

The second generation: Italian-Canadian students and fascism

TARGETING THE DIASPORA

In June 2014, it was revealed that the Toronto District School Board had partnered with the Confucius Institute, an agency funded by the Chinese government, to teach Mandarin and promote China's culture and history in its schools. Critics of the initiative claimed that the Confucius Institute was a mouthpiece for China's authoritarian regime; its instructors, they argued, were sent directly from China and were prohibited from discussing the country's treatment of minority groups or the Tiananmen Square massacre. In October of that same year, under intense public pressure, the TDSB cut ties with the Confucius Institute. Yet this was not the first time a foreign government tried to gain a foothold in Canadian classrooms. In the 1930s, Benito Mussolini's government targeted Italian-Canadian youth, through language classes and cultural programs, with the express purpose of winning their loyalty. An analysis of this episode in Canadian history is fruitful, as it not only establishes a precedent for the Confucius Institute controversy, but also touches on the broader issues of identity among second-generation immigrants in Canada, and the difficulties repressive governments often encounter in maintaining ties with their respective diasporas.

Since the beginning of the era of mass migration in the late 19th century, successive Italian governments had taken a keen interest in their emigrants, an attitude very much rooted in Italy's status as a young nation. After centuries of regional divisions, the process of unifying the diverse population of the Italian peninsula had only begun in the 1860s. Between 1876 and 1914, when 14 million people left the country, Italy was still considered a recent creation. A main priority of the Italian state, therefore, was to form a strong national iden-

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tity that would supersede any lingering regional loyalties among its citizens, including those who had migrated elsewhere. The absence of a national identity was particularly evident when it came to language. Although standard Italian was deemed the national language of Italy, regional dialects continued to be used, especially by emigrants. Consequently, throughout the Liberal era (1870-1914), the Italian government funded schools across the world that taught standard Italian. First-generation Italian immigrants were targeted, but so too were their children and grandchildren, who had the potential, in the eyes of the government, to become deeply connected to Italy, no matter where they lived. Italy's efforts in reaching out to the descendants of Italian immigrants were formalized in 1912, when its legislature defined Italian citizenship to include children born abroad to Italian fathers.

THE FUTURE OF FASCISM

After coming to power in 1922, Mussolini and his fascist government continued to court Italian immigrants and their descendants, but on a much wider scale this time. The regime believed the future of fascism lay with Italian children, including those born outside Italy. In 1927, Mussolini created a department responsible for Italians living abroad, *Direzione generale degli Italiani all'estero* (General Bureau of Italians Abroad). It was led by the high-ranking fascist official Piero Parini, and it included a section responsible for the

sons and daughters of Italian immigrants, the *Gioventù Italiana Del Littorio Estero* (Italian Youth Organizations Abroad). The Italian-language schools in Canada came under the jurisdiction of the *Gioventù*. Their official aim was to teach Italy's language, culture, and history, not unlike previous efforts during the Liberal era. However, students were also taught to believe fascism was the best path for Italy, and fascist teachers were sent from Italy to Canada for that exact purpose. The textbooks used were sent by the Italian government and contained numerous glorifications of Mussolini. Under the auspices of the *Gioventù*, a limited number of students from the language schools were also sent to summer camps in Italy, a trip paid for mostly by Rome. As with the schools, these camps extolled the virtues of the fascist regime and immersed the children in a very militarized atmosphere. In Italy, they were to conduct themselves as soldiers in battle. The children regularly took part in parades and military drilling, often while wearing fascist uniforms.

Throughout the 1930s, the RCMP monitored these developments quite closely and with great concern. They knew the Italian-language teachers were sent directly from Rome, and they were familiar with certain passages from the textbooks that criticized the British empire and praised Mussolini. Furthermore, the RCMP had received reports of the speeches that Italian consuls had given to Italian-Canadian children before they left for the summer camps. In 1937, the consul in Montreal, Paolo de Simone, had told one group that no other government did as much for its children abroad as Italy, so they needed to be "appreciative and show gratitude with deeds." In a particularly damning assessment, the RCMP argued that Italy's

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efforts at educating Italian children in Canada could “provide an effective instrument which may be put to any purpose required in the event of such hostilities as a war in which the countries concerned were implicated.” In 1938, Windsor, Ontario’s Italian school, held on Saturdays, was barred from using the classrooms of St. Alphonsus, part of the separate school board, after reports emerged that the textbooks being used espoused fascist propaganda. Shortly after, Ottawa was sent the books in question for further review. Rome’s activities among Italian-Canadian youth were also criticized within leftist circles. *The Daily Clarion*, the organ of the Communist Party of Canada, reported extensively on the situation in Windsor. And in March 1939, Toronto alderman Stewart Smith complained to the city council about Italian classes in the city.


Two questions come to mind: Was the concern on the part of the Canadian government and certain sectors of the public justified? And were these schools and summer camps able to channel the allegiances of Italian Canadians to a fascist state, as one RCMP report stated? One way to approach these questions is by looking at accounts left by the children who attended these schools and summer camps in the 1930s. The local fascist press in Canada published numerous stories on the experiences of the second generation. Montreal’s *L’Italia* newspaper, for instance, printed a letter from an unnamed girl who had written

to her parents while she was attending a camp in Italy. The youngster called Italy a “true paradise” and stated that if it weren’t for the love she felt for her parents, she would never return to Canada. The RCMP presented this type of material as further proof that the fascist regime was greatly influencing the lives of Italian-Canadian children. Nonetheless, we should be careful with these sources. Campers were expected to speak glowingly of their trips and each was required to keep a diary of his or her time in Italy, to be read at fascist events once they returned home.

A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY?

Examining the life histories of certain individuals who passed through these schools and camps can provide another perspective. The life of Rino Albanese, born to Italian parents in Port Arthur, Ontario in 1924, demonstrates that the second generation’s allegiances were not always shaped by fascist propaganda. Albanese attended Italian-language classes in the 1930s yet enlisted, along with his twin brother, in the Canadian military. Both saw action overseas during the Second World War. Interestingly, the twins’ father was a self-identified fascist and disapproved of his sons’ decision to join the military. Another interesting case is that of Gerard Di Battista. He was born in Lachine, Quebec in 1925 and, like Rino Albanese, was the son of a self-identified fascist, Luigi Di Battista. Gerard attended Italian-

language classes and even went to a fascist camp in Rawdon, Quebec for those students unable to travel to Italy. The camp was named after Piero Parini and included military drilling; a toy gun made out of wood was used instead of an actual weapon. Despite these pressures, Gerard enlisted in the Canadian military during the Second World War.

Further research will be needed to determine what other factors may have influenced the loyalties of Italian-Canadian youth in the 1930s, but I suspect Canadian schools provided a strong counterbalance to the efforts of the Italian government. Italian-language classes were only a few hours a week, which paled in comparison to the public school education that girls and boys received during the day. A parallel could be drawn between the lukewarm response of many Italian-Canadian students to the overtures from Mussolini’s regime, and the difficulties previous Italian governments encountered in shaping the mindsets of young Italians abroad. For instance, Luigi Rava, head of the Dante Alighieri Society, admitted in 1912 that the children of Italian immigrants in Argentina were taught by that country’s schools to “consider Argentina as their only fatherland.” Similar dynamics likely occurred in Canada in the 1930s. Indeed, the failure of Italy’s fascist regime to sway young Italian Canadians serves as a reminder of the numerous obstacles governments face when courting a diaspora. 

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