2006

Envisioning the Italian Mediterranean Fascist Policy in Steamship Publicity, 1922-1942

Maura Elise Hametz

Old Dominion University, mhametz@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/history_fac_pubs

Part of the Diplomatic History Commons, European History Commons, and the Political History Commons

Repository Citation
Hametz, Maura Elise, "Envisioning the Italian Mediterranean Fascist Policy in Steamship Publicity, 1922-1942" (2006). History Faculty Publications. 33.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/history_fac_pubs/33

Original Publication Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.
ENVISIONING THE ITALIAN MEDITERRANEAN
FASCIST POLICY IN STEAMSHIP PUBLICITY,
1922–1942

MAURA HAMETZ

Old Dominion University

Depictions of the Mediterranean Sea figured prominently in steamship lines’ publicity during the years of Fascist rule in Italy. These images of the sea promoted and publicized Italian foreign policy aims and aspirations as they shifted over the years from 1922 to 1942. At the same time, the images’ emphasis on Italy’s maritime heritage provided a rallying point for Italian national identity. Mussolini’s government used Italian associations with the Mediterranean to foster a national as opposed to regional consciousness and to project abroad a vision of a culturally-unified and powerful Italy.

The Italian people long for the Mediterranean, ... the Roman lake on which the ports of Venice, Trieste, Genoa, Naples, and Amalfi shone, the ports from which imperial galleons and republican warships set sail to conquer the world.¹

Throughout the Fascist ventennio (twenty years), the Mediterranean played a key role in the Italian imagination. Collective memory of Italian leadership in the ancient Roman world and perceptions that the Mediterranean formed a locus for the assertion of power in Europe drove Italian Fascist commercial aims, political aspirations, foreign relations, cultural policies and leisure priorities. Major Italian shipping lines’ publicity materials reflected the Fascist government’s vision of the sea and Italy’s role in conquering the Mediterranean. Designed to capture popular attention and appeal to Italian ‘longing’ for the ‘Roman Sea’, the materials did not present static visions of the Mediterranean. Rather, these characterizations of Italy’s relationship to the sea changed with the shifting emphases of the regime’s domestic and international policies.

Mussolini and the Mediterranean

Mussolini’s imperialist vision and aims to conquer the Mediterranean have been the focus of several studies of Italian foreign policy.² Well-documented are Mussolini’s grandiose proposals for the extension of Italian political

Copyright © 2006 Mediterranean Institute, University of Malta.
and economic hegemony across the ‘Roman Lake’ and the failure of Fascist plans due to the lack of resources, power, consistency, and even political will. Italy’s Mediterranean identity and its relevance to Fascist racial ideas and policies has captured scholars’ attentions in recent years. ‘Mediterraneanism’ has even been cast as the basis for a Fascist typology different from the German model. Nearly all scholarship examines the Mediterranean’s importance to Mussolini’s plans in the final years of his rule, after he established a formal centre for the study of the Mediterranean and after he made clear, by his intervention in Ethiopia, his aggressive tendencies and intentions. Less studied in the context of the Mediterranean are the early years of Mussolini’s rule and the cultural impact of Mussolini’s exploitation of the myth of the Italian Mediterranean.

**Modern Italy and the Mediterranean**

Associations with the Mediterranean provided a reminder of past glories throughout Italy’s history. Italy’s relationship to the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean formed a basis for claims in the nineteenth-century Risorgimento (Italian Unification) period, the liberal era, and into the Fascist period. In the late nineteenth century, Italian anthropologists most notably Giuseppe Sergi, later to make a name as a proponent of Fascist racial policy, focused on Italians as part of the ‘Mediterranean race’, ‘a race composed of many peoples of mixed blood, [who] have occupied the Mediterranean with diverse ethnic names’. Sergi glorified the proud heritage of Italians, differentiating them carefully from Aryans on the basis of ethno-anthropological traits, to establish them as founders of ‘the most ancient civilization of the Mediterranean’. Following the First World War, such claims were reiterated and emphasized in Sergi’s work focusing on Italy’s proud origins. By the time Mussolini ascended to power, therefore, the Mediterranean already held an esteemed place in the Italian mind. It represented a sea of opportunity for Italians, a link to common Italian heritage and prestige for Italians living inside and beyond Italy’s borders.

