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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Italy's first ONB Alpine *colonia climatica*: more than fresh air, exercise, and propaganda?

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## Abstract

By the end of the 1930s in Italy, ambitious winter and summer camps or *colonie cimatiche* for the young had been erected along Italy's coastline and in its Alpine resorts. Here, thousands of Italian children from the country's urban centres were sent to experience a regime of fresh air, exercise and Fascist propaganda. The small village of Fai in the autonomous province of Trento in the Italian Alps was home to the first such Alpine *colonia* managed by the Italian Fascist youth organisation, the Opera Nazionale Balilla. Through an examination of a range of contemporary Italian publications, this article will reveal how the Alpine *colonia climatica* went beyond its official remit of 'climatic assistance to childhood'. It offers evidence of the Fascist regime's exploitation of these establishments in newly-annexed Trentino as a tool to unify and italianise, and argues that they were used to promote a militarised view of the national landscape.

**Keywords:** *colonie climatiche*; Trentino; Fascism; youth movements; ONB

## Introduction

On 16 August 1925, Italian aviator and inventor Umberto Nobile travelled to the tiny Alpine village of Fai della Paganella (known at this time simply as 'Fai') in newly-annexed Trentino to test a new cable car linking the village to the valley below. In October the same year, Nobile, who was in the middle of preparations for his journey over the polar ice cap that would make him a national hero, returned to the village as the illustrious guest of honour at the inauguration ceremony of the new cable car. Three years later the same village would become home to Italy's first Alpine *'colonia climatica'* managed by the Fascist youth organisation Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) (Pranzelores 1989, 108). During this time, recently unearthed photographs also show that Mussolini's first son Benito Albino Dalser spent time on a camping trip in the village (Tommasi 2011). What was it that made this obscure Alpine village the focus of such attention?

The *colonia* in Fai is an excellent starting point for an analysis of the role of these structures in Fascist Italy. The focus on the camp's location in one of the territories annexed by Italy following the First World War offers a new perspective on the remit of these establishments, which was to provide 'climatic assistance to childhood' (PNF 1937,11). Through an examination of a range of contemporary Italian texts published between 1928 and 1939 – which include a legal statute and official guidance for those running the camps, educational textbooks, contemporary travel guides to the Alps, and publications relating to

schooling reform – this article presents an examination of the ideological and geographical importance of these mountain retreats for children. The *colonie* were central to Fascist socialisation and were part of wider schooling reforms that sought to strengthen the nation's young. However, in Italy's newly-annexed territories, the Fascist regime hoped they could do more. This article offers evidence that the *colonia* in Fai was used as tool to unify and Italianise. Furthermore, its location was exploited as a means to promote a militarised narrative of the national landscape.

## The ONB

The ONB managed the *colonia* in Fai from its inception in 1928, until 1937 when the organisation was absorbed by the Gioventù italiana del littorio (GIL). The driving force behind the formation of the ONB and other Fascist organisations was the concern of the Fascist regime to consolidate support and ensure the perpetuation of Fascism. In 1929 Mussolini declared the education of the masses the central political problem of Fascism and subsequently pursued the organisation of ordinary Italians with a 'maniacal determination'; the regime made use of existing social organisations and created new ones, making them larger and more far-reaching, to have influence over the lives of the greatest number of Italians possible (Gentile 2008: 148). Although there has been much debate among historians over the extent of the Italian population's embrace of Fascism, the mobilising effect of putting Fascist organisations at the centre of society was immense. As Paul Corner argues, by combining social organisation and welfare, of which 'free' holidays in the *colonie* were a central component, the regime was able to extend beyond its natural support base and reach more sections of society by cultivating a sense of 'debt' owed to the Italian state and ultimately Mussolini and Fascism (Corner 2002, 341). This intent is explicit in publications of the time, such as *Scuola e nazione per la difesa della razza,* which states that the young 'cannot deny a state that protects them' (Bonadies and Calogiuri 1939, 152). In the case of the ONB, hand in hand with this sense of debt was the appeal of recreation, which helped the regime obtain the consent Victoria De Grazia has demonstrated was necessary for the consolidation of its political base (De Grazia, 2002, 4–5).

The organisation of Italy's children was a key concern of the Fascist regime. The concept of youth was a central theme of Fascism. The regime hoped that the support of the young would ensure the continuation of Fascism and maintain the revolutionary nature of the movement (Wanrooij 2002, 600). The association of youth with traits such as strength, energy and virility were also fundamentally useful to the nascent regime (McLean 2018, ch. 1). However, despite Mussolini's 'special regard' for young people, essentially, they were to be educated 'following a mould', which left them little space to develop freely (De Felice 1975, 59). Indeed, the young came under the influence of Fascism through an array of social organisations and projects. The most well-known of the organisations for children was the *Balilla*, established in 1922, which catered for boys aged from 8 to 14. The equivalent group for girls was *Le piccole italiane.* Boys from all areas were much more likely than girls to join: this was particularly true in the south of the country (Eatwell 1996, 65). In 1926, the newly-formed ONB took control of the *Balilla* and the *Avanguardisti,* the organisation for boys aged 14 to 18. In 1927 the Fascist regime issued two decrees banning other youth groups and by 1928, the ONB was the only organisation with official backing. By 1929, the ONB also had control of the groups for girls: *Le piccole italiane* and *Le giovani italiane.* In 1935, there were 22 legions of *Balilla* and ten legions of *Avanguardisti* active in the Trentino region.[1] The ONB was led by teachers, and those who were also members of the Fascist militia were prevalent (Koon, 2017, ch. 4). The organisation of the ONB mirrored that of the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), with a central council that fed down to provincial and then communal councils. The growing

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influence of the ONB can be inferred from its membership figures, which jumped from just over one million members in 1929 to over six million members in 1937 (Bartoli, Pasquini Romizi and Romizi 1983, 37).

