**From CAUR to EUR: Italian Fascism, the ‘myth of Rome’and the pursuit of international ‘primacy’**

**ABSTRACT**

The formation of Fascist Italy’s inter-national imaginary in the 1930s tells a fascinating story of growing global political ambition, of constant re-calibration in the face of seismic geopolitical shifts, and in the end of a (frustrated) pursuit of symbolic ‘primacy’. In this article, I discuss two different Fascist projects underpinned by this imaginary: first, the political project of internationalisation promoted through instruments such as the *Fasci Italiani all’Estero* and especially the *Comitati d’Azione per l’Universalità di Roma*, as well as through direct diplomatic and political ties with an expanding circle of regimes in Europe and overseas; and second, the symbolic pursuit of a deeper sense of historic-cultural ‘primacy’, linked to the idea of ‘Roman’ universality, that became the discursive lynchpin of the ill-fated 1942 Rome world fair (E42/EUR). The transformation of Fascism from a hyper-nationalist phenomenon into a force actively seeking inter-national diffusion and finally ‘universality’ can be understood as a reflexive adjustment of Fascism’s ideological-political horizon, driven as much by new geopolitical opportunities and frustrations as by conquering ambition and ideological continuity. In fact, Italian Fascism’s trajectory from CAUR in the 1930s to EUR/E42 in the war-torn 1940s, unfolding against a backdrop of growing antagonism between Italy and Nazi Germany for global influence, retained a primary symbolic point of reference - the ideological, political, and cultural-historic estate of the ‘myth of Rome’ as a symbolic discourse of trans-temporal and -spatial primacy.

**KEYWORDS**

*universality, Fascist ideology, internationalism, EUR, Mussolini, Nazism, Rome*

In early January 1931, the Italian minister of aviation and Fascist *gerarca,* Italo Balbo, headed four squadrons of Italian S55 airplanes during the final legs of their record-breaking expedition to South America. Having left Italy on 17 December 1930 – the twenty-seventh anniversary of the first flight by the Wright brothers – the fourteen-plane formation flew over the western Mediterranean, then skirted the west coast of Africa before crossing the Atlantic Ocean on 4 January, landing in Rio de Janeiro on the 15th.[[1]](#footnote-1) Balbo was a well-known aviation pioneer who carried out a series of similar high-profile aerial expeditions in different parts of the world throughout the 1930s, including one to North America that coincided with the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome (*Crociera Aerea della Decennale*, 1933). His passion for aviation as the epitome of ‘mythical modernity’ echoed and re-affirmed the Futurists’ earlier cult of the airplane as the totemic symbol of a radically new future.[[2]](#footnote-2) But the expedition to Brazil – more than 10,000 kilometers in six stages, with over 60 hours of flight total – was one of the most daring of his life. His passionate embrace of the airplane as the technological symbol of an adventurous, heroic spirit of modernity paralleled the expansive geographic imaginary of Fascist Italy as an aspirational global power – pioneering, futural, history-making.[[3]](#footnote-3) Undertaking daring flight expeditions was a supreme test of skill, endurance, and engineering for those taking part; but it also brought far-flung lands and their people closer[[4]](#footnote-4), projecting an unmistakable image of Italian prowess to an admiring domestic and international audience.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Balbo received a rapturous welcome in Rio and made the most of the unique propaganda opportunity.[[6]](#footnote-6) With its sizeable Italian immigrant population (second only to Argentina in South America), Brazil was steadily becoming increasingly important for Fascist Italy, and – together with Argentina – as a bridge between Europe and South America against US hegemony in the region.[[7]](#footnote-7) Important trade ties, a growing geopolitical interest in a region where traditionally the United States had exercised primary influence, and the question of the ‘fascistisation’ of the immigrant community,[[8]](#footnote-8) all played a role in investing Balbo’s Brazilian travels with a significantly wider political significance. Back in Italy, Mussolini had ordered the maximum propaganda publicity for the event, making the most of an occasion that allowed Fascist Italy to claim world ‘primacy’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Balbo’s record-breaking transatlantic adventures in the early 1930s coincided with a period of effervescent discussion in Italy about the significance of the 1922 ‘revolution’ and the future horizons of Fascism itself. As the tenth anniversary of the March of Rome approached and the regime was preparing to mark this symbolic milestone with suitable pageantry, the putative early ‘success’ of Fascism fostered a host of more expansive ideas about its international ‘primacy’ and suitability for ‘export’ to other countries. To be sure, Mussolini had initially been averse to the idea that Fascism could be the solution to other countries’ problems. During the 1920s he repeatedly stated that Fascism was an exclusively Italian product. By 1930, however, his attitude and tone had changed markedly. The Duce now appeared to have embraced the idea that Fascism was more than just an ‘Italian’ phenomenon with a limited national horizon, opting instead for an enthusiastic pursuit of Fascism’s ‘export’. What this meant, however, how far it extended beyond Italy’s borders, and through which channels and strategies it was to be achieved, remained fluid and fiercely contested by different factions within the Fascist hierarchy, in the midst of seismic shifts in Europe and globally.