By no means did Italians monopolize discussion of the Mediterranean in the interwar era. Frenchman Fernand Braudel’s classic work was conceived and largely written during the period from 1923 to 1939. Braudel’s study saw the early modern period as the era of the eclipse of the Mediterranean world with Spain, the Netherlands, France, and England’s turn toward development across the Atlantic. Nonetheless, his work provided a framework for integration of the European, Asian, and African shores of the Mediterranean. For Italians with no Atlantic coast, this Mediterranean world remained
central. Throughout the twenty years of rule, the Fascist government conjured up images of the Mediterranean to support the promise of rejuvenation and underline Fascist prestige. These images helped to drum up support for Italian intervention in Mediterranean lands far from modern Italy's shores.

**Fascist Steamship Propaganda and the Mediterranean**

Depictions of the Mediterranean in Fascist era steamship publicity reflected shifting policies and ambitions. The themes of depictions in materials disseminated by steamship lines seem to fall into four chronological periods. The first period from 1922 to 1926 represents a continuation of priorities set by Italian liberal governments since the turn of the century. In the period from 1926 to 1931, the Fascists sought to extend Italian commercial markets in the Mediterranean and cultural influence through emphasis on the mission of Catholic Italy in the Mediterranean and the Near East. From 1931 to 1935, emphasis fell on Fascist modernity and technological advances as well as ambitions abroad. Finally, the period from 1935–1942 marked the shift to imperial priorities—to Fascist militarism and conquest of Mediterranean lands.

**In the Liberal Tradition, 1922–1926**

Mussolini’s March on Rome served as the vehicle by which the Fascists gained power and began the process of ‘fascistization’. During the period of consolidation of power, policies remained on the liberal trajectory. From 1922 to 1926, steamship lines’ promotion priorities and publicity for the Mediterranean changed little from the depictions of the post-World War I liberal period. The Fascists, like their liberal predecessors, promoted Mediterranean commerce as part of post-war recovery and reconstruction. Publicity materials for travel to the Mediterranean offered bucolic sun filled scenes, touting the trip from Italy using the ‘sunny southern route’, to undercut traditional competitors in northern Europe, primarily German lines.11

Lloyd’s concentration on its Conte (count) line from 1921 until the consolidation of the shipping lines under centralizing corporatism in 1932, was indicative of the continuity of Fascist programmes with the pre-war and post-World War I liberal programmes. The Conte Rosso, the first of the ‘counts’ to be launched, was touted in 1921 as the ‘largest and fastest Mediterranean oil burner’, catering to ‘the wonderlands of the Mediterranean’. Following quickly on the Red Count’s heels were the Conte Verde, Conte Grande, and Conte Biancomano (Green Count, Great Count, and Count
Whitehand). Their names made clear Lloyd’s attachment to nationalist iconography in the Risorgimento tradition. Publicity in green, red, and white tones, echoing the Italian tricolour, touted ‘I gloriosi quattro conti’, ‘the Four Glorious Counts’. The names of the ships honoured historic figures linked to the Savoy dynasty, the monarchy of the modern Italian state and Fascist Italy. Conte Grande celebrated the memory of Amadeus V, renowned as the thirteenth century founder of the dynasty. The Conte Verde was named for Amadeus VI (1334–1383) and the Conte Rosso for the red colours of his son Amadeus VII (1360–1391). Conte Biancamano, Humbert I—Count of Moriana, known as ‘white hands’ was an eleventh century ancestor of these counts. In the early 1920s, Mediterranean routes were served by such Cosulich line ships as the Martha Washington (originally of the Austro-Americana line, interned at New York during World War I and returned to Cosulich in 1922) and the President Wilson, clearly a nod to American influence. Commercial trade fairs in Italy focused on maritime trade and links in two regions. Padua served as the northern node for commerce, an entrepôt for trade from the Adriatic and Ligurian seas to Central Europe. Naples served the south and as a hub for commerce in the Mediterranean.

The Catholic Mediterranean and Commercial Expansion

Emphasis on commercial recovery and admiration of the Americans in the early 1920s gave way to concentration on commercial expansion abroad and Italian nationalist priorities by the late 1920s. Commercial trade fairs and maritime initiatives evolved to support Fascist aspirations. At the Padua Fair in 1927, a Sea Pavilion dominated the space. But, promotion of Italy’s commercial and cultural links to the sea was no longer reserved to these specific locations. Commercial maritime initiatives proliferated. The Fascist government initiated a Trade Samples Fair in Tripoli in 1927, a testament to ambitions abroad and colonial aspirations. In 1929, Trieste hosted a Gold Coast Exhibit. In 1930, Bari emerged as the site for a Fiera del Levante highlighting trade ties to the Near East. In 1932, Trieste inaugurated a Mostra del Mare (Sea Exhibition) focusing on trade in the Adriatic.

