

Sports and fascism in italy history essay



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Like other totalitarian governments, the fascist regime had recognized the young as the future of the nation.' The regime used sporting activities as a means to control the private life of its citizens and to spread fascist ideology. The sports policy during this era can be categorized into three phases. The first phase, which started from beginning of the regime in 1920s, considered sports a physical activity. During second phase, until about the end of 1930s, sport was used as a political propaganda. The third phase, in the late 1930s, sport activities were militarized.

Emerging after the first World War, the first phase of sport use was to rebuild the physical and political health and vitality of a population that had been badly weakened by battle wounds and rampant illnesses caused by exhaustion, overcrowding, and an unhygienic standard of living at the time.

The second phase of sports in fascism evolved during the 1930's and is where Italy (and the rest of the world) saw the fruits of their labour on the international front by notable successes in world competitive sporting events. During the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932, for example, Italy won an astounding 12 Gold metals, coming second after the United States of America. They also won 2 World Cups (1930 and 1938), the Central European Cup for soccer, and the Tour de France in 1938 for cycling. Italian-American, Primo Carnera, prevailed as the world heavy weight title in boxing in the summer of 1933. During the same time, Minister of Aviation, Italo Balbo successfully flew the difficult North Atlantic crossing lading in Chicago. Balbo instantly became idolized for his heroic and patriotic charm and was recognized as the poster boy of Fascism only after Mussolini. Although Italy lost bids to host the Olympics themselves, they did leverage hosting other

sporting opportunities to showcase the beauty and sound urban structure of their city. They also built Foro Mussolini (Forum Mussolini) and an exhibition called Esposizione della pace (peace exhibition) which aims to commemorate the successes achieved by various Italian athletes. The objective for all these events were to not only to entertain and distract the general public, but also to psychologically combat their foes, while maintaining a unified and harmonious image on the surface.

The final stage of the fascist integration with sports in Italy was the gradual transition from sports skills to military skills. The notion of uniforms, strict rules, obedience to hierarchy, and teamwork took a much more strategic presence in the physical education curriculum during the late 1930's. Since other totalitarian states were also making this transition, military games were introduced into the 1939 World University Championships held in Vienna.

This study's aim is to analyze the connection between Fascism and sports in Italy between the first and second World War. I will look at the key players and various organizations that planned the strategic education and militarization of a new generation, and the impact this has played in the formation of beliefs and attitudes of Italians especially during their early childhood years.

The Fascist regime's goal from the beginning when it came into power was to control the country's youth according to the fascist ideologies.' Children were easy targets because they are malleable and childhood was an easy and natural time to develop, absorb and assimilate. The fascist regime used a

previously neglected subject, physical education, in schools to entrust physical and political education of Italians.

Giovanni Gentile, a newly elected minister at the time, pioneered the necessary changes in the education system by radically reforming the structure and scope of the school system in 1923. In order to promote physical education and a fascist ideology, minister Giovanni Gentile handed over the physical education of the youth to an organization called the ENEF (Ente Nazionale per l'Educazione Fisica-National Physical Education Board).¹ ENEF was not successful in fulfilling the task in hand due to lack of sports equipment, exercise facilities, funding and instructors, so by 1927, ONB (Opera Nazionale Balilla-National Balilla Movement) took over this task.¹ ONB was committed and dedicated to getting the new generation of the Italian youth in shape.¹ ONB enrolled young male youth ranging age from six to eighteen, however, unfortunately, ten years later in 1937, there was another change in management, and GIL (Giovent' Italiana del Littorio-Fascist Youth) took over this task.¹

The young Italian males older than eighteen were involved in the GUF organization (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti-Fascist University Groups) and the ones waiting for military service joined the FGC (Fasci Giovanili di Combattimenti-Fascist Youth Combat Groups) or MVSN ((Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale-Voluntary Militia for National Security).¹ Also, sports fans enrolled in any association, had to join the CONI (Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano-Italian Olympic Committee), which had been at the service of the PNF (Partito Nazionale Fascista-National Fascist Party) since 1926.¹

OND (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro-National After-Work Institute) controlled the working class and starting from birth, children were looked after by ONMI (Opera Nazionale Maternit' e Infanzia-National Maternity and Child Welfare Institute), and the supreme, all powerful ruler was the 'Duce' or more formally known as Benito Mussolini. Clearly both Mussolini and Gentile were incredibly strategic with the organizational flow of the penetration of politics into the Italian population. Every single phase of one's life cycle, starting from birth, to pre-school, to University, and worklife, were carefully categorized and allocated a specific political organization in which to dictate and teach the fascist political ideology.