The ONB also became increasingly involved in Italy's schooling. Education was a pressing concern for Mussolini, and reforms designed by Giovanni Gentile were introduced in 1923 soon after the dictator's rise to power. Although their effectiveness has since been the subject of much debate, the school reforms sought to bring about social change; a move away from a 'bourgeois' past to a future for 'the people'. The aim was that the young – having grown up in a 'pure' Fascist environment untainted by the past – would be able to guarantee a future for Fascism. This transition, as the author of *La scuola italiana dopo la riforma del '23* pointed out in 1939, created an 'essentially social' crisis, visible in all areas of public life (Volpicelli 1939, 63). Although the initial changes reflected wider Western trends in education and health, as Eden McLean argues, the expanded educational infrastructure set Fascist Italy apart from other Western European nations (McLean 2018, ch. 1). The ONB became ever more present in school life. Evidence of this is offered by the declaration of the *Gran consiglio del fascismo* on 10 November 1927, calling for greater systematic development of physical education and gymnastics for the young, which led to the ONB being given responsibility for all physical education the same year (Volpicelli 1939, 60). Moreover, by the 1930s the ONB dominated school life and hours of teaching were replaced by parades, speeches, and ceremonies (Koon 2017, ch. 4). Thus, the reach of the ONB expanded, and it became one of the most powerful and important institutions in Italy (Tarquini 2015, 179). Such power was also obtained through coercion. In Trentino, this is illustrated by the issuing of a government circular by the Prefettura di Trento, dated 31 March 1928, calling for the reporting of teachers who obstructed 'the development of the *Balilla*'.[2]

## The role of the *colonie climatiche*

The ONB *colonie climatiche* were situated in different geographical settings across Italy. The *Regolamento delle colonie climatiche* divides them into five distinct categories –seaside, mountain, river, hill, and lowland settings (PNF 1937, 11). Some were permanent, and focused on the treatment of health issues such as tuberculosis, others were temporary summer or day centres aimed at promoting health and wellbeing among the children of the urban poor. Importantly, the locations were overwhelmingly rural, a characteristic that stood in deliberate contrast to the urban homes of the majority of the *colonia* guests. The regime made provisions for the construction of enormous buildings along Italy's coasts and in its Alpine resorts. In some cases, the structures could house more than 1,000 children at any one time, leading them to be termed *città dell'infanzia*. The ONB remained responsible for the *colonie* until the creation of the GIL in 1937. Children were automatically eligible to join the *colonia* programme if they were aged between 6 and 13, and could demonstrate their ONB or later, GIL membership. Consequently, as affiliation to the ONB increased, so too did stays for children in the ONB *colonie climatiche.* Of course, families often had little choice other than to enrol their children in the ONB and social pressure to do so was great, with 'costumes, honours, responsibilities, and public opinion' all impacting the attraction of the organisation for children (Cox 1935, 268).

Over the 20 years of the Fascist regime, hundreds of thousands of children would spend time at the *colonie climatiche*. By the mid-1930s, in Italy as a whole, approximately 10 per cent of children had stayed at a summer camp for at least 30 days. Official figures claim that during the summer of 1939, 806,964 children were guests at the *colonie,* a jump from 568,680 in 1935 (Bartoli, Pasquini Romizi and Romizi 1983, 37). The official role of ONB in the functioning of the *colonie* legitimised and politicised their working and these

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structures became a key tool in Fascist socialisation. Funding for the ONB *colonie* came from contributions that were often forcibly obtained, and later by way of a tithe, which was deducted from workers' pay and matched by a contribution from their employers (De Grazia 2002, 69). In Trentino, members of the Society for Alpine and Marine Colonies helped fund the *colonia* programme. Ordinary members of the society were required to make an annual payment of ten lire, while patrons were expected give at least 50 lire as a contribution towards the society's activities. Fundraising events such as lotteries and concerts were also encouraged (Statute 1932, 1–2).

The 'Rolando Cembran Colonia Alpina Balilla' in Fai was the first ONB camp to be opened in an Alpine setting. It was named after the son of Antonio Cembran, a sports enthusiast and member of a campaign to promote sport in Trentino during the 1920s, and also a representative of the Federazione provinciale fascista in Bolzano. Many of the characteristics of the Fai *colonia* later became the established norm. The building in Fai occupies the site of an old mountain refuge or *malga.* This meant that the area was already accessible, making the site an obvious choice for further construction. The new *colonia* was built by the architect Pio Giovannini and Brothers and was finished on 28 May 1928. In the year of its opening, it hosted 200 young boys under the auspices of the ONB.

