

Fascist Samurai: the Japanese race in the Italian imaginary during the Second World War and beyond

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Between 1938 and 1943, Fascist intellectuals debated the problem of how to create a racial policy that would encompass the Japanese within the Aryan doctrine. This article demonstrates how internal divisions in the Fascist party over racial issues generated alternative versions of pro-Japanese propaganda, which influenced the racial thinking of the Italian far-right even long after the Second World War. I show how Italian racial theories developed to underpin the alliance with Japan were transnational in scope, as they involved both German and Italian scholars in a common effort to lobby state racial policies. Specifically, I consider George Montandon and Julius Evola as two transnational actors engaged in building a case for the inclusion of the Japanese in the family of Aryan races, speaking either from a ‘biological’ or ‘spiritual’ perspective. While by the end of the Second World War the ‘biological’ thesis for the inclusion of the Japanese race had evaporated, the ‘spiritual’ thesis would continue to influence a generation of Italian far-right militants, especially during the ‘Years of Lead’. To make sense of this legacy, I suggest that the foundational myth of Italian Fascism, based on the spiritual heritage of the *multiethnic* Roman empire, responded to the neofascist quest for transnational affiliations against Western materialism.

Keywords: Italian Fascism and neofascism; Second World War Axis powers; Ainu; transnational fascism; Fascist race theories; German Nazism.

History knew the truth. History was the most inhuman product of humanity.

It scooped up the whole of human will and, like the goddess Kali in Calcutta, dripped blood from its mouth as it bit and crunched.

(Yukio Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel*)

Introduction

The 1938 visit of an official delegation of Fascist Blackshirts to Japan represented a prominent event for the Italo-Japanese alliance. It was arranged to celebrate the Anti-Comintern Pact (November 1937) and to prepare the ground for a fascist world order. Writing of this highly publicised ceremony, scholars have emphasised how the performative and choreographic aspects were a constitutive part of its political message, in which the military pageantry and display of friendly relationships were meant to make up for the lack of a coherent and joint vision of a future world order (Hedinger 2017). The contradictory nature of this diplomatic approach would emerge only a few months later, in November 1938, when Italy passed new racial laws that would align

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the country with the principles of Aryan superiority and anti-Semitism that informed the German racial doctrine. How could Italy possibly reconcile its white supremacist stance with the acceptance of Japan's Pan-Asian ambitions?¹ This article takes a fresh look beyond the public demonstration of friendship at the race theories and acrobatic efforts that Fascist Italy undertook to surmount the hurdle of conflicting racial discourses within the Alliance, between 1938 and 1943.²

The theoretical framework of my argument lies between the recent approach to the history of Axis powers in a transnational context (Hofmann and Hedinger 2017) and emerging scholarship in race studies that challenges the coherence and consensus of German and Italian racial ideologies (Bernhard 2019; Pendas, Roseman and Wetzell 2017). On the one hand, I will suggest that ideas related to engineering alignment between the Aryan and Japanese races were not limited to the peninsula: the discussion involved German and Italian scholars alike, travelling between the two countries and operating in a transnational context. On the other, I will dispute the idea of an existing common agreement among Fascist intellectuals about what constituted the virtue of the Japanese race, or even a general consensus behind Mussolini's orientation of praising the Japanese ally: a close reading of articles from *La difesa della razza* will show that, even in the case of a state-sponsored journal focused on a biological racial view, the *lack* of a coherent and consistent approach is what clearly emerges.

My primary goal in this article is to demonstrate how internal divisions in the Fascist party over racial issues generated alternative versions of pro-Japanese propaganda, which continued, in part, to affect the racial thinking of the Italian far-right even long after the Second World War. A number of scholarly contributions have recently dealt with the German imaginary as it related to Japan in the 1930s and 1940s; the Italian side of the Alliance, however, is still largely unexplored. As I focus on the German-Japanese-Italian racial debate as seen from Fascist Italy, first I argue that propaganda in support of the Japanese race was carried on by two distinctive and mutually excluding racial interpretations, the biological and the spiritual. What exacerbated the polemic between these two competing racial views was Mussolini's uncertainty in choosing an official racist policy for the state, which is at the origin of his ambivalent expressions of sympathy and support for both sides of the contention.

The second part of my argument shows that neither one of the two racial interpretations has their roots in the Italian soil; in fact, the issues at stake involved both German and Italian scholars in a joint effort to lobby state racial policies in one direction or the other.³ To elucidate this point, I will consider two examples of what Reto Hofmann and Daniel Hedinger describe as 'actors who produced "fascist knowledge" or "practices" in a transnational context, regarding specific formulations of fascist racism ...' (Hofmann and Hedinger 2017, 162). The first is the Swiss-born French, racist, anthropologist and ethnologist George Montandon (1879–1944), the other the Italian artist, poet and esoteric philosopher Julius Evola (1898–1974). I identify them as 'transnational' insofar as they were travelling between Vichy France, Germany and Italy with the ambition of creating a more cohesive racial front.

Indeed, their ideas were carried out by German counterparts: Montandon's attempt to demonstrate that the Japanese were of Aryan descent (as we shall see shortly) through an ethnologic study of the Ainu population, was part of an Aryan research study amply diffused in Germany (Krebs 2015: 231), while Evola's spiritual racism received, at least initially, wide attention in Germany and found in the SS chief Heinrich Himmler a receptive audience (Hansen 2002: 254). Both Montandon and Evola built a case in favour of reassessing the origins of the Japanese race by addressing two distinctive racial theories that coexisted in Italy during the period of the Alliance: Montandon appealing to a biological conception of race, Evola addressing the spiritual component of the debate.