The radical proposition of an ‘international’ Fascism – if not as a full ‘export’ then in the sense of a diffusion of some of its key innovations, such as corporatism[[10]](#footnote-10) - was promoted by important intellectual supporters of Fascism’s ‘export’, like Asvero Gravelli and Ugo Spirito. Yet as an official ideological trope, ‘international Fascism’ had a relatively short life span in the history of Italian Fascism, emerging in the late 1920s, reaching its peak in 1930-33, but becoming eclipsed shortly afterwards. It continued to live, however, subsumed into another discursive premise - *universalità*. Unlike internationalism, the idea of universality had been part of the Fascist imaginary since the early days of the movement. As early as 1920, Mussolini had claimed that “Fascism as an idea, a doctrine, a realisation […] is Italian in its particular institutions, but it is *universal* in the spirit”.[[11]](#footnote-11) Twelve years later, in the co-authored *Doctrine of Fascism*, he contended that “today Fascism possesses the universality of all doctrines that, in becoming realised, represent an important moment in the history of the human spirit”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Universality, as Spirito noted, was the essence of all genuine international ideologies and movements, in contrast to the ‘anti-nationalism’ of the socialists and liberals.[[13]](#footnote-13) From 1933 onwards, the premise of Fascist universality gained political momentum most notably with the establishment of the Action Committees for the Universality of Rome (*Comitati d’Azione per l’Universalità di Roma*, CAUR). At this stage, the Fascist regime’s international horizon remained largely confined to Europe, even if the CAUR also explored links with movements in other continents, including in South America. Within three years, however, against the backdrop of a rapidly changing geopolitical environment in central Europe, the Fascist gaze was expanding further and further afield. A host of new conceptual premises came to the fore, reflecting diverse geographic imaginaries, only partly overlapping, but cumulatively sustaining the Fascist regime’s drive for global ‘primacy’. One of these was *mediterraneità;* a scheme seeking to unite the diverse cultures and histories of the Mediterranean basin – spreading across three continents – under the putative cultural hegemony of Italy. Another feature was the imperialist drive in north and east Africa and the creation of the new Italian *impero*. A final trope was that of *latinità,* a linguistic and cultural metaphor fusing the Roman and Catholic heritage – one often used in contrast to Germanic and Anglo-Saxon cultures[[14]](#footnote-14) – with a transnational horizon that reached as far as South America. *Universalità*, however, explicitly linked to the ‘myth of Rome’ as a millenarian spiritual force inextricable linked to the physical space of the city, remained a permanent point of reference for Fascist discourse, underpinning and effectively subsuming the other, competing international imaginaries. And when the CAUR project gradually lost momentum in the face of Nazi Germany’s allure during second half of the 1930s[[15]](#footnote-15), the programme of Roman-Italian-Fascist universalism exercised an ever-growing allure upon the Fascist leadership. Accordingly, the world fair in Rome lavishly planned for 1942 (*Esposizione Universale di Roma,* EUR) was meant to both symbolically enact and materially consecrate this vision as the pinnacle of Italian *and* Fascist primacy.

This is why Balbo’s South American adventure mattered much more than merely as a feat of ‘Italian’ engineering. Instead, at the same time that it underscored and reinforced the close ties between Italy and Brazil[[16]](#footnote-16), it was intended as a symbolic tribute to Fascism’s ‘heroic’ international spirit and was extolled as the most tangible evidence of Italy’s resurgence toward global primacy under Fascism.[[17]](#footnote-17)It also marked the beginning of a more ambitious and energetic Fascist policy vis-à-vis South America, feeding a powerful mental image of the sub-continent as an area that was first and foremost under Italian cultural-political influence.After Balbo’s record-breaking 1930-31 *crociera,* Italian diplomats were joined by artists and architects in perceiving Brazil and Argentina as a fascinating, fertile ground for ‘exporting’ the allegedly pioneering achievements of Fascist Italy in their respective fields. Balbo, it seems, was championed as a pioneer of Fascist Italy’s ever-expanding ambitions for global ‘primacy’.

This article examines the formation of Fascism’s international imaginary in the 1930s, and its mutation from a project of political diffusion with a geographically limited (mostly European) horizon to a global vision of *universalità*. I argue that this transformation opened up a very different future pathway for F(f)ascism, substituting hyper-nationalism with a universalist imaginary derived from diverse operationalisations of the ‘myth of Rome’. I further contend that this change in the Fascist horizon is best analysed within the dynamic, rapidly changing geopolitical context of the 1930s; a period of intensifying competition between the ‘liberal west’, the communist USSR, and the emerging ‘fascist’ bloc [in central Europe], Yet in terms of the latter, it also a period of equally growing antagonism within it, specifically between Fascist Italy and Hitler’s Third Reich, first as adversaries and, from the mid-1930s onwards, ever-closer allies. In this respect, the present article concludes, Fascism’s trajectory from CAUR in the 1930s to EUR in the war-torn 1940s can be profitably seen as a reflexive adjustment of Fascism’s ideological horizon, one driven as much by new geopolitical opportunities and frustrations as by conquering ambition and political continuity.

