The Censorship of Translation in Fascist Italy

The Censorship of Translation in Fascist Italy

Christopher Rundle

Abstract. The purpose of this essay is to begin an examination into how the fascist regime reacted to the high number of translations which were being published in Italy; in particular translations from English during a period, the 1930s, when Britain was often a political antagonist and Anglo-American culture in general was seen by the regime as a harmful and decadent influence on the Italian people. The article focuses on non-periodical publications: this means that the figures given do not take into account, for example, the many translations which were published in literary journals.[1]

The period 1924-26 was crucial in determining the long-term fortunes of the fascist government. In 1924 the crisis sparked off by the murder of the socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti almost led to Mussolini's downfall. In late 1926, in the wake of a surge of fascist anger and violence after the third assassination attempt that year on Mussolini, the fascist government intervened brutally: it closed down all remaining opposition papers, or forcibly 'aligned' them, and suppressed all opposition parties. By the end of the year the regime was effectively in place. Once Mussolini felt himself to be firmly in power he, and the liberal and nationalist forces on whose support his government depended, wanted to normalize the situation. They felt that what was needed was a strong government that could bring stability to the country, and with all opposition either silenced or driven underground, there was to be no more need for the notorious street-fighting tactics of the fascist *squadristi* which had helped bring Mussolini to power, but which had also led to the Matteotti crisis, and were now a source of unwanted instability. A struggle therefore ensued to curb the destabilizing influence of the PNF, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*, which defended the ethos of the *squadristi* and was able at times to call into question the Duce's authority. Eventually the PNF was brought into line with the new moderate orthodoxy both through reform of its structure, which effectively disenfranchized its unruly rank and file members, and through the flooding of its ranks with tame and obedient new members. Spontaneous gang violence ceased to be an acceptable fascist political tool and the task of political policing became almost the sole preserve of the police prefects and the Interior Ministry.[2]

There followed a period of relative stability in Italy, which has come to be known by some as 'the years of consent', and which lasted up until the Ethiopian war in 1935-36, when Mussolini's popularity reached its peak, only then to decline as he dragged the country reluctantly into the civil war in Spain, into a largely unpopular alliance with Nazi Germany, and eventually into the Second World War.

---

[1] A shorter version of this essay was presented as a paper at the conference *Translation and Power* at the University of Warwick in July 1997 with the title 'Censorship in Fascist Italy: the Case of Translation'.

[2] See Lyttleton (1987) for a manageable account of how the fascist regime was put in place.

The exact nature of this 'consent' is much debated and is not the subject of this study. What concerns us is that Mussolini set about *winning* consent: he wanted to be popular, he wanted to win the hearts and minds of the people, and he knew that he could not achieve this by violent means. The result was that while the opposition was brutally silenced, (without its members being, in most cases, actually physically destroyed)[3], all the propaganda skills at his command, and these were considerable, were used to seduce, cajole and hoodwink Italians into believing that his coming into power heralded the beginning of a new era of prosperity and national pride, unmatched since the days of the Roman Empire.

The bulk of his propagandist energies were therefore focused on an effective control and manipulation of the press. Then, as developments in modern communications started to take root, attention was also paid to other forms of mass communication and entertainment such as the cinema, theatre and radio. The assault on the Italian press and other forms of entertainment ostensibly had a twofold objective. On the one hand the aim was to saturate the public with images and accounts of fascist successes and triumphs; on the other it was to make sure that no space was given to any form of criticism of Mussolini and the regime, even when this was constructive criticism from a sympathetic source.

In this context then, I intend to look specifically at what action was taken concerning books. In particular I want to look at how the regime reacted to the vast influx of translated fiction, especially English and American popular fiction. I wish to establish whether translations met with the same hostility that was afforded to other manifestations of Anglo-American culture, and whether any positive steps were taken to obstruct their diffusion in Italy. Were translations perceived as yet another symptom of that disease which so worried the fascists: unconditional admiration for all things American? Or were they largely ignored by the regime, thereby providing Italian readers with some much needed variety and excitement amidst the stiflingly orthodox literary climate that prevailed in Italy at the time?

1. Censorship in the regime

During the 1920s there was no centralized censor – unless we could say that Mussolini himself performed this function. In line with the press clamp down in 1925-26, all press agencies were also closed, except the Agenzia Stefani, which became in effect the state press agency. All papers had to apply to the Agenzia Stefani for news, and by maintaining a tight control over the agency and monitoring all papers closely, the regime maintained an effective control over the information which was published. This control was exercised initially by the Interior Ministry and its Press Office (*Ufficio Stampa*), delegated at a local level to the police prefects.

In August 1933 Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and the future Foreign Minister, became head of the Press Office, taking over from Gaetano Polverelli. The placing of Mussolini's

[3] Some notable exceptions being: Piero Gobetti and Giovanni Amendola who both died as a result of health difficulties following severe beatings at the hands of fascist *squadristi*; the Roselli brothers who were murdered in exile in France; and of course, the socialist member of parliament Giacomo Matteotti.

protégé in this position signalled an increasing awareness on the part of Mussolini of the importance of the Press Office and an increased willingness to invest in it. Ciano brought with him more generous funding and prestigious new premises. Later the same year Goebels came and visited Italy giving advice on how to organize an effective instrument of censorship and propaganda. Ciano put pressure on Mussolini and the next year, in 1934, the Press Office was upgraded to the State Secretariat (*sottosegretariato di stato*) for the Press and Propaganda. After barely a year the Secretariat was upgraded again and became a Ministry.

