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Marla Stone

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Italian Fascism’s Soviet Enemy and the Propaganda of Hate, 1941-1943

Marla Stone
Occidental College

Abstract

In conjunction with the war against the Soviet Union which began in June 1941, the Italian Fascist regime promulgated a virulent brand of anti-communism and oversaw a campaign of hate-mongering propaganda targeted at its Soviet enemy. This propaganda produced to justify the war highlighted the Manichean struggle against the Soviet Union and the special horrors of the Soviet communist enemy. Using longstanding stereotypes about a Russian lack of civilization, 19th-century ideas about racially expressed biological difference, and more recent tropes about Bolshevik barbarism and immorality, official representations of Fascism’s historic enemy—the communist—put forward a racially degenerate, godless peril from the East bent on the destruction of Western civilization and on the desecration of the Italian family and the Catholic faith.

Keywords: Soviet Union, enemy, Fascism, Bolshevism, Second World War, propaganda, culture, Italy

The Italian mobilization for the war against the Soviet Union, with the first Italian troops arriving on the Eastern Front in July 1941, unleashed a wave of cultural production highlighting the Manichean struggle against Russia and the special horrors of the communist enemy found there. The involvement of the Italian military on the Second World War’s Eastern Front produced a virulent brand of Italian Fascist anti-communism and led to a campaign of hate-mongering propaganda designed to terrify Italians into support for the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union. From the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941 until the defeat of Axis armies on the Eastern Front in 1943, official representations of Fascism’s historic enemy—the communist—put forward a godless, racially degenerate peril from the East bent on the destruction of Western civilization and on the desecration of the Italian family and the Catholic faith.

There was nothing novel in Fascism’s interest in mobilizing Italians against an absolute enemy. The designation of enemies and the mobilization of fear and hatred against them has been central to politics for centuries. Yet in the 20th century the pursuit of an enemy at home and abroad defined national politics, and the expulsion of that enemy from the body politic
often determined national health. In some cases the murderous crusade against enemies of the nation ended in genocide, as in Armenia and Nazi Germany. As Omer Bartov (2002) argues, the declaration of enemies of the nation, the people, or the race lies at the heart of modern politics, creating “a mechanism of self-definition and legitimization based on two mutually dependent conceptual and material requirements, namely the need to define enemies and the urge to make victims” (p. 91).

From its founding as a movement in 1919, Italian Fascism defined itself against an array of internal and external enemies. Between 1919 and 1945, Fascist ideology and politics targeted a number of enemies of the people, the state, and the nation as its domestic and foreign policies shifted. (On Italian Fascism’s practices of enemy formation and its anti-communist politics, see Stone, 2008). The most consistent enemy of the Fascist revolution, from its post World War I beginnings to the regime’s final days, was the internal and external Left in all its manifestations. In the language of Fascist politics, that historic enemy, first, internal, and, later, external, was “the Red enemy”: the red or communist or Bolshevik stood interchangeably in Fascist rhetoric and imagery for all leftist opposition, from anarchists to socialists to Bolsheviks.

Before we can understand the enemy central to Fascist wartime propaganda, we must see its roots in the belief in an absolute and destructive enemy from Fascism’s earliest days. In its movement phase between 1919 and 1922, Fascism’s violent crusade against the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and its members constituted its central purpose and created a climate of instability and terror (Albanese, 2006). The Fascist squads’ attacks on the leaders and institutions of Italian socialism, and the political “cleansing” it brought about, would hold a proud and pivotal place in Fascist identity and politics (see d’Orsi, 1985; Albanese, 2006; Consentini, 1923). Mussolini and the Fascist movement declared socialism and then, after 1921 with the founding of the Italian Communist Party, communism, the great menace to the continued existence of the nation and to the Italian body politic. In its violent, revolutionary struggle to take power, Fascism represented itself to a nation in crisis as all that was national, Italian, and organic, while Socialism and Communism were portrayed as signifying collapse, disorder, and foreignness. According to the Fascists, where they offered protection, stability, and meaning to the Nation, the left promulgated chaos, foreign allegiance, and class war.

In enemy images from Fascism’s movement phase (1919-1922), Socialists and Communists were depicted as the “shirkers” and “cowards” who had defiled the nation in its time of need during and after World War I. In this first period, the Red enemy was disembodied—represented by a symbol, most commonly a trampled red flag or a smashed hammer and
sickle. These early enemy images established a framework that would remain consistent: Fascism depended upon polarization and a clear set of dichotomies: Nation/Anti-Nation, order/chaos, good/evil, and us/them. For the Fascists, socialism represented the base material antagonistic to Fascism’s spiritual revolution. Against the backdrop of the post-World War I Italian socialist radicalism and revolutionary politics, the Fascist movement, and then party, presented itself as the only force able to save Italy from a domestic version of the violence and disorder taking place in Russia (Drake, 2003, p. 133).

Decades later, in the midst of World War II and in what would be the last days of the Mussolini dictatorship, the regime mobilized “the politics of hate as part of the program . . . . to demonize and dehumanize the other as the enemy” (Davison, 2007, p. 38). Demonization and hatred of the communist enemy played a key role in Fascist ideology and propaganda, in part as justification for the total war on the Eastern front. A close reading of Italian Fascist images and descriptions of its communist enemy during the war against the Soviet Union reveals how the regime represented and manipulated the fear of the loss of all that Italians held dear and used that fear to forge a deep hatred of a barbaric enemy.

From summer 1941 to summer 1943, two Italian armies participated in Operation Barbarossa: first, the Italian Expeditionary Corps (Corpo di Spedizione or CSIR), which arrived on the Eastern Front in July 1941 and consisted of three divisions (about 62,000 men); second, in July 1942, at Mussolini’s insistence, Italy increased its presence and the CSIR became the Italian Army in Russia (Armata Italiana in Russia) or the Italian Eighth Army, with a total of 10 divisions (Rochat, 2005, p. 378). By November 1942, the ARMIR numbered 235,000 men. Lured by the potential spoils of war attendant on victory in the East, despite the limited preparedness of Italian troops, the lack of war materiel, and German disparagement of Italian participation, Mussolini committed more men and arms (DiNardo, 1996). Motivated as much out of fear as desire, Mussolini demanded that Italy “demonstrate its worth” to the Germans and insisted that Italy could “not be less present [on the Eastern Front] than Slovakia” (Knox, 2000, p. 81).