The simple structure of the *colonia* in Fai was exemplary of the characteristics of the first *colonie climatiche*. Photographs of the building in Fai in its heyday show young boys from the *Balilla* in military formation, lined up in neat rows exercising, with the simple, symmetrical building towering behind them. Such simplicity, where emphasis was placed on the collective rather than the individual, would later be among guidelines published in the 1937 *Regolamento delle colonie climatiche.* This text states that 'excessive luxury' should be avoided since it could be 'antieducational and antisocial by allowing the young guests to live in an environment that is too different from that in which they normally live' (PNF 1937, 15). The housing of Fascism's young recruits in new buildings would also become part of the *Regolamento*. Indicative of the Fascist regime's obsessive promotion of hygiene – which would see the camp guests being required to wash four times a day – the *Regolamento* states that all camps should 'absolutely avoid' the use of 'old buildings', which compromise the 'hygienic order' of the *colonie* (PNF 1937, 13).

Instructions concerning eligibility for the *colonia* programme published in 1937 state that precedence was to be given to children from families in need (PNF 1937, 20). These children were admitted to the programme free of charge while wealthier families could pay for their children to participate but only if they were unable to provide a summer holiday for their children themselves (PNF 1937, 20). Furthermore, 'absolute' precedence was given both to the children of dead or injured First World War veterans, those who had participated in military campaigns in East Africa and Spain, and the children of large families (PNF 1937, 21), indicative of how access to the *colonie* was politicised. The selection of the children was decided by both an 'admissions commission' and a 'medical commission' who, together, would decide whether a family was eligible and the type of *colonia* most suitable. Families who applied, therefore, were presented with a dilemma: on the one hand was the offer of often much needed assistance, but on the other was the prospect of opening themselves up to intense scrutiny – which could lead to disciplinary action – so that their eligibility or perhaps more suitably, their worthiness, could be judged (see Corner 2002, 343–5).

## Health aims

In Trentino, the construction of numerous similarly-run structures in Rabbi, Coredo and Cavalese, to name just a few, followed the inauguration of the *colonia* in Fai, which is a

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testament to the momentum that built up around the programme. By 1932, these retreats had become so popular in Trentino that the comune of Trento published a legal statute to guide the establishment of further structures (Statute 1932). The statute states that the aim of the *colonie* was to contribute to the 'restoration' of health to the young generations of Trentino. It further claims that children of both sexes would benefit from sea bathing and Alpine climate therapies (Statute 1932, 1), in carefully chosen locations, which were to be selected following medical consultation (Statute 1932, 3).

The aims made explicit by the *Statuto* were indicative of the effort to improve children's health. This was in part driven by the poverty experienced by many children during the interwar period, especially within the nation's cities, and Trento the capital city of Trentino was no exception. Trentino already had a tradition of sending children into the mountains to improve their health. In 1885, in the *Bollettino medico dall'Associazione Medica Tridentina*, Trentino doctor Giovanni Gerloni had argued that long stays in the mountains could be therapeutic for children suffering from rickets (in Taiani 2005, 5). This was a response to a crisis in conscription rates – military authorities in Trento had classified only 22 per cent of new recruits from the 1864–6 generation as fit and healthy. This rate was particularly low when compared to levels of between 45 per cent and 50 per cent in Austria and Germany at the same time. Above all, doctors such as Gerloni argued that children's health should be safeguarded during the early years of their growth, the time in which mortality was greatest and the risk of delayed psycho-physical development most acute (Taiani 2005: 5). By 1900, to tackle high rates of rickets and tuberculosis in Trento, approximately 150 children were sent away to the coast in Emilia Romagna for stays of at least forty days. Private individuals and the Cooperative Bank funded the initiative (see Taiani 2005, 5).

By the interwar period the situation in Trentino had not changed significantly. Aware that poverty led to numerous health conditions related to malnutrition and poor living conditions, the PNF extolled the virtues of seaside stays for children suffering from scrofula, tuberculosis, rickets, and nervous conditions. Moreover, stays in an Alpine climate, it claimed, were particularly beneficial for children with anaemia (caused by malnutrition, poor living conditions, convalescence, and malaria), dyspepsia, rickets, enlarged adenoids, and lymphatic disease (PNF 1937, 56). The ONB, therefore, presented the *colonie climatiche* as a solution to health issues affecting the young.

In the case of Fai, the writings of local commentator Antonio Pranzelores offer support for the apparent health benefits of the *colonia* programme. In 1929, he claimed that the city of Trento had been 'enriched by a new source of well-being of sun, light and air for its most needy children' in his text *La porta delle Dolomiti: Zambana – Fai – Paganella*, first published in 1929 and reprinted after his death in 1989 (1989, 109). In addition, Pranzalores praised the health benefits of this *colonia*'s location, which is situated near Alpine forest and pasture land. Located 1,120 metres above sea level, it was sheltered and protected from the elements by pine forest. As Pranzelores enthused: 'From a health-hygiene point of view [the location] is ideal, both for its exposure and for the purity of the air, made balsamic by the resinous emissions of the pine trees .... its altitude .... and for the protection from the wind and the elements' (1989, 108). Indeed, such a position became another recommendation in the *Regolamento*: camps should be situated on 'dry ground, positioned well in relation to wind and sun, far from all causes of pollution' (1937, 13).

