

## ‘Mediterraneo baltico’: Italian Fascist propaganda in Finland (1933–9)

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This article focuses on Italian Fascist propaganda in Finland. Federico Finchelstein (2010) characterised fascism as a global-transnational doctrine with diverse reformulations, ramifications and permutations. Therefore, the Finnish case-study is useful in the analysis of Mussolini’s twin struggle against Soviet Communism and the increasing Nazi threat in the Baltic in the 1930s and 1940s. This article will examine how Mussolini tried to keep in touch with Finnish fascists after Hitler’s rise to power. Organisations and groups like the Lapua Movement and the Finnish Patriotic People’s Movement were inspired by Italian Fascism and the success of the March on Rome encouraged their hope that they could take power in Finland. The ultimate failure of Finnish fascism has ensured the continued marginalisation of fascism as a research subject in the Finnish academic tradition. Yet, as Roger Griffin suggests, studies of peripheral and failed fascisms can also contribute important insights for understanding both the ‘centre’ of fascism, as well as modern nationalist extremist movements. Fascism as an international political phenomenon cannot be understood from rigidly national interpretative frameworks.

**Keywords:** Fascism; Nazism; Finland; propaganda; anti-communism; nationalism.

### Introduction

The question of what constitutes ‘Scandinavia’ is ambiguous at best. Finland has been at times identified separately from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, while at others it has been grouped together with them (Briesacher 2012). The Nordic countries, in contrast, could be defined as a cultural regional identity made up of Scandinavia, plus Finland and Iceland (Almgren, Hecker-Stampehl and Piper 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Centuries of Swedish rule over Finland forged close cultural ties and the Finns like to think of themselves as Scandinavians. For example, Hjalmar Procope, Finnish foreign minister from 1927 to 1931, described his country as ‘economically, politically, and geographically Scandinavian’ (Ahonen 1993). In addition to this, the interpretation of the Finnish Civil War as an anti-Russian and anti-Bolshevik struggle, was frequently integrated with a perception of Finland as an ‘outpost’ of Western culture and as a borderland defender against Eastern ‘barbarians’ (Backlund 1983). For centuries, the Finns had kept a fearful eye on their huge eastern neighbour while taking pride in their self-proclaimed position as the last outpost of Western civilisation against Eastern barbarism (Ahonen 1993).

It goes without saying that Italy was further away from these Nordic lands than Germany. The diffusion of German cultural tendencies in Finland was evident, especially as regards German science, technology, higher education and popular culture (Backlund 1983). Italy and the Nordic

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countries, in contrast, had been separated for centuries by central Europe: Germany, France and Great Britain ruled east-west commercial cooperation and they blocked Italian ambitions of developing any north-south route. Italian Fascism tried to break this barrier but faced a question of method. The theoretical but unrealistic Fascist International project was the answer and this universalisation of Fascism is generally held to have been Mussolini's mistake.

According to Bauerkämper's studies, for example, historians have generally underestimated the role and impact of fascist transnationalism. In particular, Italian and German historiography has been of the opinion that international fascism was impossible, unthinkable and contradictory. In fact, after the March on Rome, the Italian experience became a model for different fascist movements, particularly for the Nazis (Bauerkämper 2010). Moreover, the trope of *latinitas* (a linguistic and cultural metaphor mixing the Roman and the Catholic heritage), used in contrast to Germanic culture, had a transnational horizon that reached as far as South America (Kallis 2016).

Austria is clearly another borderline case in which several fascist movements fuelled a parallel and comparative debate on the nature of fascism. As a matter of fact, the Austrian case is presented as transnational in the field of corporatism (Costa Pinto 2012). Recent scholarship in comparative fascist studies has also begun to uncover another rich case study in the transnational dimension of fascism. Nonetheless, much still has to be done to be able to accurately map the diffusion of both fascism and Nazism through the creation of the many interwar movements (Griffin 2018). Many scholars have shown us that 'international fascism' failed, while some experiences of 'transnational fascism' survived after the end of the Second World War. Francisco Franco's dictatorship, for example, did not end until 1975. This means that while 'international fascism' has never managed to find common standards (leadership, ideology, coordination, etc.), 'transnational fascism' was able to travel through the world and adapt itself to the local environment. Transnationally, 'a genuine fascist wind blew across interwar European state borders' (Finchelstein 2010). Therefore, before being studied globally, fascism must be analysed locally, taking into consideration ethnic, linguistic and economic matters. Then, it would be useful to understand how and why fascism could spread beyond the national borders of a certain country. This is the real (and experimental) essence of what we could define as 'geo-fascism'.

In general, the interest in fascism in the Nordic countries is due to the importance that German National Socialism gave to the 'nordic race', its mythology and its medieval culture (Larsen, Hagtvet and Myklebust 1980). However fascism did not become very popular in the Nordic countries and it did not achieve power anywhere (the only exception was Quisling's late experience in Norway). It is also true that, in Denmark, the national socialist party was already represented in parliament by 1938 (Poulsen 1970). Adam Holm, for example, explored the relationship between Danish radical conservatism and right-wing authoritarianism in the inter-war years (Holm 2001), while John Lauridsen described the parabola of Danish Nazism (Lauridsen 2002). In particular, Claus Bundgård Christensen investigated the activity of the Danish SS (Christensen 1998) and Martin Heiberg, emphasising the importance of fascist transnationalism, analysed Italy's intervention in the Spanish Civil War (Heiberg 2001). Salvatore Garau has described the political and ideological influence of both the Italian and German variants of fascism on local Norwegian fascist groups (Garau 2015). Some other Norwegian authors, such as Terje Emberland and Hans Dahl (without neglecting both Italian and German dictatorships), described Scandinavian fascism very well.

Erich Wärenstam (1972) and Heléne Lööv (1990) pioneered the study of Nazism in Sweden while Lena Berggren (1999) did some specific studies on the Swedish extreme right-wing and its connections to Italian Fascism and German Nazism. She evidenced some exceptions (such as Per Engdahl), but her work generally concludes that Swedish fascist groups were more oriented

towards Hitler's ideas. In particular, Engdahl was more oriented towards Italy and fascism, whereas Elof Eriksson was more attracted to Hitler (Ferrarini 2019). The origins of the Finnish Lapua Movement (*Lapuan liike*), were connected to a nationalist ideology, while Hitler's Nazism demonstrated the racial element of fascist ideology (Corni 1989). Collotti added that racism was an instrument in identifying a common enemy and this was relevant both in the German and the Italian cases (Collotti 1989). In Finland, Italian fascism was initially more successful and probably many Finnish fascist groups, at least during the 1920s, had a greater affinity towards it than towards its German rival.

### Finnish-Italian relations

Mussolini's interest in the Nordic countries, at least until the early 1920s, was really secondary. *Il Duce* was too busy creating advantageous conditions for the Locarno Treaties for which relations with Great Britain were of the utmost importance. At that time, Mussolini was not an expert on diplomacy, so he had to trust the old liberal and nationalist diplomats. In the meantime, however, he trained a new class of fascist diplomats who were prepared to endorse his personal decisions and, after the Locarno Treaties (1925), Mussolini's foreign policy became more dynamic and aggressive (Carocci 1969). De Caprariis has agreed with this interpretation:

By supporting a loyal fascist network abroad ... *il Duce* hoped to strengthen his grip on the diplomatic corps, which sided almost entirely with the traditional ruling élites. Besides, the Fasci could effectively fight anti-fascist activities abroad and inject an ideological note into Italian international relations. In this phase, Mussolini's foreign policy remained unclear. Overall, he liked to keep his options open (De Caprariis 2010).

Later Mussolini realised that the Baltic area was important too: Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, but also Northern Germany, Finland and Sweden had strategic significance. However, Italy had two potential competitors there: the first was the Soviet Union and Bolshevism, the second was Germany and the increasing threat of Nazism. Without fully appreciating the opportunity to spread Fascism in the Nordic countries, *il Duce* wasted time and let Germany engage in a silent but ambitious campaign of political, economic and cultural expansion.

However, since its escape from the Red Revolution in 1918, Finland enjoyed an exceptional interest among Italians. In 1919, a significant number of Finnish officers joined the training service in Italy. Further visits to Italy were made in the 1920s and two first-rank Finnish generals were invited to a study trip by the Fascist regime in 1933 (Nevakivi 2006). The education of Finnish officers in Italy acquired a particular ideological dimension after the March on Rome. Several extreme right-wing men like Lieutenant-Colonel Arne Somersalo, the very first head of the Finnish airforce, succeeded in visiting Italy. Somersalo and his fellows were potential top leaders of a pro-fascist Finnish movement and they were received by Mussolini. In fact, since its beginnings, the Finnish radical right had been inspired by the Italian example. In Finland, 'fascism became a word of fashion meaning the anti-communist fight' (Nevakivi 2006).

At the end of 1929, Attilio Tamaro was appointed ambassador (*ministro plenipotenziario*) to Finland and went to Helsinki.<sup>2</sup> Being one of the most important representatives of Italian irredentism in Trieste, he declared that he shared the Finnish motivations for independence. But Tamaro admitted, during an interview to the newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet*, that his knowledge about Finland came from English and German books, together with the Italian translation of the Finnish poem *Kalevala*.<sup>3</sup> He was particularly fascinated by Finnish nationalism and their sense of freedom. In fact, some years before, Mussolini had supported the Finnish struggle against Bolshevism. It should not be considered a mystery that Italy sold weapons to Finland during the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

Only in 1930 did the Italian *plenipotenziario* assert that Germany was still the most influential country in Finland and that young students were fascinated by Nazism. The old right-wing generations were more oriented towards fascism, while the new generations were more attracted by Hitler. These groups included the Academic Karelia Society (*Akateeminen Karjala-Seura*, AKS) which demanded the annexation of Karelia. That region, under Soviet control, became the main vehicle for extreme Finnish nationalism, but the AKS did not become a mass movement. The AKS wanted to create a great and powerful Finland and the project of a 'Greater Finland' included all the neighbouring areas inhabited by linguistic and cultural relatives of the Finns:

The most notable gain for the nascent Finnish state was the area of Petsamo, a slice of territory between Norway and Soviet Russia in the far north. ... Attempts to support the anti-Bolshevik uprisings of Finnic inhabitants in Russian Karelia and Ingermanland came to naught, however (Silvennoinen 2015).

Moreover, the AKS expressed open hostility towards the Swedish-speaking minorities (Ahonen 1993) and overestimated Germany's military strength. In other words, the pro-German Finnish students and organisations like the AKS dreamt of a war against the Soviet Union with Hitler's assistance (Backlund 1983). At the end of the 1920s, in contrast, Tamaro reported that Finland was particularly fascinated by the UK because of increasing commerce. Many British tourists were visiting Finland, and Tamaro spoke about a real 'anglophilia'. It is also interesting to note that there was a belief among Finns that the United States of America could defeat the Soviet Union and destroy communism.<sup>5</sup>

But, according to Tamaro, Finnish foreign policy seemed self-interested because it hoped to achieve political benefits for nothing. The Finnish government did not make formal alliances but it declared, for example, that it would protect Estonia in the event of a Soviet invasion. Finland adopted the same attitude to Poland even though they shared a defence problem. Tamaro reported that the Finnish upper class was very proud and xenophobic. Therefore, he added, Finland was very nationalist too. The Italian diplomat suggested that the Finnish government's apparent lack of planning could lead to the outbreak of conflicts. Finland (in contrast to Germany, Russia, Sweden, etc.) was a small power but the Finns did not seem to realise it. In addition to this, Tamaro concluded by saying that Finnish diplomats became particularly efficient and vibrant thanks to alcohol.<sup>6</sup>

When, after the outbreak of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in 1935, sanctions were imposed on Italy by the General Assembly of the League of Nations, Finland announced that they were ready to accept all the sanctions, if decided unanimously (Nevakivi 2006). The image of Italy had suffered in Finnish opinion and only the deputies of the ultra-right Finnish Patriotic People's Movement (*Isänmaallinen kansanliike*, IKL) gave their support in parliament to the aggressor (Nevakivi 2006). Until 1939, however, many Finns preserved their pro-Italian feelings and cultural relations were developed even more assiduously than before (Nevakivi 2006).

### Italy 'against' Germany

Italian Fascism held the monopoly in inspiring the Finnish right wing for a dozen years until Hitler's rise to power began to attract attention in the country, because Finns still had sentimental memories of the German contribution to the 1918 liberation war. Moreover, they believed that they could count on the German anti-Bolshevik stance. Despite this the Italians preserved their ideological influence over many Finnish politicians, who preferred Mussolini to Hitler because of the Führer's aggressive behaviour (Nevakivi 2006). The Weimar Republic was politically and

economically stymied all over the European continent and the east–west axis was closed, as was the Mediterranean axis. Northern Europe was the only path open and the Nordic area was thus a good option to overcome German isolation without antagonising powerful rivals. In fact, Germany facilitated and improved its relations with countries that could be potentially dominated via economic and cultural penetration. The Nordic Society (*Nordische Gesellschaft*), for example, was a hyper-nationalist German association, particularly interested in race, eugenics and Nordic culture (Briesacher 2012; Karcher 2012).<sup>7</sup> Italy, in contrast, had the *Società Dante Alighieri*. Between 1922 and 1943, the Nordic Society had a presence in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, with 11 foreign sections.<sup>8</sup> This meant that the Italo-German competition was intense, especially in the field of cultural diplomacy.

This rivalry was probably one of the reasons why Mussolini had sent Tamaro to Hamburg. He was an expert in German cultural and political subjects, after being an important leader of the so-called *irredentismo* in Trieste and a news correspondent in Vienna after the First World War. In 1927, as Italian consul in Hamburg, he wrote a long, detailed paper about German society. He reported surprising features of the country and was strongly critical of the Weimar Republic, whose system of social democracy he portrayed as the root cause of every problem. Tamaro depicted a German society dominated by alcoholism, prostitution and moral corruption. He described Hamburg as a kind of ‘sin city’ where even the police were complicit. According to Tamaro, sexual freedom, divorce, pornography and abortion were a social plague. He was astonished that there was no social control, no moral rules to be respected and that even homosexuality was tolerated. In addition, the educational system seemed dangerous to him. Boys and girls studied together in the same classrooms, even practising sport together in a state of near undress. Tamaro said that the situation was the fruit of socialism and communism. He did not regard Germany as a potentially good ally, at least not under these conditions. He believed that hypocrisy was as common in Germany as in Great Britain. Bankers and rich businessmen hid their lifestyle during the day, enjoying private parties at night. Tamaro’s conservative mentality is further demonstrated by his description of how domestic workers and waiters had managed to gain some rights. Because of Bolshevism, he wrote, work had become regarded as a torment instead of a duty.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, Paolo Emilio Pavolini, the famous Italian philologist who had translated the *Kalevala*, began to collaborate with the university of Helsinki. In particular, he was sent there to try to stem German cultural and political influence (Santoro 2012). It is not difficult to imagine that Mussolini wanted to contain German and Russian interference. German was the first foreign language for the most educated Finns and many of them studied in Germany. However, after Hitler’s rise to power, the Italo-Finnish relationship intensified and the IKL was led into the Italian sphere (Rizzi 2016).

### The matter of race

The Montreux Fascist Conference (1934) was a metaphorical Brenner Pass between the Latin and Germanic *Weltanschauung*. The matter of race broke the bloc of the European right-wing groups and above all, it brought the failure of the ‘Fascist International’ project. The disagreement of Montreux was a less visible but still relevant factor. In fact, the idea of race was the result of a reaction against modernity, which blurred the ancient and pure roots of mankind (Israel 2010).

For example, Mussolini certainly believed in the superiority of Latin culture over Teutonic barbarity (Robertson 1988). In contrast, the *völkisch* movement’s focus on Northern Europe, in particular Norway and Sweden, was motivated by the assumption that Scandinavia was the original spiritual, biological and cultural centre of the Germanic or Nordic race (Puschner 2013).

However, as Mosse (1964) demonstrated, there was a strong and fundamental connection between spiritual, political and social factors in the Germanic world. The Germanic 'redemption' had to pass through three main phases. The first one was already completed by the Lutheran reform. The second was started by Romanticism and the third had to be completed by the triumph of Germanic culture. At first Mussolini did not consider race to be relevant except perhaps as a matter for demographic and migration policy. He was convinced that Italian people had to improve, to become a dominant race, and this could be defined as 'racial nationalism'. But this improvement was social, not biological. War, for example, could be a good way to improve the Italian people. Only later during the 1930s did some Italian scientists present their earlier studies on eugenics. They were probably encouraged by the increasing popularity of these topics in Germany, the United States and Northern Europe (Israel 2010).

Several foreign fascist groups had been studying Mussolini's doctrine for years and in the conflict of the Montreux Fascist Conference, it was apparent that Mussolini's fascism was not complete. Some Nordic members of the 'International Fascist' network, such as Vidkun Quisling and Frits Clausen, emphasised that Italian fascism lacked a precise theory on race. This absence allowed Hitler to achieve supremacy in the fascist universe. Israel suggested three potential factors which led Italian fascism to become racist and, later, anti-semitic: the Lateran Treaty; the imperialistic policy of the 1930s; and the Pact of Steel (Israel 2010). Michele Sarfatti, on the other hand, argued that the path towards state anti-semitism was a three-phase process that had started at the very beginning of Mussolini's regime: the first phase was to attack Jewish equality, the second to attack Jewish rights and the third culminated in the assault on Jewish lives (Sarfatti 2000).<sup>10</sup>

At any rate questions of race were important among the different Nordic fascist groups. This was the reason why the majority of those groups chose the Nazi interpretation around the middle of the 1930s (Corni 1989). For example, Quisling explained Bolshevism's role in history as a Slavic assault against the Nordic race (Garau 2013). Moreover, from 1935 to 1945, the *Ragnarok* circle (*Ragnarok* was the most radical national socialist publication in Norway) claimed that particular virtues were inherent in the ancient Norse race (Emberland 2015). In contrast, the Italian fascists had an ideological issue with Nordic racial supremacy. In fact, they proclaimed their own Latin race to be at least equal to the Nordic (Garau 2015).

During the 1920s, the matter of race was not very important in Finland, though nationalistic hatred towards Slavic and Swedish people did exist. Consequently, this was both a racial and ethnic matter. Kaarlo Hildén, for example, was a Finnish anthropologist who denied the existence of 'pure' races. He wrote that physical and biological characteristics, rather than language or culture, measured racial origins. He was convinced that when the Finns arrived in Finland they came from the south and were already a mixture of East Baltic and Nordic elements. Not only did Hildén place the Finns among the Nordic people rather than the Eastern Slavs, but he also rejected the Nazi concept of racial purity (Backlund 1983). When the Nazis seized power in Germany, Scandinavia and Finland fell under the ambit of Nordic racial superiority. Bertil Lundman, for example, was a professor of physical anthropology at the university of Uppsala and he was one of Scandinavia's foremost anthropologists. He wrote that it was possible to classify the basic Nordic stock into several geographically defined substocks: a south-western type, usually of thin build (which, naturally, most closely resembles the more Nordic areas of north-eastern England and south-eastern Scotland), a medium type, somewhat shorter, in the central provinces, and a very tall type in northern central Sweden and the adjacent parts of northern Sweden and Norway. Finns were defined also as an East-Baltic race (Lundman 1962).

However the term 'Nordic' was understood differently by the Finns and the Nazis. The former considered 'Nordic' the equivalent of 'Scandinavian' while the latter used it to signify a unifying



racial element (Backlund 1983). Lundman described the temperament of the most common northern types as follows:

... reserved, usually taciturn, straightforward, dependable, serene, magnanimous, clean in body (and home), with a strong inclination towards sports, nature and industry. The outlook for the continued survival of Northern man in his ancient homeland is now disturbingly uncertain, even disregarding possible political dangers from the East (and perhaps South-East). Loss of the basic Northern stock would destroy the basis of the entire Northern character as it expresses itself in state, society, morals and culture (Lundman 1962).

The concept of race, therefore, is the projection of a specific ideology or an idea that needs empirical representations to explain itself. There is no common heritage of objective knowledge or a fundamental or dogmatic principle which can balance all these theories and interpretations. After considering several national and cultural explanations, it is impossible to reach anything more than a general and vague idea of the concept (Israel 2010).

### The Finnish Civil War and the Lapua Movement

In 1906, after the Russian defeat by Japan, the tsar was obliged to accede to Finnish demands for autonomy and constitutional reform. But the Russian government soon reverted to its former policy of repression. Some of the leaders of the movement for independence were imprisoned or exiled. Later, in the turmoil of the Russian and Bolshevik revolutions, Finland reached total independence. It was at once flung into the civil war between Reds and Whites (Nissen 1983).

In fact, before 1918 the Red Guards held most of southern Finland under military control. The White Army, led by Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim and eventually aided by a German intervention, gradually pushed them further south-east (Karvonen 1988). Therefore, the 1918 Finnish Civil War divided the nation into two hostile camps. For the victorious White Army, the war represented a struggle to secure the nation's independence from the Russian empire, declared less than two months before the outbreak of the civil war. Instead, for the Reds, the civil war was a class war and the question of the Finnish independence was neither the immediate cause nor the chief issue of the war (Karvonen 1988). The consequences of the civil war included the presence of a group of exiled communists in the Soviet Union and a sense of gratitude towards Germany. However, the deviations in Finnish politics from liberal and pluralistic democracy demonstrated the difference between Finland and the other Nordic countries, as when the Communist Party was outlawed, or during the early 1930s when the Lapua Movement (semi-fascist and extreme rightist) was widely sanctioned (Nissen 1983). The Lapua Movement became a mass movement after boycotting a Communist meeting in Lapua in November 1929. It emerged as a continuation of the 'Whites' War of Freedom': Lapua, located in the middle of the Gulf of Bothnia, was the heartland of the White Army of 1918. At its first meeting, the movement proclaimed the 'Law of Lapua', whose goal was the continued existence of an independent Finland and the destruction of Marxism, a task that was deemed to be the will of God. The Finnish military sympathised with the movement and industrialists provided funds for it (Ahonen 1993).

Lapua was more than a symbolic site. The Lapua Movement was the only radical nationalist phenomenon to attract wide popular support in inter-war Finland, partly because it was the continuation of a war which was thought of in terms of the *vittoria mutilata* of Italian nationalist myth – the dissatisfaction with the territorial settlement after the First World War (Karvonen 1988). It had yielded only a republican, parliamentary government, characterised by political bickering, and the dashing of irredentist hopes in the 1920 Treaty of Dorpat (Tartu), which defined Finland's borders with Soviet Russia and Estonia. The radicals considered that treaty an abject betrayal of the nationalist cause (Silvennoinen 2015). The Finnish composer, Yrjö Kilpinen, an

influential anti-communist intellectual, was convinced that the Lapua Movement promised a spiritual and national rebirth. In 1930, Kilpinen wrote to the German publisher Hans Tischer that the Lapua Movement was a vital ethical counter-reaction to materialistic communism, which respected neither traditional values nor the Finnish soul (Silvennoinen 2015). It was based on clear and simple principles: fatherland, religion and family – certainties that fed a strong desire to return to the ancient agrarian society of the ‘farmer-warrior’ model (Silvennoinen 2015).

The Lapua Movement, despite being nebulous and heterogeneous, was the best-known fascist-style organisation in Finland. Pertti Ahonen has described it as a ‘proto-fascist’ movement. While it could be argued that the movement employed fascist ideas, it was only the IKL that explicitly borrowed from its Italian and German counterparts. According to Vesa Vares, the Lapua Movement was unable to borrow from any foreign movement because it was extremely nationalist and populist. Moreover, its particular interpretation of nationalism emphasised the image of Finland as a Christian nation opposing anti-religious Bolshevism (Koskelainen and Hjelm 2017). The leader of the Lapua Movement was Vihtori Kosola, the self-styled ‘Mussolini of the North’. But being erratic, hesitant and prone to bouts of drinking, he never became a strong leader (Silvennoinen 2015). In 1931, a German jurist, Joachim-Dieter Bloch, called him ‘Lappo-König’ (Bloch 1931). However, his leadership was over by 1932 and he died in 1936 (Silvennoinen 2015). Kaarlo Reetrikki Kares, one of the Lutheran clergymen leaders of the movement, said that Kosola had been chosen by God to lead the Finnish nation and that he was directed by the voice of God (Koskelainen and Hjelm 2017). For all practical purposes, the Lapua Movement was concerned with direct action and in this way it was similar to the Italian *squadrismo*, which largely disappeared (or at least became covert) towards the mid-1920s. But the Italian *squadristi* (for example, the Futurist artists) used *squadrismo* as a sign of modern dynamism. The Lapua Movement, instead, was actually anti-modernist. It was originally generated and later moderated by particular veins of ruralism and it was the mixture of ruralism and nationalism that pointed the way to the eventual normalisation of the movement into parliamentary discourse.<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the 1920s, Italian ambassador Tamaro supported the Lapua Movement and suggested to Dino Grandi, Italian minister of foreign affairs, that the leaders of the Finnish organisation should be trained in Rome. The Italian government secretly helped the movement in order to compete with German (and also Polish) influence in the Baltic area (Cuzzi 2006). The Lapua Movement shared several common elements with Italian Fascism, such as apocalyptic visions about the threat of the Soviet Union, anti-democratism, anti-parliamentarianism, opposition to the French Enlightenment, the French Revolution and universal fraternity (here it is not difficult to make a connection to opposition to Freemasonry). Italian Fascism was greatly admired in Finland for two main reasons: firstly for its leadership principle and secondly for the importance that it gave to religion (Alapuro 2004). A fluid definition of communism as something ranging from anti-religious to a religion in itself was not unique to the Lapua Movement but common in the Finnish right wing of the 1920s. Marx, they claimed, had founded the socialist religion, whose god was Lenin. Therefore socialism, Marxism and communism became a heresy and the political enemy became a spiritual enemy (Koskelainen and Hjelm 2017). But, unlike Mussolini and Hitler, who tried to create a new secular religion, the Lapua Movement was strictly Christian, in particular Lutheran revivalist (Koskelainen and Hjelm 2017).

### **From the Lapua Movement to the IKL**

The heyday of the Lapua Movement was at hand in July 1930 with its organisation of the so-called ‘Peasant March’, consciously modelled after the March on Rome (Silvennoinen 2015). The



'Peasant March' was a dignified peaceful demonstration. Nevertheless, its 12,000 disciplined troops left no-one uncertain of the movement's sheer physical power. In fact, acts of violence during the summer of 1930 generated criticism of the Lapua Movement beyond the left wing. The fact that the Agrarian Party gradually turned against it was to prove significant (Karvonen 1988). Although at times a seizure of power was not out of the question, the movement ultimately failed and in 1932, after an attempted coup d'état in Mäntsälä, it was dissolved (Alapuro 2004). In 1933, the Italian foreign office was still interested in the Lapua Movement and some observers considered it part of the universal fascist cause: the 'lappists' had adopted the Italian fascists' new uniform (black shirt and blue tie) and the Roman salute.<sup>12</sup> Mussolini's Comitati d'Azione per l'Universalità di Roma (CAUR) network began its action in Finland in the very same time as the Nazi takeover in Germany and its activities were entrusted to the IKL. Ezio Maria Gray was an important CAUR representative (Nevakivi 2006).

In July 1933, the German foreign office described the Lapua Movement (*Lappobewegung* or *Lappo-Bewegung*) as a peasant organisation located in Ostrobothnia.<sup>13</sup> While the Movement presented itself as a spontaneous popular initiative of pious peasants defending religion and homeland, it was in fact financed by industrial and banking interests. From the very beginning, demonstrations and political violence were components in the Lapua Movement's activities (Backlund 1983). On 12 July 1933 Somersalo went to Berlin in order to deliver a dagger to Hitler. The dagger was adorned with a swastika and the Führer's name.<sup>14</sup> The Finnish officer was the editor-in-chief of the Lapua Movement's newspaper, *Ajan Suunta*, and some weeks later, in August 1933, he was received at Hitler's mountain retreat at Obersalzberg.<sup>15</sup> The *Ajan Suunta* hailed Hitler's rise to power with glowing praise, writing that he had taken command of the anti-communist struggle (Backlund 1983). Despite this, until mid-1939, German policy towards Finland remained modest, limited to expanding friendship towards Germany in Finland and to exploiting a good commercial relationship. The problems that characterised German-Finnish relations under Nazism had their roots in the 1920s. Diplomatic relations had been broken off in 1918, when Finland had adopted a pro-Entente policy, and strained in 1922 and 1926 by the German-Soviet Rapallo and Berlin Treaties (Backlund 1983). In addition, Nazism triumphed in Germany just as the Finnish variety of fascism appeared to have spent most of its resources (Backlund 1983).

Neither the Lapua Movement nor the IKL ever found a leader who had the appeal that was radiated by the real fascist dictators of the day (Silvennoinen 2015). Ideologically, the IKL inherited much from the Lapua Movement and was founded only a few months after the Mäntsälä rebellion. Its aim was to carry on the mission of the Lapua Movement. However, despite the fact that several Lapua leaders became dominant in the IKL, the new movement began to deviate from the original Lapua interpretation in many respects. For example, the IKL managed to create an efficient organisational system, without any informal contact (Karvonen 1988). While Lapua lacked a clear programme, the IKL had a detailed plan covering both theoretical and practical aspects of politics. Anti-communism, anti-parliamentarianism, corporatism, nationalism (against both Russians and Swedes), the leader principle and religiosity were the pillars of the IKL's programme. It called for the creation of a nationalist, militant, anti-socialist and anti-parliamentary state peopled by 'new men' (Backlund 1983). While the Lapua Movement never gained power, many of the IKL's members entered parliament in 1933 (as had occurred, for example, in Germany at the very beginning of the 1930s). In addition, the IKL engaged in propaganda against Freemasonry and Jews (Bogdan and Hammer 2016). Active Nazism in the 1930s was totally negative towards Freemasonry and Erich Ludendorff's attacks on Freemasonry in Germany also spread to Finland. Different political movements such as the AKS and the IKL published lists of Freemasons and issued publications with negative propaganda against them (Bogdan and Hammer 2016). This

was a potential advantage for Mussolini's anti-masonic strategy and confirmation that the IKL was closer to Italian fascism too. But these issues were not at the core of IKL ideology and had never been of any traditional importance in Finnish politics – rather, they show the influence of German Nazism. Nevertheless, in 1933 the IKL formed an electoral alliance with the conservatives (Karvonen 1988). Unlike the Lapua Movement, the IKL was very much based on the backing of the upper middle class, who were an educated and influential audience. The IKL helped in creating a favourable impression with many Italian travellers who came to Finland, especially after 1934. One of them, for example, was Alessandro Pavolini, a correspondent for *Corriere della Sera* and an agent for the CAUR (Nevakivi 2006). By early 1933 the fascist Lapua Movement still lived on, in its new guise of the IKL. It would be among the most fervent admirers of Nazism in Finland (Backlund 1983) and there was some limited contact between German and Finnish fascisms. Their propaganda was marked by references to the activities of the other as models, or arguments in favour of imitation.

In Finland, this was a further expression of German cultural domination. During the German Reichstag elections of 1932, a Nazi publicist, Hans Hauptmann, wrote *Erneuerung aus Blut und Boden. Die Lappobewegung der finnischen Bauernschaft, ein Weg zur Befreiung von Bolschewismus (Renewal from Blood and Soil. The Lapua Movement of the Finnish Peasantry, a Route to Liberation from Bolshevism)*, published by J. F. Lehmann Verlag). The purpose was to rally the German peasantry to emulate their northern fellows and defend their 'race' against the 'asiatic pest' (Backlund 1983). In the summer of 1935, however, the Italian foreign office sent Ezio Maria Gray (as a representative of the National Fascist Party) to Helsinki to deliver two busts of Mussolini to the board of the IKL.<sup>16</sup> The mission was expensive but fruitful because the IKL donated a real bear (the animal was the symbol of the IKL) in return. The bear was a gift for Mussolini's children, Romano and Annamaria, but instead the dictator decided to place it in the zoo in Rome.<sup>17</sup> Two years later, Anna Maria Speckel published a book entitled *Mediterraneo baltico*. Her work was the result of several cultural 'missions' around the Nordic countries during the 1930s and dealt with the comparison between the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea. In the later 1930s, the Italian government invited several Finnish journalists to Italy, for propaganda purposes: in return for this 'cultural vacation', they had to write pro-Fascist articles. The long 'guest list' included Linda Pylkkänen (*Uusi Suomi*), Aarne Kauthia (*Hämeen Sanomat*), Anna Kaila Snellman (*Huvfudstadsbladet, Helsingfors Journalen* and *Suomen Kuvalehti*), Yrjö Suomalainen (*Uusi Suomi*), Veli Siikala (*Pohjolan Sanomat*), Risto Sihtola (*Uusi Suomi, Karjala, Suomen Kuvalehti*), Aino Acktè-Jalander, Georg Henrik von Wright and Gorran Schildt.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Nordic historians have argued that the Italian Fascist model in Finland became quite popular but that it was not strong enough to take power or overtake the Nazi German interpretation of fascism, for generational and other social reasons. In other words, ultimately thanks to the Scandinavian structures and institutions, fascist intrusions remained limited in Finland despite the attempt at revolution in 1918 (Alapuro 2004). It appears that agrarians and farmers at first moved Finland towards a fascist dictatorship, but later contributed to the salvation of the Scandinavian institutional system. In Finland, a strong Communist Party emerged, while the Farmers' Party drifted towards the extreme right. In the 1930s, Finland came close to a fascist takeover, but the farmers saw the risk and again allied with the Social Democrats (Stråth 2004).

On the other hand, many scholars did not recognise the impact of the Lapua Movement on Finnish foreign affairs. The movement's intention was to form an anti-Soviet alliance with

Poland and the Baltic states and to launch a joint attack against the Russians. The indirect influence of the movement on Finnish foreign relations was considerable but its goals conflicted with those of the Finnish foreign office (Ahonen 1993). Even if the Italo-German relationship was unclear and ambiguous, the Soviet threat was considered more dangerous. In fact, most historians have focused on external factors in their explanations of Finland's interwar diplomatic isolation. Most have argued that Finland's geographical position, coupled with great power rivalries in the unstable international system of the 1920s and 1930s, left the country in a vulnerable condition. But the country's domestic developments had a strong impact on its foreign relations too. This impact was particularly relevant between late 1929 and early 1932 when the Lapua Movement played a prominent role in Finnish society (Ahonen 1993). However, the IKL, which had been the strongest Nordic fascist party in the 1930s and 1940s, had been outlawed in 1944 as a consequence of the peace treaty with the USSR.

The postwar European political and ideological scenario became very different, in particular because of American propaganda and anti-communism. German SS veterans did not give up their own interpretation of pan-Europe and were interested in reactivating the connections between the various national groupings of SS veterans. These links insisted on the creation of a third power bloc, one which would be both anti-American and anti-Soviet. In other words, the nationalist forces in postwar Germany had developed the conception of a '*Nation Europa*' (Tauber, 1959).<sup>19</sup> The most important legacy of Mussolini's 'Fascist International' was the rise of the various 'black internationals' that arose in Europe during the Cold War (Cuzzi 2006) – for example, the International of Malmö (1951) and the New European Order (1951).<sup>20</sup> This is also the reason why we can assert that while the end of the Second World War implied the end of the fascist dictatorships in Europe, it did not mean the end of fascism as an ideology (Albanese and del Hierro, 2016).

### Notes on contributor

Fabio Ferrarini has a PhD in History, Culture and Social and Institutional Theories. His studies are focused on propaganda, cultural diplomacy and international fascism. His publications include *Il peccato originale della diplomazia culturale italiana 1889–1943* (2017); *Cattolici e protestanti contro Alfred Rosenberg. Spunti di ricerca sulla creazione di un 'culto neopagano' 1933–1945* (2019); *Mussolini och den nya demokratierna. Gli ammiratori svedesi del 'duce' 1922–1943* (2019). He speaks Italian (native), English, German, and Norwegian.

### Notes

1. The word 'Fennoscandia' is probably the most apt to identify our geographical area of interest: 'A land mass in north-western Europe comprising Scandinavia, Finland, and the adjacent area of north-eastern Russia' (Oxford English Dictionary).
2. Andrea Rizzi's doctoral thesis examines the development of Italian-Finnish relations during Tamaro's mandate (1929–1935). In particular, Rizzi's research pays attention to the relations between Italian fascism and the Lapua movement.
3. Archivio Storico Fondazione Ugo Spirito e Renzo De Felice, Fondo Attilio Tamaro (ASD-AT), Serie II, Busta 19, Fasc. 30–40.
4. Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale, Gabinetto del Ministro e del Segretario Generale 1923–1943 (ASMAE-GS), Busta 156. See also Nevakivi 2006, 393–7.
5. ASD-AT, Serie II, Busta 19, Fasc. 30–40.
6. ASD-AT, Serie II, Busta 19, Fasc. 30–40. The Italian *plenipotenziario* also reported that masonic influence was strong in Finland.

7. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts. The Nordic Society was founded in Lübeck in 1921. In the mid-1930s, an extra headquarters was created in Berlin. In 1941 the Danish section was opened in Copenhagen.
8. Archivio Società Dante Alighieri, Comitati Esteri. The Dante Society was founded in Rome and promotes Italian culture and language around the world. Between 1922 and 1943, the organisation was present in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland, and had 11 foreign sections.
9. ASD-AT, Serie II, Busta 19, Fasc. 30-40.
10. Towards the end of the long nineteenth century, political anti-semitism had established itself as a small but stable movement in the Nordic countries (Adams, Heß and Hoffmann 2020). During the interwar years xenophobic prejudices about Jews were widespread in Danish society (Bak 2004). Norway was *de facto* the only Scandinavian country incorporated in the Nazi Final Solution. Academic works appeared in the 1980s and became relevant from the mid-1990s (Bruland 2011). In Sweden, according to Berggren, racial thought functioned as a gateway to anti-semitism (Berggren 1999). In 2009, Holmila reconsidered Finland's relationship with the Holocaust. His work reframed the thorny question of whether Finland was victim, bystander or perpetrator during the Shoah (Holmila 2009).
11. Gentile studied this topic in great depth and detail, and indeed traced the true origins of fascist totalitarianism to *squadristo*. *Squadristo* gave fascism its way of life and its 'integralist' political mentality, according to which fascism required absolute power to remodel the entire Italian nation along the lines of the *squadrista* 'apostle-warrior' (Suzzi Valli 2000).
12. ASMAE-GS, Busta 636. 'Telespresso' n. 4507, 14 July 1933, from the Italian foreign office to the Italian embassy in Finland. 'La Tribuna', titled: 'Vasto movimento in Finlandia per realizzare il programma'.
13. Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BAB), R 43-I/62a, Bd. 1. Letter from the German embassy in Finland to the German foreign office, dated 8 July 1933.
14. BAB, R 43-I/62a, Bd. 1. Letter from the German embassy in Finland to the German foreign office, dated 8 July 1933.
15. BAB, R 43-I/62a, Bd. 1. Letter from the Reich Chancellery to Dr. Hoffmann, dated 1 August 1933.
16. ASMAE-GS, Busta 636. Letter from the Italian foreign office to the Italian undersecretary dated 9 June 1935.
17. ASMAE-GS, Busta 636. Letter from the Italian foreign office to the Italian undersecretary dated 9 June 1935.
18. ASMAE Minculpop, Busta: 89. Telespresso n. 348 dated 4 July 1937; Telespresso n. 896 dated 10 August 1937; Telespresso n. 407 dated 11 April 1938; Telespresso n. 316 dated 18 January 1938; Telespresso n. 1189 dated 19 December 1936; Telespresso n. 1233 dated 8 November 1938; Telespresso n. 380 dated 31 March 1939; Telespresso n. 692 dated 3 June 1939; Telespresso circolare n. 866 dated 14 July 1939; Telespresso n. 645 dated 24 May 1939; Telespresso n. 395 dated 2 May 1939.
19. In 1951, *Nation Europa* became a German monthly right-wing magazine, established and based in Coburg. Founded by former SS commander Arthur Ehrhardt and Herbert Böhme, the magazine took its name from a phrase used by Oswald Mosley to describe his *Europe a Nation* concept. The magazine was edited by Ernhardt in association with Per Engdahl and others (Macklin, 2007).
20. The Malmö meeting was hosted by Per Engdahl, leader of Nysvenska Rörelsen (a coterie of pro-fascist intellectuals) and new head of the European Social Movement (Europäische soziale Bewegung, ESB) (Widfeldt, 2010). But some members, such as René Binet (anti-semitic, collaborationist and SS volunteer), insisted that race purity be made a keystone of the ESB. These rebels broke with the ESB, called for a new meeting and founded the New European Order, NEO (Tauber, 1959).

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### Italian summary

Il saggio prende in considerazione lo sviluppo della propaganda fascista in Finlandia. Come ricordato da Finchelstein, il fascismo era una dottrina globale e transnazionale, caratterizzata da diverse interpretazioni, ramificazioni e mutamenti. Di conseguenza, il caso finlandese consentirebbe di analizzare meglio la duplice lotta di Mussolini contro il comunismo sovietico, ma anche contro la crescente minaccia nazista nel Baltico tra gli anni Trenta e gli anni Quaranta. Mussolini avrebbe tentato di mantenere i contatti con i fascisti finlandesi dopo l'ascesa al potere di Hitler. Si trattava, ad esempio, di organizzazioni come il movimento di Lapua ed il movimento Patriottico Popolare che, avendo tratto ispirazione dal fascismo italiano, maturarono la speranza di salire al potere. Ciò non accadde e quell'insuccesso divenne una delle ragioni per cui il tema fu a lungo trascurato dalla tradizione storiografica finlandese. Tuttavia, come ricorda Roger Griffin, anche lo studio dei fascismi periferici e di quelli mancati può contribuire significativamente a comprendere il centro del fascismo, così come la natura dell'attuale estremismo nazionalista. Il fascismo, come elemento internazionale, non può essere capito attraverso i dogmi delle rispettive realtà nazionali.