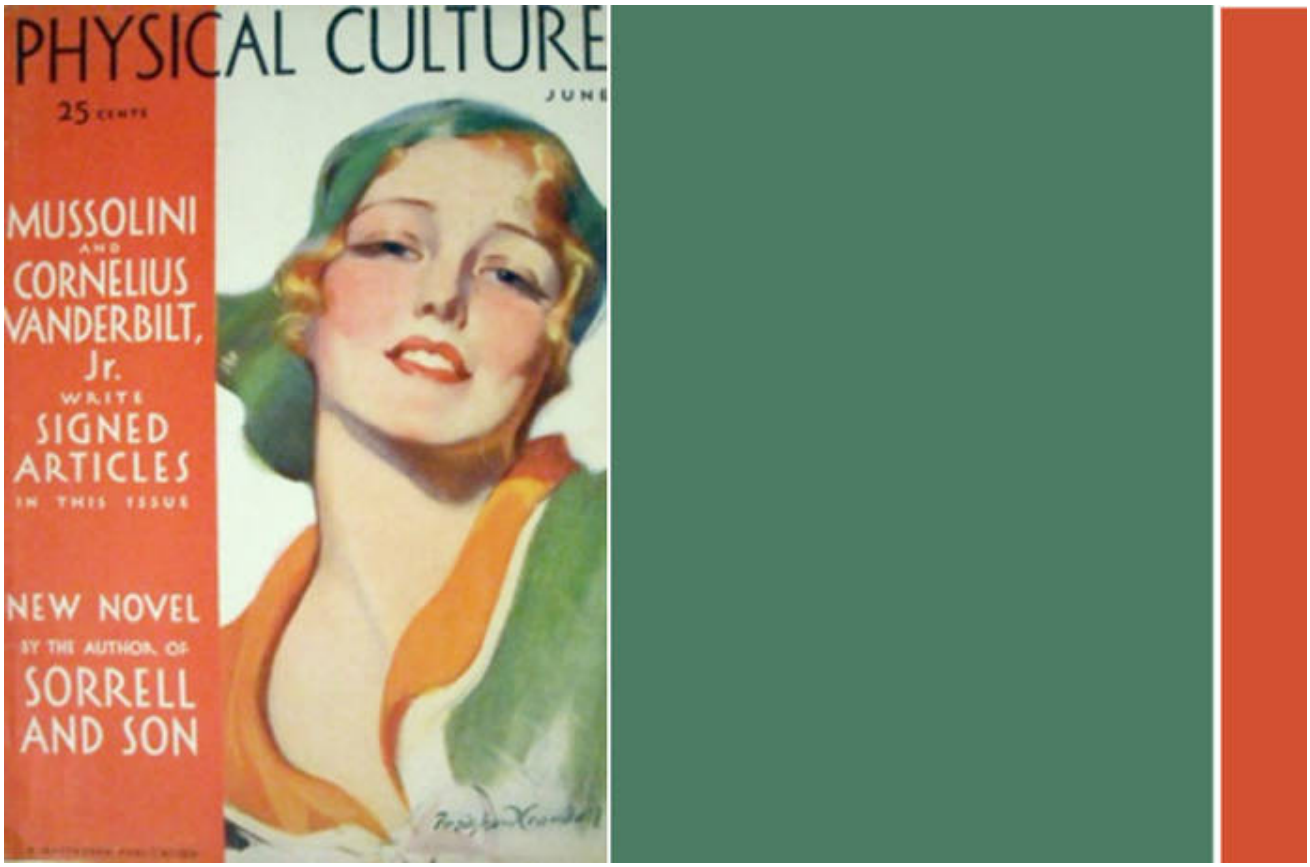
Covering Fascist Italy: American Correspondents and Regime Censorship

(October 17, 2012)



What did Americans know about Mussolini in his time? Who were the correspondents who covered Fascist Italy for the American press? What were their sources? Under which restrictions did they work? Did Italian American organizations play a role in supporting and/or opposing the censorship machine? What did American Jews know about Italian anti-Semitic policies and to what extent were their views shaped by state censorship and Italian diplomatic actions? David Kertzer will discuss Mauro Canali's research on the files of the Fascist censorship commission that oversaw the activities of US correspondents in Italy from the 1920s to the end of World War II. The discussion will cover Professor Canali's investigation into Mussolini's efforts to create an official image of his regime for America and its impact on American politics. Presented by the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Centro Primo Levi Simon Wiesenthal Center, Museum of Tolerance

With the rise of Fascism, Italy acquired new significance in the American press. Until then, the major American newspapers -The New York Times, Chicago Daily News, Chicago Tribune, The New York

Herald Tribune - and news agencies: Associated Press, United Press and International News Service, had kept Italy at the periphery of the Western world.