The camp in Fai owned 10,000 square metres of land around the building, which gave the boys ample space to exercise and become fighting fit. Such a space offers yet another example of a characteristic of the Fai *colonia* that would later become a requirement for all *colonie* set out in Article 14 of the *Regolamento* (PNF 1937, 18). The all-male environment in Fai, whereby activities to promote discipline, virility, and strength were emphasised,

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contrasted to that in other camps for girls, where the aim was to mould the young female guests into healthy, patriotic mothers (Wanrooij 2002, 602).

In addition to mountain walking, the young guests in Fai would take part in open-air gymnastics in the summer. During the winter, the *colonia* in Fai housed groups of older boys aged 14 to 18 from the *Centurie,* which formed part of the *Avanguardisti*, who learned to ski on the gentle slopes surrounding the building. For the boys from the most disadvantaged families, such activities when coupled with the generous food rations on offer – a typical day would begin with milk, sugar, cocoa and barley for breakfast, a lunch of pasta with 2 eggs and a dinner of rice, pulses and cheese in addition to 600 grams of fruit and vegetables (PNF 1937, 208) – must have been very appealing.

There was also another side, however, to the attractive exercise programme on offer. The *Regolamento* states that children in the camps should not only follow a strict regimen of physical exercise, but of 'hygienic and Fascist consciousness'. Accordingly, instructors were required to teach the importance of a strong body, resistant to illness, but to also 'secure [...] those principles capable of feeding the greatest love for the Homeland' (PNF 1937, 125). Importantly, the view prevailed that the young guests would ignore any teaching about hygiene and health unless they had received appropriate 'spiritual education' and subsequently understood the importance of such matters for the strengthening of the Italian nation. As stated in the 1939 text aimed at the directors and assistants of the *colonie climatiche:*

> It is not enough to teach personal hygiene, respiratory gymnastics, heliotherapy, it is not enough that this is carried out together with all the other hygienic practices, what is needed is that the child is given the conviction that all this is necessary and indispensable for the improvement of the race and the future of the Nation. (Bonadies and Calogiuri 1939, 123)

The *Regolamento* offers details of the methods adopted to achieve this: above all, physical activities were exploited. For example, rather than encouraging exercise that could bore the young boys, such as a simple rotation of the chest, educators were required to use imitation to garner interest in other subjects such as history and geography. Therefore, the boys were instructed to rotate their chests while imitating the movements of someone sowing corn, which would then provide an opportunity to talk about the Battle for Grain, and the *bonifica* of agricultural land (PNF 1937, 126). In another example, instructions for the boys entailed imitating a sailor taking down his ship's sail, which could lead to a discussion about the strength and influence of Italy, due to its position in the Mediterranean (PNF 1937, 127). Therefore, the aim of exercise within the *colonie* was to 'help the natural development of their [the children's] organism' and 'correct [the] organic disfunctions' of their bodies, but also to achieve a harmony between physical education and its 'educational action' (PNF 1937, 119).

In order to address such 'organic disfunctions' the guests in Fai would also be subjected to 'treatments' that were intended to strengthen the body. These included 'heliotherapy', which meant lying undressed in the sun's rays for progressively longer periods; and 'aerotherapy' which saw the young guests being exposed to fresh air for ever longer and cooler portions of time (PNF 1937, 62–3). Specific to the Alpine *colonie* was mountain 'climate therapy' which simply meant spending as much time outdoors as possible in the Alpine climate, avoiding the coldest hours of the day. As the *Regolamento* states, most children sent to the mountain *colonie* were not ill and therefore were not to be treated as such (PNF 1937, 57). Through the administration of climate therapy to the young guests, it was believed that their psyche would also feel the beneficial effects of the mountain climate and thus experience 'a sensation of well-being, of dominance, an increase in one's own

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strength, the vision of obstacles, and the certainty of ultimately overcoming them' (PNF 1937, 56). Therefore, the apparent benefits were not only physical but psychological too.

In their efforts to exploit the psychological benefits of the mountain air, the Fascist regime was able to draw on the history of a movement that had begun towards the end of the nineteenth century which saw stays away from the cities as a solution to social problems. As Marco Cuaz argues, trips to the mountains for the young became common among the Christian apostolate in Europe. Such excursions into nature, known as 'scholastic caravans', hoped to keep the young away from idleness and vice (Cuaz 2006, 369). As Eden McLean highlights, the Fascist regime was not alone in its fear of the negative effects of urbanisation on the health of the nation (2018, 71). Across Europe, there developed a prominent belief that the Alpine climate could somehow improve the human character. As Edward Dickinson argues in his study into the 'Germanization' of the Alps, the message across Europe was generally the same: 'that the mountains had a peculiar beauty, and that they therefore made people better' (2010, 581). In Italy, the Alps and the Mediterranean sea were the 'physical embodiment' of the Fatherland and time spent in this environment not only offered health benefits but allowed children to connect with the 'historical and cultural roots' of the Italian race (McLean 2018, 58; 71).

