discussions with Frercks made it quite obvious that such talks could only be conducted with the understanding that Italian racism was absolutely independent of the German variety. As evidence of this, Landra reminded Frercks that the Roman heritage of the Italian race, not anti-Semitism, was the cornerstone of Italian racial policy. The Italians were also upset over continued German allegations that "Negro blood" was present in the southern and central Italians. Such lingering racial slights had to cease between the two nations, Landra remarked. On the positive side, Landra was looking forward to more Italian racial scholars studying in Germany, and the possibility that an Italo-German Academy of Racial Science could eventually be established.(1)

Landra was quite instrumental in setting up a forum to realize these aspirations, in the form of a secret "Italo-German Committee on Racial Questions."(2) This committee, which met in Germany from December 13 to 21, 1938, was quite limited in size: Landra and his Vice-Director Lino Businco represented Italy, while the German delegation was composed of Dr. Walter Gross, Head of the Office of Racial Politics of the NSDP, and his Vice-Director Dr. Frercks. The purpose of this first meeting was ostensibly "to commence a preliminary examination of the opportune means to avoid in the respective racial propaganda those arguments that could harm the amicable spirit between the two Peoples."

As the declaration above suggests, Mussolini's own white-hot racial Germanophilia was probably cooling, perhaps as a result of adverse popular pressure in Italy. Landra, obviously on instructions from his superiors, took every opportunity to remind his hosts of the necessity of eliminating from their media the idea that certain Italian racial

elements were not Aryan (probably referring to the Mediterranean Italians of the south). He also expressed disgust over some German interpretations of the Italian Renaissance. (Here Landra is probably referring to Ludwig Woltmann's book *Die Germanen und die Renaissance in Italien*, which claims that almost all of the Italian Renaissance notables were Nordic). Nor did the Italian delegates neglect to criticize German attacks against the concept of Romanità (the presence in Italian culture of Roman values) and the Catholic religion. On all of these complaints, the Germans showed "understanding," almost "compliance." They claimed that such misconceptions were actually based on a faulty interpretation of Italian works, perhaps referring to the Italian anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi's claim that the Mediterranean race originated in Africa.

Besides addressing these complaints, the Germans were determined to impress Landra and Businco with the extent and sophistication of their racial operations. The delegates met with various representatives of the Nazi elite, including Heinrich Himmler, Rudolf Hess, the racial theorist Alfred Rosenberg, and Gunter d'Alquen, director of the Black Corps. The delegates visited the School of Racial Politics in Babelsberg; saw the exhibition "Der ewige Jude" in Berlin; attended the inaugural ceremony of a local Office of Racial Politics in Reichenberg, Sudetenland; called on the Dresden and Berlin Office of Racial Politics; examined the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen near Berlin; and concluded their visit with a short trip to Munich.

During this visit, Landra showed a strong curiosity about the radical change then taking place in German racial theory. As he wrote several days later in his official report: "The National-Socialist regime did not delay in directly establishing the uselessness and, under some aspects, the danger, of entrusting the racial question to theoretical men who conceive of their charge only as the sterile profession of rash theorists and, at least, debatable [theories]." Thus the Nazis circumvented theorists such as Alfred Rosenberg through the institution of the Office of Racial Politics, which had since re-directed German racism to more practical, "concrete and very precise notions." As a consequence of this volta face, the Office of Racial Politics decided to address the unpopularity of the Nazi party's emphasis on Nordicism as the most prominent aspect of German racism, especially among the Austrians and Sudetenlanders. In its place, the Office substituted a glorification of the "German race," the product of "a thousand year process of biological and spiritual fusion." This dramatic change in policy Landra attributed to his own mentor, Dr. Eugen Fischer, "the greatest anthropologist in the world."

Landra implied that this change in German racial policies was inspired by the Italian example. "In essence one could say that the racial politics of the Reich, after years of experience, is today reaching as a point of arrival a doctrinal position that for Italy has been instead an original point of departure" he wrote. Because of this, Landra surmised, the Office of Racial Politics probably "counts on Italian influence and support to better concentrate in its hands control over racial politics and to definitively liberate itself from the influence of those that were the first spokesmen of German racism."

These "first spokesmen" were represented in the figure of Alfred Rosenberg. Landra reported that Rosenberg looked to be "an ailing and weak person effected by a profound

melancholy," almost an allegory for the current state of Rosenberg's racial theories in Germany, at least from Landra's perspective. Rosenberg's spiritualistic, anti-Catholic and anti-Roman racism was a model for the Italian Nordicist Giulio Cogni but was strongly resented by Landra and many other Italians. Feeling which way the wind was blowing, Rosenberg tried to claim that he had always believed that the Catholic Church in Italy was not an Asiatic import, but the Italian national religion. He had never intended to attack the religion of Italy, he told Landra, nor the concept of Romanità, but only the international Church which devoted its attention to political matters. Still he saw fit to advise Landra that the racial question in Italy should not restrict itself simply to a biological vision, but should also elevate itself to a vision of ideal spirituality. Landra coolly retorted that "since the beginning the Italian racial movement contemplated at once the biological and spiritual aspects of the problem." Not surprisingly, Rosenberg was "deeply saddened" to see "already in the official direction of German racism the first signs of Italian influence," Landra noted.