The consolidation of the regime’s power and the reorientation of foreign policy with the resignation of Foreign Minister Salvatore Contarini in 1926 brought changes to the steamship industry and to publicity. After 1926, emphasis on nationalist ties based on the inheritance from ancient Rome in the Risorgimento tradition gave way to overt emphasis on association with the glories of ancient imperial Rome. In 1928, Cosulich introduced the
Saturnia and Vulcania, the names of the ships recalled the powerful Roman deities Saturn (ruler of the universe) and Vulcan (god of fire and metalworking). A clear departure from the Risorgimento precedent which emphasized modern Italy’s links to medieval Italian city states and the heritage of ancient Rome, these names signalled imperial priorities embodied in historic Roman domination of the Mediterranean world.

Increasing militancy in foreign affairs was linked to an increasingly strong hold in the domestic arena. Mussolini’s attention turned to cultural priorities. Among them, rapprochement with the Catholic Church and the Papacy in Rome was given high priority. Steamship lines emphasized Italian service to the Holy Land. In 1926, Cosulich line began offering two to three week cruises of the Mediterranean, including stops in North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The company advertised the trips ‘to the land where Christian Europe meets Mohammedan Africa’. Figures astride camels, for example one on the cover of the September/October issue of Lloyd Triestino’s magazine Sul Mare, enticed leisure travellers and pilgrims to use Italian lines to explore the Holy Land.

The conclusion of the Lateran Pacts, Mussolini’s triumph of rapprochement between the Italian state and the Catholic Church, ushered in a period of emphasis on religious mission and journey to the Holy Land after 1929. In November/December 1930, Sul Mare’s cover featured an image entitled ‘Christmas in the Holy Land’. A king on camelback approached the temple in Bethlehem guided by a shooting star descending from the heavens.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Italian attention also shifted to the campaign to secure and ‘save’ (in the name of Catholicism and civilization) populations on the nation’s borders. Fiume or Rijeka, the former Hungarian port championed by Gabriele D’Annunzio after the First World War and joined to Italy in 1924, became a particular target of Fascist attention. In 1925, the Italian National Institute for Economic Expansion Abroad organized an exhibition in the city. Ostensibly initiated to spur recovery of the city’s trade networks, its major purpose was to affirm Italian hegemony in two ways. First, in the city on the eastern shore of the Adriatic, emphasis on ties to the sea linked the city to the coastal towns and the Italian peninsula rather than lands to the interior dominated by Slavs. Second, emphasis on Italian culture reinforced Italian visions of ‘saving’ coastal populations from uncivilized Slavs (albeit in this case largely Catholic Croats and Slovenes).

Adherence to tradition and emphasis on Catholic mission remained an important element in steamship publicity. While Saturnia and Vulcania were named for Roman gods, they both supported Fascism’s emphasis on
Italy’s civilizing mission with regard to Catholic priorities in their design. Each ship boasted a chapel as ‘a central feature of the ship’. Advertisements touted the ships as the ‘only vessels in the world authorized to carry the Blessed Sacrament on board at all times’.18

Emphasis on Italy’s civilizing and imperial mission in the Mediterranean continued throughout the early 1930s. In 1930, Italian shipping lines contributed to an exhibit dedicated to Italy’s ‘imperial grandeur’ at the Belgian Colonial, Maritime and Art Exposition.19 Italy’s Catholic role figured prominently in steamship cruise offerings, including a 1932 Eucharistic Congress Cruise from New York to Dublin sponsored by Cosulich lines.20

**Fascist Technology and Modernity**

Italia-Society of Navigation, Genoa followed the Roman naming trend of the early 1930s with the launching of Augustus and Rex. These ships’ names, like those of the Saturnia and Vulcana, recalled the Roman empire, but the vessels themselves embodied the Fascist spirit and emphasis on modernity and technological advance.21 Rex, launched in 1931, was lauded as a technical marvel. The ship drew international attention in 1933 for its record-breaking trip between Gibraltar and New York, completed in 4 days, 13 hours, and 50 minutes.22 A depiction of ‘the victorious ship’, her name prominently displayed on the hulking hull graced the cover of Sul Mare in July/August 1933.23

The image of the Rex was in line with steamship lines’ publicity from 1931 to 1935 that focused on bolder ships and cleaner lines, consonant with the monumental style becoming popular in Fascist architecture. Renderings promoted the idea of strength and efficiency of Italian vessels, meeting economic priorities and setting new modern technological standards. Depictions of Catholic priorities were also redesigned somewhat. The theme of the king guided by divine light was picked up again in Sul Mare in November/December 1933, but this time with much cleaner lines and devoid of background setting. Three kings astride prancing horses were framed only by a pale blue sky. The star relegated to outline form appeared in the corner.24