The third part of my argument moves away from a transnational framework to focus on a post-war cult of Japanese nationalism within the far-right groups in Italy, which became especially popular during the so-called *Anni di piombo* ('Years of Lead'). In trying to make sense of this enduring legacy of Italian Fascist 'Japanophilia', I will resort to Roger Griffin's concept of 'ultra-nation', as a way to describe how different fascist national communities pursued their common goal of creating a homogeneous group (Griffin 2018). Griffin identified the foundational myth of rebirth of the nation as the common denominator of the fascist community, while at the same time representing a distinct feature to compare with other fascist nations. In his view, the spiritual heritage of Rome is the predominant mythical narrative peculiar to the Fascist ultra-nation. I will conclude by suggesting that this type of national myth, less genetically and more spiritually defined, is what allowed this cult of the Japanese to continue to appeal to a new generation of far-right militants, by responding to their desire to forge transnational affiliations, to offset the global reach of Western materialism.

George Montandon and the Ainu

Drawing on Arthur de Gobineau's scientific racist theory, George Montandon developed research on race and culture, premised on the existence of superior Aryan men who were born to be leaders. After starting out as an intellectual involved with the Communist Party, Montandon abandoned political activism in 1926 to pursue an academic career in Paris. In 1928 he published his most important work, *L'ologenèse humaine*, followed a few years later by the complementary volume entitled *L'ologenèse culturelle* (1934). The concept of hologenesis at the core of his research was inspired by the analogous concept put forth by the Italian zoologist Daniele Rosa, which was little known to the international community of scientists at the time. The adaptation of this concept to the field of physical and cultural anthropology allowed Montandon to develop a neo-Darwinian theory of evolutionary change, which was in contrast to the most common understanding of human evolution at the time. Briefly, the conventional view in the interwar years held that the origin of human races had progressively differentiated in prehistory from an initial single cradle of humanity. According to this view, migration and *métissage* are the reason why races are diverse and hard to distinguish. By contrast, instead of presenting a model of evolution that proceeded from a pure original race to the formation of mixed races, Montandon believed in the existence of an opposite model that proceeded from a more complex race, until being refined to a 'purer' one. The theory of hologenesis, in other words, denied the existence of a pure race at the origin of humanity, by affirming that 'all species evolved as a result of internal causes, because they were each endowed with an "ideoplasm" or substratum responsible for heredity, in a pattern of constant spontaneous dichotomy' (Conklin 2013, 174). Over time each race split into two different branches and the resulting new races eventually would divide internally still further, continuing a process that ultimately will make the races more and more distinct and 'pure'. This view of the subdivision of races throughout history ultimately intended to demonstrate that the latest and most advanced race was the Europeanoid, which was also considered the most advanced civilisation on Earth.

The theory of hologenesis granted Montandon access to the *École d'Anthropologie* in Paris, where he taught ethnography and bioanthropology and, ultimately, he obtained his naturalisation as a French citizen. When the Germans invaded France in 1940 and created the government of Vichy, Montandon seized the opportunity to collaborate with Nazi scientists in the persecution and murder of Jews. Crucially, his belief that the 'European race' was made up of the same physical types that constituted the French ethnicity (Nordic, Alpine and Mediterranean), drew him to conclude that France should join the Nazi project of racial hygiene.

While committing himself to serve the interests of Nazi Germany in France, Montandon developed a parallel relationship with Fascist Italy, which is still little known. Indeed, Montandon had a longstanding history of collaboration with Fascism that began in 1928. Initially, he was the author of several contributions to the national encyclopedia⁴ ('Enciclopedia italiana') and an official member of many Italian scientific societies, including the Italian Geographical Society, the Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems and the Italian Society of Anthropology and Ethnology in Florence (Knobel and Puccini 1991, 116–117).

With the publication of its racial manifesto, 'Manifesto della Razza' in 1938, Italy officially endorsed the German Aryan doctrine and its anti-Semitic policy. Montandon saw in this dramatic shift toward an official state racial law an opportunity to play a more influential role. The racist anthropologist Guido Landra, who was the chief editor of the 'Manifesto', offered him a position on the editorial board of the journal *La difesa della razza*, which, for six years, between 1938 and 1943, supported Fascist racist and anti-Semitic policies by focusing entirely on the issue of race. Landra considered the theory of hologenesis an effective way to subsume Italian races within a discourse of European racial superiority, therefore supporting the biological racial thesis. In a 1939 article in *La difesa della razza*, for instance, Guido Landra used the hologenesis theory as a tool to demonstrate the origin of several Italian racial types from the other European populations.⁵

The contribution of Montandon to *La difesa della razza* not only helped align the Italian racial debate with Nazi-style biological racism, but it also helped to include the Japanese race within the embrace of this irrational theory. His ethnological research in East Asia proved to be useful for Fascist scientists searching to bridge the gap between Japan and the other European allies. Montandon's contribution in this regard advanced the theory of the Japanese people as descending from an Indo-European ethnic group, whose last survivors were the Ainu, an indigenous ethnic minority of Japan living in the islands now known as Hokkaidō. Montandon had begun his research on the Ainu in 1919 when he was still cultivating his passion for descriptive ethnography, while his academic career was yet undetermined. Searching for new travel adventures while living in Switzerland and working as a medical doctor, he managed to become a leading member of the Red Cross mission in Siberia, with a mandate to repatriate war prisoners while offering medical support (Piana 2016). Travelling through Siberia by train, Montandon dedicated himself to writing ethnographic reports on several indigenous populations, including the Ainu living on the Sakhalin Island of Japan. The result of his observations became part of a volume published in a first edition in 1927⁶ and republished in an extended version in 1937 with the title of *La civilisation Aïnou et les cultures arctiques*. By conducting a cultural and somatological study of the Ainu (which included taking blood tests and skull measurements), Montandon concluded that the Ainu were the latest remains of an ancient white European bloc that had once spread out across the northern part of the Eurasian territory.