In November and December 1942, Soviet troops launched a counteroffensive at Stalingrad, and on February 2, 1943, the German Sixth Army surrendered to the Soviets. The Italian lines along the Don River collapsed, bringing the final rout of the Italian Eighth Army, the death of 30,000 Italian soldiers, and the capture of another 54,000 men (Knox, 2000). The defeats of the winter of 1943 confirmed what Italians already knew—that the “parallel war” was really a “subaltern war” and that the Germans considered the Italians more a liability than an ally. Those defeats, combined with
Allied bombing and food shortages, catalyzed existing discontent on the Italian home front, leading to widespread strikes in Northern Italian cities such as Milan and Turin (Colarizi, 1991). It was an unpopular war, and the regime met growing domestic discontent with a propaganda campaign that elevated the war to Italy’s “life or death” crusade.

Beginning in the heady summer and fall of 1941 with its German-led victories against the Soviet Union, the Fascist regime bombarded a listless home front with images of a Russian enemy outside the confines of Western civilization and determined to destroy Italian life at its most basic familial level. As the Italian military campaigns failed in 1942 and 1943, and as Italy’s subordination to Nazi Germany grew more obvious, depictions of the ferocity, godlessness, and barbarism of Fascism’s enemies intensified, becoming the central official explanation for the war.¹ The character of Bolshevik crimes grew ever more primal, with Fascist propaganda during the last year of the war in the East focusing on a communist plot to steal Italian children for slave labor in Russia. The enemy images at the center of Fascist wartime culture imply that the regime hoped that by stoking fear and hatred it could maintain the support, or at least suppress the dissent, of an increasingly anti-war population. Rather than focus on the strengths of the Nazi-Fascist New Order or the glories of Fascist empire, government and party propaganda depended on the specter of a brutal and primitive enemy. Official culture, from pamphlets to films, from the fine arts to popular culture, dipped into historical tropes about “the Russian and Eastern other” and offered a clash of civilizations—a war between the virile Fascist warrior descended from the Romans and the racially degenerate and weak Slavs and Jews locked in a conspiracy against Western Civilization.

Three key phenomena coincided to fuel the hyperbolic and dichotomous character of enemy images. First was the rise of racial politics and ideology in Fascist Italy in the middle 1930s: When the Fascist imperial project came to fruition with the conquest of Ethiopia and the declaration of Empire in 1936, Mussolini “thought [racism] would strengthen the consciousness of Italian identity, remind them of the imperial might of their ancestors, and foster the ardent desire to conquer new territories” (Gillette, 2002b, p. 53). By 1938, Fascist racial theorists argued that modern-day Italians were directly descended from the Romans and that, as declared in the Racial Manifesto, there “exists by now a pure Italian race” (Manifesto della razza, 1938; Gillette, 2002a, 2002b, p. 358). The Racial Laws of November 1938, partially modeled on the Nazi Nuremberg Laws of 1935, defined Italian Jews as a separate race, forbidding them to attend public schools, to own businesses, to intermarry, to serve in the military, or to hold government or party positions.²

The antisemitic Racial Manifesto and Racial Laws, with their biologi-
cal antisemitism, poised the regime for the transformation of its Bolshevik enemy into a racial enemy and a biological “other” (Sarfatti 1994, 2000). Increasingly after 1938, Fascist arguments about the racial degeneration of Jews and Communists were expressed by the era’s racial theorists such as Guido Cogni and by inflammatory publications, most infamously The Defense of the Race (La difesa della razza) (Pisanty, 2006; Servi, 2006). Not surprisingly, this foe whose political differences were expressed biologically overlapped with Nazism’s primary enemy, the Judeo-Bolshevik, who, the Nazis asserted, conspired to destroy German civilization. (On the relationship between antisemitism and anti-Bolshevism in Nazi Germany, see Herf, 2006, and Waddington, 2007).

Through the 1990s, both the general public and scholars of Italian Fascism minimized the place of race in Fascist ideology and practice. While racial politics functioned very differently in Fascist Italy than in its Nazi counterpart, it was far more central than either scholars or the Italian public had been willing to face. For much of the postwar period, the dominant interpretation held that the dictatorship adopted antisemitism as a result of German pressure in 1938. Most notably, Renzo De Felice (1993) argued that Fascist antisemitism was the product of Nazi influence, that Mussolini and the Fascist leadership used racial antisemitism only strategically. Today the myth of Italian detachment from racism, antisemitism, and genocide, sometimes called the Myth of the Good Italian (il mito della brava gente), is challenged from a number of directions (see Del Boca, 2005; Israel & Nastasi, 1998; Sarfatti, 2000, Centro Furio Jesi, 1994; Zimmerman, 2005).

Second, the dictatorship raised the stakes of the struggle against communism by its shift away from a focus on internal or domestic subversion. Beginning with Italian military participation on the Nationalist side in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, the enemy to be hated was an external enemy bent on global domination. With the war in Spain, the regime introduced the idea that “international communism’s” goal was the destruction of the Catholic Church and desecration of the faith. During the war in Spain, the Fascists called the Republicans solely by the name “the Godless,” or senza dio. The propaganda campaign that accompanied Italian involvement in Spain (1936–1939) primed the population to adopt a polarized worldview based on absolute enemies who were racially other and morally compromised. By 1941, total war, and an increasingly losing total war at that, made enemies pivotal to the Fascist worldview; it was critical that they be perceived as constituting civilization-destroying threats.

