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**Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s**

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*Citation for published version (APA):*

van Kessel, T. M. C. (2011). *Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s*.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Cultural foreign politics contesting the centre of the world**

Ever since the first modern maps of the world were drawn, the Mediterranean Sea came to lie more or less at the centre of Western people's visual perception of the world. Gerardus Mercator's *Designatio Orbis Christiani* of 1569 realistically shows the modest size of this sea compared to the greater stretches of water surrounding the continents, but its location together with that of the European continent, made it clear where the heart of the world was considered to be. In the earliest cultural conceptions of Europe, whether those of Pope Paul II (1458-1464) who identified it with the *Respublica christiana*, or those connected to the burgeoning idea of a *Respublica litteraria* envisioned by the humanists as rooted in classical civilization, the Mediterranean Sea could not be overlooked.<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I shall be looking at how this pivotal geographical area was to be the setting of a cultural battle in the 1930s, in a period when European culture – with its classical and Christian roots – was undergoing a period of crisis. The players on the stage that I shall be dealing with are the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council, two organizations promoting their respective national language and culture worldwide.

### **Europe divided by crises and ideologies**

From the early nineteenth century up to the First World War, the major European states could each glorify their own nation whilst confidently sharing a sense of collective supremacy over the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup> They shared amongst themselves the colonial riches to be found in Africa and Asia and each indulged in the exaltment of their own national past. Self-assured Europe – or more broadly the 'Western civilization' – was confident of its capitalist economy that permeated the world markets, of its scientific and industrial progress that augmented its control over the physical reality, of its military superiority that allowed carving the cake among themselves, and of its higher

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<sup>1</sup> Pim den Boer, *Europa. De geschiedenis van een idee* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker Publications, 5th revised and enlarged edition, 2007); Michael Wintle, *The image of Europe. Visualizing Europe in cartography and iconography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Den Boer, *Europa. De geschiedenis van een idee*, 121; David Lowenthal, 'Heritage and history. Rivals and partners in Europe' in: Rob van der Laarse ed., *Bezeten van Vroeger: Erfgoed, identiteit en musealisering* (Amsterdam, 2005) 29-39, 31.

sense of justice and political order.<sup>3</sup> If ‘white man’ could bear a burden elsewhere in the world, it was because the future of Europe was expected to be heading for ever more progress.

The barbarity and collective trauma of the First World War severely shook this European self-confidence.<sup>4</sup> A sense of approaching the end of ‘Western civilization’ and of losing former certainties had already been emerging in the late nineteenth century and found its catalyst in the Great War. Around the turn of the century, concern about decadence and degeneration – both spiritual and physical – fed the longing for ‘purity’, either in cultural, racial, sexual or medical terms.<sup>5</sup> Developments in science that questioned the laws of causality in the universe and the constants of time and space; economic changes that favoured mechanisation, seasonal unemployment and the conglomeration of capital and business; the perceived atomisation of society, where the individual was drowned by the mass; the loss of organic communities caused by urbanisation; all these trends – culminating in the futility of so many young lives having been lost in the absurdity of trench warfare – were evidence for the cultural pessimists of a civilisational decline and reason for many movements to search for new responses to the challenges of modernity. The Great Depression, of which the Wall Street Crash in 1929 was arguably the cause or one of the effects, further exacerbated the crisis. The widespread consequences of the Crash for the connected European economies made clear that the problems of the day were of a global scale.

Political movements from the Left continued to mobilize workers and to threaten the establishment, receiving new impulses from the October Revolution of 1917 and Lenin’s creation of the Third International (Comintern) in 1919. Partly triggered by the Communist threat and supported by the discontent of many First World War veterans, Right-wing movements gained force too. These latter movements were inspired at times by the social solutions sought in socialist or revolutionary syndicalist circles, but were also introducing new myths of national regeneration or purification, authoritarian rule, corporatist or ‘organic’ theories and forms of sacralisation of politics. Increasingly aggressive and expansionist forms of nationalism became the natural allies of these Right-wing movements.

In Germany and Italy, the outcome of the First World War had produced strong, widespread resentment. Germans resented their defeat, their loss of territory especially where populated by Germans, and the reparations

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, 2nd ed. (London: Abacus, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle, ‘European Identity, Europeaness and the First World War: Reflections on the Twentieth Century – An Introduction’ in: Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle ed., *Ideas of Europe since 1914. The Legacy of the First World War* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 1-13.