What was it then that the regime wanted from the press? It wanted constant attention given to the 'great' achievements of fascism and its heroes; it wanted the exalting of fascist, family and Christian values; it wanted the press to promote the image of a serious, virile, hard-working people, driven by a love of the nation and its great leader the Duce. A look at a few of the telegrams sent by the Ministry of the Interior to the police prefects (so that they could then forward instructions to local papers) will give us a sense of some of the regime's main concerns. Luigi Federzoni, the then Interior Minister, wrote in 1925:

> We recommend all organs of public opinion to tone down the continual and furious arguing which is in contrast with the *hard-working tranquillity* of the absolute majority of the nation. (My emphasis)[4]

Ferretti, the Director of the Press Office, wrote in 1928:

> Instead of lapsing into watered-down narratives ... instead of indulging in useless and sterile polemics and attacks, which nearly always have some personal basis, and which create the impression of exasperated spirits which in no way reflects the *hard-working tranquillity* of the great majority of the nation, the papers would do a patriotic thing if they were to concentrate on important issues regarding culture and scientific progress. (My emphasis) [5]

The regime also wanted favourable opinions from abroad reported, and a team of almost 40 translators were employed at the Press Office of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs to scour the foreign press and translate articles of interest concerning Italy or Mussolini. Critics of the regime were to be ridiculed and the 'degenerate' democratic culture of the West denigrated. The regime *did not* want anything that might in some way contradict or be in contrast with these aims. So all news stories of crime, murder, incest, suicides, rapes, sexual deviance, and so on had to be severely curtailed. They were preferably not to be reported at all, and when absolutely necessary only in the sparest detail. The justification for this was that

> These publications [full of "horrifying blood crimes"] create unwarranted alarm amongst the populace and lend themselves to oblique foreign manipulation to the detriment of our country. (Federzoni 1925)

---

[4] ACS, MCP, b.38, f.59. Quoted in Maurizio Cesari (1978:17). All translations from the Italian are my own. See list of abbreviations below.

[5] MCP, b.38 circolare n.420/B, 26 September 1928. Also quoted in Cesari (1978:29).

> [Dramatization of crime news] is a bad habit of the press which must absolutely stop as it disturbs the spirits of the people [*turba gli spiriti*] and is material which can daily be exploited by the international press which is hostile to the regime STOP. (Capasso-Torre, Director of the Press Office, 1927)[6]

However, not only were events of this kind not to be seen occurring in Italy: the regime did not want the populace acquiring a taste for them in the theatre, cinema, or from books. The same criterion, then, was applied in the censorship of entertainment, especially foreign entertainment which was seen as the main offender. Again the justification for this kind of control was that it was damaging to the moral fibre of the people. A very vivid evocation of the potential ills of 'foreign' (i.e. Anglo-American) culture can be found in a speech to the Senate by Dino Alfieri, which is undated but was probably given after June 1936 when he succeeded Galeazzo Ciano as Minister. In this instance he is talking about the censorship his Ministry applies to the cinema:

> First of all we must rigorously uphold [the nation's] morals; without giving way to unreasonable prejudices. But it is certainly no prejudice to want to defend at any cost the spiritual and physical health of our race. Corrupt nations don't conquer empires but lose them. ... Immorality immediately reveals itself as such and cannot withstand the spirit's inevitable reaction; but it is this confusion between good and evil, this psychology which insinuates doubt in the souls of our new generations which we cannot and never shall accept. It really would be unheard of if a constructive regime such as ours should allow itself to be taken by surprise and undermined in such a vast sector. ... For this reason we intend to exercise increasingly strict control in order to prevent the circulation of those films of foreign importation which, though they apparently contain no visible negative elements, from an ethical or political point of view harbour within them corrupting and dissoluting germs which strike the imagination of sections of the public and slowly insinuate themselves only to flower up again later, even much later, in all their virulent destructiveness.[7]

The censorship of the theatre and cinema falls beyond the scope of this article.[8] Suffice it to say that the scale of these industries was such that it was feasible for the regime to exert preventive control over the works which were performed or shown, though it was not until the mid-thirties onwards that such control was effectively applied to the cinema. One fact that does concern us is that a variety of quota systems were applied to the showing and performing of foreign works. This quota system was a measure designed to protect the Italian theatre and cinema industries

---

[6] Both telegrams are in MCP b.38 f.59 and are quoted in Cesari (1978) on pages 17 and 26, respectively.

[7] MCP, b.105 'Dino Alfieri'.

[8] For censorship of the cinema in these years see Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1986) and Mario Quargnolo (1986). For censorship of the theatre see Zurlo (1952).

from the competition of foreign (largely American) imports on the market, however, rather than a reaction against the possible effects of a foreign culture on the Italian people.[9]

Books however, received very little organized attention. A watch was kept by the police prefects on what was being sold in the bookshops (a system that therefore operated at a local level) and they could appeal to a higher political authority if in doubt over what steps to take over a specific case. The first piece of fascist legislation which specifically mentioned the censoring of books (*editoria*) was the decree law R.D.L.24/10/1935 n.2040, which elevated the State Secretariat for the Press and Propaganda to Ministry level. The Ministry was given the authority to order the confiscation of any offending publication, and a *Divisione Libri* was created and given the responsibility for examining "all non-periodical publications", thereby implying that prior approval was needed in order to publish. The lack of evidence that this sort of action took place regularly, however, would seem to imply that, at least as far as books are concerned, this law remained a dead letter and did not bring about any important changes in their censorship. This impression is confirmed by an internal report of the Ministry written much later in 1943, which states that "the problem of book production [has], until now, been completely ignored".[10]

So that although books were technically speaking supposed to be published once they had been approved by the censor, in fact they tended to be published without prior approval at the publisher's own risk. The censor might then be called in to evaluate a work once it was already in print. Alternatively, publishers might, on their own initiative, request a prior opinion from either the prefect or the Ministry. But even if the Ministry approved a publication, this was no guarantee that it would not be impounded anyway.