Third, the official fantasy of a Fascist “parallel war” helped to move anti-communism front and center. The argument put forward in 1940 by Mussolini that Fascist Italy could fight and win its own battles separately from Nazi Germany shaped the character of its anti-Soviet propaganda. The
idea that Italy could carve out its own sphere of influence in an Axis-dominated Europe drove the search for Fascism’s unique contribution to the Axis. Mussolini, as of June 1940 officially commander of all branches of the Italian military, insisted on Italy’s role in the war against the Soviet Union as a way to “demonstrate Italy’s usefulness as an ally” and to guarantee a place in postwar Europe (Knox, 2000, p. 77), even though Operation Barbarossa was a surprise to Mussolini and the Fascist hierarchy (Knox, 2000, p. 7). The regime privileged its presence on the Eastern Front despite the reality of Italy’s military vulnerability and the fact that Hitler did not want Italian troops involved in the war against the Soviet Union (Schlemmer, 2009, pp. 9-11). The regime was deeply invested in its partnership in the anti-Bolshevik coalition consisting of a number of nations, including Romania, Spain, Finland, and Japan.

In fact, one of the remaining ideological weapons that Mussolini could hold over Hitler was Fascism’s origins and primacy as an anti-communist political force. Increasingly after 1941, the regime linked Fascism’s assumption of power in 1922—the March on Rome—to the then-advancing Axis march on Moscow; Mussolini hoped to both invigorate Italians for the crusade against Bolshevism and appropriate some of Nazism’s dominance in the war against the Soviet Union. In 1941, Mussolini tried to one-up Nazi anti-Bolshevism, declaring: “Today there would be no inevitably victorious March on Moscow, if twenty years ago there had not been the March on Rome” (Parodi, 1941, p. 5). The propaganda accompanying the Italian forces in the East repeatedly emphasized Fascism’s “impressive title with respect to history” because it “before all the other contemporary right-wing movements, anticipated the need to strike at the roots and branches of the insidious Bolshevik monster” (Parodi, 1941, p. 5). Moreover, Parodi (1941) added that “the Fascist revolution was born precisely for the purpose of stemming the communist tide” (p. 5). A medallion designed by sculptor Publio Morbiducci and minted in celebration of Fascism’s 20th anniversary in 1942 highlights the pride of place given to anti-communism. This Winged-Victory wields a gladium, a Roman short sword, which she uses to rend the chains attached to a hammer and sickle.
Thus, with the Second World War the Fascist party returned to anti-communism as its *raison d’etre*. This wartime anti-communism depended upon strict dichotomies and life or death choices. The rallying cry of “Rome or Moscow,” a long-standing component of Fascist politics, was now translated into a cataclysmic struggle with the Soviet Union (Sciola, 1989, pp. 43-48).

Now the two forces . . . meet and clash: one with the idea of social disintegration and a return to the state of nature, and the other with the idea of social order and an always greater and deeper affirmation of human potential, through a hierarchy of values and a simultaneous valorization of the people’s energies,

wrote Francesco di Pretorio in *Fascism and Bolshevism in Europe and the World* (*Fascismo e Bolscevismo nell’Europa e nel Mondo*). “One is the darkest and most primitive country,” he added, “and the other, the brightest and most productive civilization in Europe” (p. 42).

Within the dichotomies of good/evil, civilized/barbaric, and us/them, two sets of attributes shaped Fascist anti-Soviet propaganda. The first was that the enemy was godless and immoral, bent on the universal destruction of Christianity and determined to put the defeated in states of mortal sin.
The second reason to hate the enemy was its insidious nature as a racial “other”—degenerate and biologically inferior. Such attributes drew from the ideologies of colonialism, eugenics, and “racial science,” as they evolved in Europe from the mid 19th century forward. These race-based depictions stressed the enemy’s barbarism, criminality, and degeneracy. The images of the communist enemy appeared across the cultural spectrum from the fine arts to mass culture and carried both sets of attributes—that is, the enemy as a threat to the moral, religious, and social order, and as menacing because of its racial and biological traits.

Fascist propaganda declared the enemy’s worst crimes to be its war on the Church and the family. Pamphlets, published in series such as *Victory Notebooks* (*Quaderni della Vittoria*) or individually as in *Bolshevism Against God, Against the Family* (*Il Bolscevismo contro Dio, contro la famiglia*) (Parodi, 1941), appeared just prior to and during the war on the Eastern Front, and listed in lurid detail Bolshevism’s past and future crimes against the Church and its followers. These publications reproduced images of churches desecrated or destroyed during the Spanish Civil War and during the Soviet invasion of Romania and Poland in 1940 (Centro di Studi e di Azione per l’Ordine Nuovo, 1942). Declaring Fascism the protector of Christianity, Fascist propagandists presented the war against the Soviet Union as having “all the characteristics and values of a true and valid religious crusade” (Parodi, 1941, p. 6). They evoked the crusades against Islam, claiming,

> Taking up the Duce’s orders these [warriors] departed with the passion and Faith of the ancient Crusaders . . . ready to give their last drop of blood, happy to contribute to the victory of civilization over the blackest barbarism, of Christianity over an absurd atheism. (Centro di Studi e di Azione per l’Ordine Nuovo, 1942, p. 87)

The reliance on and enlistment of Catholicism in Fascist attacks on its communist enemy may seem surprising given its anti-clerical origins and the anti-religion stance of its ally Nazi Germany. In fact, Fascist politics and culture had forged an ever closer relationship to Catholicism from the signing of the Lateran Pacts in 1929. With the Lateran Treaty, Mussolini settled the conflict between the Pope and the state of Italy and recognized Catholicism as Italy’s state religion. This agreement, very popular among Italians, removed any contradictions that had existed between being a “good Fascist” and a “good Catholic.” The Fascist cult merged in many aspects with the Catholic cult, and the two ideologies reinforced each other. Thus, in addition to enlisting the allegiance of Italians to the Church in the name of Fascism and Italy, the regime borrowed many of its ideological impulses, such as the integration of the population into the institutions of the state or
the merging of public and private life, from the Catholic Church. The regime aspired to a “political religion” that mirrored the language and rituals of the Church and that emulated the relationship of the individual to the Church (Gentile, 1998). Moreover, anti-communist Fascist politics and Vatican politics overlapped completely, although Vatican anti-communism was rooted in communism’s official and militant atheism and the anti-Church policies of the Soviet Union and Fascist anti-communism drew from Fascism’s anti-materialist and anti-internationalist politics and geopolitical considerations.