**TO ‘EXPORT’ OR NOT TO ‘EXPORT’? DEBATING ‘INTERNATIONAL’ FACISMS IN THE EARLY 1930s**

Constructions of *international* fascism may appear counter-intuitive. As a generic ideology with vastly diverse national permutations, fascism was inherently hyper-nationalist and enthralled by the project of regenerating a given nation-state in the context of a fierce competition with rival countries.[[18]](#footnote-18) The nation, Mussolini repeatedly claimed, “comes before and above everything else”[[19]](#footnote-19); or again, “to this myth, to this grandeur, that we wish to translate into a complete reality, we subordinate all the rest”.[[20]](#footnote-20) The centrality of nationalism in fascist thought and action meant that fascism was, *prima facie,* ill-suited for international diffusion – far less so than other dominant ideologies of its time, whether socialism (with a clear international horizon built at the core of its ideology) or liberalism (by the 1920s making significant inroads as a reproducible modern transnational template).[[21]](#footnote-21) Predictably, neither Mussolini nor any Fascist thinker explicitly endorsed a Fascist ‘*internationalism*’; the word was considered an anathema to Fascists and other interwar radical nationalists, tainted through its association with both communism and global capitalism. Instead, throughout the 1920s, the *Duce* appealed to a set of myths with a distinct Roman and/or national provenance and hue – in particular the aforementioned *romanità* (the values and heritage of ancient Rome as a diachronical agent of history[[22]](#footnote-22)) and *italianità* (the essence of Italian tradition, culture, and identity). However, the sense of Italian Fascism as an ideological pioneer, on the cusp of launching a history-making programme of political, institutional, and cultural regeneration[[23]](#footnote-23), invested specific Fascist initiatives with an *de facto* internationalist aura.

There were increasingly direct appeals to Mussolini to do much more in order to advance the cause of Fascism on the international scene.[[24]](#footnote-24) In particular, the corporatist experiment that took concrete shape in 1928 with the *Carta del Lavoro,* under the guidance of Giuseppe Bottai, emerged the most promising of these initiatives. This was a radical project with profound socio-economic and political implications, rooted in the traditions of Catholicism and the ‘Latin’ culture*,* yet at the same time distinctly Italian and ‘Fascist’ in its new formulation.[[25]](#footnote-25) As early as 1926, Bottai had maintained:

Fascism creates the new ideals, opens up new frontiers of political thought, develops the new theory of the state, makes history with its own programme and supplies civilised nations a sum of ideas and works that are sufficient to meet the needs of the current century and to give it character and name.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Such views gained a much stronger currency in the wake of the October 1929 world economic crisis.[[27]](#footnote-27) Whether referring to the experiments with the corporatist reorganisation of the state in 1928; the ‘reconciliation’ of universal Catholicism with Fascism in the next year; or the ‘myth of Rome’ as the cradle of a shared global civilisation across the centuries, Fascist intellectuals envisioned the possibility of a new kind of transnationalism deriving from the epochal ‘Fascist revolution’. Most were at pains to emphasise that this new weltanschauung was fundamentally opposed to both Bolshevik materialism and the liberal mixture of individualistic cosmopolitanism.[[28]](#footnote-28) Yet even at this relatively early stage, a chasm became apparent between two predominant models of Fascist transnationalism. Crucially, furthermore, this chasm was as much about geography as about ideological orientation and political ambition. For some, Fascism’s international horizon lay in a defensive geopolitical alliance with other kindred forces against the liberal democracies of the west on the one hand, and Soviet Bolshevism on the other. For other Fascist intellectuals – like Bottai, Gravelli or, perhaps most influential of all, Camillo Pellizzi[[29]](#footnote-29) – Fascism was above all a spiritual force for civilisational renovation, anchored with a mythic foundation of ecumenical universality and global ‘primacy’.

In spite of the early rejection of internationalisation by Mussolini, Fascism had already demonstrated its transnational *bona fide* by the mid-1920s. At the forefront of these developments, the Italian Fasci Abroad (*Fasci Italiani all’Estero*, FIaE) was established and directed by Giuseppe Bastianini, then under-secretary of the Fascist Party (*Partito Nazionale Fascista*, PNF), under Bottai’s ideological tutelage.[[30]](#footnote-30) It was a predominantly Party-led organisation, which expanded significantly in the following five years, establishing Fascist ‘cells’ in many places with Italian expatriate communities in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. By 1925, Bastianini was petitioning Mussolini with a programme of action for the FIaE echoing the “universality of Rome” rhetoric, but linking it to the proposal for setting up a ‘Fascist international’ as a prelude to a new, global revolutionary order under Italian Fascism.[[31]](#footnote-31) Mussolini had tolerated the activities of the FIaE in the mid-1920s, offering subtle encouragement while more publicly preventing them from openly pursuing a policy of internationalisation. When, in the wake of bitter jurisdictional clashes between the organisation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, MdAE), he decided that the FIaE should be absorbed by the ministry – thus losing their autonomy of action in 1928-29[[32]](#footnote-32) – he was hoping that the ‘coordinated’ FIaE still had a role to play in spreading a positive image of Fascist Italy, helping to make Fascism more accessible to audiences outside Italy.[[33]](#footnote-33)