The Ministry does not appear to have functioned as a single centralized censor. Detailed censorship and expurgation of publications continued to be carried out by the local police prefect's office as well. Even at this local level, however, it would appear that periodical publications absorbed most of the censor's time and energies.[11]

Furthermore, up until 1938 no distinction was made between foreign and Italian literature. No specific procedure was established for translations, there was no specific censorship criteria. Although the regime recognized the influence of translations, talked of the insidious effects of foreign culture generally, and complained about the high numbers of translations being published, it was reluctant to openly obstruct the flow of foreign literature. This may have been for a number of reasons.

Firstly, an efficient system of preventive censorship would not have tallied with the regime's pretence at maintaining a degree of freedom of speech. Even when efforts were made later to curb

---

[9] See the chapter 'The Fascist State and the Cultural Industries', especially the section on cinema, in David Forgacs (1990:68-72).

[10] ACS, MCP, b.143, f. 'Atti riservati. Varie', sf. 'Stampa italiana'. Report dated 15 February 1943.

[11] The essay 'La censura del *Garofono rosso*' in Greco (1983:99-132) provides an interesting insight into how the local censor at the prefecture in Florence functioned.

translations, these were made using official instructions sent via discrete channels, and not openly through any legislative measure.

Secondly, the regime was aware how lucrative the translation market was and was probably reluctant to damage publishers with restrictions, given that the publishers had proved on the whole to be loyal supports of fascism, with whom a constructive working relationship had developed.

Furthermore, the regime probably felt that books did not exert an influence on the public 'mood' or 'spirit' comparable to the propaganda potential of the cinema or the theatre. Reading was largely indulged in by middle and upper class Italians who on the whole either supported the regime or, at worst, passively tolerated it.[12] Consequently, any negative influence that foreign literature might have was countered by the perceived reliability of the vast majority of the reading public.

Finally, at least until the late thirties, the regime probably felt that there was no need to police the introduction of foreign literature as it was confident that fascist culture was equal to the competition; they were confident that Italians would seek out fascist culture of their own accord. Again in the words of Alfieri,

> the public, the general public at least likes and prefers healthy reading, of the kind that not only helps pass the time but that allows them to profit from the time spent in terms of knowledge or at least in gaining spiritual elevation/edification.[13]

2. The translation industry

In actual fact the situation was very different. So great was the Italian public's taste for popular fiction, especially Anglo-American fiction, that it had led to a veritable translation boom during the thirties, contributing to the success of publishing houses such as Mondadori and Bompiani, to name but two of the most famous. The figures are interesting.

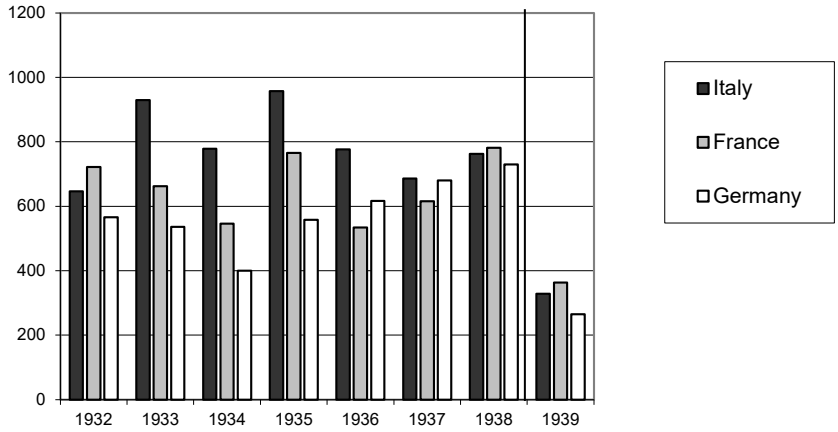
Throughout the thirties, contrary to what one might expect, Italy translated consistently more than any other country in the world (at least among those for whom figures are available). The graphs that follow compare the three countries who published the highest number of translations.

---

[12] Eventually efforts were made to change this situation and lip service was paid to the notion of placing a shelf of books in each Italian home, as we see in Alfieri's speech to the Senate quoted earlier: "We must resolve the very complex and serious problem of the diffusion of books ... we must make books into consumer goods. We must ensure that books enter equally into the homes of professionals and workers". What the regime was reluctant to admit, however, was that this could only be achieved through the translation of works that had mass appeal.

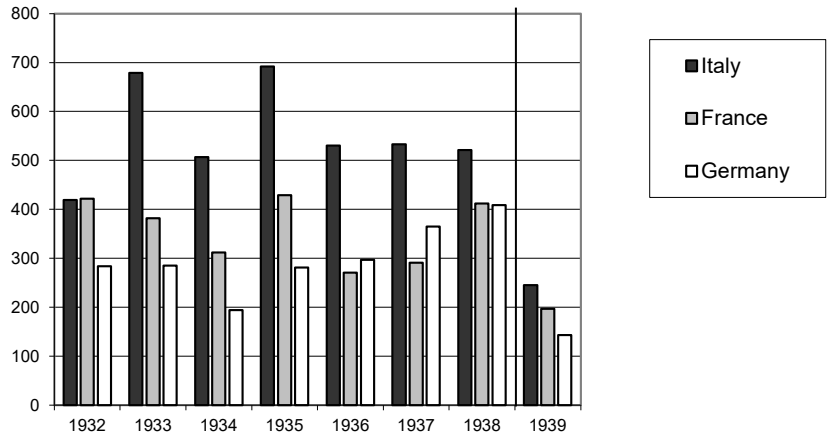
[13] MCP, b.105 'Dino Alfieri'.