<sup>5</sup> Rob van der Laarse, Arnold Labrie and Willem Melching ed., *De hang naar zuiverheid. De cultuur van het moderne Europa* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1998).

demanding by the Allies. Italians deplored the many men they lost fighting on the Austro-Italian border and the insufficient recognition of this sacrifice by their Allies. These bitter feelings fed extreme forms of nationalism. Together with the European malaise of the interwar period, the indignation, the wounded nationalist pride and the collective war trauma provided a fertile ground for the emergence of new political movements. In Italy it resulted in the seizure of power by Mussolini, who by the early 1930s was clearly aiming to build an ever more totalitarian regime. As of 1933, Germany was in the grip of National Socialism. Communism, National Socialism and Italian Fascism: each had a cultural programme to go with their vision of a better future. International relations in Europe were becoming inexorably linked to political ideology and rivalry between European states took on a cultural component.

It is in the midst of this crisis of European civilization, in 1934, that the British Council was created. This was a non-governmental organization whose foremost task was to make British life and thought known abroad, to encourage the study and use of English, and "to promote a mutual interchange of knowledge and ideas with other peoples".<sup>6</sup> Why was the British Council created only then? In the other major European states such organizations already existed since the end of the nineteenth century. The German language and culture were promoted by the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums im Ausland (1881), which in 1908 was renamed as the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland. In France, the Alliance Française (1883) was set up to carry out the *mission civilisatrice* the French had assigned themselves since the French Revolution. In Italy too, the Società Dante Alighieri (1889) was created to defend the Italian language and culture abroad, primarily in areas that were not yet incorporated in the unified Italian state. These three existing organizations had comparable goals and used similar methods: language classes, lectures, libraries, concerts and other cultural activities. In the case of the Alliance and the Dante, they underlined their secular nature, though both succumbed to co-operation with missionaries in Africa because of their activities in education. Furthermore, all three professed to be a-political and non-governmental while being each to some degree co-financed by government funds. In all cases there was a continuous tension between the independence of these private organizations and the growing significance that governments attached to cultural foreign policy after the First World War.

The British Foreign Office was well aware of the foreign cultural promotion the Germans, French and Italians were engaged in, and tried to obtain information about how much these foreign governments were spending in that field.<sup>7</sup> Government involvement in cultural propaganda was deemed

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<sup>6</sup> TNA, BW 151/1, Report by The Rt. Hon. Lord Eustace Percy, M.P. of Activities from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1936 to 15<sup>th</sup> July 1937.

<sup>7</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain, British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 135-139.

unnecessary in Britain and even rather disreputable. Nevertheless, when it became clear that the British trade relations abroad were being threatened by the active foreign cultural policy of especially the Italians and the Germans, the practical need for an organization that would promote British culture abroad seemed to be proven. It was also evident that the socio-political changes in Italy and Germany affected the Società Dante Alighieri (Dante Alighieri Society) and the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, organizations that – each in their own way – were increasingly deployed for the spreading of ideological and aggressively nationalist propaganda. Although the spokesmen of the British Council were keen to underline that the Council was not in charge of propaganda but of diffusing information for the benefit of greater international understanding and world peace, the ‘factual’ information was not free of ideology either. It consistently emphasized the love of freedom, the liberal and democratic values, and the social justice that Britain was said to embody.

Trade and political ideology were central concerns for the British Council. But just as important if not even more so was the diminishing political and military control over the Empire that the Council was meant to compensate with its cultural activity. The model offered by the Dante Alighieri Society was explicitly recommended as example for the British Council in a fundamental policy document that lies at the origins of the Council.<sup>8</sup> In this specific case, the person in question – the British High Commissioner to Egypt – was uttering concern about the cultural influence that Italy was gaining in Egypt whilst the British neglected that field of power. British diplomats regularly encountered the Dante’s activities around the Mediterranean Sea. For the British, control over the Mediterranean was of vital strategic importance to have access to the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, the shortest route to its major colony India. Also, from the moment that Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty (1911-1915) provided for the transition of the British Royal Navy from coal to oil as fuel, it became indispensable to secure supplies of oil from the Middle East.