Communist determination to corrupt the Italian family through the imposition of immoral practices, from abortion to illicit sex, and to destroy the Church, through the physical destruction of churches and the murder of clergy, was a dominant theme in wartime pamphlets, books, film, radio, posters, and the fine arts. Pamphlets such as Bolshevism Against God, Against the Family and Bolshevism, Shame of Man (Bolsevismo obbrobrio dell’uomo) and feature films such as Odessa in fiamme (Odessa in Flames) and L’Uomo dalla Croce (Man of the Cross) told harrowing tales of the social and moral disintegration that came with communism. Under communism, proclaimed Bolshevism Against God, “humans are satanically made prey to unbridled lust and the most coarse materialism” (Parodi, 1941, p. 11). This vision of the enemy argued that communism’s anti-religious character was part of a larger plan to destroy humanity: “Slaves to materialism, the Bolsheviks seek only to lower mankind to the level of animals, destroy the purifying religious feelings which are innate to all men” (Di Pretorio, 1940, p. 42).

In fact, went the argument, the Bolshevik’s core purpose was the destruction of the faith and the faithful. “To understand Russia today – the massacres committed with its own borders, the essential shape of its politics, its arts, the goals of its foreign propaganda–one must,” insisted Mario Parodi (1941), “recognize that the dominant and immutable characteristic of Bolshevism is hatred of God and hatred of Christ and his Church” (p. 6). Godlessness stood at the center of Bolshevism and it was the reason to hate the enemy: “Bolshevism is first of all and above all a struggle against God and religion,” urged Parodi in the pamphlet Bolshevism Against God, Against the Family (p. 24).

The enemy’s godlessness was inseparable from its racial degeneracy. Many wartime representations of the Soviet enemy were steeped in a racial ideology that argued that the enemy bore immutable biological characteristics—that that the enemy, while marked as a foe for ideological reasons, carried that identity in a racially-determined manner. Racial inferiority and otherness was written on the body, and the body itself also manifested ideological difference, which in turn was revealed through immorality and apos-
tasy. Because this godless enemy was essentially and biologically programmed, only its absolute physical destruction could protect Italy. The biologically/racially-motivated hatred of the enemy often expressed itself in disease and germ metaphors. As Bolshevism, Shame of Man, warned, “Bolshevism, like a cancerous cell, has begun to invade the world. Like neoplastic cells, it will destroy the host organism” (A.R.L., 1941, p. 5). But defensive surgery will save the day, reassured Bolshevism Against God, Against the Family, as “Europe jumps to its feet and marches against the greatest shame of the century, and together with the German army will cleanse the old continent of the Moscovite leprosy” (p. 24).

Fascism’s Bolshevik enemy of 1941 to 1943 was fully embodied, distinctly biologically differentiated from Italians—gone were the Red flags and hammer and sickles that stood in for the enemy in the 1920s. In their place, this enemy was a racial other—swarthy, with beady eyes or distorted physiognomy, and was always contrasted with the classical, fine-boned features of the model Italian. All Soviets, ran the argument, were racially identifiable, from Lenin with his “Mongolian profile” down to the Soviet foot soldier (Parodi, 1941, p. 7). The Bolshevik soldier was identified by his bulkiness, high cheekbones, and unintelligent and confused gaze. He was also often marked in Fascist propaganda by unruly dark hair or a beard.

The racialized propaganda argued that the Bolshevik foot soldier was more animal than human, driven by instinct, rather than intelligence or morality. As Mario Giacomelli argued in 1942 in The Russian Soldier: Heroism or Animal Instinct (Il soldato russo: Eroismo o istinto bestiale), “Their actions are devoid of all ethical considerations” (p. 250). The Soviet political commissars, a central figure in Fascist enemy images, manipulated the Soviet foot soldier, forcing him into battle. Fascist propaganda argued that these wily, cunning, but physically small, political operatives controlled the Russian soldier. The commissar was often coded in ways drawn from antisemitic propaganda to imply that he or she was Jewish; this caricature involved small stature, a large nose, glasses, and kinky hair. According to the propaganda, these commissars forced the soldiers, who are disabled mentally, into battle. The Soviet master plan to “kill God in the hearts of men” would never had succeeded if not for “the Soviet commissar’s pistols pointed at the soldier’s heads (Parodi, 1941, p. 30).

Fascist biological anti-Bolshevism of the war years intersected and cross-fertilized with racial antisemitism—Fascist physical stereotypes of Bolsheviks had, by 1941, significant overlaps with the National Socialism’s Judeo-Bolshevik enemy, as well as with modern racial antisemitism in general (Gilman, 1991; Herf, 2003; Lindeman, 2000). Fascist propagandists copied some post-1941 Italian anti-Soviet propaganda directly from the Nazis, such as a January 1941 Difesa della razza antisemitic caricature.
showing “the Jewish Spider” waving a red flag and weaving a web over the map of Europe (Pisanty, 2006; Waddington, 2007).

The racial/biological explanation for the need to defeat the Soviet Union drew heavily on longstanding, pre-Fascist arguments about the Russia people’s uncivilized and barbaric nature. It also tapped into pre-existing Western European prejudices about “the East.” In this vein, Fascist depictions of the Russian enemy mobilized centuries old tropes about an East/West conflict. The regime articulated the clash of civilizations as one of Europe against Anti-Europe, with Italy shutting the door on the invading forces of Anti-Europe. A postcard printed and distributed by the Italian armed forces in 1942 and 1943 for soldiers at the front to communicate with loved ones at home shows an Italian soldier keeping the demons at bay by closing on them the door marked “Europe,” while protecting a mother and child who are in a Madonna and child pose. Deep xenophobic tendencies in Italian culture, stemming from centuries of foreign occupation and foreign rule, shaped Italian Fascist approaches to enemy formation.