(i) Number of Translations Published in Selected Countries 1932-39



If we look at 'literary' translations then Italy stands out even more:

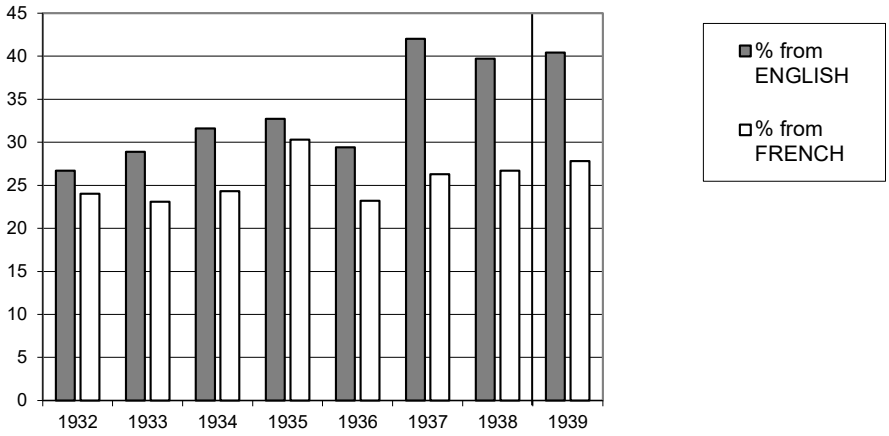
(ii) Number of *Literary* Translations Published in Selected Countries 1932-1939



Of the translations published in Italy the greatest proportion were literary texts (on average 68%): of these an average of 34% were translations from English, with a peak of 42% in 1937. Next in descending order were translations from French with an average of 28.6%.[14]

[14] All figures compiled by the author from the *Index Translationum* (1939 is projection based on the first six months only). There is no Italian bibliographical source for the 1920s and 30s which lists translations separately, so that unfortunately it is impossible to gauge the accuracy of the figures in the *Index*. The one alternative source is the annual statistics reports published by ISTAT, the Italian Statistics Institute. On an irregular basis, and often with very different criteria, these volumes do provide figures on the number of translations published in Italy. Those few years which are comparable to the figures in the *Index* on the whole coincide with the figures I have compiled – except that the ISTAT figures would imply that more books (of all genres, not just literary) were translated from French than from English in the years 1934-36.

(iii) Percentage of Literary Translations into Italian from *English* and *French*



The vast majority of these translations were of 'popular' literature: crime and adventure novels, romances – what are called *feuilleton* or *romanzi d'appendice* in Italian – which were worldwide bestsellers at the time.

This flow of translations is a graphic illustration of how wide the gap was between the propaganda of the regime and the reality it pretended to represent: far from preferring 'healthy reading', the Italian public was developing an appetite for the novels of Agatha Christie, Edgar Wallace, Zane Grey and P. G. Wodehouse. Despite official disapproval of the effects of Anglo-American culture, English and American literature continued to be imported into the country unhindered, and Italian readers cultivated their taste for it unchecked.

3. The Axis and the racial laws

By 1938 it was difficult to continue pretending that fascist culture was popular with the general public. Gherardo Casini, the Director for Italian Press at the Ministry for Popular Culture, wrote:

> The tendency of publishers to print foreign books undoubtedly reflects a marked tendency of our public to read what is produced abroad. ... It is not just a matter of counting how many French novelettes, Jewish storytellers, Hungarian playwrights or American pseudo-scientists have been translated into Italian. We are more concerned to know whether this is not one of the symptoms which reflect the present state of Italian culture, and its continued subjection to certain forms of foreign culture.[15]

The failure of the regime to cultivate any recognizably fascist culture is well-documented and has been much written about. As we shall see in the following section, the fascist hierarchy had a chauvinist and nationalist view of culture: fascist culture had to be purely Italian, it had to be

[15] Gherardo Casini (1938:54), quoted in Forgacs (1990:79).

inspired by and express Italian/fascist values. The climate imposed as a result of these prejudices did nothing to favour artistic activity. There were a few members of the regime who felt differently. Most prominent among these was Giuseppe Bottai, the Education Minister and a very active intellectual, who was convinced that the only way to stimulate the growth of a genuinely fascist culture was both to allow greater freedom of expression and encourage wider debate, and to expose fascist culture to stimulus from the outside. He fought an almost single-handed battle to achieve these aims, protected by his highly prestigious status, but he gained little support within the party.

It would hardly be surprising if, in the wake of this failure, the regime should more aggressively try to counter the flow of translated literature, whose success must have been so galling. And, in fact, the conditions for these translations became steadily more difficult from 1937 onwards. This coincided with the build up towards, and the introduction of, the infamous anti-Semitic racial laws which were introduced in 1938 following the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis.

In January 1937 the prefects were told to order all publishers under their jurisdiction to send complete lists of their books in print and those about to be printed "in order that we can monitor and co-ordinate all Italian book production with greater discipline and rationality".[16] Furthermore, it became a requirement that publishers seek prior permission for all publications and that they notify the Ministry each time they decided to translate a foreign work. Ostensibly these measures served to collect data for a bibliographical survey which the Ministry had launched, but they are also important in that they provide the first official sign of a potentially hostile attitude to translations on the part of the authorities.

In May 1937 the Ministry underwent a further upgrade. It changed its name to Ministry for Popular Culture (*Ministero della Cultura Popolare*) and the number of people working for it rose from 183 to 800. In January 1938 the Ministry requested a list from publishers of all the translations that they had both published and were intending to publish.[17] This request is further indication of the Ministry's increasing sensitivity on the subject of translations and particularly to the fact that so many were being published in Italy. During 1938 and 1939, it seems that the Ministry restricted itself to monitoring the translations which were being published a little more closely without actually intervening against them. It should be said that while there can be no doubt that the fascist regime deeply disapproved of Anglo-American culture, there is no evidence to justify attributing this increasingly hostile attitude to translations to anti-American and anti-British sentiment alone. The problem was really of a more general nature. As we shall see later, the regime did not like the image of Italy as a very *receptive* country, and eventually its distaste for this image would outweigh its scruples in openly obstructing the publication of translations, and limits would be imposed on their numbers.