On the other hand, Mussolini was apt to declare the Mediterranean Italy’s ‘Mare Nostrum’, belonging to the country’s secular sphere of influence, and to express this in his colonial ambitions. Since the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), Italy was in possession of the Dodecanese Islands, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan. The latter three were unified in 1934 to form Italian Libya. In the 1930s Mussolini’s rhetoric increasingly referred to the revival of the Roman Empire that he envisaged and anti-British propaganda was being broadcast across the Mediterranean area by Radio Bari. Upon invading Abyssinia in 1935,

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<sup>8</sup> “Some central direction from London would, of course, be necessary, and I suggest that it might be more advantageous if the direction were rested in some unofficial body, similar to the Dante Alighieri Society, with, however, Government representation on the Managing Board.” (TNA, BW 29/3, Extract from despatch by Percy Loraine, British High Commissioner to Egypt, 9 November 1933, in British Council report ‘British Cultural Propaganda in Egypt’, March 1935.)

Italy began to pose a serious threat for British interests along the Suez Canal and the Red Sea as well as in the rest of Africa. The Mediterranean, including its gateway to India, was where British and Italian cultural, economic and political ambitions most evidently clashed.

Around this pivotal 'Middle Sea' the Dante Alighieri Society devoted itself to preventing the denationalisation (*snazionalizzazione*) of the numerous Italian communities that settled there, be it along the North-African coast or on the Eastern Mediterranean shores. It also supported the mission to turn the young nation Italy into an imperial power and as soon as Abyssinia was conquered it eagerly sought a role for itself in the new Italian East Africa. In so doing, it thought in terms of a nineteenth-century colonialist model. The British Council, on the contrary, tried to rescue Britain in what became a transition from an Empire to a leading nation among nations within the Commonwealth. In that respect it was helping Britain to find a new form of imperialism, presented as internationalism. By distancing itself from aggressive colonialism and purporting to promote international understanding, the British could still to some extent direct the world order but now through the maintenance of an allegedly neutral ground.

It has been pointed out that it was an initiative of the British Council during the Second World War that laid the basis for the creation of UNESCO.<sup>9</sup> Upon the initiative of the British Council, starting from the autumn of 1942 a Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME) was held to discuss their countries' educational issues. Eventually, encouraged by the establishment of the United Nations, this Conference led to the setting up of UNESCO (November 1945). Curiously, the history of UNESCO as it is told in a study commissioned by the UNESCO itself makes no mention of the British Council having been a guiding light in the creation of a global educational organization.<sup>10</sup> This omission must have been made due to the fact that in 1985 Britain stepped out of UNESCO. Whatever the exact relationship was between the Council and UNESCO, the British Council's conception of international cultural exchange may well have had a greater influence on post-war models of global co-operation than has so far generally been recognized. This makes its confrontations with the Dante in the Mediterranean on the eve of the war all the more interesting.

Although the war-time activities of the Council are a prelude to the British initial role in internationalist movements after the Second World War, the period covered by my historical analysis will extend more or less up to the

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<sup>9</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The British Council. The First Fifty Years* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984) 122-123. Donaldson quotes from Richard Seymour, 'Developments in the United Kingdom during the Second World War leading to the practice of collective cultural co-operation', June 1965 (unpublished paper commissioned by the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe) 3, 18, 25 and 29.

<sup>10</sup> Martinez Fernando Valderrama, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1995).

outbreak of that war. From that moment on, the foreign cultural promotion of the countries taking part in the war needs to be considered side by side with war propaganda, in as much as there is a distinction between the two. This would have required taking into account new considerations, such as the unsafe conditions on the ground that foreign cultural policy had to take into account and the loss of young male staff.

Altogether, the aim of this book is to provide a better understanding of how cultural policy became a significant part of international relations; in particular how the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council functioned in the cultural, political and economic rivalry between Italy and Britain. This was a rivalry between an emerging and a declining imperial power, and between on the one hand an authoritarian, Fascist regime eager to show the physical and spiritual prowess of a young nation, and on the other hand a constitutional monarchy proud of its parliamentary democracy, its liberalism and its pragmatism. Inevitably, the research results touch upon a wide range of topics. Some of these topics are closely related to the evolution of mass communication and the increased mobility of greater numbers of people that characterize modern society. Good examples of these are the development of tourism, the expansion of the book market, the formalized 'internationalisation' of European universities and twentieth-century forms of sociability. Such phenomena are unmistakably present in the functioning of organizations like the Dante and the Council, in part explaining their creation and viability. There are also more long-term factors, such as the history of missionary activity in European colonies. Although I mention many of the elements that interplay with the activities of the Dante and the Council in the Mediterranean during the 1930s, I have chosen to focus on a selection of these. The central themes in this study are: the emergence of foreign cultural policy in Europe and its relation with the state, the transnational influence present in foreign cultural policy, national identity as viewed from abroad, attitudes towards tradition and modernity, the clash in the Mediterranean between two imperial models as well as two political systems, and the role of religion, of the sacralisation of politics and of attitudes towards race.