The opportunity for children to have access to prolonged periods away from the influence of their parents was an important feature of the *colonia* programme. Evidence of a desire to keep the children separated from their families for the duration of their stay is provided by the *Regolamento*, which states that visits from relatives should 'in principle be denied' (PNF 1937, 46). This rule is justified, the guide states, by the desire to limit 'contagion' from infectious disease, but it is not difficult to connect this with the desire to avoid contagion of another kind. The regime was at pains to show how the health benefits of the *colonia* programme should be seen within the wider context of the development of a Fascist nation. Those who merely extol the health benefits of the *colonie* are 'off course', states the *Scuola e nazione per la difesa della razza*. Such people do not understand, it continues, the educational value of measures which 'include the full development of the body, mind and spirit'; and 'they do not understand the directives set by the Duce to achieve the strengthening of the nation' (Bonadies and Calogiuri 1939, 123). This suggests a mistrust of society's ability to fully implement all the educational aims of the *colonia* programme. There is also ample evidence of the *colonia* guests being kept under a close watch; a climate of 'surveillance' was encouraged, with numerous measures adopted solely to 'facilitate' this endeavour (such as the number of beds permitted in each dormitory – PNF 1937, 15), which cannot have been conducive to a particularly warm or welcoming environment. A suggestion that this was the case comes from the testimony of an elderly resident of Fai. She remembers on one occasion the whole village being mobilised in an effort to locate a young *Balilla* who had apparently 'run away' from the *colonia* in Fai.[3]

## The promotion of the newly-acquired territories to unify and Italianise

The main educational aim of the *colonie climatiche* was to instil a 'the greatest love for the Fatherland that unites all' (PNF 1937, 125). Nowhere was this aim more important than in Italy's newly acquired border areas, which until 1918 had been ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today, the mountain path that leads to the *colonia climatica* in Fai still bears the name *Sentiero Ricci*, which alludes to the province's history. Before becoming head of the ONB, General Renato Ricci had risen through the ranks of the Fascist militia and participated in the March on Rome. Most importantly, however, he was a passionate irredentist and had been part of the raid on Fiume led by Gabriele d'Annunzio in 1919. The annexation of predominantly Italian-speaking Trentino, or 'Venezia Tridentina', had been central to the irredentist programme prior to the First

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World War. This vociferous movement led in part to the signing of the 1919 Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which would formalise the Italian annexation of Trentino but also of German-speaking South Tyrol to the north of Trentino, an area that had never been part of the widely accepted irredentist programme.

As Roberta Pergher has highlighted, Italy's new borderlands were areas where Italians felt 'insecure' about their claim to sovereignty (Pergher 2018, ch. 3). Rather than wrestle with the challenges, highlighted by Pergher, of consolidating rule over people who did not identify as Italian, Italian-speaking Trentino provided the Fascist regime with an opportunity. Here, the regime sought to harness the energy of the Italian nationalism of the irredentist movement in the hope that the province could act as a springboard to wider Italianisation and colonisation. The success of the irredentist movement in Trentino meant that Italian nationalism and attempts to defend the national character of Trentino were already deep-rooted. Parallels can be drawn with another 'redeemed' borderland, that of the city of Trieste, which Maura Hametz has described as 'one of the most fiercely Italian nationalist cities' in Italy (Hamitz 2014, 131). Evidence of the regime's intent to build on the history of Italian nationalism in Trentino is offered by the early marches by Fascist squads in Bolzano and Trento, which took place in early October 1922, before the infamous March on Rome. Moreover, as the *ventennio* progressed, the regime sought to make the link between Fascism and Trentino irredentism ever more apparent. This was in part a response to the growing threat of German nationalism, just north of the border (Tonezzer 2009, 490). In 1935, the headline of local Fascist newspaper *Il Brennero* claimed that the key figures of Trentino's irredentist movement would have supported Fascism, leading with the headline 'Battisti, Filzi and Chiesa for the Duce: Present!', as it announced a forthcoming visit by Mussolini to Trento (reported in *Il Brennero*, 3 August 1935). More significantly, the same year saw the erection of an enormous mausoleum to the memory of Italian 'martyr' Cesare Battisti, who, it was erroneously claimed, had been a close friend of Mussolini (Mack Smith 1985, 16). The dictator's message was clear: Trento had been and would continue to be the 'incorruptible, unconquered and impregnable bulwark of the language and the race' (reported in *Il Brennero*, 1 September 1935).