---

[16] ASMi, PMG I, b.716 'Rassegna Bibliografica. Elenco delle pubblicazioni'.

[17] Telegram from Gherardo Casini dated 15 January 1938, a copy of which can be found in AFM, FAM, 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare'.

In the meantime the anti-Semitic campaign which was one of the legacies of the pact with Germany was steadily getting under way. The Ministry formed a special commission called the Commission for the Purifying of Books (*Comissione di Bonifica del libro*),[18] whose principle aim was to examine all books printed since WWI and eliminate those by Jewish authors. Work progressed slowly however. The first meeting was held in October 1938, when they discussed the general need

> that literature and art on the one hand, and the culture of the people and of the young on the other, conform to the aspirations of the new Italian Soul and to the requirements of fascist ethics.

At the 6th meeting in February 1940 the commission finally made some decisions. Firstly, the commission unanimously agreed that Jewish works which had become classics ("which are by now part of our universal cultural heritage") could be published and sold freely. Secondly, concerning contemporary Jewish authors, there were two schools of thought: the publisher Arnoldo Mondadori and a colleague felt the Ministry should examine each case separately. Mondadori ("this last in favour of foreign authors of particular value and importance") was clearly defending his own privileged province of translations and probably felt that in such a scenario he would, in most cases, be able to exert his considerable influence and obtain a favourable decision from the Ministry. Two other members of the commission however, argued that "any work by any Italian or foreign Jewish author should absolutely be excluded quite independently of any possible merit". The conclusion states: "the commission has adopted the intransigent viewpoint".[19] Most Jewish literature was therefore banned and a blacklist of Jewish authors was eventually distributed.[20]

4. The case of *Americana*

In the wake of the anti-Semitic drive, and with war approaching, the climate became harsher for translations. Nationalistic considerations now became more important and aggravated that climate of xenophobic hostility that the anti-Semitic policies of the regime had already fostered. In the Autumn of 1939, Alessandro Pavolini replaced Alfieri as Minister. Pavolini had been a journalist

---

[18] The word *bonifica* is very difficult to translate, and it is worth reflecting on its use here. It is usually used to describe the reclaiming of marshland for agricultural purposes: making the land productive in other words. One of the famous public works which Mussolini promoted, and which was hailed as a great fascist achievement, was the reclaiming of the Maremma marshlands, an area which for centuries had been ridden with malaria. Its use in the title of this commission, then, would appear to be a conscious attempt to insert its operations within a 'glorious' fascist tradition of great public works of improvement: weeding out Jewish works of literature was to be an achievement that would go down in the history books alongside the transformation of hundreds of square miles of marshland into fertile arable land.

[19] All quotations from: ACS, MCP, b.56, 'Produzione libraria italiana e straniera: bonifica libraria'.

[20] See Giorgio Fabre (1998) for a detailed account of how fascist anti-Semitic policies were applied in publishing.

and the founding editor of the literary journal *Il Bargello*: he entertained a very fascist notion of culture and its role[21] and was an unabashed promoter of the regime's racial policies:

> But the edges of that great and pure current which is the Italian tradition … were clouded, in the dark years of our nation's life, by a disorganized and poisonous importation of doctrines, intellectual fashions, modes of thought, of art and of life that were entirely alien to the style and genius of the race. It is our constant effort, by now largely realized, to purify our native culture from this marginal pollution. The purification of books, the monitoring of translations, the selection of foreign books and periodicals for importation, an ever more severe selection of theatrical, musical and cinematographic productions from abroad: all these and other analogous provisions … have helped to render our Italian culture ever more 'Italian'. Italian: that is herself, free from any small-minded protectionism, but conscious of her own eternal role as disseminator rather than receiver.[22]

This passage is very telling. The minister is reluctant to acknowledge the xenophile tastes of the Italian people which are considered undignified, so he minimizes the 'pollution' of foreign imports as a marginal phenomenon. He clearly feels that Italy should by right export more culture than it imports: that Italian culture should receive the same degree of attention abroad as it gives to foreign culture at home.

On 10 June 1940 Italy declared war against both Britain and France. That Autumn the Ministry held a series of meetings with various representatives of the publishing world, including amongst others Vallecchi, who was the President of the Publishers' Federation, and Mondadori.[23] There was talk of a maximum quota of 10% being applied to translations. Things came to a head during a meeting with a group of representatives of the Federation when the Minister Pavolini instructed the publishers that the number of translations being published must be reduced. He said that Italy must have a great national literature worthy of the important political role that Italy was playing on the world stage, a typical fascist blend of cultural and political aims, and that for this reason he intended to

> limit translations of foreign works, when these are not of particular value, and restrict the importation of foreign books to a minimum. All this, however,

---

[21] "We are not men of culture, we are men of 'a culture', ours, and we are exclusively hers." From a speech given by Alessandro Pavolini to the General Command of the Fascist Militia on the closing ceremony of the first Course on the Problems of Race, 21 May 1942. ACS, MCP, b.103, f. 'Discorsi dell'Eccellenza Pavolini'.

[22] Speech given by Pavolini at the annual inauguration of the Italo-Germanic Association. Undated. ACS, MCP, b.103, f. 'Discorsi ed articoli del Ministro Pavolini'.

[23] Mondadori and Vallecchi both had meetings with Casini in September 1940 at the MCP and exchanged letters afterwards which are preserved in AFM, FAM, 'Ministero della Cultura Popolare' and 'Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Industriali Editori'.