After Mussolini came to power, they all opened bureaus in Rome and sent correspondents. The shift addressed the curiosity and preoccupation that the new Fascist prime minister elicited in the American public opinion.

In the first phase of the Fascist era, the 1920s, Italian affairs were covered i by American journalists stationed in Rome such as Hiram Motherwell, Edgar Mowrer, William Carroll Binder Stonemann (Chicago Daily News), George Seldes, John Clayton, and David Darrah (Chicago Tribune) and Ralph Barnes (New York Herald Tribune). The New York Times relied on the cautious Arnaldo Cortesi. The Associated Press had Hudson Hawley and Percy Winner, who later transferred to Hearst International News Service; the United Press Bureau Chief was Thomas Morgan.

In the early years of the regime’s consolidation Mussolini enjoyed an overall appreciation and positive judgment from the American correspondents. The journalists who visited Italy to interview him returned home and wrote flattering articles about the young dictator, exalting his effectiveness and energetic spirit. Interestingly, many of them found similarities between the personality of Mussolini and that of Theodore Roosevelt.

Among Mussolini’s apologists there were important names including Edward Price Bell, Ida Tarbell who signed quasi-fictional apologies of the dictator, as well as Lincoln Steffens and Samuel McClure. The latter confessed that he had found Mussolini "full of charm, force and kindness", admitting candidly that his heart "beat hard for a long time after I left him."
The pro-Mussolini attitudes of some of these journalists deserve more careful consideration. At the beginning of the century some of them had been among the muckrakers’ movement . They had a history of fierce criticism of American capitalism dovetailing with socialist ideology. Their immediate sympathy for Mussolini enables us to analyze certain aspects of Mussolini's ideology and political opportunism during the first years of his regime.
Mussolini liked to present himself to the outside world as an ex-socialist who had not abandoned this original ideas to tame capitalism. He tended to present Fascism as a kind of 'third way” between communism and capitalism, which, through major structural reforms, would temper the excesses of capitalism and contain the expansion of communism. It is possible that these former muckrakers would have found his professed ideology the realization of ideals they had sought in vain for many years: a serious reform of capitalism through the introduction of social humanitarianism.

While it was easy for Mussolini to play his part as a wise, far-seeing and energetic statistician, a lover of the country and the working class, it proved more difficult to sustain this image with foreign correspondents stationed in Rome, who had the opportunity to observe first hand and gauge the system of pervasive violence established by the dictatorship.

Reports of the Fascist police show increasingly diverging opinions on the regime between the visiting journalists and the correspondents who lived in Rome.
A case in point is Edward Price Bell, who, after interviewing Mussolini, wrote a apologetic pamphlet entitled "Italy's Rebirth". Almost simultaneously, his colleague George Seldes was expelled because of his criticism of the Italian justice system.

Mussolini imposed a discreet but tight surveillance system on the American correspondents in Rome. He was determined to present a attractive image of himself and his regime to the American public. He was particularly interested in exerting a strong influence on the large Italian-American community, which he saw as a powerful means to exert indirect pressure on Washington.

Control was exercised mainly through the police structure that Mussolini had built. He could count on an array of instruments of pressure and retaliation for those correspondents who did not follow the directives of tone and content issued by his press office.
The police could substantially limit the freedom of movement of correspondents, deny benefits that were traditionally granted to foreign journalists (reduction of railroad rates, access to official events, interviews, etc.), and in extreme cases issue an order of expulsion.

Among the agents of this control system was the Italian Embassy in Washington D.C. that kept under close watch the US press. Thousands of press clippings coming from the embassy are preserved in the archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They testify to the tight information system that the regime maintained to control what was written and thought about Fascism in the US.

