

# Fascism in venice

War



Ryan Johnson December 13, 2012 HIST 3400 Soper Venetian Fascism in the Shadow of Wars The qualities that compose fascism are debatable and endless. What is really important about fascism is how it attempted to succeed by influencing not only Venetian, but also Italian culture and society from the beginning of World War I until the end of World War II. Benito Mussolini when speaking on fascism stated that, "...For Fascism, the growth of empire, that is to say the expansion of the nation, is essential manifestation of vitality, and its opposite a sign of decadence..." (Enciclopedia Italiana, Handout).

The success with which fascism had in expanding the nation is an argument for another time, but the ways they attempted to maintain the "essential manifestation of vitality" and challenged the boundaries of cultural society in hopes of success are well worth mentioning. Fascism did not have many cultural victories and this could be one aspect of an argument as to why it was a failure. However, one of fascism's greatest "cultural victories" in Italy can be viewed when studying the floating city of Venice and events that accompanied it.

Fascism, as a whole, attempted to conquer in more ways than just obtaining land by means of military victory or tangible items as tokens of their success. As stated above by Mussolini himself, if fascism was indeed to succeed, it needed to support the growth of the Italian nation. The Fascist Party needed to not only influence the Italian people through propaganda, but also gain the support of the Italian nation while challenging the cultural and societal boundaries.

In the years between World War I and World War II, fascism made attempting strides to try and create an aesthetic visual for the party, mainly by intervening in society and culture. All moves made by the fascists with regards to culture appeared to be solely instrumental and functional to gaining one hundred percent support of the population in favor of the dictatorship. The effects of World War I, World War II, and fascism can still be seen today in Venetian and Italian culture. World War I was a horrendous time for Italian soldiers fighting in the trenches.

Venice was very close to the battle lines on the border with Austria-Hungary, just North of where they lie. Venetians could not only feel the constant threat from the Austrians, but also had a daily reminder when they stepped outside. Venice closed their port, for fear of attack, but they also had to deal with the fact that, "...barrage balloons could be seen...". Barrage balloons had long steel cables attached to them and were mainly used to deter low-flying enemy aircraft from reaching or bombing an area.

These defense balloons were used during World War I and II. For the short distance that Venice was from the battlefield they were fairly lucky in how little devastation took place during the war. During World War I Venice was always extremely nervous about their next-door neighbors, the Austrians, of attacking the maritime port, but the city never fell to enemy attack. There were very few bombings that occurred in Venice, and the deaths that did take place mainly happened during the "black-out" hours.

These "black-out" hours would occur in hopes of minimizing the amount of light escaping outside. By doing this, the Venetians were making it very difficult for any sort of aerial attack to bomb their city, port, or boats off of

visibility alone. These were the only significant negative effects even worth mentioning that occurred for the city of Venice during World War I. World War II was similar to World War I with regards to the significantly negative effects it had on the city of Venice, there were just about none.

As opposed to the devastation that occurred throughout much of Italy, Venice got away pretty nicely. Yet again, the “ blackout” hours when people would fall into the canal or injure themselves in other ways in the dark were one of the primary contributors to the death toll. It has been stated that Venice remained essentially untouched throughout the duration of the Second World War. However the minute losses that did occur, with exception of Germans capturing Jews, can be summed up in a few sentences. One or two windows were broken; a stray shell hit the tower of San Nicolo del Mendicoli as the Germans were retreating; and the Tiepolo friezes in the Palazzo Labia were damaged when an ammunition ship exploded in the harbour. ” Although the people of Venice saw little to none of the intense fighting, they were not as lucky to maintain an unconquered status during World War II as they had in World War I. For Germany, September 1943 was the beginning of a fairly short control over northern and central Italy that included Venice.

Although Germany occupied Venice until April 28, 1945, very few deaths occurred to the Venetian citizens while in the city. “ In the city itself a campaign of sabotage was followed by reprisals in which five men were shot in Cannaregio on July 8, 1944; some thirty partisans were executed later that month, followed on August 3 by seven hostages in Riva dell’Impero, called subsequently, in their memory, Riva dei Sette Martiri. ” The most extensive

part of the death toll came to the Jewish population in Venice with the presence of the Germans in 1943.