> would concern so called 'fictional' works and works of entertainment, and would not involve classics or scientific works. [24]

In the nationalistic climate of the war, questions of national prestige were becoming more important than any other consideration.

These issues come out in Pavolini's correspondence with the publisher Valentino Bompiani over the authorization of an anthology of contemporary American literature entitled *Americana.* The letters provide us with rare documentary evidence of the attitude of the Ministry towards translations and of what tactics publishers would use to negotiate the publishing of a potentially 'sensitive' translation. What this episode shows us is that despite the much harsher climate in which the publication of translations was being negotiated, there was still a surprising amount of room for manoeuvre. The anthology *Americana* was edited by Elio Vittorini and it has become a famous instance of fascist censorship, largely due to the fame of Vittorini, who was also the victim of another notorious case when the literary journal *Solaria* was confiscated in part for having serialized his novel *Il Garofano rosso*. *Americana* was a selection of pieces by contemporary American authors, translated by a number of Italian writers including Eugenio Montale, Alberto Moravia and Cesare Pavese.

In November 1940 Bompiani writes to Pavolini as follows:

> When I had the honour of being received about 20 days ago, I asked you if the limitations on translations of which you were talking also applied to classics of the various literatures, and I referred in particular to two short novels by HENRI JAMES [sic] and to the anthology AMERICANA. You replied that they did not, and in accordance with your instructions I immediately suspended publication of a number of modern foreign works and continued preparing the two mentioned above, the proofs of which were sent to the Ministry shortly afterwards[25].

This letter confirms the Ministry's preference for communicating restrictions of this kind in private interviews rather than by written instruction, which would have been the normal channel. This is consistent with Pavolini's desire not to be seen as a 'small-minded protectionist' and is in line with the regime's habit of denying, for the benefit of foreign observers, that it exerted control over what was published,[26] and that the press in particular, but all cultural activity in general, was simply the spontaneous expression of the 'hard-working' fascist people. The only censorship that the regime would admit to was that which they argued was morally justified, and from 1938 onwards that which enforced the new racial laws. It is also interesting to observe Bompiani's skill in handling

---

[24] The quote is from a type-written report of the meeting in AFM, FAM, 'Federazione Nazionale Fascista degli Industriali Editori'.

[25] Letter from Valentino Bompiani to Alessandro Pavolini dated 30 November 1940. ACS, MCP, b.116 'Valentino Bompiani (Editore)'.

[26] Cf. Alfieri in a speech given to the Italian parliament (undated but probably in 1936): 'The Ministry does not hand out secret or even restricted orders, it merely provides clarification, information, generic directives, guidance …". ACS, MCP, b.105 'Dino Alfieri'.

the minister. Aware of Pavolini's attitudes, he has, by a kind of slight of hand, slipped in his anthology of contemporary American authors, who have hardly had time to become classics yet, alongside two short novels by an author of almost unquestionable stature and moral probity. Unfortunately for Bompiani, the minister was not taken in by this manoeuvre. The letter continues:

> Now I am told that, for reasons of general disposition, you will not allow the publication of the American anthology, this when, unfortunately, due to the festive season, and assured of your later approval, we have already printed three quarters of the work.

It is noteworthy that the Ministry will not publicly give a reason for this ban, beyond the meaningless reference to a general disposition (*ragioni di indole generali*): to do so would be to risk an indefensible justification. Bompiani, for his part, does not give up easily, and so plays the card of the inevitable financial damage which he will suffer because of this ban. He then tries to rescue his original sleight of hand by attempting an even more ambitious one: he tells Pavolini that the American anthology was to be the first of a series of anthologies of Classic literature, including four volumes of Italian classics, one volume of German classics, one of Hungarian and one of Scandinavian classics, all "balanced by analogous publications in the various countries from which we are translating", and finally tries to pass the whole enterprise off as an effort to promote Italian literature:

> this enterprise … has an obvious cultural purpose and will contribute to a better and wider diffusion and understanding of ancient and modern Italian literature in our country and abroad.

I have quoted at length from this letter because it brings home to us the position of publishers dealing with fascist censorship. On the one hand they benefited from a degree of laxity and flexibility which gave them room for manoeuvre and negotiation; on the other, they suffered from never really knowing what the 'official' position would be, and from the tendency on the part of the Ministry to change its mind – with sometimes quite serious financial consequences for the publisher. That censorship was applied so inconsistently is not surprising when one considers the regime's reluctance to ever admit to censoring publications, and the absence therefore of any clearly defined policy.

Bompiani was clearly not one to be easily discouraged, however. A month after the letter quoted above, he sent Pavolini a volume entitled 'Love letters of Italian Writers' claiming it was the first of that same series which *Americana* was to have been a part of. Then in January of 1941 Vittorini went to a meeting with Pavolini where he showed him the proofs of *Americana*. Following this meeting Pavolini writes to Bompiani to repeat his ban on publication. His justification for this decision reveals the same concerns that he expressed in the speech quoted above:

> The work is admirable both for the judgement shown in selecting the material and in the information provided, as well as for the presentation as a whole. I remain of the opinion, however, that publishing this anthology – at this moment in time – is not a good idea. The United States are a potential enemy

> of ours: their President has shown himself to be hostile to the Italian people. This is no time to perform acts of courtesy towards America, not even literary ones. Furthermore, the anthology would simply rekindle that excessive enthusiasm which has been shown for recent American literature: a fashion which I am determined not to encourage.[27]

Pavolini then goes on to congratulate Bompiani on his intention of counterbalancing the anthologies of foreign literature he intends to publish with analogous publications abroad, and adds: "if an anthology of Italian literature were actually to be published in America then I would see no difficulty in allowing *Americana* to be published here".