Publicity reflected Fascist consolidation of the shipping sector in 1932 at Genoa to form what was touted as a more efficient, resourceful, and logical administrative centralization of various lines to better promote national interests. It was clear that the Conte di Savoia launched under the newly unified Italian banner and named in the Risorgimento tradition was a testament to a passing era. The ship was touted simply as the beautiful sister to the more powerful and technically advanced Rex.
Ambitions Abroad, 1931–1935

From 1931 to 1935, Mussolini attempted to project Italian power abroad. He took an active role in international negotiations and sought to intensify Italian involvement in Central Europe through defence of Austria and in the Middle East through interference in British affairs in the eastern Mediterranean. The changing image of a ship on the cover of Lloyd Triestino's handbook demonstrated the progression of Fascist priorities.25 The 1922 image [Figure 1] was closely replicated in the 1928 handbook. Both depicted the steamship Helouan (part of the Lloyd fleet from 1912 to 1937) named for the city Helwan in modern day Egypt. In both 1922 and 1928, the ship steamed under the twin banners of Lloyd Triestino and Trieste with the Italian flag obscured. The ship, accompanied by seagulls, departed a port,
vaguely visible in the distance. By 1928, the Helouan had clearly been refitted, and rode a bit higher in the frame. A slight shift in priorities was evident in a change in the cover text. Lloyd Triestino ‘Steam Navigation Company, Trieste’, was, by 1928, advertised offering the ‘quickest routes to Greece, Constantinople, Palestine, Egypt, India, and to the Far East’, focusing on links to the eastern Mediterranean.

In 1931, the text mirrored that of 1928, with a change only in the name of ‘Constantinople’ to ‘Istanbul’. However, the 1931 image [Figure 2] differed in subtle, yet distinctive ways from the earlier cover. The Victoria, named to signal Italy’s ascendancy, replaced the Helouan. Victoria, a more modern model, no longer belched steam. She glided across the ocean against the background of an azure sky dotted with white clouds. Gone were the images of the port in the background and the seagulls. Neither Lloyd Triestino’s banner nor Trieste’s halberd was shown. Not even an Italian flag detracted from this ‘clean’ image of Italian mastery of the sea.

The image on Lloyd Triestino’s ‘General Itinerary’ booklet for 1933 was similar in feel. Sleek, clean, nameless steam ships lined up against a nondescript background. Further, the image on the 1931 handbook was presented as a true work of art, signed by the artist P. Klodic. This reflected the increasing politicization of art—the reach of the control of the ‘patron state’, the centralization of artists’ work, and the intention to guide presentation of the arts to reflect nationalist priorities.

National maritime commercial fairs and exhibitions held throughout the country in the 1920s and early 1930s were centred in Genoa by the mid-1930s. As the ‘Mostra della rivoluzione fascista’ (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution) promoted the Fascist government’s priorities and power in Rome in 1932, celebrating ten years of Fascist rule, the ‘Mostre del Mare’, or Sea Exhibitions, in Genoa grew into annual celebrations of the country’s maritime achievements. By 1935, coordinated efforts and consolidated lines focused attention on Italian conquest of the Mediterranean based on historical claims to the ‘Roman Sea’. The January 1935 cover of Sul Mare bore a depiction of ‘Italia Mediterranea’, a naked fair-skinned kneeling woman with flowing hair. Roman columns and a flowering desert plant punctuated a black background silhouetted by the moon. A bulletin of the new Italian Line entitled ‘The Ships and Men of the Italian Line’ outlined Fascist intentions. Referring to Italy’s ‘twenty centuries of shipbuilding’, it claimed the link to the sea as Italy’s ‘natural heritage’ and touted her ‘mastery of it’ as a ‘great and lasting tradition’.
Militarism and Conquest, 1935–1942

Steamship publicity reflected the turn toward militarization and aspirations for conquest. Gone was the emphasis on Catholic ‘missionizing’ and travel to exotic Holy lands. Covers of the Italian Line’s SS Roma Mediterranean cruise brochures of 1934 and 1937 testified to the shift in attitudes regarding the peoples and lands of the Mediterranean. The 1934 cover depicted an exotic, yet civilized, eastern Mediterranean. An attractive woman in a provocative pose, dressed in western clothing, carried a water jug on a bare shoulder through an outdoor café or market where men of a variety of cultures appeared in the shadow of classical Roman columns [Figure 3]. By 1937, Mediterranean populations and lands were portrayed as primitive and the cultures as backward. A veiled figure relegated to the background in a street scene depicting shepherds and robed men and a donkey in a narrow street replaced the attractive woman with a western appearance and posture and the café scene [Figure 4].