### **Cultural promotion: a tool in international politics**

In one of the few academic articles in which the British Council, the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institute, usually seen as the successor of the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, are compared, the authors state that there is a

neglect of the cultural component in the study of international relations.<sup>11</sup> This article was published in 2003. Since then, a considerable interest has emerged for what has been coined 'soft power'.<sup>12</sup> This interest has been triggered by the re-orientation of United States foreign policy following the 9/11 attacks and is echoed in the current caution with which 'Western' observers analyse the soft power of emerging world powers, as is the case with the Chinese Confucius Institutes launched in 2004.<sup>13</sup> Yet, despite the analogies one could make with soft power, research on the contemporary history of cultural foreign policy or cultural diplomacy remains scarce. This thesis will therefore elucidate the change in international diplomacy during the first decades of the twentieth century that induced European states to give greater importance to their cultural propaganda abroad.

As a result of democratisation, public opinion began to matter more to the official dealings with foreign relations. At the same time, technological advances offered new, more efficient ways of influencing public opinion. Cultural foreign policy was furthermore linked to the ideological oppositions that were becoming part of international relations, beginning with the fear of Bolshevism in Western Europe, passing on to the divisions of allegiance in the Spanish Civil War and culminating in the 1930s with the Axis of Steel defying the democratic countries. From the First World War onwards, European governments recognized the utility of this new instrument. The Dante Alighieri Society began as a private organization at the end of the nineteenth century, before this rise of official cultural foreign policy had taken place. How did it position itself in the 1930s as the Italian Fascist state reached its most totalitarian phase? Given that the British Council was created after the cultural dimension of international relations had gained more importance, did it operate differently and benefit from the insights of a latecomer?

### **Cultural foreign politics from a transnational perspective**

What also distinguishes the article by Martens and Marshall besides their attention for foreign cultural policy, is their comparative approach. The authors are interested in how British, French and German organizations for cultural promotion abroad function. So far, none of the historical studies of the British

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<sup>11</sup> Kerstin Martens and Sanen Marshall, 'International organisations and foreign cultural policy. A comparative analysis of the British Council, the Alliance Française and the Goethe-Institute' in: *Transnational Associations* 4 (2003) 261-272.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); Jan Melissen ed., *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); John McCormick, *The European Superpower* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> James F. Paradise, 'China and International Harmony. The Role of the Confucius Institute in Bolstering Beijing's Soft Power' in: *Asian Survey* 49, 4 (2009) 647-669.



Council, the Alliance Française, the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Goethe-Institute or the Dante Alighieri Society have aimed to show how these organizations functioned alongside each other. Preference has been given to treating each single organization within its own national context and in terms of its national foreign policy.<sup>14</sup> The same could be said about the history of cultural foreign policy as has been said about the development of cultural nationalism. Arguing for a more comparative approach in the study of nationalism, Joep Leerssen has posited that “[...] if we study national movements on a single-country basis, the study of national thought and nationalism will collapse into the history of a single country. In order to understand nationalism and national thought in their own right, and not just as factors playing into a country’s history, we must work comparatively and study various cases.”<sup>15</sup> Although examining the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council jointly carried with it the risk of becoming an inconclusive juxtaposition, it has been my aim to use this juxtaposition precisely to show the distinctive characteristics of each organization. Simultaneously though, I also illustrate how the interaction and rivalry between the Dante and the Council has shaped their respective identities and strategies. It is the understanding of the dynamics between the foreign cultural policies of different nations that is the great added value of this approach.

### National identity constructed from abroad

Those historians who do not endorse the notion of primordial nationalism have generally studied the construction of national identity as a process that takes place within the state borders, through mechanisms such as homogenisation, invention of tradition and canonisation.<sup>16</sup> In this thesis I will argue that the way

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<sup>14</sup> Diane Eastment, *The Policies and Position of the British Council from the Outbreak of War to 1950* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leeds, 1982); Maurice Bruézière, *L’Alliance française 1883-1983 Histoire d’une institution* (Paris: Hachette, 1983); Donaldson, *The British Council*; Filippo Caparelli, *La «Dante Alighieri» (1920-1970)* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1985); Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica nella Società «Dante Alighieri»* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995); Patrizia Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale ed emigrazione nella Società «Dante Alighieri»* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995); Eckhard Michels, *Von der Deutschen Akademie zum Goethe-Institut. Sprach- und auswärtige Kulturpolitik 1923-1960* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005); François Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française et la diplomatie de la langue. L’Alliance française (1883-1940)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006); Alice Byrne, “Boosting Britain”: *Démocratie et propagande culturelle, Britain To-Day 1939-1954* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Provence, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe. A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 18.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and*

in which national identity was defined must also be studied in an international context. My prime interest lies in how presenting one's own national culture to a foreign audience in part reflects and in part shapes the characteristics of that culture. What definition was 'national culture' given in an international context and what does this say of the position of culture within the nation? In the case of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council, they chose to define 'Italianness' and 'Britishness' in a foreign, 'other' context. However, unlike the post-colonial studies that are generally associated with analysing the construction of the 'Self' versus the 'Other', I am looking at the Italian and British assertion of superiority through cultural means in a rivalry among themselves and other European countries, rather than in the domination of 'exotic' people.

An inspiring example for this thesis has been Mark Choate's *Emigrant Nation*.<sup>17</sup> As the subtitle - *The Making of Italy Abroad* - aptly suggests, Choate illustrates how Italy's emigrants abroad were inextricably part of the way in which Italian national identity was construed. The sheer numerical total of Italians that emigrated between 1880 and 1915 - thirteen million - with which Choate opens his book, is enough to make one realize how fundamental this phenomenon is to the nation's history. Concurring with Benedict Anderson's view that it is easier for those who have settled elsewhere to imagine the national community they have left, Choate refers to the many exiles - including Mazzini and Garibaldi - who forged the vision of Italian unification and points out that "the young Italian state adapted to a new global era with innovative policies to 'make Italians' abroad in a Greater Italy."<sup>18</sup> Choate analyses the way in which emigration also shaped Italy's colonial policy, from the liberal concept of peaceful emigrant colonialism to Mussolini's more aggressive use of emigration to redeem conquered colonial territory. Although the Dante Alighieri Society's prime mission was to maintain alive - and in many cases teach - the Italian language and culture to the many emigrants who left while having hardly experienced the effects of unification, in my thesis I will concentrate on how the Dante presented Italy to non-Italians. In this focus on foreign cultural policy, I also take into consideration the interaction between a private initiative such as the Dante and the growing state control in this field.

In the field of British studies too, a greater attention for the interaction between national identity and the international context can be found. The latest volume of the Oxford History of the British Empire Series, *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas*, presents a successful combination of national,

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*Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Mark I. Choate, *Emigrant Nation. The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 224. Here Choate cites the famous words spoken by Massimo d'Azeglio after the Italian unification about the need 'to make Italians'.

imperial and emigration history viewed from personal experiences to colonial policy.<sup>19</sup> The significantly lower number of British emigrants makes the relationship between emigration and national identity different, although Scottish and Irish identity-building might reveal more similarities with the Italian case. Unlike the Dante, the activities of the British Council were mainly aimed at foreigners, not British emigrants. This difference reflects the national histories of Italy and Great Britain. Obviously a young nation would be more concerned about keeping its co-nationals bound to the motherland. The British, having had a longer history of national unity, had less concerns about their co-nationals losing their British identity abroad and through their colonial history had other instruments at their disposal to guard these barriers, as testified by the cliché of the British gentleman's club. The focus in this thesis is on how the British Council presented Britishness to foreigners when the changing international context required it to do so.

### **Clashing empires and political systems in the Mediterranean**

In the 1930s, Great Britain was gradually coming to terms with the decline of its Empire, whereas Italy, under Mussolini's Fascist rule, was confident in an imminent revival of its imperial past and was eager to prove this with its colonial conquests, in particular the seizure of Abyssinia. How did this affect the cultural policy of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council? To understand the cultural rivalry between the two organizations and their differences in approach, our attention needs to turn towards the Mediterranean area. Both organizations referred to the imperial model provided by ancient Rome. The existing British Empire and Fascist Italy, which was aspiring to build a new empire, each in their own way appropriated the Roman Empire as the 'proto-empire' of European civilization. How was the classical heritage used in the national image that the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council respectively promoted in the particularly symbolic and strategic area of the Mediterranean, the 'cradle of Western civilization'? The British male elite were expected to have a thorough knowledge of the classics, essential for their future public roles as 'Roman senators' in parliament or as 'Roman officers' in the Empire's civil service.<sup>20</sup> From the murder of Matteotti in 1924 onwards, Mussolini's government in Italy exposed the undeniable traits of a totalitarian regime. As Italy's territorial ambitions in the Mediterranean took shape, the fact

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Bickers ed., *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen. The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); Linda Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992; 2005) 50 and 168-169.

that a rivalling and authoritarian state embraced the cult of *romanità* made it problematic for the British to continue claiming this Roman heritage.<sup>21</sup> As will be shown in the third chapter, one of the ways in which the Council dealt with this dilemma was by emphasizing the similarity between the British Empire and the democratic colonial power of Athens, that was allegedly gained not by force but by trade. A shift in reference of this kind also helped to legitimize the British Council's development of activities in Greece, which as the Second World War broke out was to become an important component of British economic and political foreign policy. Studying the cultural claims made by the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the Mediterranean makes it possible to analyse the intricacies of the clash between the 'Pax Romana' envisaged by the Italians and the 'Pax Britannica' defended by the British.

### Modelling modernity

The British Council felt itself called to defend the nineteenth-century capitalist, bourgeois Europe, with faith in gradual progress, liberalism, justice and parliamentary democracy. This was a reaction to the political ideologies it was meant to counter. Italian Fascism and National Socialism, though also incorporating (re-)created traditions, were perceived by the Council as products of modernization and of a growing state control that afflicted this period. Both ideologies repudiated the nineteenth-century liberalism that was still cardinal to British attitudes regarding the relation between state and society. This coincides with the considerable consensus nowadays on a generic definition of fascism - meaning Italian Fascism and National Socialism - as being "an ideologically driven attempt by a movement or regime to create a new type of post-liberal national community that will be the vehicle for the comprehensive transformation of political, social and aesthetic culture, with the effect of creating an alternative modernity."<sup>22</sup> The historian Roger Griffin has recently provided many arguments for analysing both Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes from the perspective of the creation of modernism.<sup>23</sup>

But modernity was not just connected to the contentious political ideologies developing in Europe. In the early 1930s, despite efforts by Mussolini's regime to form a new type of man, many Italian youths brought up in the Fascist educational system nevertheless discovered the appeal of

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<sup>21</sup> Romke Visser, 'Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità' in: *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 27, No. 1 (1992) 5-22.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Griffin, 'Introduction: God's Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion' in: *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5, 3 (Winter 2004) 291-325, 299.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007).

American cultural products: novels by writers such as William Caldwell, John Steinbeck and Erskine Saroyan, but most of all American films. As Wanrooij has remarked, the new youth cultures, “which tried to imitate the customs of a consumer society even before its economic premises had come into existence”, made evident the failure of the regime to control their formation.<sup>24</sup> This statement says as much about the pervasive and highly successful influence of the American film industry as about the regime’s limited power. The consumer society associated with the emerging American commercial and cultural influence in Europe was closely connected to the rise of new media. Mass consumption, new media and global communication were perceived as aspects of modernity. British culture was experiencing the rising power of the use of media both by non-democratic forces such as Italian Fascism and by the ‘democratic’ forces of capitalist American expansion. Given the complex associations with modernity, it is worth analysing how the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council used modern images and methods in their promotion of culture.

The Fascist movement in Italy had initially been close to the avant-garde artists known as the Futurists and in favour of all things modern. This desire for innovation partly persisted in the Fascist regime. However, the Dante Alighieri Society had its roots in the nineteenth century, in the literary and historical canons of the Risorgimento. At times in its activities we nevertheless perceive the desire to show Italy’s innovation and modernity. But on the whole, the Dante did not have the capacity or the ambition to reach out for the tools of mass communication. On the other hand, the British Council promoted Britain as the defender of tradition, of the old democracy and of European civilization. A former staff member of the British Council commented that at the end of the Second World War Great Britain “represented the continuity of Europe’s cultural past which had been interrupted everywhere else by Fascism, war, occupation, a repository of civilised values.”<sup>25</sup> This image of Britain was not only the result of the wartime experience. Already in the Council’s activities at the eve of the war it was evident that Britishness was meant to represent the tried and tested values of European democratic and liberal culture. Ironically, though being a harbinger of tradition the Council was right away geared towards an effective communication strategy, consciously targeting the influential circles in foreign societies and aware of the need to use communication tools such as richly illustrated magazines, film and broadcasts.

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<sup>24</sup> Bruno Wanrooij, ‘Youth, Generation Conflict, and Political Struggle in Twentieth-Century Italy’ in: *The European Legacy* 4/1 (1999) 72-88, 76.

<sup>25</sup> From the unpublished papers of Richard Auty quoted in: Douglas Coombes, *Spreading the word: the library work of the British Council* (London & New York: Mansell Publishing, 1988) 145.

## Citizenship, race and religion

Another consideration in the choice to analyse the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council is related to the issue of race and religion in foreign cultural politics. The way in which the Council made British life and culture relevant to all mankind was essentially more challenged by the Dante Alighieri Society than by the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein, the other ideological counterpart. The Dante was devoted to protecting *italianità* (Italianness) but also to showing how Italy's primordial creativity and genius had brought benefits to the whole world. In the hands of the Fascist regime, the Dante could serve to advance Italy's global ambitions. National Socialism was based on racism, on the biological, exclusivist concept of an existing race, the German *Volk*. The Fascist ideology, on the other hand, was one based on values that could be seen as transmittable.<sup>26</sup> Thus Italian Fascism, more so than German National Socialism, was seeking to create a new worldwide ideal of man and society that was considered to be 'exportable' to other countries.<sup>27</sup> Although the attitude of Italians towards the Africans living in the territories that they conquered was one of racial superiority and even if Mussolini accepted as part of his alliance with the Third Reich to introduce anti-Semitic laws, there was more scope for 'conversion'; an effect of Rome as capital of universal Fascism being the successor of Rome as capital of the Catholic world. This less rigid attitude towards race and the willingness to operate through local elites made British and Italian conceptions of colonialism similar and thereby more in rivalry with each other. Here we need to bear in mind the Roman Empire as model, where all subjects of the Empire, regardless of race, could through devoted service to the Empire acquire the Latin Right, a part of the legal benefits appertaining to Roman citizenship. The British and the Italian Empire inspired by this model, though not immune to thinking in terms of racial hierarchy that was still common in Europe then, did not in principle preclude the idea of universal citizenship. By contrast, one of the weaknesses of the Third Reich was that it saw no other rightful citizen than the German *Volk*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Renzo de Felice and Michael A. Ledeen, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Gius. Laterza & Figli: Rome and Bari 1975) 90; George Mosse, *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the search for a "Third Force" in pre-nazi Germany* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1970) 27-28; George Mosse and Michael A. Ledeen, *Nazism: a historical and comparative analysis of national socialism* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1978) 42-43, 92-93 and 101. Renzo de Felice, the former *éminence grise* among the historians of Italian fascism, made the distinction between 'fascist movement' ('fascismo movimento') and the more conservative 'fascist regime' ('fascismo regime'), a distinction that I shall maintain.

<sup>27</sup> Michael A. Ledeen, *Universal fascism. The theory and practice of the fascist international 1928-1936* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1972); Bruno Wanrooij, 'Il fascismo come merce d'esportazione' in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome XLVI/11* (1985) 155-163.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (London: The Penguin Press, 2008) 181-184, 189.

What also comes to the fore is the religious heritage that can be traced in the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council. The nationalist and Masonic roots of the Dante had initially made the secular character of the organization a point of pride. Yet the growing number of rituals and ceremonies that became part of the Dante practice suggest that the 'sacralization of politics' was an essential aspect of the Society's appeal.<sup>29</sup> The Dante rhetoric also made references to the Catholic background most Italians still had, as is shown by the frequent use of the term *apostolo d'italianità* and even the production of a *Decalogo per gli italiani all'estero*, similar to a list of Ten Commandments to feed national pride in the Italian abroad, described at the Dante annual congress of 1927 as a kind of Catechism for the emigrant.<sup>30</sup> The British Council also reveals some traits that may be connected to a religious background, in this case Anglicanism. The Council's attitude to international relations rested on a model of civilisational development that assumed a moral hierarchy justified by Anglicanism. The English had for many centuries seen themselves as a 'chosen people' and the Church of England was closely bound to the British sense of identity.<sup>31</sup> An echo of the old enmity towards the Catholic countries can be felt in the Council's concern about the 'Latinisation' of Egypt, that will be dealt with in Chapter Five. As we shall see, there was at the same time an Anglo-Catholic vein in the Council. This, however, does not exclude a negative attitude to Latin Catholicism, on the contrary. Inevitably this background influenced the Council's reaction to Italian cultural promotion, and more specifically to the activities of the Dante.

### Outline of the chapters

The above-mentioned main themes will be dealt with in five chapters. The first chapter presents a brief history of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (1881) (later the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland), the Alliance Française (1883), the Dante Alighieri Society (1889) and the British Council (1934), analysed in the context of the emerging importance of cultural foreign policy in Germany, France, Italy and Britain starting from the end of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>29</sup> Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 179; Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Bari: Laterza, 1993); idem, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> 'Congresso di Ancona – XXXII (9-13 ottobre 1927)' in: *Pagine della Dante* 5 (September-October 1927) 97-98, AS-SDA. The decalogue was written by Amy Bernardy, one of the few female members of the Dante not to be confined to organising fund-raising events and a very active advocate of more care for Italian emigrants, especially in the United States of America. (Maddalena Trabassi, "Ripensare la patria grande" – *Gli scritti di Amy Allemande Bernardy sulle migrazioni italiane* [Isernia: Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2005].)

<sup>31</sup> Colley, 'Protestants' in: idem, *Britons*, 11-54; Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples. Sacred sources of National Identity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Various factors will be shown to have played a part in this history, such as the loss of military power, economic rivalry, the growing influence of public opinion accompanying the extension of suffrage, the effects of national unification and the use of propaganda in the First World War.

Subsequently, the second chapter contains a more in-depth description of the two organizations that are central in this study: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council. The emphasis in this chapter is on the relationship between these two private organizations and their respective governments. Both organizations risked being incorporated by the state: the Dante by being merged with the Istituti di Cultura Fascista and the Council through incorporation by the Ministry of Information that was created shortly before the Second World War broke out. Similar arguments were used by the Dante and the Council to plead for their independence. What has been referred to as the 'fascistization' of the Dante is hereby shown to be a far more complex process than has been suggested. Furthermore, in order to understand what interest groups in society backed the activities of the Dante and the Council, this chapter will take a closer look at the people that led these organizations.

In the third chapter we examine how the Dante and the Council defined their respective concepts of *italianità* and 'Britishness' and what relevance to the wider world was attributed to these national cultures. Were they offering models of society that they believed could surmount the European insecurity of the interwar years? Did these concepts take into account aspects of the modern world, such as the development of mass-communication and the greater democratic participation? How did they refer to their national past? Besides representing scientific, industrial and political progress, the chosen images of Italian and British culture also - consciously or unconsciously - encapsulated the nation's spiritual heritage. Are there Roman Catholic or Anglican values or concepts traceable in the chosen definitions of *italianità* and Britishness respectively?

A fourth chapter concentrates on the case of Malta, a chess-piece in the Mediterranean around which British and Italian political interests severely clashed. Here the Dante and the Council participated in a political conflict that revolved around cultural influence. Malta was of utmost strategic importance for control over the Mediterranean Sea. Fearing that Malta would fall under Mussolini's - and not to forget, the Roman Catholic Pope's - sphere of influence if the Italian language were to gain too much ground on the island, in the 1930s the Governor of Malta banned the use of Italian in education and public administration. This caused indignation at the Dante headquarters in Rome and led to accusations of hypocrisy because the British had always purported to defend the freedom and stability of the Maltese. In 1938 the Council began to set up an Institute in Malta with the intention to win sympathy for British culture and in doing so reacted to earlier manifestations of cultural promotion



displayed by the Italian government and the Dante. What strategies did the Council adopt to appeal to the Maltese?

The fifth chapter brings us to Abyssinia and Egypt to further illustrate the role of the Dante and the Council in the imperial project that revolved around the Mediterranean area. Abyssinia is viewed here as an extension of the Mediterranean, a part of the strategic gateway to India that the Suez Canal meant to the British. After the Italian army invaded this country in 1935, the Dante hastened to establish itself in Addis Ababa, the newly proclaimed capital of Italian East Africa. How did the Dante envision its own role in Italy's imperial project? Meanwhile in Egypt the British government had come to realise that if it wished to maintain control over this protectorate, already given some degree of self-rule with the Unilateral Declaration of Egyptian Independence in 1922, it needed to buttress its military and political power with an effective cultural policy. The Council's activities in Egypt demonstrate how the British tried to counter what was perceived as the increasingly competing Italian cultural influence in the area.

In the conclusion, besides the final reflection on what the five chapters have explained about the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the Mediterranean area during the 1930s, some suggestions are made regarding further research that could lead to yet more new insights into the significance of cultural foreign policy, from the beginning of the twentieth century right up to today.