Montandon was not the first Westerner to consider the Ainu as white European ancestors; other early European travellers who visited northern Japan reached similar conclusions.⁷ One such early visitor was the Sicilian Jesuit Girolamo de Angelis, who went to Hokkaidō in 1618 and, after noticing their exterior differences from other Asian people, concluded that the Ainu were 'white'. The wave of European visitors only increased in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Japan was forced to open ports for trade with Western powers, including the port of Hakodate in Hokkaidō. The increased accessibility of northern Japan to external travellers did not change the image of the Ainu from this European myth, and in fact the opposite occurred. Searching for more evidence for the Ainu's Caucasian origin, European visitors emphasised other atypical somatic aspects, such as the hairiness of their bodies, in contrast with Asian bodies. Another ludicrous argument used to support a European origin for the Ainu was their personality, which was

described as 'intelligent', 'welcoming', and 'unthreatening'. The 'good' Ainu, open to receiving strangers in their land, could only be of Western descent. Finally, a linguistic argument for the inclusion of the Ainu language into the family of Indo-European languages was presented by the British missionary John Batchelor, who authored the first Ainu–English–Japanese dictionary, published in 1887. Given the absence of linguistic experts who could object to his thesis, Batchelor conducted a linguistic archeological study in which the Ainu language was forced to fit the grammatical categories of European languages, thus leading the author to demonstrate, artificially, the 'Aryan' origin of the Ainu language.

In the end Montandon only reinforced a preexisting idea about the Ainu as white Europeans that was widely circulating at the time.⁸ Drawing from the same body of research, he also echoed the theory that the Ainu were the last representatives of a primitive stage of Japanese history; in fact, he concluded, the Ainu provided the first racial stock of the Japanese race. According to this theory, (Montandon 1937, 10) in early times this aboriginal population had been settled all over the Japanese archipelago, until, between the tenth and fifth centuries BC, a wave of Mongoloid migration invaded from the south, forcing the Ainu to retreat north. As a consequence of this migration, a new racial composition that included the Ainu stock was mixed with other racial components. Therefore, the Ainu population currently existing in Hokkaidō was considered the last remnant of the Japanese ancestors who had resisted assimilation to the Mongoloid invasion.

This wrong conclusion offered nonetheless a useful perspective to Italian biological racists. In fact, the search for a link between Europeans and the Japanese race is the reason why Italians first learned about the Ainu during the period of the Axis Alliance.⁹ The journal *La difesa della razza* widely diffused Montandon's discoveries in several issues. In 1940, an article by Eugenio De Aldisio introduced the Ainu to the Italian public. In a journal mainly concerned with promoting biological racism, the article's focus on the prehistory of Japan was given as a pretext to argue for the Caucasian origin of the Japanese ally. In fact, De Aldisio presented the Ainu as people of 'white race' ('razza bianca') of European resemblance, who were originally situated in the main part of the Japanese territory and Siberia. By presenting them as the first inhabitants of the archipelago, De Aldisio could finally demonstrate that the current Japanese race still carried the genetic presence of the white/European Ainu mixed with the Mongoloid component introduced by subsequent waves of migration. In a 1940 article published on *La difesa della razza* Armando Tosti did not hesitate to dismiss the association of the Japanese with the 'Yellow Peril', popular until then, in order to put forth, unabashedly, the idea of Japanese being as white as the Europeans: 'I giapponesi per il loro aspetto, per la loro mentalità, per le loro istituzioni, per le loro costumanze, non hanno in sé nulla di mongolico, ma sono "bianchi" come gli Europei' ('The Japanese, in their appearance, their mentality, their institutions, their customs, do not have anything of the Mongolian; instead they are "white" like the Europeans'. Tosti 1940, 21.)

If De Aldisio¹⁰ and Tosti gave substantial credibility to the white origin of the Japanese, via the Ainu, other contributions on *La difesa della razza* tended to undermine this theory. The argument in favour of the 'whiteness' of the Ainu presented several shortcomings to those who believed in a correlation between the colour-line and civilisational progress. If the Ainu were 'white' European ancestors, how could their 'uncivilised' status be explained? Furthermore, if the Ainu were Caucasian, how could their ultimate domination by Mongol populations be justified? These questions were debated internationally and the editorial board of *La difesa della razza* itself clearly did not reach a shared opinion on this matter. An article by the Albanian geographer Alessandro Kemal Vlora in 1942 substantially minimised the biological impact of the Ainu in the constitution of the Japanese race, by circumscribing it to the population living in northern Japan. However, the most

surprising evidence of this division comes from Guido Landra, who wrote a misleading review of Montandon's book on the Ainu – surprising because Landra was the main liaison between Montandon and the Italian group of eugenic scientists, as well as a follower of Montandon's holo-genetic theory. Yet, in an article in which he announces that he is simply giving an overview of Montandon's studies on Japanese prehistory, he blatantly intermingles his views with those of the book's author. Rejecting Montandon's understanding of Ainu as white, Landra seamlessly alternated a summary of the book's main discoveries with a personal statement about the exterior aspect of the Ainu: 'Malgrado questi indubbi tratti europodi, gli Aino [*sic*] non possono in alcun modo essere confusi con le razze tipicamente europee, come la nordica, la mediterranea, l'alpina e la dinarica. Se ne distaccano difatti per alcuni caratteri particolari, come le arcate sopraccigliari marcate, la forte pelosità e molti altri caratteri di primitività' ('Despite these obvious Europoid traits, the Aino [*sic*] can in no way be confused with typically European breeds, such as the Nordic, the Mediterranean, the Alpine and the Dinaric. In fact, they stand out due to some particular characters, such as the marked eyebrow arches, the strong hairiness and many other primitive aspects' (Landra 1940, 13).