Depictions of Africans also underwent a dramatic change. On its September 1930 cover, Sul Mare featured an ‘African Beauty’. She sported...
Maura Hametz

exotic jewellery, but the close-up on her face and features clearly revealed a western European style, particularly in her make-up including rich red lipstick outlining 'pouting' sensuous lips. The April 1935 cover ‘Tripoli’ portrayed the mixture of western and eastern once again, but this time from a distance. The woman in the background balancing a jug on her head wore a western style dress, but she stood as a part of the background against the city wall with the clearly ‘eastern’ minareted cityscape behind. By March 1937, the only figures that appeared in the African desert scene on Sul Mare’s cover were completely robed, discernibly dark-skinned and dwarfed by a monumental Fascist arch. By implication, Eastern Mediterranean populations were those that Italy should colonize. Steamship companies provided the transport for conquerors rather than adventurers and tourists.

Conclusion

From 1922 to 1942, Italian Fascists employed visions of the Mediterranean to promote a unified vision of Italy. The roots of Italy’s association with the Mediterranean lie in Rome’s historic links to the Roman Empire and Roman predominance over the sea. Italy unified in the nineteenth century with Mazzinian visions that portrayed a nation ‘encircled by the Alps and the sea, [with] boundaries marked out by the finger of God for a people of giants’. But, the modern association of Italy and the Italians with the Mediterranean owes much to Fascist efforts to nationalize Italians and centralize Italy, to Mussolini’s government’s promotion of the Mediterranean as a unifying factor in the creation of a national, as opposed to regional or local, identity. Throughout the twenty years of Fascist rule, steamship companies disseminated materials that painted the Mediterranean, in a variety of iterations, as an Italian Sea. The publicity echoed Fascist polemic to reinforce notions of Italian economic, political, and cultural mission in the Mediterranean and legitimize Fascist ambitions for conquest abroad.

Visions of Italy as a nation linked to and by the Mediterranean Sea resonate today. The success of the 1991 film Mediterraneo, directed by Gabriele Salvatores, testified to the continuing allure of the Mediterranean for Italians. The film’s stereotypical depictions of regional types in characters of soldiers from all over Italy who grew together while stranded on a Greek island during World War II was immensely popular in Italy. The film earned acclaim abroad as well, including winning the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film 1991. The resonance of the metaphor of the unification of Italy through
shared experience and the allure of the Italian relationship to the sea was and remains strong enough to translate across national boundaries to symbolize a unified Italy today.

Notes


11. The Library at the Mariners’ Museum (Newport News, Virginia, USA) (LMM), Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 144, Navigazione generale Italiana, Genoa, later Italian Line, various bulletins.


13. LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 157, Lloyd brochures.

14. LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 63, Cosulich Line brochure.

15. Sergio Vatta, *Sul Mare: grafica pubblicitaria ed editoriale attraverso le copertine*
della rivista di viaggi del Lloyd Triestino dal 1925 al 1944 (Trieste, 2000), 44 (illus. 21).

16. Vatta, Sul Mare, 51 (illus. 34) and 63 (illus. 52).


18. LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 63, Cosulich Line, Euchartistic Congress Cruise brochure.


20. LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 63, Cosulich Line, Euchartistic Congress Cruise brochure.


22. LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 144, Rex brochure, Italian Line, 1933.

23. Vatta, Sul Mare, 61 (illus. 50).

24. Vatta, Sul Mare, 63 (illus. 52).

25. The three handbooks, from 1922, 1928 and 1931, are available in LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 157, Lloyd Triestino.

26. Paolo Klodic de Sabladoskj was a noted Triestine artist whose work focused on maritime subjects and ships. His work was featured in a maritime art exhibit and in the Italian Coast Guard bulletin Notiziario della Guarda Costiera 4:4(2002).

27. On the role of the Fascist state as patron in the arts and arbiter of culture see Marla Stone, The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy (Princeton, 1998).


29. Vatta, Sul Mare, 70 (illus. 59).


31. LMM, Collection of Steamship Ephemera MS15, Box 144, Navigazione generale italiana, Italian line.

32. Vatta, Sul Mare, 50 (illus. 33).

33. Vatta, Sul Mare, 70 (illus. 62).

34. Vatta, Sul Mare, 82 (illus. 85).