To improve the Italian race, from the early years of the regime, the goal was to improve the nation's physical health. In a speech 'Ascension Day' delivered on May 26 1927, Mussolini stated that in the past the state was not concerned with the nations' health which leads the nation to suicide.' Mussolini stated that in a well-ordered state,'people's health must be a priority, and that they must watch over the destiny of the Italian race with great seriousness.' The programs put in place by the regime included to reduce premature death and illness, support for maternity and childhood, and the physical education of the youth.' These measures over time showed a decrease in mortality rate and an increase in population, whom were stronger mentally and physically (7).

The regime's goal to strengthen the race concerned both men and women.'" Men were required to develop physically and morally by being healthy and physically active which would make them into good 'comrades'" ready to sacrifice themselves for the Fascist creed.' Women, on the other hand,

needed to be healthy so that they could give birth to healthy children and moral strength to breed true Fascists of the future. Besides being good 'mothers', women actively participated in the 1936 Olympics and unexpectedly even won a gold medal. Trebisonda Valla was victorious in the 80-metre hurdle race. This was a huge accomplishment given that women weren't even trained for the prior Olympics of 1932.

From the 1920s onwards, military training was organized, and the aim of the regime was to form an 'armed nation' (17) whose citizens and soldiers were one.' The State paid meticulous attention to pre-military training of its youth.' From 1919 to 1922, all youth groups were active and were controlled by the fascist party (18). In 1926, the ONB was established and its goal was to include their members within the state's legal system.' The aim of the ONB was 'the physical and moral assistance and education of the young'. 19 An objective expressed forcefully in the words of the Duce himself: 'Our duty has to be education and teaching. These children must be educated in our religious beliefs but we need to integrate this education, we need to give these children a sense of 'virility', of power, of conquest, above all we need to inspire them with our beliefs and awake in them our hopes.' 20

The ONB's educational activities were grouped into three categories (25): 'activities that were to be integrated into the school curriculum or into cultural training; military preparation; sports and gymnastics.'(26)' These were considered a 'fascist moral education' and built future model citizens with pure fascist spirits, ideologically pure fathers and mothers, soldiers and child-bearers of the future 'Italian Race'.

The ONB was directly under the control of Mussolini and was headed by Renato Ricci. 'The foundation of ONB aimed to assist both male and female children, but in 1929, it only admitted girls.' The children aged 6 to 18 were divided into Balilla and Piccole Italiane aged 6 to 13 and Avanguardisti and Giovani Italiane (14 to 18 years old).' The division of children in groups were based on military grouping. The first group was the 'squad', made up of 11 young people and a squad-leader; three squads formed a manipolo or platoon, and three of these formed a centuria (i. e. a body of 100). Three centurie became a 'cohort', and finally a 'legion' was formed from three cohorts. The various divisions were organized by the officers of the MVSN (Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale-Voluntary Militia for National Security). 29'''

To protect the monopoly of ONB, a decree was issued in 1927 which forbade any other organization that claimed to promote the physical, moral or spiritual education or professional training of the young (30).' This decree caused suspension and termination of all Catholic, Socialist and Communist sporting organization.' Even CONI which was under fascist party control could not promote sports activities for children under the age of 18.' '

ONB used schools as a source of recruitment.' Eventually all activities that were once undertaken by ENF were transferred to ONB with the full approval of Fascist government. 'The fascist were criticized that the education minister had neglected the aspect of physical education which develops personal courage and military skills.' Mussolini adopted the slogan, 'books and muskets, perfect Fascist' which meant that education of the young should include military training, believing that this form of education

teaches the youth to 'live dangerously'. Young people were trained to become future soldiers.' The exercises adapted to the children's age and situation instilling in them fascist ideology and by getting the children used to living outside the family and following a militarized life style (37).

Eventually, tens of thousands of youth were participating in set marches and other organized sports competitions. These events, especially the marches, served as a testament of the success of the values, skills and dedication the regime sought to achieve.

Fascism had begun to crumble in 1938, when Mussolini supported the Anschluss of Austria, and further still when he declared war on Britain and France, and the eventual start of the Second World War

Mussolini succeeded on creating a new nation that was truly Fascist. He used sports, of all things, to successfully promote a Fascist ideology on the culture and upbringing of an entire generation. Blah blah blah blah - ADD 2-3 Lines to finish the essay off.