Fascist wartime culture described an enemy fueled by its hatred of Christianity and a battle in the East in which Fascist forces held the line between civilization and barbarism. *Legionnaires’ Christmas* (Natale Legionario), a 1942 radio play, offered a sanitized description of battle conditions on the Eastern Front and explained the character of the enemy found there. Set on Christmas Day 1941, *Legionnaires’ Christmas* tells the story of the Tagliamento battalion of volunteers awaiting a Soviet attack. The soldiers open packages from home, pray, and sing. They know that “the enemy will attack first because it is logical and obvious that the Godless Bolsheviks want to sanctify the Birth of Christ with a day of massacre.” The radio play then moves to the family home of one of the soldiers, Annuccelli, as the family sets his place at the Christmas dinner table. The family listens to Mass on the radio and the daughter reminds them all: “I am sure that they are listening to Mass there too because this is what they fight for.”

Back at the front, another soldier, Vanozzi, sits alone in his tent. Annuccelli, his commanding officer, asks why he is not drinking and singing with the others. Vanozzi’s problem is that he does not have a family; he volunteered for the Eastern Front only from a sense of duty. Annuccelli explains that “in this war you have to know how to hate, to hate the evil that is on the other side” (p. 16). He continues,

I saw Bolshevism in Spain... I saw churches blown up by a mine placed at the altar by the Reds. The church was full of women and children gathered there to pray after the city was taken. The Bolsheviks lit the candles at the altar because they knew the people would come looking for
Fig. 2. “Europe Against Anti-Europe,”
Italian armed forces postcard, 1942.
God’s comfort. It was a cowardly massacre. For we are here because of that! (p. 17)

Annuccelli recounts that the current war really began “when I was a baby . . . when my father went with his squad . . . because someone had to defend the Patria, the family, and our home.” Here Annuccelli gives voice to the regime’s position that the anti-Bolshevism of the Second World War had its roots in Fascism’s founding days and the the war against Russia represented the culmination of a generation of anti-communist struggle.

As dawn breaks, the battle begins. Vanozzi, now prepared for martyrdom, dies valiantly. In their farewell prayer to him, the legion recites: “God who lights every flame and stops every heart . . . Make your Cross the sign which precedes the banner of our Legion and save Italy” (p. 20). The broadcast, set on Christmas Day 1941, reminded listeners that their sons and fathers were at the front to protect them from an enemy determined to destroy their homes and their churches. It reassured Italian mothers that wherever their sons fought, they also prayed. The radio play seamlessly intertwines commitment to Catholicism and the Fascist cause, as in the final prayer which asks that “the sign of the Cross precede the banner of the Legion” (p. 21).

As scholars of Italian Fascism and culture have established, film represented a privileged mode of communication between the regime and its public (Argentieri, 1998; Reich & Garofalo, 2002; Ricci, 2008). Beginning in the regime’s period of consolidation in the middle 1920s and escalating from the mid 1930s forward, Mussolini ordered the party and the government’s direct involvement in film and newsreel production and exhibition. In 1925, the regime, keenly aware of the power of cinema, founded the Istituto Luce as “the state’s own newsreel and documentary agency” (Ricci, p. 59). The state supported domestic film production, found new venues for the showing of films, such as the Venice Biennale Film Festival, and, with the coming of the war, limited the distribution of foreign films. Mussolini had always understood film as “a fundamental tool in the expansion of the Fascist reformation of culture” (Ricci, p. 58). In other words, the Fascist government saw film as a critical tool in binding Italians to it and in forging an Italian identity in sync with Fascist priorities.

The Second World War deepened the regime’s commitment to the production of films with a Fascist message. Feature films, approved and censored by the Ministry of Popular Culture, continued to be produced and distributed in Italy through the summer of 1943, when the Fascist Grand Council and King Victor Emanuel III removed Mussolini from office, ending the Fascist regime. Film production, in fact, increased during the war years, making feature films, in genres from combat films to melodramas,
critical to the government and party’s propaganda effort. Production increased from 83 films in 1940 to 119 in 1942, and the Italian film industry found new markets and co-producers among occupied and friendly regimes, such as those of Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania (Ben-Ghiat, 2002, p. 276).

In these wartime films, depictions of Fascism’s enemies pervaded. In these films set on the various Axis battlefronts, the communist enemy received much cinematic focus, with a string of Italian films in 1941-1943 highlighting its terror and provoking in audiences a special hatred. These included Marcello Alabani’s Redenzione (Redemption), Romolo Marcellini’s Inviati Speciali (Special Envoy), Gottfredo Alessandrini’s Noi Vivi (We the Living), Carmine Gallone’s Odessa in Fiamme (Odessa in Flames), and Roberto Rossellini’s L’Uomo dalla Croce (Man of the Cross). These films stressed narratives of triumph over the enemy and its immutable evil.

Two films of 1942 in particular—Odessa in Flames and Man of the Cross—offered a compelling visual embodiment of Fascist enemy images. Carmen Gallone’s Odessa in Flames, a joint Italian-Romanian production, is set against the Soviet invasion and occupation of Bessarabia and Bukovina in June 1940 and the subsequent Axis conquest in July 1941. It recounts the tale of a family separated and persecuted during the Soviet occupation and focuses on Bolshevik attacks on the family, the social order, and religion. Carmen Gallone is best known for his 1937 Scipio, the African (Scipione l’Africano), a re-invention of the conflict between Rome and Carthage as the battle of authoritarianism against democracy and as action against debate and irresolution. In Scipio, the African, Gallone introduced a racialized enemy, presenting the Carthagians as uncivilized and “semitic”—an enemy image he developed further in Odessa in Flames (Nowell-Smith, 1984, p. 154; Hay, 1987, p. 15; Brunetta, 1975, p. 77).

Through the example of Romania, Odessa in Flames offers an explicit lesson about what Soviet occupation might mean. That Italian audiences were to identify with the occupied Romanians is established in the first scene when the protagonist Maria Teodorescu, an opera singer played by the famous Romanian soprano Maria Cebotari, puts her son, Nico, to sleep with the tale of the Roman defeat of the Dacians in the First Century. “We are children of the Romans,” she tells him, “the children of justice and civilization.” This opening scene establishes the dichotomy of civilization against barbarism around which the plot unfolds.