The Fascist regime also used the *colonia* programme as a tool to promote a militarised, 'concrete geographical knowledge of the Homeland' (Rizzo 1931, xxxiii), as seen through the lens of Fascism. Key to this, and a source of pride, were the newly-annexed territories. *La guida del maestro moderno*, published in 1931, shows how the regime hoped that travel and group events could build upon the experience of the First World War, which had led to a 'true fusion' of Italians, and thus 'strengthen a national sentiment' (Rizzo 1931, xxxiii). As the work of Zeev Sternhell has demonstrated, within Fascist ideology the notion that the 'revolutionary factor', that which could truly overthrow the liberal democratic order, was in fact the nation and not the working class, gained traction; the nation could embody, therefore, a unity of all social classes (Sternhell 1987, 380). Accordingly, holidays at the *colonie climatiche* gave Italy's young a chance to travel and familiarise themselves with their country, while encouraging national cohesion: 'We will have continuous occasions to make the boys proud of the Italian nation!' proclaims *Scuola e nazione per la difesa della razza* (Bonadies and Calogiuri 1939, 152). It can be no coincidence that the characteristic flag folding ceremony held for the boys at the *colonia* in Fai took place under a shelter erected at the top of a lookout point that enjoys views of the entire Adige valley stretching out towards South Tyrol and Austria.

An important component of officially endorsed travel under the regime was the desire to bring attention to the newly annexed border areas through tourism and travel. The Italian Touring Club's *Annuario Generale* for the year 1932–3 offers evidence of this intent. Here, there is a list of the annual excursions organised by the club between 1895 and 1932.

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An examination of the years following the First World War shows that on nine out of the fourteen occasions, the excursions organised were to Italy's newly-acquired territories of Trentino-South Tyrol (referred to as Venezia Tridentina in the guide), Venezia Giulia and the linguistically diverse borderland, Valle d'Aosta (Touring Club Italiano 1932). All three areas were home to linguistic minorities who were the subject of compulsory Italianisation by the Fascist regime.[4] Further evidence of the desire to encourage Italian tourism in the newly annexed territories is offered by the *Guida del maestro moderno*. The guide contains a description of a school outing, which just happens to be to the Stelvio Pass that stretches along Italy's new national border and into Trentino-South Tyrol (Rizzo 1931, 37). Within the guide, such excursions are cited as practical examples of history and geography combining to form a valuable 'life experience' for Italy's young Fascists, thus bolstering the strength of the nation (Cammarata in Rizzo 1931, xxxiii).

Roberta Pergher argues that the Italian hotel industry was 'presented as a vehicle for the propagation of Italianness' within the newly annexed areas (Pergher 2018, ch. 2). In this light, the hosting of large groups of Italian-speaking (or at least Italian-dialect speaking) children across the Alps in Italy's ethnic diverse border regions, first in Italian-speaking Fai and but later further north in German-speaking South Tyrol, in locations such as Toblach and Plancios, was an attempt to reinforce if not impose the 'Italian' character of these areas. Similarly, Hardenberg sees the creation of the Stelvio National Park in 1935, which incorporated part of South Tyrol, as an attempt to foster the presence of the Italian state in this newly-acquired border region (2014, 278). Eden McLean also highlights the regime's efforts to establish 'an expansive official presence' that could promote italianness (McLean 2018, 54). Attempts to encourage tourism to Fascist Italy's colonies in northern Africa offer some interesting parallels. As the author of *Il Fascismo nelle colonie* pointed out in 1928, tourism to the African colonies should be encouraged to 'get to know their characteristic way of life, like in any other colonial land, [and] to enjoy the summer and winter climatic stations' (D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota 1928, 159).

## Physical access to the 'Rolando Cembran Colonia Alpina Balilla'

Physical access to the *colonie* was of particular importance to the Fascist regime. Fascist propaganda portrayed the regime as a trailblazing force, able to render previously unreachable areas accessible. A prime example was the draining of the Pontine marshes, which was carried out to make way for agricultural land and gave rise to the concept of reclamation (*bonifica*) that became central to Fascist environmental discourse. Thus, the drive to 'reclaim' or 'tame' the mountains was a common theme of Fascist propaganda. An illustration from *Illustrazione del popolo* dated 18 March 1934, under the title *The Great Works of the Regime,* shows workers hammering determinedly at a mountain face in the Apennines to create a new road linking Geneva to the Po Valley. The caption describes the work as an 'assault on the Apennine rocks', which is typical of the bellicose language used to describe infrastructure projects in Italy's mountainous areas during this time.

The young guests at the Fai *colonia* were predominantly from the urban centres of northern Italy. As a result, it was important that the site be easily accessible from Trento, the nearest city. The 1935 *Guida pratica ai luoghi di soggiorno e di cura d'italia,* published by the Italian Touring Club, draws attention to the growing importance of the village of Fai – described as a 'nest of greenery and coolness' shaped like a 'plunging rampart' overlooking the fertile Adige valley – following the construction of two cable car routes, which had given greater access to the village for visitors from the valley (1935, 29). Moreover, the use of such militaristic language is reminiscent of Mussolini's description of Trentino as the

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'bulwark of the language and race' mentioned previously. As the guide indicates, with the first cable car, Fai had become accessible from the village of Zambana, located just 10.5 kilometres from the city of Trento and reachable by bus (1935, 29). Once in the village the young guests of the camp would be able to walk to the hamlet of Santel from where a second cable car left. In ten minutes, this second cable car would arrive at ||La Tezón, 1,120 metres above sea level. From here the footpath named *Passeggiata Generale Renato Ricci* would take the boys directly to the camp. Such easy accessibility became yet another prerequisite for future camps, as stated by the *Regolamento* (1937, 14). From a propaganda point of view, it gave the Fascist regime the opportunity to promote an image of Fascism as a modernising force, able to tame, or indeed 'colonise', remote areas.