Such reactions to the biological thesis of Japanese 'whiteness' are a clear demonstration of how longstanding racist views against the 'yellow' race could hardly be surmounted (Miyake 2018, 624). Landra's opposition to Montandon's theory was a decisive influence on the entire debate, given his authority as director of the Racial Studies Department in the Ministry for National Culture.

Yet, the 'rehabilitation' of the Japanese race, as standing on an equal footing with the Aryan race, became a matter of contention in Italy between two antagonistic racial theories that were confronting each other in *La difesa della razza*: the biological and the spiritual. The next paragraph focuses on the lesser-known, nevertheless vital, current of spiritual racism, which placed a high price on claiming affinities and commonalities with the Japanese ally.

Where Japanese and Roman traditions meet

The 1938 publication of Italy's Racial Manifesto did not preclude the continuation of alternative racial theories, whose origins preceded the advent of Fascism. Among those, the 'spiritual' racism, inspired by the writings of Julius Evola, proposed a notion of race that enabled a discourse of rapprochement between the 'yellow' and the 'white' races. Evola's spiritual brand of racism was by no means the only one existing in Italy, nor the first to be formulated. In the first half of the twentieth century the influence of prominent philosophers such as Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile led a significant part of the Italian intellectual community to embrace the tradition of humanism and neo-idealism against positivism and Marxist materialism. During the liberal period, the racial debate around the issue of defining the Italian national identity found in the anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi (1841–1936) a leading representative of this anti-scientific cultural front. Sergi became the major proponent of a Mediterranean racial identity for Italy, in opposition to the German Aryan thesis, which adopted a more 'scientific' method of racial classification. A cornerstone of this Italian theory was the belief in the spiritual unity of all Italians as a result of sharing the same cultural environment, despite the phenotypical differences, especially between North and South Italians. Mussolini embraced this thesis until 1938, because of the appealing notion, which described the ancient Romans as the spiritual ancestors of modern Italians (Gillette 2002, 24–34). However, after 1938, Evola's strain of spiritual racism became handier than the Mediterranean thesis to Mussolini, as it predicated the idea of a confluence of Italians and Germans under the Aryan race while distancing itself from German biological racism.

Considering Italians as a Roman-Aryan race fulfilled Mussolini's ambitions of appeasing the German ally without renouncing the notion of a distinguished Italian racial theory (Gregor 2005, 218).

Evola considered the biological notion of race, and racial purity, as a vulgar reduction of the single human being to a materialistic interpretation. For him, beyond the superficial layer of the body aspect, two deeper elements completed the racial outlook: one, the 'race of the soul' (the human psychological and emotional structure) and the other, the 'race of the spirit' (a human predisposition to embody 'traditional' values that best express the ideal human person, such as courage, virtue, character, integrity, etc.) By embodying the traditional values of the Roman empire, such as virtue, spirit of sacrifice, courage, and obedience to the superior authority, Italians were considered descendants of the Aryan-Roman race, a concept that reconciled the Risorgimento's myth of *Romanità*, of pure Roman-ness, with the German glorification of the Aryan race.

However, the priority of the 'spiritual' element over the 'biological' also allowed Evola to include in the so-called superior race individuals of different racial profile, or geographical origin, including, occasionally, some Jews whom Evola regarded as 'Aryans' in spirit. In this regard, according to Evola, individuals who embodied in the present day the traditional values inscribed in ancient forms of spirituality (Buddhism, esoteric and ascetic cults, Taoism, the Jewish Kabbalah, Hinduism, and Greek philosophy) were legitimate members of this 'super-race'. In this sense Evola regarded the Japanese nationalism of the 1930s as an ideal addition to this family, for its blending of old and new traditions, of ancient philosophies integrated with a modern army. Of course, Evola was not claiming this fascination with Japan in a vacuum. Indeed, there was a long history of Italian nationalistic admiration for modern Japan that Evola himself must have experienced in his early career, when he was part of the Futurist movement together with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. In this arena of right-wing writers, Japan was already considered a great example of a nation that created a strong sense of spiritual unity, militarism and national identity based on the ancient doctrines of Shinto, Buddhism, or Confucianism.¹¹ It mattered little to these admirers of the Japanese that emperor worship was not an ancient cult in Japan, but rather a modern invention of tradition, introduced during the Meiji Restoration and quite dependent on Western influence. Indeed, Shinto had become a state religion only in 1867 when the shogunate was replaced by the central role of the emperor, who became the father of the family-state (*Kazoku-kokka*). This modern creation of an imperial nationalism linked to a traditional samurai ethic (*bushidō*), was reactionary and conservative, rather than democratic. Indeed, at the outset of the Second World War, many nationalists in Italy saluted the alliance with Japan as the spiritual union of two rising empires, modelled after the virtues of ancient Rome on the one hand and the Shinto virtues of war and loyalty to the central figure of the emperor on the other.