In the early years of the regime there were several cases of expulsion, the most glaring of which was that of George Seldes, guilty of having written about the Matteotti murder. Seldes described Fascism in his memoir "Sawdust Caesar". David Darrah was also expelled and narrated his experience in a recollection published under the title of "Hail Caesar". These correspondents played an important role in making known the true face of the Italian dictatorship outside of Italy. They did so with courage and were punished with expulsion for choosing not to abide to the “suggestions” of the regime press office and the pressure of the Italian police.

The principle of the freedom of the press very soon clashed with the regime’s growing need to control what Italian and foreign readers were allowed to know. Foreign policy was a treacherous territory for correspondents. After an initial phase, traditionally considered a continuation of the foreign policy of the previous liberal government, starting in 1933-34, Mussolini pushed more firmly for the revision of international treaties, progressively separating Italy from its allies of World War I and moving to a full-fledged alliance with Hitler.
The Ethiopian war and Italy’s growing opposition to France and England reinforced the attention of the US press on Italy; news agencies sent more correspondents to Rome. Mussolini’s venture in Ethiopia was the last event of the Fascist policies to be reported in the US without particular criticism, if not with a certain sympathy. It also marks the point when the retaliation against those journalists who had expressed doubts on the Italian aggression became more stringent.

At this stage, from the mid-thirties until the beginning of World War II, Mussolini unleashed the might of its repressive machine upon the American correspondents in Italy. This included the political police, as well as the Ministry of Popular Culture - on which the foreign press depended. Both bodies were equipped with a network of informants who infiltrated the journalistic circles at all levels and reported in great detail on habits, opinions, privacy and even arrière - pensées.
Informants were often assistants and friends of the foreign correspondents. They provided the police and the Ministry of Popular Culture with private and professional information on the journalists, which constituted the basis for all measures taken against them by the government, including expulsion.

In addition to informants, the police kept the foreign press under surveillance through wiretapping. Correspondents who reported to main offices in Paris and London were the main targets of this system. Recordings were transcribed and preserved in their personal files. If any statement considered anti-fascist was detected, the journalists were almost immediately expelled. The case of Henry Gorrell is exemplary: he was expelled because he had publicized the news of the mass arrest of communists in the province of Terni.

As yet to be written is the story of those correspondents who were assigned to Rome after having spent time in Spain covering the events of the Spanish Civil War. Having manifested their sympathies for the loyalist forces, when they arrived in Italy, they were already surrounded by suspicion and immediately subjected to strict surveillance. Among them were Herbert Matthews of the New York Times, Reynolds Packard and his wife Eleanor of the United Press, and Richard Massock of the Associated Press.

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Mauro Canali is professor of Contemporary History at the University of Camerino and specializes in the history of the Fascist control and police system. He is the author of the first comprehensive study on the history of the Fascist political police (Le Spie del Regime, Il Mulino, 2004) and of Il Delitto Matteotti, (Il Mulino, 1997). Prof. Canali was a visiting professor at Harvard University. He a member of the scientific committee of “RAI Storia” and collaborates with the Journal of Modern Italian Studies, Nuova storia contemporanea and Liberal.

David Kertzer is the Paul Dupee University Professor of Social Science at Brown University. He is the author of The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara (Knopf/Vintage, 1997), The Popes Against the Jews (Knopf/Vintage) and Prisoner of the Vatican (Houghton Mifflin, 2004). From 2006 to 2011, Prof. Kertzer he was the Provost of Brown University. He is currently completing a book to be published by Random House in the U.S. and Rizzoli in Italy on the relationship between Benito Mussolini and Pope Pius XI.

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October 22 at 6:30 pm

Presented by the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Centro Primo Levi [2]

Simon Wiesenthal Center, Museum of Tolerance

226 East 42nd Street New York, NY 10017

The program is free and open to the public. Reception to follow.

Reservations are required and should be sent to Melissa Hooper at 212.697.1180 or mhooper@wiesenthal.com [3] www.museumoftolerancenewyork.com [4]RSVP: 212.697.1180 or mhooper@wiesenthal.com Reception to follow.

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