The high-profile opening of the first section of the cable car from Zambana, situated in the valley, to the mountain village of Fai, at which Italian aviator Umberto Nobile was present, gives weight to this argument. The presence of such a prominent figure at the opening ceremony of a cable car in a tiny Alpine village underlines the importance given to the construction of new infrastructure and inextricably, the desire to associate Fascist Italy with innovation and modernity. The speed of the new Zambana-Fai cable car received much praise: 'In less than a quarter of an hour you reach the plateau!' gushed Pranzelores in 1929, adding that Fai had almost become a 'green and gay suburb of Trento' (1989, 43). Sabastiano Brandolini argues that in relation to Italian coastal areas, the intention of the new summer *colonie* was to celebrate the occupation of new territory and the building of new coastal roads and tram and railway lines (1988, 95). The same argument applies here. The establishment of the first ONB Alpine *colonia* in Fai provided the regime with an opportunity to display new infrastructure and thus the 'colonisation' of previously inaccessible mountainous areas. The relatively close proximity of Fai to the urban centre of Trento, when compared to other more remote and difficult to reach villages, also helped cultivate this image.

## Mountain-dwellers as the defenders of the nation

During the Fascist era, an interest in the mountains and their people steadily grew in prominence. The mountains were essential to German notions of 'living space' and the Italian quest for a 'neo-Roman Empire' (Ellis 2001, 49). The Fascist regime was responsible for the establishment of Italy's first four national parks, two of which were situated in the Alps. A lively theoretical debate also developed during the 20 years of the Fascist regime, which pitted conventional 'western' mountaineering, traditionally dominated by the British and the French, against a new 'eastern' school of mountaineering. The latter had the Italian Dolomites as its backdrop and was dominated by Italian veterans of the First World War. Whereas the first school was thought to be exclusively 'instrumental', the new Italian school recognised the 'intrinsic values' of mountaineers. This debate had its roots in Futurism and the elevation of the superman and gave rise to a drive to 'confirm' the Italianness of the eastern Dolomites (Bardelli 2002, 41). As a result. the early 1930s saw the opening by Italian mountaineers of new, very technical routes, on peaks that had previously been the terrain of choice for climbers from beyond the Alps (Pastore 2004, 70). Mountaineers were, therefore, revered and their achievements publicised. For example, Leonardo Emilio Comici, a mountaineer and caver from the newly annexed city of Trieste, made numerous ascents in the eastern Alps during the late 1920s and 1930s. He became a cause célèbre for the Fascist regime and entered politics himself in 1938 as the Fascist *podestà* of Selva in South Tyrol.

In the case of Trentino, this reverence for mountaineers had become entwined with the Italian nationalism of the irredentism movement in a narrative that portrayed mountain dwellers and mountaineers as the natural defenders of the nation. Gradually, this

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discourse would shift towards a more aggressive image of them as the perfect pioneers for Italian imperial ambitions (Armiero 2014, 264). Pranzalores described the inhabitants of Fai as 'good, helpful, intelligent, honest, healthy and active' (1989, 44). Further contemporary publications provide numerous descriptions which seek to celebrate and elevate the character of Italy's mountain folk or *montanari*. The 1932 *Diario dell'Alpinista* invites visitors to the mountains not to 'criticise the beliefs and customs of the montanaro' acting as their guide, 'or seek to convince him to act differently' (Tavecchi 1932, v). Furthermore, the advice for mountaineers finishes with the exclamation '[behave] like this in the mountains, [behave] like this in life!' which is testament to the high regard held for the way of life in the Alps (Tavecchi 1932, v).

This narrative was closely linked to the victories and betrayal of the First World War, and in particular the fighting that had taken place within the newly-annexed 'redeemed lands'. Thus, the elevation and militarisation of mountain folk became yet another layer to the 'education' received by the guests at the Alpine *colonie climatiche.* Teaching instilled the importance of the Alps as the stage for many battles of the First World War. The *colonia* guests read the 1918 'Victory Bulletin' during their stay, which detailed the victorious advance of Italian troops through Trentino (ONB 1931, 65). Their textbook *La Vacanza dei Balilla* also contained glorified accounts of the Battle of the Karst Plateau (Carso in Italian) in the mountains above Trieste and encouraged them to learn the patriotic *La Leggenda del Piave* about the Battle of the Piave River, in the eastern Alps, north of Venice (ONB 1931, 71–3).

The regime's support for war-tourism in these areas provides further evidence of the potency of this narrative. The Stelvio National Park, for example, was created as a 'natural war memorial' (Hardenberg 2014, 278). There are also numerous references to the Great War in the Italian Touring Club's *Guida pratica ai luoghi di soggiorno e di cura d'Italia* published in 1935. To cite just a few examples, the volume describes the villages of the Sugana Valley in Trentino as having 'risen from ruins of war', and Serrada, similarly in Trentino, is described as having numerous footpaths that lead towards 'mountains that were the theatre of war' (Touring Club Italiano 1935, 43; 47). In addition, in 1931, the Italian Touring Club published *La guida dei campi di battaglie*, whose aim was to

> recall the epic deeds of our war; to lead the greatest number of Italians in pious pilgrimage to the sacred places where it took place; and make an austere but fervent glorification of our army. (Touring Club Italiano 1935, 36).