If more circumspectly than before, the FIaE continued their activities into the 1930s, predominantly in the cultural field, alongside other national cultural institutions (such as the Istituto Dante Alighieri[[34]](#footnote-34)) and PNF organisations (such as the *Gruppi Universitari Fascisti*, GUF, founded in 1920 but restructured in 1927[[35]](#footnote-35)). Yet by this time, it was always subordinate to the state diplomatic apparatus. By 1939 there were 487 FIaE ‘cells’ across the world, collectively performing a number of educational, recreational, and social activities, on addition to assisting the regime’s wider propaganda efforts abroad.[[36]](#footnote-36) Still, by the turn of the 1930s, this kind of ‘quango-like’ activity was no longer deemed sufficient. As Mussolini finally came to support the notion of Fascism as an ‘export’ product – invested with a unique regenerative mission and history-making ambition – Fascist transnationalism was re-launched with a proactive, state-led political agenda seeking to forge alliances between radical right movements, parties, and eventually state governments.

There was a longstanding advocacy in Italian Fascism for creating a bloc of ‘fascist’ ideological forces from across Europe as a ‘third way’ against liberalism and socialism. Since the late 1920s, the Fascist intellectual Asvero Gravelli, author of the influential treatises *Verso l'internazionale fascista (Towards a Fascist International,* 1932) and later *Panfascismo* (1935), had attempted to reconcile Italian Fascism with the idea of a pan-European ‘fascist’ front, coining it the “International of Nationalisms”. Gravelli envisaged a powerful new bloc of nationalist forces throughout the continent – united in their opposition to both liberalism and communism, aligned with Italian Fascism's much-publicised corporatist experiments – forming a collaborative structure under Italian Fascist hegemony.[[37]](#footnote-37) Gravelli's vision was essentially a defensive one. Confronted with similar internationalist projects emanating from either communist (the Comintern) or liberal (including Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi’s 1923 ‘Pan-Europa’ platform, and Aristide Briand’s 1929 ‘Federal Union of Europe’ project), Gravelli believed that Fascism had to match its ideological competitors with a transnational project.[[38]](#footnote-38) He developed his internationalist platform further in the early 1930s, editing two journals (*Antieuropa* and *Ottobre*) that sought to articulate the vision that Fascism, as a universalist ‘young’ movement, ought to spearhead the political and spiritual regeneration of Europe.

The first years of the 1930s proved the decisive turning point in Fascism's embrace of transnationalism. The lavish celebrations for the *Decennale* of the 'Fascist Revolution' in 1932 provided a spectacular backdrop for the idea that October 1922 was a watershed moment – not just for the rebirth of Italy, but for the renaissance of Europe and even human civilisation itself.[[39]](#footnote-39) At the same time, the world economic crisis had cast a grave shadow on the future of 'western' democracies as dominant powers on the international scene, unable to steer the people of the continent to political stability, social harmony, and prosperity. Speaking in Milan in October 1932, Mussolini predicted that “the twentieth century will be the century of Fascism … [and] within ten years Europe will be fascist or fascistised".[[40]](#footnote-40) Yet it was the appointment of Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor on 30 January 1933 that proved the most significant driver of the regime’s universalist-internationalist transnational discourses. Initially greeted by the Fascist leadership as a victory of a kindred political force – proof of Fascism's growing influence on international politics – the establishment of the National Socialist regime in Germany nevertheless ushered in a period of instability that soon complicated German-Italian relations. In fact, escalating suspicion and antagonism remained the determining features of Fascist-Nazi relations until at least 1936.[[41]](#footnote-41) In the aftermath of the 1934 Nazi-led coup in Austria, an Italy-led 'Fascist international' campaign already in progress received a powerful political boost from Mussolini and reached a more definite political milestone. By the time representatives from carefully selected 'fascist-like' parties and movements from across Europe met at the Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland on 16-17 December 1934, it had become apparent that the Fascist regime was eager to solidify a permanent transnational front of kindred forces under the ideological and political tutelage of Rome. Underpinning this initiative was as much the traditional Fascist opposition to the 'liberal west' and communist 'east' as the growing fear of a resurgent (Nazi) Germany.

**THE ‘UNIVERSALITY OF ROME’ AS A EUROPEAN PROJECT: CAUR**

It was not Gravelli, however, heading this initiative. His star ebbed as quickly as it had flowed. Widely regarded as a protégé of Mussolini in 1930, he was sidelined in favour of the Florentine lawyer Eugenio Coselschi. Coselschi brought to the project a more streamlined organisational approach and a very different ideological perspective – more alert to the opportunities offered by the myth of Roman universality than Gravelli’s brand of Fascist transnationalism. For Coselschi, Fascism represented a global force of both spiritual and political renewal, one rooted in the (revived) traditions of ancient Rome. The centrality of Rome's mythology to Coselschi's vision was unmistakeably echoed in the title of the new organisation (Action Committees for the Universality of Rome, CAUR). Against the backdrop of a resurgent Fascist cult of *romanità* in the early 1930s, Coselschi characterised Rome as the diachronic foundation of European civilisation, the spiritual cradle of the most creative energies shaping the continent's history.[[42]](#footnote-42) For him, the idea of Rome was more than the single most important inspiration for Italian Fascism; it was a force bigger than any single historical agency, which, had given Fascism an inter-national, pan-European, and indeed ecumenical-universalist thrust.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The political usefulness of this vision for the Fascist regime in the circumstances of the early 1930s cannot be exaggerated. Hitler’s appointment as German Chancellor had introduced a new – and potentially threatening – variable in the volatile European geopolitical landscape of the 1930s. Initially Mussolini and other leading Fascists were eager to cultivate the impression that Hitler's victory was both a continuation and a resounding confirmation of a broader ideological-political trend first initiated by the Fascist movement in Italy. As early as 1930, the Fascist intellectual Sergio Panunzio had greeted the electoral rise of the NSDAP as a decisive step in the “inexorable march of international fascism”.[[44]](#footnote-44) The NSDAP’s election victories in 1932-33 had also been received with enthusiasm in Italy. The Italian press did not hesitate to call the new regime “German fascism”, portrayed as a triumph of “Fascist civilisation, reincarnation splendidly young and vital of the civilisation of [ancient] Rome [...] advancing with its proud banners to conquer the hearts and minds” of others across the continent.[[45]](#footnote-45) The NSDAP’s Alfred Rosenberg and Hermann Goering were invited to speak, along with other luminaries of the European radical right, at the high-profile 1932 Volta conference on the theme of European unity. To be sure, Rosenberg’s contribution to the conference – arguing that Europe could only be led by great nations at the expense of smaller ones – did very little to alleviate the impression that National Socialism differed from Italian Fascism on a number of fundamental issues, above all those related to the former’s racialist worldview.[[46]](#footnote-46) Still, Mussolini applauded Hitler’s rise to power in January 1933 in the belief that he had acquired a junior partner in his quest for reshaping European politics.

However, Fascist enthusiasm quickly gave way to scepticism and then, for a brief period at least, outright hostility. It was more than just ideological differences (Nazi biological racism and 'Aryan' suprematism recast Italians as inferior vis-à-vis the Nordic/Germanic people of the north[[47]](#footnote-47)) or geopolitical rivalry that poisoned Italian-German relations in 1933-35. Above everything else, it was the threat of a resurgent National Socialist Germany as a mighty political competitor to Fascist Italy that really unnerved Mussolini, prompting him to take a more resolute course of international action. Coselschi's plan to hold a series of international conferences under the aegis of CAUR was accordingly aligned with the Duce’s growing ambition to lead a transnational group of ‘fascist’ forces, actively in opposition to both socialism and liberalism, before a resurgent National Socialist Germany had stepped in to steal the political limelight.

A closer alignment of the Fascist transnationalism with the 'myth of Rome’ and its universalist premise therefore became an attractively expedient proposition for Mussolini’s regime in 1933-34. Official discourse of the CAUR swiftly moved away from the discursive platform of ‘internationalism’, which Coselschi himself described at the Montreux meeting as having “a very marked scent of certain other internationals that we know of, socialist international and others”.[[48]](#footnote-48) This comment was a direct rebuff of Gravelli’s earlier proposals for an ‘international’ Fascism; all the same, it did share a commitment to respecting the national autonomy and specificity of all participating movements. This was precisely where the ‘idea of Rome’, as the intellectual basis of the CAUR initiative, proved the most useful. The special October 1932 edition of the regime’s official journal *Gerarchia,* for the 1932 *Decennale*; for instance, bearing the title “The Universal Mission of Rome”, reproduced a phrase by Mussolini on the cover that foreshadowed the significant discursive shift away from ‘internationalism’ and toward a Rome-centric notion of ‘universality’: “force of mediation and equilibrium between antithetical universalist forces from the west and the east”.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Coselschi was a fervent supporter of the idea of a Rome-based Fascist ‘universality’. As president of the National Association of War Volunteers (*Associazione Nazionale Volontari di Guerra*) and the irredentist Action Committees for Dalmatia (*Comitati d’Azione Dalmatica*), he had overseen the establishment of a new propaganda organisation linked to both the ANVG and the CAD, but containing a still broader ideological and geographic horizon.[[50]](#footnote-50) The story of the new organisation’s name is interesting in itself: initially ‘Imperialist League’, it mutated to ‘League of Rome’, and then to ‘Latin League’, before eventually becoming the basis of the CAUR. In the statute of the Imperialist League, Coselschi had already described his idea of the universality of Rome as based upon “the superior rule of Roman equity for all peoples and all races, within their own limits marked by traditions and nationality”.[[51]](#footnote-51) When it came to statutes for the CAUR, his tone was markedly similar:

spiritual alliances that will give the world, still tormented and full of discord, its political restoration and civic and social salvation […] leaving intact and inviolable the traditions, characteristics and needs of the respective countries.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The ‘universality of Rome’ concept, coupled with the promise of the participants’ autonomy and equality, thus offered Fascism the opportunity to form and then potentially lead a pan-European bloc of kindred ideological forces – all the while mitigating any impression that the CAUR were mere instruments of Fascist hegemonic policy and propaganda. Coselschi used the time between the official inauguration of the CAUR (July 1933) and the Montreux conference (December 1934) to travel extensively in various European countries in order to forge links with kindred movements. This, he hoped, would ensure that the first meeting benefitted from the maximum possible international participation and publicity. The organisers of the 1934 conference invited fascist representatives from every European country bar Yugoslavia and even some extra-European ones, as well as from authoritarian regimes (Lithuania, Portugal).[[53]](#footnote-53) In the end, fourteen movements from twelve countries sent delegates to Montreux- mostly from well-established radical right political parties of the time. Some important invitees, like the delegation of the Spanish Falange and the representative of Salazar's regime in Portugal, did attend but only as observers. Although by the time of the Montreux meeting the CAUR had established links with nearly forty movements in countries across the world[[54]](#footnote-54), the conference (and indeed the CAUR as a whole) had a definite European character. Rome was presented as the “fulcrum of Europe’s spiritual unity” and the key to the formation of a “new Europe”.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Unsurprisingly, for an international meeting of radical nationalists the delegates at Montreux disagreed on almost everything of ideological substance – over the centrality of Fascist corporatism; on race and the so-called ‘Jewish question’; on the role of Christianity; on the ‘universality of Rome’ theme, and eventually, over the very balance between national independence and international collaboration.[[56]](#footnote-56) In spite of such major differences, however, delegates reaffirmed their commitment to the CAUR initiative, agreeing to establish a permanent executive committee with broad international representation as a forum for regular future meetings.[[57]](#footnote-57) A new statute for the CAUR was approved soon afterwards, its official launch tellingly coinciding with the yearly celebrations of the birth of Rome (21 April 1935). The statute invested heavily in the idea of Rome's universality as a spiritual compass for contemporary Europe. Meanwhile, further meetings of the executive committee were held during 1935 in Paris, Amsterdam, and again Montreux with an expanded register of delegates from more movements.[[58]](#footnote-58)

**THE SHADOW OF NAZI GERMANY AND THE ALTERNATIVE PURSUIT OF FASCIST ‘PRIMACY’**

Yet there were ominous signs on the horizon. For one, it soon became clear that the efforts of the Fascist regime to promote, via the CAUR, a *de facto* 'fascist international’ cloaked in a discourse of Roman universality – while excluding, and even challenging, National Socialism – did not stop a (growing) number of ultra-nationalist movements across Europe from flirting with Nazism. Especially in the case of movements from central and northern Europe, the ‘universality of Rome’ remained an alien and unsatisfactory ideological premise for such a transnational enterprise. Soon after the first Montreux in 1934, the CAUR leadership started questioning the loyalty of many adherents to the front. That very year Frits Clausen, leader of the Danish National Socialists, was distrusted and frequently referred to by the CAUR officials as "the long hand of Hitler".[[59]](#footnote-59) By the end of 1935, Anton Mussert, head of the Dutch National Socialist Movement and for a brief period entertaining a close relation with the CAUR, had severed links with Rome and aligned his party with Germany.[[60]](#footnote-60) Oswald Mosley – initially unimpressed with, and critical of, Hitler's racialist and anti-Semitic obsessions – was busy establishing ever-closer links with Nazi Germany. His increasingly pro-German overtures had long been apparent to the Italians, resulting in a breakdown of contacts (political and financial) by 1936. The leader of the French *Franchistes,* Marcel Bucard, was similarly treated with suspicion for his increasingly pro-Hitler views and activities, despite serving in a senior capacity on the Montreux coordinating committee. Contacts with Portugal came to an end in late 1935 over the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.[[61]](#footnote-61) Even in Romania, where the outlook for the CAUR was initially very optimistic, a local network of Legionaries had shown alarming signs of "Hitlerite infiltration" from 1934-35 onwards.[[62]](#footnote-62) Meanwhile, as a wave of dictatorships swept away democratic regimes in southern, central, and eastern European countries as the 1930s wore on, an increasing fascination with the dynamism of Hitler’s regime and an eagerness to court Nazi Germany was evident [palpable / unmistakeable?] – even at the risk of alienating Fascist Italy.[[63]](#footnote-63)

The CAUR initiative was also the victim of shifts within the ranks of the Fascist regime. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia from October 1935 paved the way for a diplomatic and political settlement between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. This rapprochement brought about the emergence of the so-called pro-German faction within the Fascist regime, signalling an embrace of biological, ’Aryan’-based racialism and anti-Semitism as official policy by 1938.[[64]](#footnote-64) More importantly, the meteoric rise of Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini’s son-in-law and a long-time sceptic vis-à-vis the Montreux front, heralded the demise of the CAUR. Ciano, an early champion of the Italian-German alliance, took over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in summer 1936, having earlier served as head of the regime’s propaganda organisation. He considered the CAUR, along with the tangled web of semi-autonomous Italian state and party institutions operating abroad, as an obstacle to Fascism’s overseas propaganda effort. Ciano thus sought to re-organise such activities into a more centralised structure presided over by his ministry, alongside the newly-formed Ministry of Popular Culture (*Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, MCP).[[65]](#footnote-65) As a result, Coselschi’s influence on Mussolini diminished rapidly and CAUR’s activities shrank dramatically after the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936. After a short period of frustration, diminishing membership, and slow decline, the CAUR operation was formally suspended three weeks after the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939, with only a few of its functions absorbed into the existing structure of MCP.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In effect, the CAUR’s demise was symptomatic of the dramatically changing geopolitical context in the second half of the 1930s. A key strategic consideration behind the establishment of the initiative – ensuring that Italian Fascism would maintain its hegemonic role in Europe vis-à-vis a resurgent Germany – had lost most of its urgency in the wake of improved Italo-German relations. Gravelli's earlier fears that Nazi Germany would dominate Europe with a very different brand of radical politics to that espoused by Fascism, eclipsing Italy as the political centre of a new, radical-right transnational creed, proved well-founded in this respect. His 1935 *Panfascismo* consequently abandoned the notion of a ‘Fascist international’ in favour of an alliance between “fascist and corporatist states” on the basis of a shared Latin heritage. For Gravelli, this would act as a counter-balance to Nazism’s obsession with both Nordicism and paganism.[[67]](#footnote-67) Ironically, something that is nowadays identified with 'fascism' did spread across Europe in the second half of the 1930s, clearly becoming a transnational force. Yet it was a more pragmatic, *ad hoc* 'international fascism' – one increasingly dictated by the radical praxis of Nazi Germany[[68]](#footnote-68) and the diminishing influence of Fascist Italy. Simply put, Europe might have indeed become largely “fascist or fascistised”, as Mussolini had confidently predicted back in 1932[[69]](#footnote-69), but it was all but lost as a sphere of ideological and political influence to Fascist Italy in the process.

Nevertheless, the CAUR’s demise did not entail Fascism’s complete abandonment of discourse based on the ‘idea of Rome’. Rather, it resulted in its re-calibration as a cultural weapon of Italian ‘primacy’ – now with a much wider global remit. The ‘universalist’ foundations of the Fascist ‘myth of Rome’ offered a rich repertoire of discursive tools to articulate the claims and widen the horizons of the Italian *primato*:the notion of a millennial *missione civilisatrice* based on ancient and Renaissance civilisations; a fusion of classical and Christian universality, *mediterraneita*[[70]](#footnote-70)*,* and *latinità* could be referenced back to the fountain of a diachronic Roman civilisation putatively renewed and reloaded through Fascist revolutionary agency. Casting its gaze much further than Europe, in the second half of the 1930s the Fascist regime sought to rebuild its international image by reverting to the universalist themes already rehearsed at the Volta conference back in 1932.

To be sure, the competition with Nazi Germany for global influence never fully subsided, even after the improvement in the two regimes’ relations post-1936. First through the FIaE and the CAUR, and subsequently through the streamlined network of cultural propaganda and diplomacy instituted by Ciano, the Fascist regime retained aspirations for influencing kindred movements abroad, thus luring them away from the growing appeal of a resurgent Nazi Germany.[[71]](#footnote-71) When the Italian embassy in Rio de Janeiro reported the emergence of a new radical movement in Brazil that bore striking similarities to Italian Fascism (the Brazilian Integralist Action – *Ação Integralista Brasileira*, AIB), the Fascist regime followed that lead, dispatching a special emissary in early 1937 to establish direct channels of communications with, and influence over, the AIB.[[72]](#footnote-72) The leader of the movement, Plinio Salgado, previously had been a political pilgrim to Rome (he visited in 1930). Not unlike the case of Mosley, Salgado’s experience from the visit to the city and his meeting with Mussolini had a transformative effect upon his subsequent ideological development and political action.[[73]](#footnote-73) Subsequent fears that Nazism was gaining ground – in Brazil as a whole, and inside the ranks of the AIB in particular – were taken very seriously by the Fascist leadership, especially since South America (with Brazil as its largest country) occupied a special place in the Fascist imaginary, as part of the ‘Latin’ sphere that had to be defended as a privileged space of Italian ‘primacy’ at all costs.[[74]](#footnote-74) In parallel, Italy was also cultivating stronger political and cultural ties with the government (and, from 1937, formal dictatorship) of Getúlio Vargas, whose corporatist experiments also shared common ideological reference points with Fascist Italy. The trans-Atlantic gaze offered some relief from the impression that the Italian influence in Europe, including the ‘Mediterranean’ and ‘Latin’ countries, was rapidly waning.