Whereas the Office of Racial Politics, under the ultimate supervision of Rudolf Hess, was moving in a more biological and scientific direction, according to Landra, Himmler's operation was drifting in the opposite direction, toward racial spiritualism. Himmler informed Landra that the S.S. no longer laid as much stress on choosing men of a particular anthropological type, but now selected them increasingly for their spiritual attributes. "Now it depends not so much on the color of their hair or a given cephalic index," Landra explained, "but rather if they have the psychological quality belonging to the ideal and heroic model of the German race."

At the conclusion of the visit, Gross and Landra developed a series of modest proposals meant to give the meeting some substance. They endorsed Landra's earlier idea of an "Italo-German Society or Academy for Racial Studies" which could facilitate mutual understanding and "increasingly inspire a greater respect [for racism] precisely in those intellectual classes that in Germany as well as in Italy are the most resistant to accept the new ideas." In addition, the Academy could supervise scientific work and popular publications on race with an eye to eliminating any themes that could lead to conflict between the two countries.

Related to the above proposal, Landra and Gross suggested that the German and Italian racial offices formally consult their opposite number before allowing publications from the other country to be translated. This would "avoid the translation and the diffusion of books that do not respect or at least do not come close to the orthodox thought of the politics of the two countries."

Given the quasi-academic nature of the German and Italian Racial Offices, it is not surprising that the Committee included among its proposals a suggestion to increase the exchange of university students interested in racial studies. Germans could study colonial questions at Italian "Institutes and Museums already strongly committed to this goal" whereas Italian students could profit from German expertise on eugenic and hereditary questions.

The Committee also proposed a basic exchange of data, consisting of "statistics, photographs, and news of racial propaganda with reference to the current important problems." Such an exchange, Landra promised, would enable Italy to justify its "natural aspirations" to German people, through "the far reaching German racial organizations."

The final proposal hammered home the original purpose of Landra's visit by declaring "the necessity of producing a concrete study that fixes in an accord the themes which must be avoided in the racial field that would otherwise have unpleasant consequences for the amicable feelings between the two Peoples."

In line with a meeting that was more style than substance, Adolf Hitler himself awarded Landra the Order of the German Red Cross first class, and Businco the same decoration second class, thus symbolizing the Führer's appreciation for the work the Italians had done in spreading the gospel of racism. Before Landra left Germany, he agreed with Hess that the next meeting of the Italo-German Committee would occur in Italy in the middle of February, 1939. Though both governments approved the accords reached in this meeting, the second was destined never to take place.(3)

On February 15, less than a month after his triumphant visit to Germany, Landra was removed from the direction of the Racial Office and replaced by Sabato Visco, a committed Mediterraneanist and one of Landra's opponents. Landra was allowed to stay on at the Office only as a technical consultant.(4) Several years later Landra would complain that he was never told why he had been removed from his post.(5) We might surmise, however, that his dismissal was a product of Mussolini's growing alienation from any hint of reliance on German racial models, or the "Nordic-Aryan" orientation of Italian racism once so proudly declared by the Ministry of Popular Culture.(6) Landra's close connection to Eugen Fischer, and the zeal he had shown in establishing formal links with the Germans in matters of racial policy, probably compromised Landra too much in Mussolini's eyes to allow him to remain as head of the Racial Office. His replacement by the well-respected Mediterraneanist Sabato Visco was probably meant to quiet those who objected to the racial alliance with Germany. It is also suggestive that when Landra spoke on "The Scientific and Political Problem of Race in Italy" at the University of Berlin only little more than a week after he was demoted, his speech was noteworthy because of its denunciation of the concept of Nordic superiority and its assertion that the Italians were no less a superior race than were the Germans.(7)

Thus we see that even during their most collegial phase, Italian and German racism had irreconcilable differences. The Italians never asserted as virulent an anti-Semitism as did their Nazi allies. Furthermore, the fascist ideology concerning the racial identity of the Italians was more oriented toward ancient Roman and native Italian models than it was the Aryan and Nordic ideals evinced by the Germans. These differences were further exacerbated by important anti-Nordic ideologues in Italy's government and intelligentsia. This faction would attempt to sabotage any further attempts to reconcile Italian and German racism. Indeed, the fierce polemics that swirled around the Italian concepts of race would help to turn Italian fascists against one another, and so aid in the collapse of the fascist regime in July, 1943.

NOTES:

(1) Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, pp. 176-179.

(2) Landra Papers, MCP, Ufficio Razza, "Attivita' del prof. Guido Landra presso il Ministero della Cultura Popolare."

(3) The above account is based on Landra Papers, MCP, Gabinetto, Ufficio Razza, Guido Landra, "Appunto per S.E. il Ministero," Roma, 31 dicembre 1938/XVII, "Prima riunione del comitato Italo-Tedesco per le questioni razziali, relazione: Berlino-Monaco, 13-21 dicembre 1938/XVII."

(4) Landra Papers, MCP, Ufficio Razza, Memorandum, Sabato Visco, 16 April 1940.

(5) ACS, SPD (CO) 183.506, "Dott. Guido Landra," letter, Guido Landra to Benito Mussolini, 27 September 27 1940.

(6) For other evidence of Mussolini's shifting racist allegiances, see Raspanti, "I razzismi del fascismo," p. 78.

(7) Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, p. 220; Landra Papers, letter, Hellmuth Schwarz to Guido Landra, 25 March 25 1939