The entire first chapter of this text is dedicated to the heroic fighting in Trentino, conveniently omitting the fact that nearly 60,000 Trentino men had been drafted into the Austrian army (Sørensen 2003, 122). This offers evidence of how war tourism developed to further a Fascist account of the country's history. The link between the Alps and the First World War was inserted, with ever more frequency, into public discourse; by the late 1930s it had become an almost 'obsessive refrain' within Fascist communications (Dogliani 2014, 253). Images of dying soldiers in mountainous scenes dominated Fascist propaganda. Contemporary publications, typified by the *Diario dell'Alpinista*, published in 1932, described mountaineers in increasingly militaristic and glorified terms and the appointment of a First World War veteran to lead the Italian Alpine Club serves to underline this.

## Conclusion

As Paul Corner has argued, 'Almost everywhere Fascism developed, it did so as a response to a particular local situation and assumed certain features as a consequence of that

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situation' (Corner 2006, 196). In Trentino, the Fascist *colonia* programme was no exception. Here, the 'local situation' was a turbulent history of Austrian rule and Italian nationalism that the regime sought to use to its advantage. The regime endorsed travel to Trentino, which included stays at the *colonia climatiche*, to consolidate and advance the Italian identity of this area and to promote national cohesion and pride in a very fragmented country. The working of the Alpine *colonie climatiche* was also a testament to the Fascist regime's fascination with the Alps, which gave rise to a militarisation and glorification of this landscape and its inhabitants, and to its desire to appear as the conqueror of previously inaccessible areas. Finally, in Trentino, the health objectives of the *colonia* programme were built on a strong tradition of regarding mountain stays as a solution to numerous health conditions.

The emphasis the Fascist regime placed on the health and fitness of the young guests of *colonie climatiche* was indicative of the wider desire to transform society and mould the Fascists of the future. However, as part of a broader ambition to instil a Fascist mindset and to mobilise all sections of society around the Fascist cause, the movement was ultimately unsuccessful. Renzo De Felice underlined Fascism's inability to educate the young 'liberally', as a cause of the regime's failure to create a new political class (De Felice 1975, 58). The 'nationalisation' of Italians existed merely in a bureaucratic sense, therefore. There were also vast differences in support between the different sections of society, as Victoria de Grazia (2002) has amply demonstrated.

In Trentino support for Fascism reached its peak in 1935. Following the war, in stark opposition to the centralist aims of Fascism and a testament to their failure, the 1946 De-Gasperi-Gruber agreement was signed, confirming the 1918 border, but laying the foundations for political autonomy for Trentino and South Tyrol. Elena Tonezzer describes the prevalence of a feeling of 'unease' stemming from the Fascist myth of the 'heroic war' among a people who predominantly fought on the side of Austria or suffered as refugees within the Italian state (2009, 49). Nevertheless, the idea of the *colonie* as a socio-medical tool would survive well into the postwar period, which is a tribute to the success of the health aims of the *colonia* programme. Indeed, structures like the one in Fai continued to host children from disadvantaged backgrounds until the 1960s and beyond, a testament to their, at least partial, success.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

## Notes

1. Scheda del soggetto produttore: Comitato provinciale di Trento dell'Opera nazionale Balilla, Trento, 1927 aprile 6–1937 novembre 12, available at: https://www.cultura.trentino.it/archivistorici/soggettiproduttori/920762
2. Scheda del soggetto produttore: Comitato provinciale di Trento dell'Opera nazionale Balilla, Trento, 1927 aprile 6–1937 novembre 12, available at: https://www.cultura.trentino.it/archivistorici/soggettiproduttori/920762
3. Interview with E. Mottes, 12 January 2018.
4. The Italianisation programmes in these areas included measures such as the compulsory introduction of the Italian language in schools, the Italianisation of place names and the mass immigration of Italian speakers.

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## Italian summary

Alla fine degli anni trenta in Italia furono istituiti per i giovani, lungo la costa italiana e nelle località alpine, ambiziosi campi invernali ed estivi, chiamati '*colonie climatiche*'. Qui migliaia di bambini italiani provenienti dai centri urbani del paese furono inviati a sottoporsi ad un regime di aria fresca, di esercizio fisico e di propaganda fascista. Il piccolo villaggio di Fai, nella provincia autonoma di Trento, situato nelle Alpi italiane, ospitò la prima colonia alpina gestita dall'organizzazione giovanile fascista italiana: l'Opera Nazionale Balilla. Attraverso l'esame di una serie di pubblicazioni italiane dell'epoca, questo articolo rivela come la colonia climatica di Fai sia andata oltre il suo mandato ufficiale di 'assistenza climatica per l'infanzia' (PNF 1937, e fornisce prova dello sfruttamento da parte del regime fascista di questi stabilimenti nel recentemente annesso Trentino, quale strumento per unificare e italianizzare, nonché l'utilizzo degli stessi al fine di promuovere una visione militarizzata del paesaggio nazionale.

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