However, the most high-profile and sustained Fascist initiative in the pursuit of universalism during the second half of the 1930s did not come from the fields of diplomacy or political diffusion. In the spring of 1935, Giuseppe Bottai (then Minister of Corporations) convinced Mussolini that Italy should seek to organise the 1941 world fair in the Italian capital. In his first report on the idea for a Rome world fair drafted in April 1935, Bottai noted:

The moment is opportune for an International Exhibition [in Rome ...] that would illustrate all progress and all rediscoveries from twenty-seven centuries of human activity, that is, from the moment that Rome shone across the world the light of its genius and might [...] A Universal Exhibition [...] will provide a tangible and rightful testimony to the civilisational and revolutionary agency of *Roma Littoria,* [*…* admired] by all people and their heads of state (attending the exhibition).[[75]](#footnote-75)

The award of the world fair to Italy was formally announced in late June 1936, days after the declaration of the Italian *impero.* From the first moment, the Fascist authorities imbued the occasion with precise 'political content'. For example, in the words of the event organisers,

the Exhibition would furnish the most comprehensive and potent consecration to the [celebration of] the *Ventennale* of the Fascist Revolution. But this has to be done in an almost invisible manner.[[76]](#footnote-76)

The intended connection between the world fair and the celebrations for the *Ventennale* of the Fascist ‘revolution’ was confirmed after Italy had been formally allowed to move the exhibition from 1941 to 1942 in order to coincide with the twentieth anniversary from the March on Rome. Holding the world fair exclusively in the capital, in a lavish new exhibition quarter that was to be constructed ex nihilo to the south of the metropolitan area, offered Fascism the ultimate opportunity to use the world fair as the simulation of the most expansive idea of ‘universality’, based on an amalgam of the ‘myth of Rome’, Italian cultural ‘primacy’, and an expansive Fascist global conscience. It is telling that the organisers of the EUR chose a competitive analogy borrowed from sport as the event’s title – ‘Olympic Games of Civilisation” (*Olimpiadi della Civilta*). With a purpose-built, gigantic and lavish permanent exhibition city built *ex nihilo* in the shadow of Rome, ‘E42’ was conceived as the ultimate global stage for the consecration of Fascism’s universalist horizon.[[77]](#footnote-77) As the organisers themselves professed,

in this *contest* [... the result can be no other than] the victory of [Fascism....] Victory not in words and without showing it. Here is the programme [of the E42 exhibition] - one that the other countries could not possibly compete with on this terrain.[[78]](#footnote-78)

**CONCLUSION: THE GHOSTS OF EUR**

From the turn of the 1930s, once Mussolini had decided that Fascism should become not only an ‘export’ product but a global success story of history-making significance, the Fascist regime invested heavily in the universalist power of the ‘myth of Rome’. Although instruments of policy (FIaE, CAUR, MCP, MAE), driving personalities (Gravelli, Coselschi, Bottai, Ciano), geographic horizons (Mediterranean, Europe, the ‘Latin’ countries, the world), and ambitions did change regularly in the course of the decade, it was Rome and the Fascist mythology built around it that served as the discursive core of Fascism’s international imaginary. In all its guises, the Fascist project of internationalisation balanced – however awkwardly and often disingenuously – hegemonic ambition, desire for ‘primacy’, and a paternalism that appeared more welcoming of other national specificities than its belated rival, Nazism. And after all political projects of internationalisation had failed or been superseded by a hostile reality, the Fascist regime fell back upon the ‘myth of Rome’, mining its vast symbolic estate - as the beacon of civilisation; as the fount of all universalities; as the ultimate bridge between cultures and temporalities; and as a unique global, spiritual and cultural asset.

The spectacular consecration of Fascist universalism that the regime had intended to host on the grounds of the new city built for the EUR remained a haunting illusion, scattered amidst the few incongruous buildings that had been completed ahead of the decision to postpone the event in 1941-42. The Axis alliance and the war that it provoked proved harrowing, calamitous experiences for Mussolini’s Italy. The Italian military campaigns in the Balkans and the Mediterranean were catastrophic, in both cases necessitating the intervention of Nazi Germany. The envisaged global sphere of influence that Fascist Italy had sought to build across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, in reality, had already crumbled. If Balbo’s 1930 transatlantic *crociera* to Rio de Janeiro had celebrated the global horizon of Fascist universality, by 1937 relations between Italy and Brazil had taken a decisive turn for the worse. Suspicious of Italian involvement in an abortive 1937 coup attempt by the more hardline Integralists, Vargas distanced himself from the Axis, initially declaring Brazil neutral in the global conflict. Then in 1942, the country joined the war on the side of the western allies. Meanwhile, many erstwhile sympathisers in Europe and beyond ignored or altogether abandoned Mussolini’s Italy in the second half of the 1930s, being increasingly drawn to the Nazi orbit.[[79]](#footnote-79) Overshadowed in Europe by the resurgent National Socialist Germany, eclipsed on the military front, and witnessing its diplomatic and cultural propaganda efforts unravel in other parts of the world, the Fascist Italy of the late 1930s and early 1940s was a diminished – and ever-diminishing – presence on the world stage, an inverted image of the confident, ‘young’ country with global ambitions for primacy so animating Balbo’s trans-continental aviation adventures only a decade earlier. After all these failures, the Fascist regime sought refuge in the discursive terrain of Roman *universalità* as a privileged field for Fascist ‘primacy’. This is why the 1942 world fair mattered so much to Mussolini: thwarted in almost every other sphere of activity, the coveted universal ‘primacy’ could at least be *simulated* against the backdrop of the resplendent, monumental creations of the EUR exhibition quarter, erected in the shadow of the city that had long symbolised to the Fascist quest for universality. The cancellation was a fatal setback, depriving Fascist Italy of what turned out to be its last chance to contemplate a different future scenario, one where universal primacy and global success remained within its reach.

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