In 1940 Julius Evola published in the journal *Asiatica*, directed by the orientalist Giuseppe Tucci, a celebratory article of the Tripartite Pact of September 27, 1940. He welcomed this alliance as the pact with a "'traditional' civilisation' that would help Italy in the struggle against the forces of Western (especially Anglo-American) materialism. He portrayed Japanese values as similar to ancient Roman values: for instance, the Shinto sense of loyalty to the emperor was compared to the concept of *fides* in the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages and in ancient Rome itself. When Japanese soldiers in the Pacific theatre became famous for their suicide attacks, in which their bodies were used as human bullets (*nikudan*), Evola compared their ethic of self-sacrifice with the 'ancient Roman ritual of *Devotio*' (Evola 2011, 122).¹²

Evola's historic shortsightedness can only be explained by his desire to fit Japan into the grand scheme of the history of civilisation that thinkers such as Oswald Spengler and René Guénon had

laid out (both were in fact translated into Italian by Evola).¹³ Indeed, following the ideas that Guénon expressed in 1927 in *La crise du monde moderne* (Italian version Guénon 1937) Evola pursued an interpretation of his present time in which the decline of Western societies was interpreted as a progressive abandonment of traditional and spiritual values, which existed only in fragmented form. According to this view, Eastern countries were the only remaining guardians of such esoteric cults and metaphysical traditions as connected the individual with a transcendental authority. Thus, Evola concluded his article explaining that the most beneficial aspect of the Japanese-Italian alliance was the merger of two ancient traditions. In his words:

Japan can find itself with us, and especially with the conscious advocates of the Roman imperial tradition, on the same front, which is not only political, material, and military, but also spiritual and ideal. The ethnic and naturalistic differences here cannot mask the undeniable convergence in the theme of the traditional spirit except to the eyes of the myopic. (Evola 2015, 97)

This interpretation of the nature of the alliance between Italy and Japan would reverberate with many political commentators, to the extent of becoming the driving racial discourse to help promote the Italo/Japanese coalition. In a 1941 issue of *La difesa della razza* the esoteric philosopher Massimo Scaligero would echo Evola's article by stating that even though the Japanese could not be considered 'white', nonetheless they still belonged to the 'Aryan' group by virtue of expressing 'traditional principles', such as the *Zen* doctrine and the mystical/heroic spirit of the *Samurai*. (Scaligero 1941, 21–24). A year later, *La difesa della razza* would publish a series of three articles on *La razza giapponese* by Alessandro Kemal Vlora. If in the first article of the triptych, above mentioned, Kemal Vlora undermined the biological solution to the problem of how to include the Japanese in the Aryan race, in the second article, he underscored a 'spiritual commonality' between 'the Italian and Japanese people' (Vlora 1942, 11).

It is not by chance that these articles were published in this period. In fact, this idea of 'spiritual racism' reached its greatest popularity in Italy between summer 1941 and mid-1942. In this period, Mussolini read with enthusiasm Evola's essay *Sintesi della dottrina della razza* ('Synthesis of the Doctrine of Race', 1941) and authorised Evola to pursue the project of a bilingual German-Italian journal on race to be titled *Blood and Spirit*. With an editorial board composed of German and Italian esoteric philosophers, this journal aimed at counteracting the 1938 Racial Manifesto, by offering insights into Aryan myth, the 'racial soul', and the 'spirit of the race'. The project, however, could not survive the criticism of biological racists both in Italy and in Germany. Guido Landra vehemently accused Evola of compromising basic racist principles by suggesting that non-Aryan individuals could still carry Aryan characteristics as part of their soul or spirit. Eventually, Mussolini chose to maintain the status quo and decided to terminate the journal project in March 1942.

With the end of Fascism's collaboration with spiritual racism, the journal *La difesa della razza* gradually abandoned the 'spiritual' argument to justify the Italo-Japanese alliance altogether. In the last issue of the magazine, Felice Graziani published an article lamenting the lack of unity and collaboration between Aryan groups scattered around the world (Graziani 1943, 12–13). In contrast to this phenomenon, Graziani mentioned both the spiritual unity of the Jewish diaspora and the example of Japan's racial consciousness and spiritual cohesion. Graziani considered Japan's spiritual unity as independent from the Aryan race. After having dismissed the idea of 'whitening' the Japanese by focusing on a supposedly Caucasian genealogy, *La difesa della razza* ended its publication cycle with an article that ignored even the spiritual argument in support of the 'Aryanization' of Italy's Asian partner. By representing the Japanese as non-white and

non-Aryan, this infamous Fascist magazine finally came full circle to its initial position: the Far East ally could now once again be ‘othered’ and kept at a safe distance.

A legacy slow to die

In the end, this analysis of the racial theories that aimed at including Japan in the group of Aryan races has brought attention to two antagonistic approaches: biological and spiritual racism. The parallel developments of similar arguments in Germany suggest a transnational approach that would include Italian Fascism in relation to the Third Reich and, possibly, other twentieth-century fascisms as well. Within this broader context, the case of Italy stands out for its continuity between the pre and postwar period. In fact, while the biological thesis about the Italian/Japanese affinity was dropped with the demise of Fascism, the spiritual thesis would survive the end of Axis Alliance, resurfacing in different forms in the postwar years. By contrast, in Germany, ‘few spoke of the alleged German-Japanese similarities after the final defeat, and those who had propagated such images most actively either lost their jobs and influence or turned to other subjects on which to write’ (Bieber 2017, 324). Some of them committed suicide, including Goebbels and Himmler in 1945, and Haushofer a year later. Eugen Herrigel (1884–1955), however, washed away his past Nazi affiliation by becoming a best-seller author with his book *Zen oder die Kunst des Bogenschießens* (*Zen or the Art of Archery*, 1948), which appealed to young Western readers looking for Oriental teachings of wisdom and peace. Regardless of the commercial success, ‘one should perhaps note that *Zen or the Art of Archery* does not contain a single reference to similarities between German and Japanese culture’ (Bieber 2017, 324).

Julius Evola’s fate in Italy was different. After his failed collaborations with both Italian Fascism and Nazi-Germany, Evola abandoned the political arena, while becoming a *maître à penser* for a generation of right-wing activists. In this new role, Evola became a point of reference for a postwar regrouping of neofascist militants seeking to continue the struggle against the forces of Western materialism and modernity. With both Europe and Japan experiencing an economic boom and embracing the American way of life, Evola’s search for exceptional individuals who embodied ‘traditional values’ became increasingly hopeless and defeatist. Nonetheless, a book like *Cavalcare la tigre* (*Ride the Tiger*), with its message directed to those men of tradition who refused to concede to the values of modernity, appealed to far-right groups, searching for ideological guidance during the season of political terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s. The image of the ‘spiritual warrior’, upholding traditional values in an age of decadence, was largely inspired by references to Japanese Zen. In an article published in the journal *East and West*, directed by Giuseppe Tucci, Evola challenged the notion of Buddhism as a non-violent form of spirituality, as it appeared to 1960s Western pacifist (and left-wing) groups: ‘Zen Buddhism could be called the doctrine of the Samurai, i.e., of the Japanese nobility, who are certainly not noted for their abhorrence of arms and bloodshed’ (Evola 2018, 476). The spectacular suicide of Japanese writer Yukio Mishima in 1970 appealed to him as the perfect example of this nobility protesting against the triumph of modernity: ‘If modern developments continue their course, Mishima’s death will only be a distant memory of the past and never be seen in a proper light, namely as an example of high paradigmatic value’ (Evola 1994, 15).

With this warrior-like interpretation of the Zen, Evola created access to Zen teachings (as well as Taoism and Tantric doctrines) for young far-right militants, in competition with the Beat generation’s enthusiasm for Zen forms of spirituality and self-enlightenment. By continuing to stress a spiritual unity between Eastern and Western men who followed the path of traditional wisdom,

Evola was able to maintain the same message that had appealed to Mussolini during the Fascist years and to perpetuate his influential role in the political activism of the far right.

Unlike the Fascist doctrine, this new form of political radicalisation was dismissive of concepts of nation and people. In *Cavalcare la tigre*, Evola calls for the formation of ‘transnational regroupings’ and even foreshadowed a ‘world without frontiers’ (Evola 2003 [1961], 183) where an elite cadre of individuals from every nation could coalesce around prominent leaders. *Ordine Nuovo* was the radical right Italian movement, which, more than any other, was receptive to Evola’s ideas. The followers of this neofascist group especially embraced the Evolian idea of a transnational elite group fashioned after the example of ‘the warrior castes and the soldiers/heroes of a familiar list: the *Samurai*, the *Kshatriya*, the medieval knightly Orders’ (Ferraresi 1996: 55). *Ordine Nuovo* was in fact a key protagonist of the period so-called *strategia della tensione* (‘strategy of tension’), between roughly the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s, during which time several terrorist attacks, including bombs planted in key targets, were aimed at preventing a feared Communist takeover of Italy, as well as promoting a *coup d’état*.

The intersection of neofascist ideology and Evola’s fascination with Japanese traditionalism is well represented by Delfo Zorzi (1947–), who was one of the leaders of *Ordine Nuovo*, a young Japanese scholar at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples and founder of the first karate school in the Veneto. His name is associated with numerous massacres (especially the 1974 bomb attack in Brescia) committed by Italian extremists in this period. In 1974 Zorzi moved to Japan, where he married a local woman, which helped him achieve citizenship status in 1989. He promptly used his new Japanese affiliation, under the name of Roi Hagen, to seek government protection against repeated requests of extradition by the Italian government, which tried in vain to overcome the Japanese reluctance to hand him over for trial in Italy. Since the 1980s, Zorzi has apparently become a successful and wealthy entrepreneur through an import/export fashion business between Europe and East Asia. In 1995, using the *nom de plume* of Dario Zanchi, he published *Ten-chû!*, a history of Japanese far-right groups and their adoption of the *bushidô* ethic during the Meiji period and the rise of nationalism in the 1930s.

Evola’s blend of neofascism and Japanese warrior spirituality even continues its legacy today in the context of the Italian far-right movement. The notorious Italian neo-Nazi activist Franco Freda carried on his subversive activity by directing ‘Edizioni di AR’: a far-right publishing house, which is still a point of reference for Italian neofascist militants. The title of the book series *Sannô-kai*, devoted to Japanese nationalist writers, is a reference to the name of the Tokyo hotel (*Sannô*), where on 26 February 1936 a group of Young Officers gathered to commit the assassination of two prime ministers, together with other cabinet ministers and business leaders. The authors of this failed *coup d’état* were part of an army faction called the *kôdô* (Imperial Way), which upheld the traditional imperial values that members of *Ordine Nuovo* so admired. Perhaps echoing the failed takeover of Italy by members of the Italian army during the ‘Strategy of tension’, this book series demonstrates that the Fascist spiritual affinity with Japanese nationalism survived the death of Evola in 1974, and it is still maliciously present in today’s far-right propaganda.

The surprising longevity of these ideas after the end of Fascism finds its *raison d’être* in the historical context of the postwar years of reconstruction. The fact is that when the Italian constitution came into force in 1948, the formal decision to outlaw Fascist racism from the Italian legislation was a symbolic gesture of rupture with the past, rather than an opportunity to reflect on the racial imaginary that underpinned the drafting of Fascist racist laws (Giuliani, 2019, 86). This lack of public debate in the aftermath of the Second World War allowed racist ideas (like

the one posing the existence of a set of superior Aryan-Japanese virtues) to survive the end of Fascism and then circulate, undeterred, in the political underbelly of Italian society.¹⁴

Conclusion

The competing racial theories discussed in this article had the ambition of building a transnational fascist community to which the Japanese, Germans, and Italians could equally belong. These attempts to incorporate racial differences within an organic community is a typical example of what Roger Griffin defines as a fascist ‘ultra-nation’: a concept that reconciles the fascist tendency to aggregate the national community under the myth of blood, language, and territory, with the creation of multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic ties. As Griffin explains, each fascist ultra-nation builds upon a different mythical narration of its origins: in other words, the past is considered a ‘reusable’ tool to lay out the foundation of a national community destined to carry on a modern fascist revolution. The predominant foundational myth of Italian ultra-nationalism, among other available narratives, ‘was the vision of modern Italians as direct descendants from and spiritual heirs of the Romans’ (Griffin 2018, 68–69). This particular formulation of the foundational myth was relatively unconcerned with ethnic purity, since its core mission was the rediscovery of the (multi-ethnic) Roman identity. On the contrary, the Nazi foundational myth, based on the notion that ‘Germans were descended from an Aryan super-race’, ensured ‘that Nazism absorbed a far more poisonous dose of scientized racism into official culture that did Italian Fascism’ (Griffin 2018, 70).

These differences help to explain why Italian supporters of the Japanese alliance had an easier way to promote their arguments than their German counterparts.¹⁵ Above all, the sense of belonging to a superior race defined more spiritually and culturally than genetically, favoured the continuation of the Italian right-wing fascination with Japanese militarism in the postwar years. Indeed, the lack of a systematic repudiation of Fascist doctrines at the dawn of the Italian Republic is not the only reason why spiritual racism continued to circulate in the postwar years. The non-predominately genetic version of Fascist ultra-nation must be another. In the context of the growing crisis of the nation-state, Evola’s type of transnational fascist community suited the aspirations of neofascist groups to move beyond Mussolini’s dream of national rebirth. In response to the international outreach by the New Left, Italian far-right movements found in Evola’s traditionalism the inspiration for an (ill-defined) cultural revolution, that would reverse the perceived decline of the European or Western civilisation.¹⁶

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Fascination with Japanese Culture (Liverpool University Press, 2020), which examines the experience of Japan in works by Italian writers who visited the Land of the Rising Sun beginning in the Meiji restoration period (1868–1912) and during the concomitant opening of Japan’s relations with the West. Previous publications include a book on the nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi (Florence: University Press, 2005) and a volume of letters by the philosopher Benedetto Croce (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2007). With published peer-reviewed articles on transnational relations between Italy and Japan, Cold War literature, and ekphrasis in poetry, his current research addresses a largely unexplored human ecological approach to the East African colonies of the Italian empire.

Notes

1. Of course, the other members of the alliance were also exposed to the same type of inconsistency as Reto Hofmann has shown in the case of Japan (Hofmann 2015, 102–108) and Gerard Krebs in the case of Germany (Krebs 2015, 238).
2. In chapter two of my monograph *Searching for Japan. 20th Century Italy’s Fascination with Japanese Culture*, I closely follow Mussolini’s changing attitude toward Japan. I consider the Anti-Comintern Pact between Italy, Germany, and Japan of 6 November 1937 as the decisive event in determining the shift in the mode of representing Japan, from negative to positive. I also dispute the idea that this type of Fascist propaganda was lacking foundations in the Italian cultural establishment, by identifying in the Fascist polyglot Pietro Silvio Rivetta (1886–1952), who took part in the official delegation of Fascist Blackshirts in Japan, an example of a longstanding cultural project of introducing Japanese culture to Italy that preceded the advent of Fascism itself. On the shifting tone of Fascist propaganda toward Japan, see also Basilone 2019, 5–8.
3. A possible major difference between Italy and Germany in evaluating the Japanese race could be the higher degree of tolerance that Mussolini was willing to adopt in embracing the biological notion of race after 1938. In Germany also a Nazi party journal, *Die Bewegung* (‘The Movement’), tried to challenge the notion of the Japanese as an inferior race (Orbach 2017, 356). However, Hitler himself, in spite of his admiration for the Japanese military might, remained coherent with his racial hierarchy (Orbach 2017, 356). Gerhard Krebs reached a similar conclusion: ‘Despite the eagerness on the part of German Japanologists and Nazi leaders to draw parallels between Japanese and German concepts of heroism, they faced a formidable hurdle because of their own Nazi ideology of racial superiority and its resultant relegation of the “Japanese race” to a lower rank in the racial hierarchy’ (Krebs 2017, 334). Finally, Christian W. Spang also noted that ‘with regard to Japan, [Hitler’s] racism meant that he was reluctant to conclude any (too) close alliance with the “yellow” Japanese’ (Spang 2006, 146).
4. Montandon is the author of the entry on the Ainu in the *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere e arti* (see Montandon 1929). Interestingly, when he wrote this entry, Montandon had not claimed yet the European origin of the Ainu.
5. Landra 1939a and 1939b.
6. Montandon 1927.
7. The American naturalist Albert Smith Bickmore was the first scholar to put forth a theory of a Caucasoid origin of the Ainu in his article ‘The Ainos or hairy men of Jesso, Saghalien and the Kurile Islands’ (*American Journal of Science*, May 1868, cited in Levin 1963, 266).
8. In 1910 a Great Japan-British Exhibition in London featured the reconstruction of an ‘Ainu Village’ in an effort to debunk the ‘Yellow Peril’ myth by demonstrating that at the origin of the Japanese civilisation there is a Caucasoid race. In Germany, a 1921 novel by Otfried von Hanstein (1869–1959) entitled *Von Tokyo zu den Waldmenschen von Yezo – Reise-Erzählung aus dem fernen Osten* (Leipzig, 1921) the Ainu are described as friendly collaborators of a German adventurer in a struggle against Russian spies in Hokkaido. In the period between the two wars, the theory of the Caucasoid origin of the Ainu found acolytes in Father Wilhelm Schmidt and Father Wilhelm Koppers from the Wiener Schule, (Schmidt and Koppers, cited in Kreiner, 1990, 145). According to Josef Kreiner: ‘In the 1930s the Third Reich tried to justify their alliance with Japan by arguing that the Japanese should be treated as equals with the German “Aryans” because of their descendants from Nordic Aryans, that is, the Ainu ... This argument was rejected because the ancient Ainu had nothing in common with later Europeans’ (Kreiner 1999, 131; see also Krebs 2015, 231). In Italy Renato Biasutti, the well-known geographer from the University of Florence and staff member of the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, relied on