When Soviet forces arrive, Maria is in the countryside singing at a folk festival, her estranged husband is in Bucharest with his mistress, and their child is in Kishinau, Bessarabia. Maria returns home to find that Nico has been stolen by the Soviets, who have taken thousands of boys and hidden them in an underground cellar. Soviet commissars assign the boys numbers
and hide them in preparation for the boys’ deportation to Russia for work and reeducation. When Maria begs for her son’s release, Commissar Smirnoff, a close friend turned traitor, forces Maria to sign an oath to the new regime and to agree to sing Russian songs for the occupiers. That the Bolsheviks force Maria to sign a false oath further demonstrates their disregard for Christian morality.

The film uses dichotomization and polarization to stoke hatred of the enemy and to give desperate urgency to the battle against the Bolsheviks. The social order, piety, and civilization of the Romanians contrasts with the inhumanity, detachment, and violence of the Soviets. In a number of scenes, Romanian peasants are summarily executed for being caught praying or for possessing religious objects, such as icons of the Virgin Mary. Trembling peasants whisper about “black cars” “that look for bodies.” The idea that Bolshevism brought gender inversion and sexual immorality plays a central role in *Odessa in Flames*, embodied by a ruthless and masculine woman commissar who, dressed in black leather, demands ever more executions. The dark-haired, swarthy commissar repeatedly occupies the frame with the maternal, blond, and feminine Maria to make the point about the insidious effect of Bolshevism on women. The opposition between the healthy social world of the Romanians and the distorted amoral one of the Bolsheviks is coded on the bodies of Maria and the female commissar.

*Odessa in Flames* plays on the deepest of fears—fears of the loss of a child. As in a number of Fascist films focused on the communist enemy, such as Augusto Genina’s *Siege of the Alcazar* (1940) and Goffredo Alessandrini’s *We the Living* (1942), the communists are always men and women without family or sentimental attachments. The plot of *Odessa in Flames* pivots on the Soviet kidnapping and mistreatment of Romanian children. The film repeats scenes of desperate parents begging for news of their stolen children, only to be told that “they are now property of the state.” Evoking Soviet labor camps, and perhaps subconsciously hinting at the Nazi death camps, the children in the film are given numbered armbands and referred to by their numbers. One of parents is told by the Commissar, “Your son is now number 778.” The film climaxes in a dramatic last-minute rescue of the kidnapped boys by the advancing Romanian forces; the Romanian troops free the boys from a cave that has been rigged with explosives by the Soviets. The penultimate shot offers a close-up of the reconstituted Teodorescu family. And the last shot of the film is newsreel footage of Romanian troops toppling a hammer and sickle from a building in Odessa. The diegetic edit between the reunited family and the destroyed hammer and sickle connects the individual and the political.

The harrowing threat of children being stolen from their mothers appeared repeatedly in Fascist accusations against the Soviet enemy. A
pamphlet produced in late 1943, after the Nazi invasion and occupation of Italy, warns of children “torn from their mothers.” The pamphlet’s cover shows a caricatured British soldier taking a baby from a distraught mother, only to hand it to a grinning, menacing Bolshevik. “Mothers of Italy,” cries the text, thousands of children are taken from Sicily by “the claws of the Soviet monster, just as they were in Spain and Poland.” But its real message comes in the final sentence, with the command: “Against the savage ferocity of such an enemy there is only one choice: struggle.” This pamphlet, the product of joint Nazi-Fascist propaganda directed at an Italy under brutal Nazi occupation and coming in the wake of the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily and Southern Italy, testifies to the Fascist belief up to its final days that accusations of the enemy’s outright, planned destruction of the family could mobilize Italians.

Other crimes attributed to the enemy in *Odessa in Flames* represent acts of displacement, in that they attribute to the Soviets behavior being committed by the Fascists. The reconquest of Romania by the Axis is celebrated in the film’s conclusion as a liberation, repeating, as Patrizia Dogliani argues, Nazi and Fascist propaganda’s habit of “manipulating images in such a way as to present acts of conquest as acts of liberation”; a prime example is the infamous aerial bombardment of Guernica on April 26, 1937 (Dogliani, 1999, p. 406). Are the numbered armbands of the captured boys transferred from the numbered prisoners of Nazi concentration camps? The displacement involved in the Fascist articulation of conquest as liberation mirrors the larger discourse of victimization at the hands of the Allies present in both Fascist and Nazi propaganda. Hitler’s repeated argument that the Nazi war of expansion was in self-defense and that the Germans were really the victims of an international Jewish/Bolshevik conspiracy are examples of a similar phenomenon (Herf, 2006; Waddington, 2007).

*Odessa in Flames* contains all the elements of Fascist wartime enemy images: anti-religion, anti-family, anti-traditional gender roles, representations of the enemy as racially inferior, and depictions of crude and unintelligent Russian soldiers and wily commissars. The film, through identification with the threatened Teodorescu family, telegraphed to Italians at home that this could be their fate too, were it not for an Axis victory; that the deprivations and violence they suffered at home in 1942 and early 1943 were nothing compared to the destruction the enemy might bring.

Roberto Rossellini’s *Man of the Cross* of 1942, released shortly after *Odessa in Flames*, presented a similarly hateful enemy, one racially degenerate and morally bankrupt, but open to Christian salvation. One of Rossellini’s least known films, *Man of the Cross* was filmed north of Rome in the summer and fall of 1942, as the Axis advance on the Eastern Front began to slow. It was screened in the spring of 1943, after the final defeat of the
Fig. 3. Pamphlet warning of the destruction of the Italian family by Bolsheviks.
Italian Eighth Army and the massive casualties, missing persons, and prisoners that accompanied it. In the context of Fascism’s defeat and imminent collapse, it offers a double-edged portrait of the hated enemy and a multivalenced explanation of the war’s purpose. During the Second World War, Rossellini, the director later known as a founder of neo-realism and the apogee of anti-fascist filmmaking, directed and collaborated on the scripts for three combat films funded by the Italian armed forces: *La nave Bianca* (Hospital Ship, 1942), *Una pilota ritorna* (A Pilot Returns, 1942), and *Man of the Cross*. (For more about the war trilogy’s relationship to Rossellini’s career, see Ben-Ghiat, 2000, pp. 20-35.) The last film in the trilogy, *Man of the Cross*, set on the Eastern Front in the summer of 1942, presents a bleak, charred world of violence and ideologically fuelled war. Asvero Gravelli, a Fascist ideologue and editor of *Gioventù* and *Antieuropa*, wrote the script, along with Rossellini and Alberto Consiglio (Liehm, 1986, p. 326).