The Venetians had historically tolerated the Jewish population up until about 1938 with the enactment of new racial laws. After the racial laws, persecution got so bad for the Jewish population, that they were laid off from their job, and grotesque signs were placed on businesses stating “ Dogs and Jews Prohibited”. It only got worse from there after the Germans arrived in 1943, and the open persecution, capture, and killing of Jews from 1943 to 1945 took place.

It has been estimated that approximately two hundred Jews were hunted down and sent to concentration camps in the mainland, with some even being deported to Auschwitz. The Germans were so thorough in their cause to vaporize the Jewish population from the earth, they would even go to hospitals to retrieve mentally ill Jewish patients and send them to an early grave. It has been recorded that only eight of the two hundred Venetian Jews captured by the Germans were ever returned home again.

The German's vicious attempts to eliminate the Jewish population and the atrocities that ensued will never be forgotten. With that being said, Venice got out of not only World War I, but also World War II with an extremely minimal death count compared to the millions of lives that were lost as a consequence of the two wars. World War I and II both impacted Venice, but in a fairly nominal way when viewing the status of many other parts of Italy and the world. However, there were two very influential fascist characters that emerge as a product of World War I and are present throughout World War II.

These two men are noteworthy fascist figures with one that called Venice a home for a period of his life and another that was a true Venetian. The first man, Gabriele D'Annunzio, assumed a position, as a fascist political figure in Venice, and he was well known even before fascism was created. D'Annunzio was not a native-born Venetian, but was fairly well known in Italy as a " poet, novelist, playwright, politician (right- and left-wing in rapid succession), and daring First World War pilot who led sorties against Vienna itself".

It was during World War I when D'Annunzio decided to establish his residence in Venice. When he was not contributing to the fighting he could be found at his home, that was located off of the Grand Canal, called Casetta delle Rose. D'Annunzio continues to have a presence in the fascist politics all the way until its eventual demise, but was most famous for his irredentist taking of Fiume, which is now present-day Rijeka in Croatia. He was angry that Fiume was not ceded to Italy by the Austrians at the end of World War I with the signing of the peace Treaty of Saint-Germain.

D'Annunzio ruled over Fiume as a dictator until December of 1921, and it has been said that Benito Mussolini even " viewed D'Annunzio with a mixture of admiration and envy..." D'Annunzio was a fascist political figure that did not necessarily contribute much to the city of Venice as much as he was solely a constant reminder of the fascist presence. The second man that emerged from the outcome of World War I was an entrepreneurial man by the name of Giuseppe Volpi. Unlike D'Annunzio, Volpi was a native-born Venetian.

He was born in Venice in 1877, and before he was thirty years old he had established the Societa Adriatica di Elettricita in the Palazzo Balbi on the Grand Canal, " which soon had a monopoly on the supply of electricity in the

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Veneto and Emilia-Romagna. " Along with his northeastern electricity monopoly, Volpi was constantly finding new ways to improve and advance Venetian industry. He would dabble in other industries that included petrochemicals, iron, and shipping that significantly contributed to advancing Venetian industry, more specifically in Porto Marghera.

Volpi's success on top of his founding of Societa Adriatica di Elettricit  was substantial; it has been recorded that he was a, " president or vice-president of twenty other companies, as a member of the boards of forty-six more, and as a major shareholder in over fifty. " During World War I Volpi was the head of a Committee for Industrial Mobilization where his project of turning the old Venetian fortress of Marghera into an industrial port and factory capable area. Volpi was quite successful in his project in Marghera.

The area, prior to Volpi's presence, only contained a thousand inhabitants in 1921. The growth of Marghera after Volpi's intervening was exponential. "... Marghera had grown by 1940 to a town containing fifteen thousand workers in a hundred industries, and by 1967 to one of thirty-five thousand workers in 211 industries. " Volpi's tremendous success as an entrepreneur and financial guru in northeast Italy, without fail, caught the attention of the Italian government. Volpi was awarded for his successes with the title and position as Governor of Tripoli.

Soon after being deemed Governor, and already a standing member of the Fascist party, Volpi was put into office as Mussolini's Minister of Finance in 1925. It has been stated that Volpi, " became one of the most successful administrators of the regime. " Three years after Volpi was positioned as Minister of Finance he resigned after disagreeing heavily with Mussolini on

the “ artificially high level at which the leader insisted on fixing the exchange rates, and never having become one of his close circle, he concentrated again on Venice and industry. Volpi was always a very influential fascist figure in Venice, but his greatest contribution to the success of the influence of the Fascist party and its cultural production came when he assumed the position as, “ President of the reconstituted Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte in 1932. ” This Exhibition, more commonly known as the Biennale, originated as nothing more than an Exhibition with strange occurrences such as a man’s face that was stuck in rigor mortis known as Supremo Convegno.

In 1934, the Fascist government declared the once bi-annual event was to start taking place annually. The success of the Biennale was consistently growing after it was introduced as an annual event. In 1934, there were 41, 000 people that showed up, in 1935, 38, 500 people, in 1936, 50, 000 attended, and in 1937, there was a staggering 60, 000 participants. The Biennale by the year 1948 was considered to be one of the most important events in the entire world of art, and the Exhibition got to that point with the help of Giuseppe Volpi as he active President for twelve years. The international respect and publicity the Biennale gained each year was consistently growing. Countries would set up pavilions at the Biennale and present among them even during the Biennale’s early stages were Belgium, Britain, Germany, Hungary, France, Russia, Sweden, Spain, Czechoslovakia, and the United States. Even though the Biennale is an Exhibition where artwork is displayed, it has a sense of friendly competition between countries for who can produce some of the best artwork.



During one Biennale exhibition there were not only paintings by nearly all of the best Italian artists under Italy's pavilion, but also works " by Picasso and Klee, by Chagall and Kokoschka. The French staged exhibitions by Braque, Rouault, and Maillol, the Belgians by Delvaux and Ensor, the British by Henry Moore. " The participation of artists as prestigious as these helped in securing the validity and existence of the Biennale as a true appreciation for art. There was even an exhibition for Impressionist artist and that same year there were ninety-eight Impressionist pieces of art.

The Biennale was an exhibition that appears to be more of a friendly competition and get together between major countries of the world. All of the countries that have previously been at one another's throats in prior wars all come together to participate in the Biennale that takes place in Venice, Italy. The Biennale brings together a magnitude of countries, despite their differences, and allows them to partake in a mutually pleasing and intellectually stimulating event. The importance of the Biennale is much greater than the sole criticizing of artistic works and abilities.

The event brings together a variety of countries with extremely varying viewpoints and opinions to meet communally and peacefully. The Biennale during the presence of fascism and in attempting to be a useful tool of fascism held a much more substantial meaning than multiple countries coming together peacefully. It allowed for Italy to feel unified even if it was on the smallest cultural level of coming together for an art festival, and it also gave the Fascist party yet another opportunity to use propaganda towards the masses to their advantage.

In 1932, Giuseppe Volpi was deemed the President of the Biennale and Mussolini was in his tenth year of his regime when, “ a good number of prizes went to pictures of marching Blackshirts, dynamic cranes and planes, idealized Italian landscapes, and women and children saluting Il Duce. ” Just prior to this particular Biennale of 1932, Volpi was an active member of the Fascist party, and was most recently the Minister of Finance for Mussolini and the Fascist party. Then again, in 1935 during the film festival aspect of the Biennale, prizes were awarded to Nazi, Soviet, and Palestinian-Zionist films.

Volpi's ability and willingness to give awards to fascist based artwork, regardless of actual artistic value, was no coincidence. Marla Stone describes Fascist Italy as presenting a paradox with regards to the cultural politics of the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that reigned in Europe in the time period between World War I and World War II. She states that since, “ No one style, school, or monument summarizes the patronage practices of the Fascist state. Rather, the official culture of Italian Fascism is best defined by its diversities, contradictions, and ambiguities. The culture that was present during fascism closely mirrors the culture of the United States, but with different ingredients. The United States is considered a melting pot with all of the diversities that are represented in the country. Fascist Italy creates its own form of a melting pot, but not with an abundance of ethnic diversity. The “ official culture”, if there was a true “ official culture”, of Fascist Italy was composed of the differences between the Italian people geographically, politically, hierarchically, socially, and of course culturally.

Therefore terms that have become popular when speaking of Fascist culture such as “ Fascist realism” and “ Mussolini modern” are irrelevant and inconceivable. Since the beginning of Mussolini’s regime he had always strived to obtain and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship with those who encompass the art world. Under Mussolini’s dictatorship artists were free from censorship as long as they were not openly and actively anti-Fascist, and in return, as a sign of their gratitude, many artists and architects would accept the Fascist regime’s patronage.

Certain artists who defied Mussolini’s regime would end up with repercussions. Such is the case with a Venetian abstract painter, Armando Pizzinato, who was an avid member of the Italian Communist Party, and from September 1943 until the end of the war he fought with the partisans and did jail time for certain anti-Fascist activities. However, Pizzinato represents a small portion of the artistic community that was anti-Fascist. The majority of artists cooperated with the Fascist regime, and “ the association between art and the state was one of mutual recognition and legitimation. Mussolini and his mutually beneficial policies with the art world began to create a more central form of cultural production. Marla Stone refers to the outcome of the newly centralized form of cultural production as a cultural policy of “ aesthetic pluralism - the Mussolini dictatorship’s practice of accepting and supporting a range of aesthetics”. This now meant that there was a magnitude of “ imageries and aesthetic formulations” that represented Fascism and “ were a part of its cultural system, its imaginary and its aesthetic universe. The Fascist party was in a constant search to uncover a single Fascist rhetorical-aesthetic vision while at the same time combining “

modern and avant-garde aesthetics, emerging mass cultural forms, and a discourse of natural culture to produce, during the 1930s, many dynamic and vibrant products. " The products such as exhibitions, fairs, and expositions, that the government produced and were heavily supported by the Fascist party, generated a considerable audience from the Italian population. More specifically speaking, the Biennale was a direct product of the cultural productivity that was being pursued by the Fascist party.

Victoria De Grazia argues that the Fascist party was never able to obtain a singular aesthetic vision and identity due to its incapability to mobilize the masses, limits due to the party's interests, and "...its appropriation of preexisting cultural forms and institutions, which precluded the formation of " total" Fascist identities..." The introduction of Exhibitions such as the Biennale were a key component in Fascism's political aesthetic vision considering the primary goal was to encompass the cultural sphere of Fascist Italy. In doing so, the Fascist party was hoping to unify Italy under a national culture.

Exhibitions had multiple purposes to them while aiming to obtain a unified national culture: "(1) they were primary sites of state patronage; (2) they opened the social boundaries of culture to the mobilized masses; (3) they offered a location for the appropriation of the cultural identities and cultural capital of preexisting elites; and (4) they courted the participation of cultural producers. " The Venetian Biennale and other similar Exhibitions were, for the most part, good for everyone that attended regardless of party affiliation, social status, or job title.

World War I, World War II, and the fascism that accompanies them individually had a lasting impact on the country of Italy. Venice, in particular, was not prone to mass amounts of devastation as a consequence of the World Wars. The Fascist presence in Venice was very strong even though the actions of the majority of its supporters were minimal. This problem of mobilizing the masses was not just a problem of Fascism's in Venice, but throughout Italy. The best attempt Fascism had at completely unifying a Fascist Italian culture was through its support of state patronage in the Exhibitions such as the Biennale in Venice.

The political differences, ambiguities, and varying class rank made it virtually impossible to create a single Italian culture under Fascism. However, the ability of the Fascist party to participate in state patronage and allow aesthetic pluralism allowed artists to maintain their careers and not have to alter their stylistic ways. The Fascist party did not succeed in creating their own cultural identity under Fascism, but they did allow for a hybrid-like culture to develop. Fascism did many terrible things for the country of Italy, but allowing the aesthetic pluralism to flourish aided unifying the country under one culture.

Lucky for Italians it did not create a unified Fascist culture, but rather a hybrid culture unified due to the intervention of Fascism and the varying differences among the Italian people. Bibliography Ackroyd, Peter. Venice: Pure City. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2009. Print. Garrett, Martin. Venice: A Cultural and Literary Companion. New York: Interlink, 2001. Print. Hibbert, Christopher. Venice: The Biography of a City. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989. Print. Reich, Jacqueline, and Piero Garofalo. Re-viewing

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