- Montandon's theory of the Caucasian ancestry of the Ainu in his monumental work *Le razze e i popoli della terra* (1st ed. 1941, 4th ed., posthumous 1961; for the paragraph on the Ainu see vol. 2nd, 449–454).
9. In the same period Fosco Maraini, perhaps the most known Italian expert of Japan, was fleeing Fascism thanks to a scholarship that brought him to live in Hokkaidō where he had the chance to join a group of Ainu scholars, including Neil Gordon Munro and John Batchelor. See Maraini 1942 and 2001.
 10. 'Ma le caratteristiche somatiche europee che-si riscontrano in molti giapponesi, non sono dovute esclusivamente all'assorbimento degli indigeni bianchi Ainù, ma anche ad immigrati caucasici, andati dalla Cina, in diverse epoche' (De Aldisio 1940, 31).
 11. Emilio Gentile noted how early twentieth-century Italian nationalists, like Enrico Corradini, used the cult for Japan's rising empire as an example of a nation worshipping the fatherland and its heroes (Gentile 1996, 14–15). Interestingly, the Italian translation of Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900) was published in 1917: see Nitobe 1917. Nitobe Inazō's essay on bushidō 'is an often frustrating work filled with generalizations and tautologies' (Benesch 2014, 97), which received a lukewarm response from Japanese scholars who read the English edition. Nonetheless, this Westernised presentation of a Japanese ethical system widely contributed to the internationalisation and popularity of this concept, which sought to explain Japan's military success. The German translation of Nitobe's book appeared in 1937: *Die Seele Japans*, translated by Ella Kaufmann.
 12. The article titled 'Volti dell'eroismo' originally appeared on 19 April 1942 in *Diorama mensile*, the monthly news magazine of *Il Regime Fascista*.
 13. See Guéron 1937; Spengler 1957.
 14. On the continuity of the racist discourse in Italy after the end of the Fascist *ventennio* see Patriarca and Deplano 2018.
 15. Fabrizio De Donno poignantly underlines this different approach toward Asian forms of nationalism between Germany and Italy since the early 1930s. He writes that 'with the Nazi seizure of power in Germany and Hitler's implementation of state racism, the potential of Italy as a more appealing candidate for collaboration with Asian and African nationalisms suddenly increased, thanks to Fascist anti-racist propaganda' (De Donno 2006, 403). In this period, Mussolini's critique of British colonialism allowed Fascism to offer support to Arab leaders in Palestine and Egypt, to collaborate with Indian nationalism and even with Zionist leaders. Mussolini considered Hitler's state racism as a limitation to the plan of connecting these international forms of nationalism in order to counter the Anglo-American geopolitical hegemony.
 16. Evola's transnational networks of political conservatives and anti-materialistic groups continue to influence Italian neofascist movements today in their attempt to build a Eurasia geopolitical bloc to oppose the Atlanticist alliance between Europe and the United States. For an analysis of the Eurasian movement in Italy in its connections with Evola, see Savino 2015.

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Italian summary

Tra il 1938 e il 1943, gli intellettuali fascisti si posero il problema di come includere l'alleato giapponese nel contesto della dottrina ariana. Questo articolo dimostra come, a causa di divisioni interne al partito fascista sulle questioni razziali, due versioni alternative di propaganda filo-giapponese hanno influenzato il pensiero razziale dell'estrema destra italiana, anche molto tempo dopo la seconda guerra mondiale. L'articolo mostra come le teorie razziali italiane sviluppate per sostenere l'alleanza con il Giappone sono di natura transnazionale, poiché hanno coinvolto studiosi tedeschi e italiani in uno sforzo comune per fare pressione sulle politiche razziali dei propri rispettivi paesi. In particolare, considero George Montandon e Julius Evola come due operatori transnazionali impegnati a giustificare l'inclusione dei giapponesi nel novero delle razze ariane, a partire da una prospettiva 'biologica' o 'spirituale'. Se alla fine della seconda guerra mondiale tramonta la tesi 'biologica' per l'inclusione della razza giapponese, al contrario la tesi 'spirituale' avrebbe continuato a influenzare una generazione di militanti italiani di estrema destra, specialmente durante gli 'Anni del piombo'. La spiegazione che l'articolo offre per dare conto di questa longevità della proposta spiritualista conduce a considerare il mito prevalente del fascismo italiano, che è basato sull'eredità spirituale e multi-etnica dell'impero romano. Questo mito 'ultra-nazionale' ha offerto una risposta al bisogno di gruppi neofascisti alla ricerca di una coalizione transnazionale per combattere le forze del materialismo occidentale.