*Man of the Cross* uses the backdrop of an Italian tank division operating on the Eastern Front to bring the audience into contact with the enemy. After a clash with the Soviets, the tank division temporarily retreats (Rossellini, 1943). One of the wounded cannot be moved and the chaplain (Alberto Tavazzi) remains behind to nurse him. The following day, the Russians capture the chaplain and the wounded soldier; the Russians bring their prisoners to the local political commissar. During the interrogation, an Italian air raid creates chaos in the Russian lines, giving the chaplain and his charge a chance to flee to one of the burning village’s huts. Here the chaplain encounters pious peasant women and children refugees from the Steppes. As the battle rages, a group of Russians, led by another political commissar, Serge, and a female soldier, Irina (Roswitha Schmidt), take refuge with the chaplain, the refugees, and some Italian soldiers. The long night, during which a baby is born and baptized, allows the chaplain to spread the gospel among the enemy. He converts Irina and saves the wounded, the women, and the children. But in the gunfire of the Italian advance, he is mortally wounded, along with a Russian officer. As they lie dying, one across the other, together they recite the Lord’s Prayer.

*Man of the Cross* challenged official pronouncements of inevitable victory and both embodied and rejected dominant Fascist tropes about the enemy. Rossellini’s film divides into three primary and, at times, contradictory, themes or subplots. First, it shows the Italians at war, presenting a well-organized and technologically superior military in the midst of an advance. Second, it portrays a monstrous, terrifying enemy, subhuman and determined to exterminate its foe by any means possible. Third, it offers Christian redemption and a universal humanity under Catholic salvation as the only route out of the devastating conflict and violence.

From the film’s opening frames, the audience is asked to identify with
Italian soldiers at the front who are homesick and up against a terrible enemy. The young Italian soldiers are listless; they sing in dialect (despite the fact that the government forbade the use of dialect in films), and dream of home. As they await the return of their tank division from the front, the soldiers seek out the chaplain for advice. His answer reveals the meaning of the war for these foot soldiers: “Always write home,” counsels the chaplain; “your loved ones in Italy need to hear your voices always. For the rest, God will take care of it.” The film establishes early on that what matters to these young men from Naples or Venice (the regionalism is signaled by various characters speaking in dialect) is their families back home.

Man of the Cross’s initial focus on the personal and familial impact of war is shattered by the chaplain’s confrontation with the enemy. This enemy fits the ideologically determined characterization and is scripted to incite terror and hatred in the audience. The chaplain and the wounded soldier he is protecting are captured by the Red Army. In a schoolhouse adorned with a painting of Stalin and a drawing of a naked woman (simultaneous markers of political and moral deviance), a political commissar interrogates the chaplain. The filthy, unshaven, and bandaged commissar grabs the chaplain’s crucifix; taunting him, he says, “He is a sorcerer, a conjurer of the dead, a Catholic witch doctor, and that is his amulet.” In response to the dirty and scratching commissar, one of the Soviet soldiers jokes, “Have him exorcize you. Maybe it will cure your eczema.” This scene takes up the wartime admonition that the “godless” are hell-bent on the destruction of Catholicism, its flock, and its instruments of faith. By cursing the chaplain’s crucifix as an instrument of witchcraft, the Russians declare themselves to be devils and demons fated for eternal damnation.

The commissar is diseased and a carrier of infection. This enemy bears a broad array of visual markers of degeneracy, criminality, and racial “otherness.” As already noted regarding biologically-based hatred of the Soviet enemy, this commissar and the other Russians in the interrogation scene share a physiognomy taken from racist propaganda about Jews and degenerate races: They have broad faces, high foreheads, sunken eyes that are far apart, and protuberant noses. For most of the eight-minute scene, the commissar and the chaplain occupy the same frame, each in profile, highlighting the physical comparison between the bandaged, smoking, and unwashed commissar and the classically-proportioned, fine-boned, clean, and well-groomed chaplain.

In the same scene, the commissar’s discovery of a Fascist Party card on a captured Italian soldier reveals the enemy’s exterminationist ends. The commissar explains, “For us, you are not a regular soldier. We consider you an agitator, an instigator; thus we have the right to exterminate the enemies of communism.” The commissar continues: “Unless you would like to
recant? Do you want to sign here?” he taunts, like the devil asking for a man’s soul. The soldier refuses and is executed. This exchange demonstrates the crusade character of the war: It tells the audience at home that surrender is not an option. Finally, the abandoned and barren landscape that makes up the film’s background also signals a kind of racial degeneration and “otherness.” The undeveloped or “primitive” landscape, as Robin Pickering-Iazzi has written, evokes “the discursive naturalization of the racial other, who is frequently associated with . . . a territory to be conquered and cultivated” (Pickering-Iazzi, 2002, p. 195). The Italian forces, shown moving aggressively forward with their heavy firepower, appear in this context as the more “civilized,” offering a precondition for a “form of mastery.”

Despite its emphasis on Italian victory on the battlefield and on the diseased and demonic enemy, the second half of the film rejects the racial determinism proposed by the beginning and questions the value of military conquest itself. Rossellini located Christian universalism and the idea of a single humanity under God at the core of Man of the Cross. The film’s dramatic and emotional center is the Christian community forged from the Russian refugees, Italian and Russian soldiers, and the chaplain trapped overnight in the semi-destroyed hut. The camera shifts from broad, long shots to close-ups inside a hut of rubble and straw—an archaic, timeless interior evocative of the manger in which the newborn Christ was laid. The Italian soldiers and wounded Russian fugitives pass the night suffering together in a collective that is neither Fascist nor Soviet. Here, the unarmed chaplain, physically the smallest of them all, becomes the leader and spiritual guardian. The film’s dramatic climax is signaled by the arrival of Irina, the female Russian soldier, and Sergei, a political commissar and her lover. Irina’s military attire, her ripped khaki clothing, her gun, and her devotion to a man who is not her husband mark her as a fallen woman and a lost soul, in contrast to the pious and modestly clothed peasant women.

In the film’s long night of the mortal soul, during which most of the sacraments of the Church, from baptism to confession to last rites are given, the chaplain brings the group to salvation. When a baby is born, the chaplain risks his life to get water for the baptism, saving the baby from the risk of purgatory. “At dawn the battle will begin again—what will become of him?” explains the chaplain. “It is my duty to baptize one of God’s creatures.” The baby, in his innocence and purity, symbolizes Christ among the sinners. Soon after, Serge, the commissar, is shot by Irina’s husband, Ivan. A saved soul is born and an infidel dies. But, Serge’s death opens the door to Irina’s confession and redemption. She excoriates Ivan, saying, “You have killed a political commissar in front of the enemy.” The chaplain ministers to her:
I am not an enemy; I am a man of God, who is father to all men. Even if they are hostile, they are all brothers in his presence. I know that they have made you hate, but you are not lost. The lights don’t go out, just because you close your eyes. God will not be lost to you, if you could feel him, as I feel him now in my heart. Then, you would not be dead. Now you are more dead than your Serge. When you have an empty and tired heart out of desperation, all of a sudden it can happen that you feel “un accovamento” less crude. This is Him, God, who slowly enters your empty and tired heart.

This sermon brings Irina to confession: She confesses her sins of idolatry and apostasy. She is lost, but redeemable. She suffered under communism—her mother died, her father remarried a woman “only three years older” than her, she was forced into marriage with a barbaric man. She leads an immoral life because the system itself is immoral and degrading to women.8

Rossellini uses the barren landscape of his imagined Eastern Front to bring the audience a night of meditation over the destiny of the human soul, or as a contemporary review described it, Rossellini draws “attention to the most intimate shifts in the human spirit” (Calcagno, 1943). The film searches for a point of human understanding and finds Catholicism and the reunification of peoples through faith. The director transforms an infidel collective into a community of salvation in Christ’s body. This Christian humanism rejects the racial determinism of much Fascist propaganda; the enemy is not predestined to evil, but it has souls primed for salvation, through suffering. In the middle of an ideological crusade, the film rejects the world of enemies, battles, and victories, in favor of one of individual spiritual redemption. The chaplain dies a martyr during the act of converting the infidel. The blood on the dying chaplain’s face connects him to the suffering body of Christ.

In Man of the Cross, Rossellini transforms hatred into identification with an enemy that has renounced its evil ways. He proposes that bravery is the abandonment of a false system in the name of salvation and faith. The pro-Nazi and racist journal Il Tevere interpreted the film and the figure of the chaplain as scandalously unpatriotic. “There is no Patria in him, there is no Italy. There is simply faith in the universal justice and mercy of God,” wrote Giorgio Almirante, the postwar leader of the neo-fascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI). “All of this is undeniably very nice from a purely Christian standpoint,” he continued, “but not from the standpoint of our war film propaganda, which, in my opinion, should not be spreading universalist ideas, but should be stressing our differences with the enemy and intensifying our hatred (sacred e sancrosanct) against the enemy.”9 As Almirante noted, a propaganda film that failed to have the audience leave
the theater hating the enemy was no propaganda film. He identifies the mechanism at the heart of Fascist wartime enemy images: that the enemy had to be represented as so unredeemable as to forge a hatred equal to total ideological war.

Fascist propaganda produced to justify the war against the Soviet Union entailed a campaign to terrify the population and rally it in a deep hatred of the Soviet/Bolshevik enemy. To accomplish this politics of fear, the regime turned to culture, hoping that a barrage of images of a barbaric and immoral enemy might mobilize the population. Using deep-seated stereotypes about Russian lack of civilization and racial degeneracy, and more recent ideological tropes about Bolshevik barbarism and godlessness, Fascism promoted a complex wartime enemy to be hated for both immutable biological flaws and an immoral ideology. Recruiting these two sets of anxieties, the Fascist government and party enlisted language and visual culture in a variety of forms to provoke the greatest fear possible of what might accompany a Soviet victory.

NOTES

1. On the complete unpreparedness of Italy’s military, industry, and economy in the face of total war, see Knox, 2000.

2. Regio Decreto – Legge, November 15, 1938, no. 1779. See also Gillette, 2002a.

3. Natale Legionario (Fronte Russo), collana “vita legionaria,” no. 3, “Radiotrasmissione effettuata il 1st febbraio 1942-xx per il XIX annuale di fondazione della milizia,” testo e regia di Alberto Casella.

4. A translation of the radio play in its entirety can be found in Marla Stone, The Fascist Revolution (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012).

5. On the Italian film industry during World War II, see Mino Argentieri, Il cinema in Guerra (Riuniti: Rome, 1998). Films such as Augusto Genina’s Bengasi and Goffredo Alessandri’s Giarabub had plots focused on the heroic Italian resistance to the nefarious British enemy in North Africa; Una pilota ritorna (A Pilot Returns) and Quelli della montagna (Those From the Mountains) took their plot lines from the Fascist wars in Albania and Greece.

6. Odessa in fiamme (Odessa in Flames) 1942, directed by Carmine Gallone, screenplay by Nicolai Kiritescu and Gherardo Gherardi, starring Maria Cebotari, Mircea Axente, Carlo Ninchi (83 minutes). Produced by the Scuola nazionale di cinema and the Centro sperimentale di cinematografia, in collaboration with the Ufficio nazionale della cinematografia, Ministero della propaganda romeno.
7. Propaganda Abteilung Italien. Germany, Heer. Accession no. 90038-9.06. Hoover Institution, Stanford, California.

8. *Noi Vivi* (We the Living), the Italian film adaptation of the Ayn Rand novel of the same name, highlights the notion that one of communism’s greatest crimes is its degradation of women.

9. G[iorgio] Al [mirante], *Il Tevere*, Rome, June 9-10, 1943.

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