Here, then, we come to the nub of the question. Pavolini admires the work but does not want to encourage the idea that the Italians have a disproportionately keen appetite for foreign literature. Neither does he want to appear small-minded, however, so he clings to a rather arbitrary principle of reciprocity.[28]

Bompiani did not insist further on the matter of *Americana*, but did request that he be refunded some of the money lost as a consequence of the ban; a request which Pavolini refused, though he agreed that the Ministry might buy a certain number of copies of his anthologies of classics by way of compensation. This concession is interesting, in that it betrays a desire on the part of Pavolini to appease Bompiani in some way, though he was under no obligation to do so. It is impossible to say whether he does this out of a sense of friendship for Bompiani, or because he felt he had to make up for a harsh decision. Over the next year Bompiani kept up the pressure on Pavolini with a letter in March 1941 announcing the publication of another volume in the series of anthologies, and a letter in December 1941 where he provided Pavolini with a list of his publications, underlining the number of Italian works in his catalogue.

Then in March 1942 there was a breakthrough. Back in February 1941 Bompiani had tried to argue that far from encouraging an excessive enthusiasm for American literature, an anthology such as his would have the opposite effect and "throw water on the fire" given that the quality of the classics in his anthology would cast the moderns currently in vogue in an unfavourable light.[29] In line with this reasoning, Bompiani had the eminent critic Emilio Cecchi write an introduction expressing a rather critical opinion of contemporary American literature, to replace the enthusiastic introduction originally written by Vittorini. In this new guise, Pavolini finally agreed to let Bompiani publish *Americana*:

> The preface by Emilio Cecchi is excellent and should make it possible to authorize the publication of the anthology of American writers: but … the notes [by Vittorini] which precede each group of writers must be removed as

---

[27] Letter from Pavolini to Bompiani 7 January 1941. ACS, MCP, b.116 'Bompiani Valentino (Editore)'.

[28] See Rundle (1999) for the way in which Arnoldo Mondadori used 'reciprocal' translations of Italian literature abroad to protect himself from the criticism that he was somehow damaging Italy with the number of translations he was publishing.

[29] Bompiani to Pavolini, 6 February 1941. ACS, MCP, b.116, 'Bompiani Valentino (Editore)'.

> they are not only unadvised at the current state of affairs, unilateral and critically questionable, but they wholly contradict the position expressed by the preface.[30]

Before the volume could actually come out, then, Vittorini's introductory notes to each section of the anthology were also removed and were replaced by a selection of critical writings chosen by Cecchi. That *Americana* did not meet with the approval of the fascist cadres is borne out by the following unsigned note to the new Minister Gaetano Polverelli, who was appointed to succeed Pavolini in February 1943, and which is worth reading for its curiosity value alone:

> In the days of the massacres at Grossetto, in Sardinia and in Sicily, the editor Bompiani has the gall to publish a 'lump' [*mattonissimo*] entitled 'AMERICANA', an anthology of little value with a preface by an academic and translations by Vittorini; an anthology modelled on that Jew Lewis. And the same Bompiani continues to publish and republish Cronin, Steinbeck and others – out and out Bolsheviks, and in any case extremely pernicious. Mondadori too, having for years helped to 'educate' our youth to appreciate American immorality and frivolousness with the series 'La Palma' and the crime series, today continues to publish English and American authors
>
> [In red type, the Minister has added:]
>
> *I agree entirely. I have given instructions that a strict ban be applied and that the titles mentioned above be taken out of circulation*
>
> [In blue pencil, Mussolini himself has written:]
>
> "*Yes. It's time this stopped!*"[31]

The cabinet reshuffle in which Polverelli succeeded Pavolini as Minister, just over 5 months before Mussolini was deposed, only made conditions for translations harsher. The new minister was sent a report by the General Directorate for the Italian Press, Division IV (the office which was supposed to be monitoring the translations being published in Italy) in which a lot of emphasis is placed on past laxity and on the renewed severity now being operated by the Directorate in protection of the 'newer generations'.

---

[30] Pavolini to Bompiani, 30 March 1942. ACS, MCP, b.116, 'Bompiani Valentino (Editore)'. Pavolini also chooses a quotation from the preface to go on the book jacket: "30 years ago we succumbed to the ineffable of the Slav soul; now we were succumbing to the ineffable of the American soul. And so a new literary bacchanal was beginning".

[31] Unsigned note to the Minister dated 26 June 1943. ACS, MCP, b.116, 'Bompiani Valentino (Editore)'.

The report begins with a list of problems which needed to be solved, including:

> Concerning comics:
>
> a) An almost complete Americanization, carried out via the reproduction of illustrations which are either imported or simply copied from foreign models. …
>
> Concerning books:
>
> f) The diffusion of works which are absolutely incompatible with the new international political situation and the current state of conflict. …
>
> h) The invasion of translations of foreign works, which are often disrespectful of Italy, nearly always very mediocre, and essentially inflationary: hindering the rebirth of a healthy national production.[32]

The report outlines the severe measures which the Ministry had recently taken to purge children's comics and adventure stories: removing all 'harmful' material, such as Buffalo Bill and Mandrake, and making them more Italian, to the extent that the characters with Anglo-Saxon physiognomies were "drastically eliminated". It then moves on to books in general and states that

> of the books presented for revision (86% Italian and 14% foreign [not clear if this means translations]), about a third (35%) were approved without comment, a third (34%) had substantial modifications suggested, and the remaining third was not authorized. Of the foreign books that were to be translated ex novo or reprinted, 60% were rejected. In this way only excellent foreign material was approved, in a proportion of merely 8% compared to the Italian material.[33]

5. Conclusion

Contrary to what we might have expected, then, there was no 'blacklist' concerning translations, or even Italian authors, until the racial laws in 1938. Each case was considered, when it was considered, on its individual merits. Up until the onset of the war there was no official policy against translations or against the importation/introduction of foreign literature, and when limits were finally imposed they tended to be applied generally and were not openly aimed at any single culture.

This picture of an unhindered flow of translated literature into Italy needs to be set into perspective, however: we should not under-estimate micro-effects on translations of the cultural climate in which they were being published. The absence of any real policy against translations or

---

[32] ACS, MCP, b.143, f. 'Atti riservati. Varie', sf. 'Stampa italiana'. Report dated 15 February 1943.

[33] It is worth comparing this figure to the ISTAT figures given for the period 1934-39. The average proportion of translations compared to the total number of books published in this period is 11.4%, while the figure for 1939 is 7.8%. Assuming the Ministry's figures to be correct, its efforts do not appear to have brought about any drastic reduction in the proportion of translations published. Cf. *Annuario statistico italiano*, ISTAT, Rome, years 1939-41.

foreign literature, even in such a nationalistic country as Italy became under fascism, does not mean that the translations which were published in their millions, (thousands of titles), were uncensored. The moral crusade which the regime embarked on and which it successfully imposed on all forms of culture, information and entertainment also took its toll on translations. On the evidence available, and if Mondadori and Bompiani are to be taken as typical, it would seem that a large proportion of the translations that were published had undergone some kind of review, as a precautionary measure, by the publishers themselves, and where necessary were bowdlerized. It is difficult, if not impossible, however, to measure the scale of this process of self-censorship. The regime exerted no systematic control but the threat of its intervention, the occasional instances where editions were impounded, were enough to ensure that a large amount of material that the regime would have considered offensive was probably removed. Very few publishers could afford the financial risk of publishing an unacceptable book without censoring it. If a book was impounded they got no compensation (as we saw in the case of Bompiani) and could therefore risk bankruptcy because of an unfortunate decision. It was in the publisher's interest therefore to try and remove any potentially dangerous material. If doubts remained, then prior permission was in some cases sought, though this was not a failsafe option as the Ministry was quite capable of revoking an earlier decision.

By the thirties the people working both in the press and in publishing had a fairly good idea of what was likely to offend those in authority. When faced, then, with a work which was at risk – because it dealt with the theme of incest, or contained a suicide, or portrayed Italians in a negative light – the publishers faced two options: either remove the offending material and go ahead, or seek a prior opinion from the Ministry.

If the status of the text was such that they could manipulate it freely, then they did not hesitate to remove anything that might put the enterprise at risk. They were apparently sensitive to the damage they might do to the work, and they were wary of offending the authors and losing the rights to a potential bestseller, but the risk of having an edition confiscated was clearly a more important consideration. If, on the other hand, the importance of the author made it imperative not to put his or her contract with the publishing house at risk by making too many unauthorized cuts, or the artistic status of the work imposed a greater than usual level of respect, then the publisher could apply to the Ministry arguing that the importance of the work and its author were such that certain 'faults' should be overlooked. [34]

What the study of translation in this period highlights is the surprising permeability of the 'totalitarian' fascist state. Despite its nationalistic and partisan exaltation of all things Italian, it was unable to organize any effective resistance against the invasion of Anglo-American culture, a culture that it so deeply disapproved of. Another surprising fact that emerges from this study

[34] Albonetti (1994) contains a selection of readers' notes on books being considered for publication by the Mondadori publishing house, in which judgements concerning how the censor was to be dealt with are often made. See also Rundle (1999) for a detailed examination of the strategies used by Arnoldo Mondadori in publishing so many translations and of his negotiations with the Ministry.

is the reluctance of the regime to admit that it was exerting any control over what was being published. The fascists were very sensitive to world opinion and sought to maintain the illusion of an industrious and contented people basking in the reflected glory of their beloved leader. This same propaganda, however, also tied their hands, given that any drastic censorship measures would also be an admission that the consensus enjoyed by the regime was not as unanimous and as uncritical as the regime liked to think.

Abbreviations

ACS	Archivio centrale dello stato, Rome
AFM	Archive of the Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, Milan
ASMi	Archivio di stato, Milan
FAM	Fondo Arnoldo Mondadori
MCP	Ministero della cultura popolare
PMG I	Prefettura di Milano, Gabinetto – I serie

References

Albonetti, P. (ed) (1994) *Non c'è tutto nei romanzi. Leggere romanzi stranieri in una casa editrice negli anni '30*, Milano: Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori.

Cannistraro, P. V. (1975) *La Fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media*, Bari: Laterza.

Casini, Gherardo (1938) 'Il libro e la cultura italiana', in *Il libro italiano*, Rassegna bibliografico a cura del Ministero di Educazione Nazionale e del Ministero della Cultura Popolare, II, n.2, February.

Cesari, Maurizio (1978) *La censura nel periodo fascista*, Napoli: Liguori Editore.

Fabre, Giorgio (1998) *L'Elenco. Censura fascista, editoria e autori ebrei*, Torino: Silvano Zamorani editore.

Forgacs, David (1990) *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Greco, Lorenzo (1983) *Censura e scrittura. Vittorini, lo pseudo-Malaparte, Gadda*, Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Lyttleton, Adrian (1987) *The Seizure of Power 1919-1929*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2nd edition.

Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey (1986) 'The Italian Cinema under Fascism', in David Forgacs (ed) *Rethinking Italian Fascism*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Quargnolo, Mario (1986) *La parola ripudiata. L'incredibile storia dei film stranieri in Italia nei primi anni del sonoro*, Gemona: La cineteca del Friuli.

Rundle, Christopher (1999) 'Publishing Translations in Mussolini's Italy: a Case Study of Arnoldo Mondadori', *Textus* 12(2): 427–442.

Zurlo, Leopoldo (1952) *Memorie inutili. La censura teatrale nel ventennio*, Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo.