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van Kessel, T.M.C.

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CHAPTER 2

THE DANTE ALIGHIERI SOCIETY AND THE BRITISH COUNCIL: THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE

This chapter takes a closer look at how the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council were organized in the 1930s. Far from providing an exhaustive and detailed description of the administrative and operational structure of the two organizations, the aim is to concentrate on two particular aspects. Firstly, what was the relationship between the two organizations and the state they were functioning in? The Dante had to adjust itself to an authoritarian government while the Council was expected to have all the freedom of movement possible in a liberal and democratic state. How did this work in practice? Secondly, who were the people at the head of the Dante and the Council in this period, and what professional, political and social background did these key-players have? This latter question is obviously related to the first. It extends further though by giving us information about the motivational drive behind the two organizations that did not come from any governmental influence, including the power of private agency.

In the case of the Dante, the Risorgimento ideals that had stood central to the organization determined what type of persons supported it and to what extent it could adapt to the Fascist regime. To begin with, the social groups engaged in the Dante's activities belonged to those layers of Italian society who benefited from the function they had in a unified Italy, such as politicians, civil servants and teachers. At the same time these groups were part of a national educated upper class that still showed significant regional differences; their heterogeneity made it harder to attach concrete values or institutions to the notion of *italianità*. This might in part explain the tendency to opt for abstract ideals, for seeking roots in the shared Ancient Roman past or in the new future promised by Italian Fascism. In this chapter it will be necessary to take a few steps back in time to explain why the Dante's Risorgimento heritage led to a clear shift in interest once an older generation of members left the scene and how the past determined the relationship with the state. The two most recent histories of the Dante Alighieri Society do not cover the period of the 1930s but the authors suggest that the organization was taken over by the Mussolini's regime.¹ The main reason for the latter conclusion is sought in the change of

¹ Beatrice Pisa, *Nazione e politica nella Società "Dante Alighieri"* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995) and Patrizia Salvetti, *Immagine nazionale ed emigrazione nella "Dante Alighieri"* (Rome: Bonacci Editore, 1995).

statutes in 1931 that introduced the article that Mussolini would from then on appoint the Society's President. However, there has been no in-depth research into how the position of the Dante Alighieri Society was affected by the tightening of control from above nor has attention been paid to the Dante's attempts to remain independent. Given the longer history of the Dante, the background and structure of this organization has claimed a greater number of pages in this chapter than the section on the Council.

Like the Dante, the British Council was officially a non-governmental, private organization. An important difference is that it was from the start closely connected to the Foreign Office. The Dante and its Committees abroad regularly cooperated with the diplomats and civil servants of *Affari Esteri*. But even during the Fascist years it was not as embedded in *Affari Esteri* as the Council was in the Foreign Office. There was also a degree of homogeneity, a consensus about what the best of British culture was; a result of the Oxbridge formation that in the 1930s most of the high-ranking British civil servants still had. This does not mean that the Council always followed the Foreign Office's policy. Several figures within the Council were known for being critics of appeasement. In 1938-39 preparations were made for a Ministry of Information that could serve during wartime. According to the initial plans, the Council was meant to be absorbed by this new ministry. The Council was able to block this and maintain its relatively independent position under the aegis of the Foreign Office. One of the most important arguments used in favour of the Council's independence was that its apolitical position was essential to the efficacy of its work. This echoes the arguments put forward by the Dante when it tried to maintain its independence from the state.

Internal leadership and government ties. The Dante Alighieri Society between two centuries

Risorgimento and freemasonry

Numerous central figures in the Italian *Risorgimento* and in the early days of the new Kingdom were Freemasons. The best known example is Giuseppe Garibaldi, the national hero, who was initiated as Freemason in the lodge of Montevideo (Uruguay) in 1844 and became Grand Master of the first national Masonic organization: the Italian Grand Orient. In 1889, at the time when the Dante Alighieri Society was founded, Francesco Crispi was for a second term the Italian Prime Minister. Not only was Crispi himself a member of the Grand Orient: so were Giuseppe Zanardelli (Minister of Justice), Federico Seismidoda (Minister of Finance), Paolo Boselli (Minister of Public Instruction and later President of the Dante), Pietro Lacava (Minister of Post and Telegraphs) and Benedetto Brin (Minister of Naval Affairs). Furthermore, it was well known

that Francesco Crispi was close friends with Adriano Lemmi, the Grand Master of the Grande Oriente. Although the Masons denied having any political agenda these personal ties certainly enabled them to influence government policy, allowing them to safeguard the secular character of the state and to encourage the passing of civil and social reforms cherished by their democratic wing.² The Italian Freemasonry, besides having a considerable albeit covert part to play in the political developments of the country, was also influential in the social life of the upcoming bourgeoisie. Rather than being an exclusive network of intellectuals and aristocrats like it had been in the past, by the late nineteenth century the Freemasonry became far more a social and political training ground for the bourgeoisie of the new nation. It gathered mainly middle-class entrepreneurs, traders, clerks, artisans and liberal professionals who found in the massonic lodges a way to establish their identity as the guardians of Italy's new secular, republican and unified state. Observing with concern the emergence of a mass politics that gave ever more voters to the socialists and – after Don Luigi Sturzo founded the Partito Popolare Italiano in 1919 – also the Catholics, the Masons sought to encourage a more centrist political direction.³

Given the significance of the Freemasonry in the context of Italy's nation-building and its worship of mazzinian republican ideals, it is not surprising that so many Masons were members and even leaders of the Dante Alighieri Society. The foundation of the Dante was to a large extent driven by the support it received from Masons and at times the Grand Orient actually made donations.⁴ Occasionally this provoked clashes within the Dante because of the strictly anticlerical stance of the Masons and the fear that they were too dominant a component within the organization.⁵ Possibly the process of 'ritualisation' that has been seen as a characteristic of the Dante in its first decades of its existence should not be connected solely to the 'sacralisation of politics'.⁶ This strongly felt connection with the Risorgimento, the sacred duties that the members saw for themselves, the faith in the nation and the almost religious rituals with which these sentiments were expressed at the annual congresses might also have been inspired by the Masons' ceremonial cult.

The patriotism of the Dante Alighieri Society could potentially have implied warm ties with the royal family that had played so great a part in the Italian Unification: the House of Savoy. However, because of the many republican Masons amongst its members and leadership, the Dante had to be careful with how it officially dealt with the monarchy. It had to be made clear to

² Fulvio Conti, *Storia della massoneria italiana. Dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003) 120-122.

³ Anna Maria Isastia, *Massoneria e Fascismo. La repressione degli anni Venti* (Florence: Libreria Chiari 2003) 28.

⁴ For example, in December 1904 the Council of the Grand Orient decided on giving 500 lire to the Dante (Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 208, footnote 154).

⁵ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 31, 34, 176-177 and 202-218.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 279.

the republican Dante members that gaining the royal family's sympathy was of instrumental value rather than ideological. A first sign of rapprochement came subsequent to the murder of King Umberto I of Savoy on the 29th of July 1900. The Dante Congress that was being held at that moment in Ravenna passed a motion in support of the mourning Queen Margherita and was then immediately suspended. At the King's funeral, Pasquale Villari laid a wreath on the tomb as the President and representative of the Dante. Thereafter, while Queen Margherita's son Victor Emmanuel III took over the throne, the now Queen Mother continued to follow the Dante's activities. Good relations between the Savoys and the Dante Central Office were from then on maintained. In 1918 Queen Elena of Savoy, wife of King Victor Emmanuel III, became Life Member of the Committee in Rome and registered Prince Umberto of Savoia and the four Princesses as well. After the March on Rome these relations went a step further, with even the King himself presiding at the Annual Congress held in 1927.⁷

The members connected to the Italian Grand Orient were a cardinal force in the Dante Alighieri Society right until the early 1930s. How the Grand Orient reacted to the rise of the Fascist movement in Italy is therefore relevant to a better understanding of the Dante in the same period. In June 1908 a schism took place within the Grand Orient, leading to the creation of the Grand Lodge of Italy (*Gran Loggia d'Italia*). In the early days of the Italian Fascist movement, the Grand Masters of the two Masonic organizations – Domizio Torrigiani and Raul Palermi respectively – both had the difficult task of mediating between the Fascists and the anti-Fascists among their members.⁸ However, the Grand Lodge's members tended more to support Mussolini and soon this was also being used as a way to set the Duce against the more left-wing Grand Orient. The members of the latter had initially reacted positively to the rise of Fascism. The programme that the *Fasci di combattimento* first proposed at their launch in 1919 appeared to be fairly progressive and democratic. Even when that turned out to be misleading, the Masons of the Grand Orient made the same mistaken judgement as many Italian liberals did. They assumed that it would be possible to control the National Fascist Party, to transform it into a force for civic reform and to use it as an instrument to fend off the revolutionary left.⁹

Only gradually did it become clear to the Grand Orient's leadership that Mussolini's government was taking a very different direction than they had hoped for. In February 1923 the Grand Orient's Council officially declared that membership of the Fascist National Party was incompatible with being a Mason belonging to the Grand Orient. Only then did key figures in the Party, such as Italo Balbo, Giuseppe Bottai and Galeazzo Ciano, leave the Lodges they

⁷ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 107-109; 'La Dante a Fiume. Atti del XXIX Congresso' in: *Pagine della Dante* 6 (November 1924) 18.

⁸ Isastia, *Massoneria e Fascismo*, 48.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 26, 37 and 38.

had been part of. The murder of Giacomo Matteotti in June 1924 was the turning point. On the 30th of May Matteotti had accused the Fascists in a parliamentary speech of violent intervention in the national elections of April 1924, crimes that he had previously denounced in a book published in London. Thereafter Matteotti was 'eliminated', an act that was immediately attributed to Mussolini. Subsequently, the Grand Orient outspokenly chose for a militant anti-Fascist position.¹⁰ Mussolini declared the Grand Orient an enemy of Fascism and on 19 May 1925 a law was passed that by implication declared Freemasonry illegal. By the end of the year both the Grand Orient and the Grand Lodge had disbanded their Lodges. Some of these had been severely attacked by Fascist squads, as were the Masons themselves.

It is worth noting that the ban on Freemasonry was only implemented in Italy. In Italian communities abroad, the local Fasci were prepared to accept a Fascist Party member's affiliation to a lodge because of the central role that Masons often played in maintaining the *italianità* of these communities.¹¹ This means that the Dante's Central Office and Local Committees in Italy had to reckon with the ban, but not necessarily the Local Committees abroad. The ambivalence of the situation is also sustained by the observation that Italian Freemasonry and Fascism clashed because both were claiming for themselves the cultural heritage of the Risorgimento.¹² The Dante Alighieri Society too was competing with the National Fascist Party in this respect. It was not as secretive as the Freemasonry and was less involved in internal politics, yet the Dante had such a strong Masonic component that one could have expected it to suffer a worse fate during Mussolini's regime. It shows once again how very complex the political game was during the *ventennio fascista* and how the Dante had a special position on the stage. The longest ruling President of the Dante Alighieri Society, Paolo Boselli, was a Mason of the Grand Orient. His story illustrates how Risorgimento, Freemasonry, the Dante and Fascism could be interconnected.

From Risorgimento to Fascism: President Paolo Boselli

Paolo Boselli, the President of the Dante Alighieri Society from 1906 to 1932, more than any other of its active members embodied the legacy of the Society. Born on the 8th of June 1838 in Savona, on the Ligurian coast, he graduated as a law student in 1860. In that year the Kingdom of Sardinia had unified much of Northern and Central Italy and was well on its way to proclaiming a Kingdom of Italy. In 1870, when Rome was conquered and added to the new Kingdom,

¹⁰ Ibidem, 56-59.

¹¹ Luca de Caprariis, 'Fascism for Export? The Rise and Eclipse', 162.

¹² Ibidem, 86.

Boselli was elected as Member of Parliament. He served in various ministerial posts, from Minister of Agriculture to Minister of Finance. Most notably, he was Minister of Public Education (Ministro della Pubblica Istruzione) from 17 February 1888 to 6 February 1891. In 1906, at the ripe age of sixty-eight, Boselli was appointed as President of the Dante. He managed to remain at the head of the organization throughout both the turmoil brought about by the First World War and the changes that came with the rise of the Italian Fascist movement. In June 1916, in the midst of the war, Boselli took on the function of Prime Minister but he resigned in October 1917, following Italy's severe military defeat against the Austro-Hungarian army at Caporetto.

In its official publications, the Dante Alighieri Society prided itself in having such an aged president. For example, in 1928, on Boselli's ninetieth birthday he was referred to as the 'Grand Old Man' (il 'Grande Vegliardo') who had presided over the organization for well over a decade. The extensive ceremonial celebrations on this occasion showed what importance was attached to making known how well established Boselli was.¹³ Boselli was expected to inspire admiration for how in his advanced age he always guided the Dante Alighieri Society with "intelletto d'amore", an intelligence guided by love.¹⁴ Here love was presumably intended as patriotic love and the expression itself originated from the first canzone in Dante Alighieri's *Vita nuova*: "You women who have understanding of love" ("Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore"). But by the 1920s, it was not what was tried and tested that was per definition praiseworthy. In the avant-garde cultural movements that had been gaining ground since the turn of the century and in the Fascist revolutionary movement, it was not age and wisdom but youth and dynamism that were revered. As if to satisfy traditionalists and modernists alike, the youthfulness of Boselli was emphasized as well. Hence in an interview with Boselli on his eighty-seventh birthday, this "great teacher of Italianness" ("grande maestro d'italianità") was described as an "illustrious Old Man" ("illustre Vegliardo") with yet a magnificent and blooming old age ("magnifica e fiorente vecchiezza"), with a firmness of thought and a sharp memory. In the same interview, it was recalled how the year before, on the 10th of June 1924, Mussolini had received from the hands of Boselli the first golden medal of the Dante for the "champions of Italianness" ("benemeriti dell'italianità"). On this occasion Mussolini had in turn praised Boselli for being the man whose name brought together all the noblest tradition of the Risorgimento, up to and including the triumph of youth brought by the Fascist Revolution.¹⁵ This was the same vision of Italian history as the one canonized in 1927 by the historian Gioacchino Volpe's *Italia in cammino: l'ultimo cinquantennio* (Milan: Treves, 1927), whereby Fascism was seen as the final act in the struggle for national

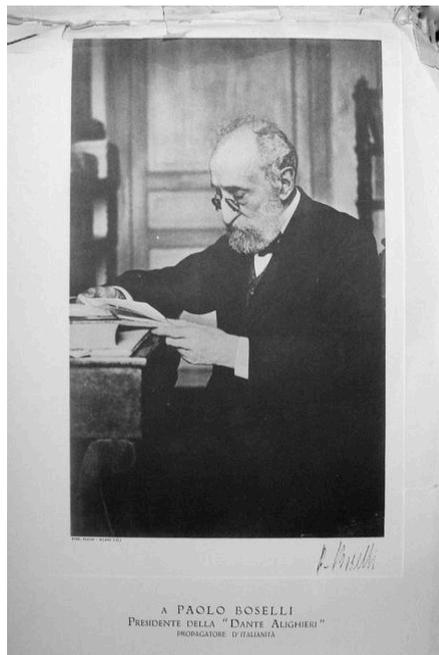
¹³ 'La « Dante Alighieri » per Paolo Boselli' in: *Pagine della Dante* 3 (May-June 1928) 37.

¹⁴ 'Plausi alla « Dante » in Parlamento' in: *Pagine* 3 (May-June 1930) 61.

¹⁵ 'Paolo Boselli parla della «Dante»' in: *Pagine* 4 (July-August 1925) 72-74.

unification. At Boselli's ninety-third birthday, in 1931, in celebratory speeches held in the Senate he was described as being in his "green old age" ("verde vecchiezza").¹⁶

Boselli's relationship with the Duce and the National Fascist Party must be seen in the light of the initial convergence that Mussolini sought with the nationalist factions of Italian society. In the early 1920's, before Matteotti's murder made evident the violence and lawlessness that accompanied Mus-solini's growing power, having the Duce at the head of the government was seen by many – also foreigners abroad – as a good safeguard for order in the country. Boselli's political position had initially been liberal but he drew closer to right-wing, nationalist expansionist politics under the authoritarian government of Francesco Crispi. The strikes of 1919 had augmented the conservative Italians' aversion for socialism. No doubt Boselli belonged to those who saw in the leadership of Mussolini, the once socialist journalist turned champion of a Fascist revolution, a way to curb the socialist threat. Boselli's dedication to furthering Italy's cultural and political power as a nation, just as the nationalist ideals that motivated most Italian Dante members, makes it likely that he genuinely sympathized with the goals defined by the National Fascist Party. In 1924, a thousand members of the National Fascist Party of Savona ceremoniously gave Boselli honorary Party membership. Boselli officially thanked the Fascists from Savona with a letter, published in the Dante's internal bi-monthly. Here Boselli asserted that he saw in the Fascist Party a similar striving to that of the Dante Alighieri Society, equally achieved through ideas and action, spiritual and factual renewal.



Paolo Boselli, President of the Dante Alighieri Society, 1906-1932 (Photo: Archivio Storico della Società Dante Alighieri).

¹⁶ 'Per Paolo Boselli e per la «Dante»: discorsi al Senato del Regno di S.E. Grandi e S.E. Federzoni per la «verde vecchiezza» e il 93o genetliaco di Boselli' in: *Pagine 3* (May-June 1931) 57.

Your Duce is the Duce of those who with Him want an Italy that is great in its heart, in its intentions, in its work, great in its own being, great compared with other nations.¹⁷

Boselli refers to “your Duce”, suggesting that what he sees is an alliance between the Dante and the National Fascist Party, with both being equal to and independent from each other. For it appears from Boselli’s words that Mussolini in his eyes was not yet the key symbol of the nation, which is something the Duce became in the process of constructing his personal dictatorship. The Dante President described the Party membership card as a distinctive of those who with the help of God and the tricolour flag of the People and the King wanted to make Italy ever more worthy of its martyrs, heroes and prophets. It was the cross, the national flag and the crown that mattered; no mention was made of the pervasive *Fascio Littorio*. We may add that once again Boselli’s agedness and vitality were brought to the fore, as he wrote that the words of Savona’s Party members had given him in his old age the fervour of youth.¹⁸

In 1927 a message from Boselli to the Italian youngsters was published in *Il Tricolore*, a weekly for young supporters of the Fascist movement published by the *Libreria del Littorio*. It was apparently thought to convey a message that was also suitable for the Dante members and therefore reprinted in the Dante bi-monthly. Grateful as Boselli was to God for having experienced the passion and victory of the Risorgimento, so too – he wrote – should the Italian youth be thanking God for living during the wonderful ascent of the resurgent nation. He encouraged the young to educate themselves in action and sacrifice, gaining knowledge from books and learning from their mothers how to love the fatherland. An “ardent youth” (“giovinezza ardente”) was needed to further build the nation. This time Boselli did refer to the *Fascio Littorio*, which he presented as a symbol of restorative, liberating and creative energies.¹⁹

One young author, Dario Lischi, devoted an entire article to the “spiritual youth” of the then ninety-three-year-old Boselli. Whereas spiritual renewal had removed all the “stale and rancid old stuff” (“vecchumi stantii e rancidi”), Lischi, on behalf of the young revolutionary generation of “impenitent old-age eradicators” (“svecchiatori impenitenti”) wanted to express his admiration for Boselli. According to Lischi, despite his old age and the more than sixty years at the forefront of Italian political life, he had maintained a youthfulness of spirit, heart and mind so sturdy and fresh, so healthy and active, in short, so “anti-old-times-revering” (“antipassista”) that

¹⁷ “Il vostro Duce è Duce di quanti vogliono con Lui l’Italia grande nel cuore, nei propositi, nel lavoro, grande nell’essere suo, grande al confronto delle nazioni” (Paolo Boselli fascista *ad honorem* in: *Pagine* 3 (May 1924) 58).

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ ‘«Ai Giovani d’Italia», messaggio di Paolo Boselli nel n. 2 de *Il Tricolore*’ in: *Pagine* 1 (January-February 1927) 5.

he could be regarded as among the best of the present day youth.²⁰ Placed among the “Apostles of our Risorgimento” (“Apostoli del nostro Risorgimento”), on a par with figures such as Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi, Boselli was viewed by Lischi as a man who knew about sacrifice and whose motto was “to act” (“agire”).²¹ Some direct remarks followed about how the past was to inspire the future. Seeing Boselli came from the Ligurian coast, he was held to be aware that Italy’s power had once been gained at sea and that it was from the sea that such power would return. The example of Imperial Rome, of the medieval glories of Genoa, Venice and Pisa, were to be levers for the future: tradition was to be an incentive to venture ever further. With this vision of the national past as confirmation of the greatness that Italy was on its way of achieving, Lischi claimed that the young Fascists revered Boselli as a prophet who lead the way. The symbolical and promotional value that was attributed to this image is evident in the editorial introduction to this article, which explained that the Dante had been eager to reprint these words because the spiritual youth of the ‘Eminent Old Man’ (“Insigne Vegliardo”) was the same perennial youth of the ideal that led the Dante.²²

Another initiative that illustrates the veneration accorded to Boselli is that of the Dante Committee of Busto Arsizio, which had several thousand copies made of a photographic portrait of the ‘Illustrious Old Man’ (“Illustre Vegliardo”), reading the pages of a book in thoughtful meditation. In presenting this initiative, the Committee members wrote about Boselli’s various political functions, his belonging to the Italian parliament since 1870 and his joy as a patriot at having witnessed the conciliation between the Italian Kingdom and the Vatican. The members were convinced that:

[...] honouring Paolo Boselli, means honouring the continuity and the glory of our race in its works of peace and thought. Having His meditative effigy means possessing in Him the symbol of the inexorable freshness of Italian thought.²³

The Presidents of the various Dante Committees were asked to offer their members the possibility to give a donation in return for a copy of the portrait.

²⁰ “[...] che pure conserva una giovinezza d’animo, di cuore e di mente così robusta e fresca, così sana e attiva, così...antipassista da esser ben degno di figurare tra i primi dei « giovani » del tempo presente e fra i migliori di questi giovani [...]” (Dario Lischi, ‘La giovinezza spirituale di Paolo Boselli’ in: *Pagine 4* (July-August 1931) 91-92, 91).

²¹ *Ibidem*, 92.

²² *Ibidem*, 91.

²³ “[...] significa onorare la continuità e la gloria della nostra stirpe nelle opera della pace e del pensiero. Averne l’effigie meditabonda vuol dire possedere in Lui il simbolo della freschezza inesauribile del pensiero italiano” (Circular letter from Francesco Gianni and Luigi Milani of the Busto Arsizio Committee to the Presidency of the Committee of the Dante Alighieri Society, date to be indicated by the postal stamp, 1930, Busto Arsizio, N. 11115, Anno 1930, Fasc. 3, Fasc. 3/3.10, Busta 1239, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1928-1930, ACS).

All the money collected would be sent to the Central Office in Rome to support the Society's activities.

It was not only in the interest of the Dante Alighieri Society to underline how the Society and in particular its President represented the continuity between the Risorgimento and the Fascist Revolution. For Mussolini as well, to secure political support from part of the administrative and entrepreneurial elite, it was useful to keep in place such a respected organization that could help legitimize his regime as the fulfilment of the Risorgimento. This is well-illustrated by Boselli's intervention as spokesman in the Italian Senate of the project for the approval of the Lateran Accords, the agreements reached between the Italian state and the Roman Catholic Church in 1929. Alfredo Bacelli, a fellow member of the Italian Senate, described the vote on the Lateran Accords as a historic moment not only for the "vigorous and clear" ("vigoroso e lucido") speech held by the Duce as Head of Government, but also for the words spoken by Boselli. Bacelli claimed that even Mussolini had said to be touched by Boselli's intervention.²⁴ Praising the clarity of mind and the ardour of this man beyond his nineties, Bacelli saw in this event the proof that even while youth was renewing Italian life, there was still a place for "noble and worthy old age" ("vecchiezza nobile e degna"). No one better than Boselli could reassure those people who held on to the past for fear of what this unforeseen settlement between Church and State could bring. This Dante President was the only survivor of those who in 1870 had signed the Law of Guarantees that was offered to the Pope Pius IX once the Papal States had been taken over. As such, Bacelli pointed out, he had a unique symbolic function.

The new generation, guided by the great Man that God has conceded to Italy [Mussolini], could with more assured openness take a step along the new road because beside it, with serene tranquillity, the Man that represented the spirit of the Italian Risorgimento [Boselli] was also taking this step.²⁵

The paternalism that was projected on Boselli in such descriptions made him a kind of spiritual father for all patriotic Italians. In this specific case, we also see what function such a figure could have for Mussolini when making his policy, *in casu* the Lateran Accords, acceptable to the traditionalist and nationalist groups of Italian society.

²⁴ "[...] lo stesso Mussolini, non uso a commuoversi facilmente, affermò di aver ascoltato con emozione" (Alfredo Bacelli, 'Paolo Boselli e i Trattati Lateranensi' in: *Pagine* 3 (May-June 1929) 45-46, 45).

²⁵ "La nuova generazione, guidata dall'Uomo grande che Dio ha concesso all'Italia, poneva con franchezza più sicura il piede sulla nuova via, perchè, accanto a lei, ce lo poneva, con serena tranquillità, l'Uomo che rappresentava lo spirito del Risorgimento Italiano" (ibidem, 46).

A new generation

However much the vigour of Boselli was emphasized, the Dante Alighieri Society's central leadership could not deny the need to attract new members among the youth. The image of a vibrant organization capable of connecting the Risorgimento heritage with the new élan of Italian Fascism was more on paper than in actual reality. One could suspect that the very focus on Boselli's youthfulness is evidence of the Dante leaders' concern about connecting with the next generation. Towards the end of the nineteenth century it had become harder to rejuvenate the membership, seeing the irredentist movement began to be seen as a thing of the past, of little current relevance. Young people, and certainly many of the intellectuals among them, were more easily interested in socialism or in modernist movements. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, the participation of younger members had been stimulated by the creation of local Youth Sub-committees (*sottocomitati giovanili*). The First World War, with the renewed assertion of Italy's international position and of its territorial claims, helped to increase the popularity of the Dante's ideals among the youth. Furthermore, by then somewhat dissatisfied by the answers that a positivist philosophy could provide, there was a swing towards irrational life visions.²⁶

Though the revival of nationalist thinking provided welcome new blood for the Society, it was also evident that there was a considerable ideological gap between the generations. The younger generation was fed by a more aggressive nationalism. They longed for an active involvement of the Dante in the First World War, in the form of propaganda and military training. Like other interventionists, the younger members of the Dante saw the war as regenerative event. Many cultivated the disregard for life, the voluntarism and the vitalism brandished by the Futurists. This was a different set of motives than those that drove the older generation of Dante members to support the war, which saw it more as a necessary evil to defend the beloved fatherland.²⁷

During and after the First World War, the dissatisfaction of veterans and the generational revolt were both key to the further development of the Italian Fascist movement. From the start, Mussolini recognized the importance of appealing to the youth and knew how to capitalize on the need of those who hadn't fought in the war to dedicate themselves to the nation in some other way. Particular attention was given to university students, who were

²⁶ Boselli can be said to have belonged to the intellectual generation that contributed culturally to the construction of Italy. June Edmunds and Bryan Turner have posited that newer generations play an important role in deconstructing primordial versions of national identity in favour of more open ones. In the case of the generation that followed Boselli's, the contrary was true (June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, *Generations, Culture and Society* [Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002] 119-120).

²⁷ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 310-312.

approached as the future new leaders and formed a considerable part of the Fascist Party membership. By focussing on the generational change, a sense of revolution was created that did not however touch the social class structure. The older generation of the ruling class was to be replaced by the younger generation of that same class, so that apart from the mobility of middle classes, Mussolini was maintaining the social order as it was. At the same time, by presenting Fascist forms of entertainment and activity as the modern-day occupations for all young people, the intergenerational cohesion within the working classes was reduced, thereby weakening their political force.²⁸

In the interwar years the Dante was obliged to seek a compromise between the organization's fairly rigid and well-established traditionalism and the youthfulness (*giovanilismo*) held high by the new politics.²⁹ Quite inevitably the style and mindset connected to Italian Fascism gained evermore influence within the organization. The rise of Fascism coincided with the gradual dying out of the 'old guard' of Dante members, which meant that the ideological tendencies of the younger generation gradually gained the upper hand. The death of Ernesto Nathan³⁰ in 1921 was a prelude of the changes to come. With no longer such a strong defender of secularism in its leadership, the Dante secularist and Massonic tradition began to wane.³¹ In 1927 a number of the most prominent leaders passed away: Giuseppe Zaccagnini, Donato Sanminiatielli and Giannetto Valli.³² Luigi Rava, who had been President of the Dante from 1903 to 1906 and also belonged to the old generation, replaced Sanminiatielli as Vice-President, staying on until he died in 1938, aged seventy-eight. Libero Fracassetti, a member of the Central Council in charge of promoting Italian books, became the new Secretary General until he too died, in 1930.³³ Together

²⁸ Bruno Wanrooij, 'Youth, Generation Conflict, and Political Struggle in Twentieth-Century Italy' in: *The European Legacy* 4/1 (1999) 72-88, 73-76.

²⁹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 171-174.

³⁰ Anna Maria Isastia, *Scritti politici di Ernesto Nathan* (Foggia: Bastogi, 1998); Alessandro Levi, *Ricordi dei tempi e della vita di Ernesto Nathan*, Andrea Bocchi ed. (Domus Mazziniana-Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, Pisa-Lucca, 2006).

³¹ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 399.

³² Giuseppe Zaccagnini (d. 1927) until 1907 directed several Italian schools in Constantinople and wrote articles from there for Italian newspapers. He was closely involved in the Dante Committee of Constantinople and from 1907 up to his death was secretary general of the central Dante in Rome. Donato Sanminiatielli (1866-1927) after leaving a diplomatic career became a close friend of Pasquale Villari, with whom he joined the Dante central council. From 1898 onwards Sanminiatielli was the Dante's vice president; Giannetto Valli (1869-1927) was auditor of the Dante from 1907 to 1910, since the First World War a member of the central council and between 1921 and 1922 the mayor of Rome (Giulio Natali, 'Giuseppe Zaccagnini, "Il segretario ideale"' in: idem, *Ricordi e profili di maestri e amici* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1965) 183-191; Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 280-281, 287 and 296).

³³ Luigi Rava (1860-1938), professor of philosophy of law at the universities of Siena and Pavia, then of administrative sciences in Bologna, had a distinguished political career serving as member of parliament, minister of agriculture, of public instruction and of finance, and mayor of Rome (1920-1921). As of the end of 1920 he was a member of the

with Boselli, they tried to still defend the original nature of the Dante. As more criticism against the old management came from the younger generation of members, who were often members of the National Fascist Party, so too the younger leaders with Fascist sympathies moved to the forefront: Enrico Scodnik, Roberto Forges Davanzati, Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco and Eugenio Coselschi.³⁴

Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco (b. 1866) was several times Member of Parliament, former Undersecretary at the Ministries of Public Works, of Interior and of Mercantile Navy, and Senator from 1929 onwards. He was part of the Dante's Central Council as of 1920. Roberto Forges-Davanzati (b. 1880 – d. 1936) worked as a journalist. Initially driven by syndicalist ideas, he had been a collaborator of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*. Subsequently he joined the burgeoning nationalist movement, became travelling editor and Roman correspondent of the *Corriere della Sera* and founded *L'Idea Nazionale* (1910). Enrico Scodnik (b. 1866 – d. 1951), after a military career, became staff member and then Director General of the Istituto Nazionale delle Assicurazioni (INA). From 1912 to 1929 he had been a member of the Dante's Central Council especially concerned with Italy's territorial claims in the Adriatic area. From 1933 to 1943 he was Vice-President and then administrator of the Dante. He helped found the Museum of Italian Patriots at the Fortress of Spielberg, in Brno (Czechoslovakia), which was an almost holy 'lieu de mémoire' of the Italian Risorgimento. His interest in maintaining the collective memory also came to the fore in his contribution to organizing the historical archive of the Dante as well as a historical exhibition on occasion of its fiftieth anniversary. Interestingly, he was also a member of the Società Geografica Italiana. Forges Davanzati was President of the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers (from 1929-1933), a member of the Italian Senate as of 1934 and a Central Councillor of the Dante.³⁵ Upon his death he was praised for having expressed his belief in Fascism both in thought and in action, making it his way of life, for having been antidemocratic and antimasonic, and for having sensed early on the demise of the old political parties, choosing instead nationalism as guiding principle.³⁶ Coselschi was the President of the National Association of War Volunteers

Italian Senate. The Rava Law of 20 June 1909, number 364, was the first in Italy to protect cultural heritage on a national scale. Following his earlier efforts in nature conservation, Rava also became president of the Ente Nazionale Industrie Turistiche (Enit), Italy's national board for tourism. Libero Fracassetti (1863-1930), also a former minister of public instruction (1906), was a close collaborator and friend of Rava. Fracassetti joined the Dante central council in 1920 and from 1926 on was specially charged with the promotion of Italian books. From 1927 until his death he was the secretary general of the Dante. He was closely involved in the restoration of Palazzo Firenze, the Roman base of the Dante's Central Council. (Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 282 and 295.)

³⁴ Pisa, *Nazione e politica*, 31, 399 and 419-420.

³⁵ Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 301.

³⁶ Speech by Luigi Federzoni, President of the Senate, The Italian Kingdom's Senate, Parliamentary Acts – Discussions, 15 December 1936.

(Associazione Nazionale Volontari di Guerra) and former collaborator of D'Annunzio, who however did not have a flattering opinion of him, despite his active involvement in the Fiume enterprise. In the words of historian Michael A. Ledeen, Coselschi was an "opportunistic and rather mediocre" man.³⁷

Symbolic for the constricted space in which the Dante would find itself was Palazzo Firenze, the building in Rome where until this day the organization is based. Boselli had until 1925 insisted that though the Dante aided government activity, it was by no means to accept any offer of a new office building given by the State. Attempts were made to buy an old, noble palace but eventually Boselli could find no way to refuse Mussolini's 'politically indebted' gift. It was confirmed in the spring of 1926 that the Dante would be given Palazzo Firenze after the Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia had moved out of it at the end of the year. Once the building was indeed handed over, an extensive restoration began. On 21st of April 1930, officially the day dedicated to the poet Dante, Mussolini, accompanied by Bottai (Ministero delle Corporazioni) and Giunta (Ministero degli Affari Esteri), ceremoniously visited the new location of the Central Office of the Dante Alighieri Society. In thanking Boselli for the reverent inaugural speech, Mussolini quoted Gioberti's phrase "There where the language is, the Nation is" ("Dove è la lingua, ivi è la Nazione") to illustrate the importance of defending the Italian language at home and abroad and commented on the coincidence that the palace's name, Palazzo Firenze, coincided with the hometown of Dante. All nations, Mussolini was keen to recall, had similar institutions to spread their own language and with infinitely more means, especially France and Germany. In talking about cultural foreign policy, it so appears that even Mussolini could not avoid succumbing to the claim that the grass on the other side was greener.³⁸

³⁷ "Many things can be said of Eugenio Coselschi, but D'Annunzio perhaps summed the man up best one day in a letter to Giuseppe Piffer, his private secretary, who had written D'Annunzio to announce the arrival of an excited female nationalist who was desperate to see him. What should Piffer do? The comandante replied: 'Have her flutter off to Coselschi, or some other literary figure with time on his hands.' The change from the passionately committed Kochnitzky to the opportunistic and rather mediocre Coselschi may well epitomize the situation in D'Annunzian Fiume [...]" (Michael Arthur Ledeen, *D'Annunzio: The First Duce*, 2nd ed. [Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2002] 186).

³⁸ Caparelli, *La "Dante Alighieri"*, 76; 'La Casa della "Dante"' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1926) 30; Benito Mussolini, 'L'assegnazione del Palazzo di Firenze alla "Dante"' in: *Pagine 1* (January-February 1927) 5; Rodolfo Bonfiglietti, 'Il Palazzo di Firenze ed il suo restauro' in: *Pagine della Dante 4* (July-August 1929) 70-74; 'Il Duce a Palazzo di Firenze' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1930) 27-29; 'Inaugurazione della nuova sede della "Dante Alighieri". Un discorso del Duce sulle finalità della benemerita istituzione' in: *Il Popolo di Roma*, 23 April 1930, 6; 'Per il Palazzo di Firenze' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1930) 35-36.

Issue of independence

The revision of the Dante statutes was already being discussed in 1931, when Boselli was still President. It is unclear where the initiative came from, whether it came from an internal call within the Society or was urged for by the Head of Government. Boselli himself presented a proposal via Giunta, the Undersecretary of State, to Mussolini at the end of January 1931. A commission composed of Forges Davanzati, Celesia di Vegliasco and Marotta had helped draft the new statutes and Boselli requested Mussolini's comments and approval before letting the Central Council vote on it.³⁹ In general terms, the changes suggested were meant to reduce the democratic participation in decision-making, increase control over the finances and improve efficiency. The old statutes foresaw a Central Council made up of 28 members and an Executive Board, without further specifying the tasks of the members of either group. With Boselli's proposed new statutes the Central Council was to be limited to 24 members of which eight were to form the Directive Board (Direttorio). The Directive Board was to be in charge of the entire running of the Society and of choosing the Secretary General that would lead the Central Office.⁴⁰

The Directive Board together with the sixteen remaining members of the Central Council were expected to discuss decisions and approve the yearly financial report. Until then the participants of the Annual Congress approved the financial report. However, the Congress gave no opportunity to examine the figures closely and for tactical purposes some details regarding propaganda expenses could not be openly mentioned. The finances of the Society were now to be under better supervision. A Secretary-Treasurer and a delegate specifically in charge of finances – both appointed by the President – were to be part of the Directive Board. The Central Council would vote on the financial report after two auditors chosen outside the Council had examined it. Committees were to be instructed not to spend more on their own administration than a fourth of their income through annual individual membership fees.

Care had to be put in making sure that the Presidents of the major local Dante Committees were to be included in the Central Council. Here Boselli appeared to want to mitigate the discontent that could be expected if financial control was restricted to a body that would not include them. Furthermore, the old statutes enabled the Annual Congress to elect the Dante President and the Central Councillors. The new statutes would only give Local Committee Presidents the right to vote. They were deemed most capable to judge who

³⁹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Boselli to possibly Giunta, Personal, 28 January 1931.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, Statutes of the Dante Alighieri Society, January 1931.

deserved to be in the Council and, as Boselli argued, a more hierarchical elective process was more suited to the new – modern – times.⁴¹ Significantly, the idea was to let the Committee Presidents vote for the Councillors on the 21st of April, the Anniversary of Rome, thereby symbolically connecting the procedure with the myth of Rome as carrier of the Roman imperial heritage and capital of Fascist Italy. The 30 Honorary Councillors were instead to be chosen by the Council. Even if the proposed new statutes took away any decisional impact the Annual Congress could have, what was to be put on the Congress agenda was first to be approved by the Directive Board. All registered members could participate in the Congress and its main purpose was to be the promotion of the Society.⁴²

Furthermore, Local Committees were to be created only with prior authorization from the Central Council, preventing undesired ones from being formed, and the local Councils had to be approved by the central Directive Board so as to ensure that Local Committees were led by people adhering to the principles held high by the Regime.⁴³ Every Committee was expected to have a President and ten Councillors, to be chosen by the Committee members at a general assembly. Within twenty days the list of chosen members had to be communicated to the Directive Board for ratification. In serious cases the Central Council was to be able to dissolve a Local Committee. Each Committee was responsible for its own finances. Inheritances and Life Membership fees were however to be considered as part of the inalienable property of the Dante Society as a whole. By the end of January, Committees were obliged to send an activity and a financial report.⁴⁴

Grandi, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, let Giunta know that he was interested in following what was going on with the reorganization of the Dante. He explicitly added that this interest was not because of any intention of his ministry to incorporate the Dante but because it needed to know how the Dante would act abroad.⁴⁵ That Grandi felt the need to be clear about this, suggests that there was some talk of Affari Esteri taking over all of the Dante's tasks. Grandi further explained his wish to be involved by pointing out that in Tunisia, where local National Fascist Party sections did not exist, a great part of the battle against the 'denationalisation' (*snazionalizzazione*) of the Italians living there was being entrusted by the Ministry to the Dante. Therefore Grandi was

⁴¹ "Ciò sembra opportuno per abolire un sistema elettivo non più consono coi nuovi tempi [...]" (Statutes, articles II-III, *ibidem*).

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ "[...] si garantisce che le persone poste a Capo dei Comitati stessi siano tutte di provata fede e operanti conformemente al Regime" (Statutes, article IV, *ibidem*).

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ "La cosa interessa moltissimo il mio Dicastero che, pur escludendo ogni intendimento di assorbire la "Dante", ha però necessità di seguirne da presso i programmi di azione all'Estero [...]" (ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, N. 1207, Dino Grandi, MAE, to Francesco Giunta, Undersecretary of State of President of the Council of Ministers, 26 March 1931).

eager to be kept informed and to be given the possibility to give feedback regarding the Dante's reorganization.⁴⁶ Hence, when he was shown the proposed new statutes as re-elaborated by Giunta, his main concern was that one of the articles seemed to suggest that the Dante Committees outside Italy were totally exempt from supervision by the Ministero degli Affari Esteri. Grandi instead expected Affari Esteri to have some grip on the schools run by the Dante abroad and on the relations between the Committees and the Fasci all'estero, and he wished to see this clearly stated in the new statutes. This was furthermore in line with what to Grandi's satisfaction had already been done within Affari Esteri to avoid dualism: unification of the post of Segretario dei Fasci with that of Director General of Italiani e Scuole all'Estero.⁴⁷

After the new statutes had been amended and approved by the Head of Government, the Ministero degli Affari Esteri and the Secretary of the National Fascist Party, Giunta, sent a copy for consideration to Boselli. The tone in the accompanying letter was not imperative. Rather cautiously Giunta communicated the suggestion made by the Secretary of the Party to make Gigi Maino the Secretary General – here named Director General – of the Dante and the endorsement of this idea by Mussolini who “wished that the proposal of H.E. the Secretary of the N.F.P. were to be approved”.⁴⁸ Taking into account also Boselli's response, the process of changing the statutes does not appear to be one of imposition but of diplomatic negotiation. Boselli's reply to Giunta, and more extensively to Mussolini, on 12 August 1931, by no means suggests he was cowed into the position he took. The amended new statutes as proposed by the government contained articles that coincided with Boselli's already envisaged reforms, meant to bring more unity between the Dante and the Fascist Regime, with which the Society collaborated - in thought and in action – for the promotion of *italianità*, or so Boselli claimed (“rendere la ‘Dante’ [...] sempre più concordemente unita col Regime Fascista, così come ne è ferma e fervida collaboratrice nel pensiero e nell'azione di antesignana e banditrice di italianità.”). Boselli blamed his age for not being able to leave his holiday address in Cumiana, up north in the province of Turin, to come to Rome immediately. He assured Mussolini that he would implement the new statutes as soon as possible and could do so thanks to the special trust the Dante had in its President. Yet Boselli may also have found it useful to delay matters a little.

⁴⁶ Dino Grandi, MAE, to Francesco Giunta, Undersecretary of State of President of the Council of Ministers, 26 March 1931.

⁴⁷ “Se d'altronde la vigilanza sulla azione della Dante fuori del Regno, nel modo come tale Società viene ora organizzata, debba essere esercitata, come sembra naturale, a mezzo dei Reggi Uffici diplomatici e consolari, occorre, ai fini gerarchici non dare ai medesimi l'impressione che per questo servizio essi non dipendono dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri” (ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Grandi to Giunta, 8 June 1931, N. 5467/1).

⁴⁸ “[...] gradirebbe che la proposta di S.E. il Segretario del P.N. F. fosse accolta” (ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Giunta to Boselli, 31 July 1931, N. 5467).

There were after all a few things that Boselli wished to discuss with Mussolini verbally upon his return to Rome; issues which he, with his twenty-five years of experience as President of the Dante, saw as important for the Society. Among these were matters such as agreeing on specific conditions whereby other members than the Committee Presidents would be able to participate in the Annual Congress, the need to make inalienable that part of the property that formed the financial backbone of the Society and the desirability of avoiding a forthright statement ascertaining that the Dante had and could receive contributions from the State. The latter aroused far too much suspicion in the *irredente* where the Dante's position was delicate. Boselli announced that the following year new rules would be designed for the internal working of the central organs and offices, as well as the peripheric ones. These he was willing to present to Mussolini in due time, but the nomination of the new Secretary General could not wait because of the preparations that had already been done for the coming Annual Congress, already approved by Mussolini himself. It was to take place in the Sicilian city of Siracuse. The vicinity of Sicily to Malta, the visit to Tripolitania that would be arranged and the lectures on *italianità* in the Mediterranean to be given by the archaeologists Biagio Pace and Giulio Quirino Giglioli would all help affirm Italy's cultural position in the Mediterranean. Now that Affari Esteri had agreed with the plans, suspending the congress would have given a bad impression and could have damaging effects for the Society.⁴⁹

Firmer statements were still to come. In further comments, transmitted to Mussolini via Celesia di Vegliasco, Boselli questioned the fundamental principle behind the new statutes as amended by the government. The heart of the matter was "[...] whether it is worth turning the Dante into a cultural political body dependent on the Government [...], or whether it is preferable to let the Dante continue to be a cultural Society, so as to disguise the political ends that it pursues." ("se convenga che la Dante divenga un organismo politico culturale alla dipendenza del Governo [...], ovvero non sia preferibile lasciare che la Dante continui ad essere una Società culturale, in modo da mascherare il fine politico che essa persegue."). The statutes proposed by Giunta were seen by Boselli as working from the former assumption whereas he regarded his own version of the statutes as resulting from the latter. He was also straightforward in declaring himself in favour of the latter stance. For example, independence from the government was crucial because the Dante would otherwise no longer be able to open schools in those countries where the Italian government could not. According to Giunta this argument was inspired by ideas that had by now been surpassed by the Regime ("ispirata a concetti ormai superati dal Regime") and tended towards the conclusion that there was

⁴⁹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Boselli to Mussolini, 12 August 1931.

no need for reform. Giunta dismissed Boselli's concern with three counter-arguments. Firstly, Giunta believed it was wrong to think that the statutes proposed by the government would transform the Dante into a State body because legally it would remain a Society. This was also confirmed by the fact that the Ministry of Affari Esteri fully supported the proposed statutory changes. Secondly, the Dante would not be directly dependent on the Government but would be only under its control and supervision. In the eyes of Giunta this merely meant adjusting the Dante to a fundamental Fascist principle that an organization of national character which even operated abroad could not function outside the grasp of the State. Thirdly, according to Giunta the Regime had reckoned with the distinction between culture and politics that Boselli continued to make:

If culture is not informed by the political ideals of the Regime, it is no longer the culture of today's Italian; but a wrong, false and at least superseded culture. And in that case it is better not to spread it.⁵⁰

Fourthly, Giunta dismissed the argument that the new statutes could meet with hostility from the governments of the countries where the Dante operated. If the Dante could not organize the activities set down by the new statutes, then it had better not be there at all. Fifthly, Giunta did not think that ideals could be spread and at the same time disguised. This would also be in contrast with the tradition and spirit of Fascism, seen by him as being marked by the frankness and openness regarding its ideals.

What Giunta did object to were Boselli's proposals to exclude the mention of the contribution from the state, to not set the rules regarding the Congress in the Statutes but in the separate list of Regulations of the Dante, to limit the Council meetings to one every six instead of one every three months so as to reduce travel expenses, to let ordinary members take part in the Congress, to drop the prerequisite of fifty members for a Local Committee to be formed, and to keep the fees lower so that individual members would pay 12 lire per year instead of the 20 lire Giunta envisaged. Instead, Giunta accepted having the category of student members, declaring the inalienability of the Dante's most essential property, and including in the Statutes a mention of Boselli's nomination as President for life at the Congress of Treviso (1928). Boselli must have asked to have the latter specified in the Statutes to secure his position as President but also to postpone as long as possible the risk of there being a new President who might accept to give up the Dante's independence entirely.

Removing the article in the Statutes demanding that the President of the Dante each year handed in a report of the Society's actions over the past

⁵⁰ "Se la cultura non è informata alle idealità politiche del Regime, non è più la cultura dell'italiano d'oggi; ma una cultura errata, falsa o quanto meno superata. Ed, in tal caso, è meglio che non sia diffusa."

year and an activity plan for the year to come was instead out of question for Giunta. A number of points were just as categorically rejected: that the President and the Directive Board could be elected by the Presidents of the Local Committees instead of by the Head of Government; that the leadership would be entrusted to the Directive Board rather than to the President and that within the Board there would be a Secretary and a Treasurer, an idea disliked by Giunta on the grounds that a collegiate system reduced efficiency and that a full-fledged Secretary General at the President's side who could devote all his attention to the Society would improve activity; the suppression of the article requiring the approval by the Head of Government of the regulations and the changes in the statutes. Furthermore Giunta preferred neither to have Honorary Councillors nor an article determining that one quarter of membership income of Local Committees could be reserved for their own administration. Altogether it would seem that Giunta was intent on getting as much economic benefit out of the Dante and its Committees as possible, on having a clear decisional hierarchy and of extensive state control. Boselli sought ways to maintain a minimum of independence and to keep giving voice to more members than just those belonging to the Council or the Directive Board.⁵¹

Thus Giunta's answer to Boselli's letter, though he made sure to stress that great care had been put into examining the matter both because of its singular importance and because of the respect owed to the high authority of Boselli, here even called "His Excellency" ("sia per la singolare importanza dell'argomento, sia per il riguardo dovuto all'alta Autorità dell' E.V.."). As for the confirmation of Boselli's nomination as President for Life, Giunta added that if he had known about this decision, an article referring to it would have been included in the proposed new statutes right from the start. Clearly Giunta thought it necessary to maintain good relations with Boselli and to prevent him from feeling surpassed.⁵² The cordiality was returned. Boselli, playing the game without quite saying he had been mistaken, let Giunta know that his remarks about the institutional status of the Dante had come from the past and that the Dante had to conform to the basic principles of the Fascist State. As if it were a question of religious doctrine, Boselli wrote that his faith in the Fascist Regime was such that he would certainly not come with heretical proposals.⁵³

However, this cordial exchange did not bring the negotiations to a conclusion. Almost two months later, whilst the new statutes had not been

⁵¹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Rilievi sulle osservazioni fatte da S.E. Boselli in merito al progetto di nuovo statuto per la Dante Alighieri, September 1931. A report was made for Mussolini – presumably by Giunta – of observations Boselli had made in a document on the project of the new statutes handed over to Mussolini by Celesia.

⁵² ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Copy of Giunta to Boselli, 19 September 1931, N. 5467/1.

⁵³ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Boselli (from Cumiana) to Giunta, PERSONAL, 23 September 1931.

implemented, Affari Esteri seems to have had second thoughts. An official memorandum from the ministry advanced the opinion that the Dante Alighieri Society, and in particular its Secretary General, ought to receive advice for the Society's activities abroad from a Vice-Secretary General or an Inspector General chosen and paid by Affari Esteri. To reinforce this position, it was pointed out that Affari Esteri provided nearly all the funding for the Dante's activities abroad, even if to the outside world this wasn't apparent. This funding had to remain concealed, hence Affari Esteri in this memo endorsed Boselli's proposal to not mention government funding in the new Dante statutes. The ministry's connection with the Dante's Vice-Secretary General could also be left out of the statutes and for confidentiality's sake be arranged with an exchange of letters between Affari Esteri and the Dante. Despite the fact that Piero Parini, the head of the Directorate General Italiani all'estero, twice wrote to recommend accepting the ministry's plan, it was right away rejected by Giunta and by Mussolini as being counter-productive for the unity of action.⁵⁴

The statutes that Boselli eventually proposed to Mussolini for approval by Royal Decree, attributed an important degree of control to the Head of Government.⁵⁵ The first article now explicitly referred to the Dante's mission to promote *italianità* as defined by the new spirit brought by the War and the Fascist Revolution. As was to be expected from the course of the negotiations, the statutes determined that at the beginning of each calendar year the Dante President was obliged to present an activity report of the past year and a final account to the Head of Government. The President was to be named by the Head of Government. This President proposed the candidates for the eight members of the Directive Board, of which four were Vice-Presidents and one the Administrator, all of them to be appointed by the Head of Government. The thirty members of the Central Council, or the Consulta as it was now called, the Secretary General who would run the Central Office and the Central Office staff could not be appointed without the approval of the Directive Board. Twice a year the Consulta would convene to give its view on the moral and financial report presented at the Congress, on budget plans and on final accounts. As Boselli had pressed for, thirty Honorary Councillors could be appointed. The President of a Local Committee had to be chosen by the Dante Directive Board and a local Directive Council of ten members approved by the President of the Dante. Notes in the margin show that at the last minute Boselli agreed with Giunta to have four Vice-Presidents instead of three. Perhaps having discussed

⁵⁴ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Parini to Giunta, 2 November 1931; Ibidem, MAE, DIES, Appunto per S.E. l'On. Giunta, 2 November 1931; Idem, Appunto per S.E. Il Capo del Governo, 17 November 1931; Idem, Parini to Giunta, 19 November 1931.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, Boselli to Mussolini, 17 November 1931, and attached statutes.

the candidates it was deemed wise to have the four rather than leave one aside?⁵⁶

On 21 November 1931 a communiqué from the Presidenza del Consiglio announced that new statutes for the Dante Alighieri Society proposed by Boselli were that day officially been approved per Governmental Decree. The Directive Board was composed of the illustrious Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel, Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco, Felice Felicioni (Vice-President) and Luigi Rava as Vice-Presidents, Domenico Marotta as Administrator, and Roberto Forges Davanzati, Giulio Quirino Giglioli and Piero Parini as members. Making Parini a member established a personal connection with the Directorate General Italiani all'estero, so in some way must have satisfied Affari Esteri's request for greater control over the organization.⁵⁷ The composition of the Directorate would suggest that those in favour of a pro-Fascist stance were on the winning hand.

After Boselli's demise (1932)

Despite his praised vitality, Boselli passed away in Rome on the 10th of March 1932 at the age of ninety-three. An extensive procession accompanied his coffin across the streets of Turin, where he was buried. Presumably the choice of burial location was in part motivated by the fact that Turin had been the first capital of a unified Italy as well as by Boselli's several terms as President of the province of Turin. A Paolo Boselli Foundation was created and a collection of Boselli's speeches and writings were published to honour him. The aforementioned Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco became the new President of the Dante Alighieri Society. Concurrently the journalist and politician Ezio Maria Gray (1885-1969) was made Vice-President, a man described in the *Pagine della Dante* of having an "exquisitely Fascist temperament" ("temperamento squisitamente fascista"). His Fascist credentials were unequivocal: founder of the Fascio di Combattimento of Novara, front-line participator in the March on Rome, made member of the Direttorio Nazionale of the National Fascist Party in 1924 and in the same year of the Gran Consiglio Fascista. Having initially been a member of Enrico Corradini's nationalist party, the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana*, he was also a typical example of how nationalist convictions could develop seamlessly into Fascist ideals.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibidem, Boselli to Mussolini, 17 November 1931, and attached statutes, p. 2.

⁵⁷ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1A, Communiqué from the Cabinet of the Presidenza del Consiglio of 21 November 1931.

⁵⁸ 'Re, Governo e Popolo rendono omaggio alla memoria di Paolo Boselli in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1932) 26-27; 'Il grande lutto della 'Dante'', idem, 31; 'Il nuovo Presidente

However, Celesia di Vegliasco's presidency lasted only a year: he himself for 'personal reasons' handed in his resignations, which were officially recognized by the Head of Government on 3 March 1933.⁵⁹ Because the entire Directive Board resigned too, Mussolini intervened by appointing former Vice-President Felice Felicioni (1898-1982) as Extraordinary Commissioner (Commissario Straordinario). Like Ezio Maria Gray, Felicioni had been a Fascist of the first hour. Starting as the leader of the Fascist squad of Perugia, he had played a role in the March on Rome, became the Federal Secretary of the National Fascist Party in Umbria and was then asked to join the Party's Direttorio Nazionale (1924-25). If Celesia di Vegliasco with his then 48 years of age had already been a relatively young President of the Dante, Felicioni being 35 was even more so. He had joined the Central Council already in 1925 and the Directive Board in 1931. With this veritably young President, it was hoped that the spirit of the Fascist Revolution could help advance the Dante Alighieri Society, aiding it to act rapidly and with clear action, with faith in the youth and in the future, enabling it to be not only ambassador of Italy's traditional thought and culture, but also of Fascist *italianità*, here made synonymous with Italy's modernity.⁶⁰ Within the same year that Felicioni took over the Dante leadership, new statutes for the Society were finalized and then approved by Royal Decree on 26 October 1933. These statutes were later to be regarded as a sign of the Dante's definite 'fascistization' and loss of independence. Thus, by closer examination the negotiation process that led to the statutory shows a less straightforward picture than that of a regime that imposed its will on a by now powerless private organization.⁶¹

When Felice Felicioni took over the leadership of the Dante, some further changes to the statutes were introduced. The Secretary General would be allowed to discuss the budget in the National Council but still without taking part in the voting procedure. Predictably, more power now went to the President. Instead of eight members the Directive Board was now to have six,

della "Dante" in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1932) 51-52; 'Saluto all'on. Gray' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1932) 53.

⁵⁹ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N. 33000, Sottofasc. 3, Anno 134 e segg. – 3/1, fasc. 3.1.2, Dimissioni dell'on. Giovanni Celesia di Vegliasco da Presidente (D.C.G. 3 March 1933).

⁶⁰ "[...] per il maggior sviluppo della Dante che vuole essere non solo ambasciatore del nostro pensiero e della nostra cultura tradizionale, ma messaggera di italianità fascista nel mondo" ('Il Commissario straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1933) 37-38, 38).

⁶¹ The press release of Stefani as reproduced in 'Annuncio: Il Duce nomina l'on. Felice Felicioni Commissario Straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine 1* (January-February 1933) 1; 'Il Commissario Straordinario della «Dante Alighieri»' in: *Pagine 2* (March-April 1933) 37-38; 'Il Fascismo nel Mondo – parte della conferenza tenuta da u.s. il Commissario Straordinario della Dante Alighieri on. Felice Felicioni, nell'Aula Magna della R. Università di Messina, sul tema "Il Fascismo nel mondo"', 8 May 1933 in: *Pagine 3* (May-June 1933) 65-67; 'Il Nuovo Statuto della S.N.D.A. (approvato con R. Decreto 26 ottobre 1933 – XI)' in: *Pagine 6* (November-December 1933) 207-210.

with only one Vice-President. The Secretary General running the Central Office would be one of the six, replacing the Administrator, and his was to be the only paid function. Four bodies were to lead the organization: the Presidency, the Directory (*Direttorio*, formerly *Consiglio direttivo*), the National Council (*Consiglio nazionale*, formerly the *Consulta*) and the Auditors' Committee (*Collegio dei revisori dei conti*). The most drastic reform concerned the National Council, which was now to be made up of so-called Provincial Fiduciaries (*Fiduciari provinciali*), by which were meant the Presidents of the Committees located in the provincial capitals. Introducing a new hierarchical distinction, the statutes determined that Local Committees were grouped per Province and were to be guided by the Provincial Fiduciaries. The latter were expected to maintain good relations with the Prefects of the Federal Secretariats of the National Fascist Party. Besides the Fiduciaries, the National Council would also include representatives of a variety of (semi-)governmental institutions: the National Fascist Party, the Directorate General of Scuole Italiane all'Estero, the Directorate General of Italiani all'Estero, the Directorates General of the Ministry of Educazione Nazionale (for higher, secondary, technical and elementary education), the Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura, the Opera Nazionale Balilla, the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the Istituto Nazionale L.U.C.E. and the E.N.I.T.. The National Council approved the financial accounts, appointed the auditors and advised on matters presented by the President. In the statutes of 1933 it was even more plainly stated that the President of the Dante chose the Presidents of the Committees within the Kingdom, in the Colonies and abroad. Every two years there was to be a National Assembly (*Raduno nazionale*) of members from cities within the Kingdom and in the Colonies to promote the Dante. No mention was made here of the Committees abroad, whereas at the same time the standard Regulations were discarded on the grounds that each Committee, especially abroad, had its own requirements. Elementary school children no longer had to pay a membership fee and the category of Student Members was added, for whom the fees could be lowered according to local regulations. This made it easier to raise the total number of members.⁶²

When two years later the statutes again underwent some modifications, permission was given for Local Committees to vote for their Presidents in a general assembly, after which the decision would be ratified by the Dante President. For the law in other countries that concerned private associations sometimes required a direct choice of President and in practice some of these Committees had continued to choose their Presidents this way. The revision of the statutes in 1935 also enlarged the Directive Board so that it again had eight

⁶² ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1B, Cabinet's copy of the Royal Decree of Approval and a copy of the paper for the Adunanza della Sezione Prima del 24 ottobre 1933, No. sezione 1159, Consiglio di Satato, Firmato E. Filippini, Segretario della Sezione.

members, needed to assist an ever busier President. The Secretary General was no longer to be member of the Directive Board so that he could fully concentrate on managing the Central Office. A representative of the *Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda* would now replace the E.N.I.T.'s representative in the National Council, as the E.N.I.T. had come under the direction of the *Sottosegretariato*.⁶³

Not everyone was happy with the fact that the Dante managed to maintain a niche for itself in the field of Italy's cultural relations abroad. In June 1937, Parini handed in his resignation as member of the Dante's National Council, on the grounds that he believed the Dante to be by now obsolete. The *Fasci* and the *Scuole Italiane all'Estero* provided the state with sufficient instruments for it to spread Italian language and culture abroad.

In the heart of the collective group abroad, the Dante no longer has any effective task seeing that the educational and fascist organization has already been put in place and is in progressive and rapid development, such that it will soon be absolutely totalitarian.⁶⁴

Felicioni tried to mitigate this critical opinion by juxtaposing it to the view held by Mussolini and the highest Fascist representatives that the Dante could and should assume some vital tasks in this field. He argued that the Dante had increased its activity abroad and doubled its forces within Italy. There was now more than ever a strong need to spread the Italian language and culture, as was being shown especially in the Americas and in the Mediterranean basin ("come si sta dimostrando in special modo in alcuni settori delle Americhe e del bacino del Mediterraneo"). Felicioni also pointed out that the Dante could reach those places that the governmental organizations could not and that by working alongside the State the Dante helped reduce public expenses. As a voluntary society that was predominantly cultural, the Dante was to his opinion well equipped to spread Italian political thought among foreigners and could do so in cooperation with *Affari Esteri* and *Cultura Popolare*.⁶⁵

Whether it was through the right personal connections or Felicioni's arguments in favour, the Dante was allowed to keep going. It must therefore have been regarded by most of the higher functionaries of the regime and by Mussolini himself as useful enough to be maintained or too prestigious to be

⁶³ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 1, Anno 1934 e segg., 1C, Felicioni to Presidenza del Consiglio, 6 June 1935; Report to the Head of Government for the Council of State, June 1935; Copy of the Royal Decree of 18 July 1935.

⁶⁴ "In seno alla collettività all'estero la 'Dante' non ha più alcun compito efficace dato che l'organizzazione scolastica e fascista è già salda ed è in via di progressivo e rapido sviluppo così da diventare fra poco assolutamente totalitaria."

⁶⁵ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 3, Anno 1934 e segg., 3/2, Felicioni to Medici del Vascello, 10 June 1937; Idem, Copy of Parini to Felicioni, 19 May 1937.

dismantled. Parini was replaced in the Dante's National Council by Baron Andrea Geisser Celesia di Vegliasco, Director General of Propaganda at the Ministero della Cultura Popolare. On 8 June 1938 a Decree issued by Mussolini approved the revised internal regulations of the Dante, which essentially brought these regulations more in line with the new statutes of 1935. At the same time a stronger emphasis was put on the role of the Dante in the Italian colonies. At the beginning of the year a Dante Day (*Giornata della Dante*) was to be held by all Committees in Italy, Libya and Italian East Africa. This event was comparable to what had once been the Annual Congress except that members now could only listen to the annual report given, without any possibility of discussion, and watch good examples of patriotic fervour being awarded prizes.⁶⁶ These same Committees were emphatically given the task of divulging the mission and ideals of the Dante amongst the people, through activities that would show the importance of spreading the Italian language and culture throughout the world, the creations of the Italian genius abroad, the life of their conationals abroad and Italy's linguistic and cultural ties with other countries. Gathering income through membership fees and fundraising activities was important too.⁶⁷ The degree to which the Committees in Italy, Libya and Italian East Africa were integrated into the regime's official policy abroad is illustrated by the fact that by now the directive councils of these Committees were expected to include representatives of the local Italian schools, of the Fascist youth and free-time (*dopolavoro*) organizations, and of the local section of the Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista.⁶⁸ At the same time it is worth noting that this was only expected of the Committees in Italian colonial territory: all other Committees abroad were less tightly regulated.

To reinforce the opinion that the regime could not simply set aside the Dante Alighieri Society, the Central Office occasionally emphasized the Dante's essential international position among other similar organizations, especially those of France, Germany and Britain. For example, in an article in the *Pagine* of July-October 1938, the Dante drew attention to the various examples of foreign cultural promotion in Italy itself, including the activities of the British Council.⁶⁹ The British Council for Cultural Relations was described as having issued directly from the Foreign Office ("emanazione diretta del Foreign Office") and as being equipped with all the instruments of linguistic propaganda imaginable: schools, libraries, radio broadcasts, film projections, theatre performances and the like. Furthermore, the article pointed out that the Council had enhanced the methods of English language teaching to make possible the

⁶⁶ ACS, PCM 1940-1943, Busta 3035, Fasc. 3/3.10, N 33000, Sottofasc. 2, Anno 1934 e segg. – 2/3, Regolamento della Società Nazionale "Dante Alighieri", probably attached to Felicioni to Marchese G. Medici del Vascello, Sottosegretariato di Stato, 1 April 1938.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, Article 22.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, Article 24.

⁶⁹ 'Lingua e cultura degli altri in Italia' in: *Pagine* 4-5 (July-October 1938) 12-13.

spread of a “subsidiary” language known as “basic English” (“Giova ricordare che questa istituzione va perfezionando sempre di più i suoi metodi e si arricchisce sempre di mezzi più potenti. Attualmente sta favorendo la diffusione di una lingua sussidiaria – il *basic english* – che permette, con l’acquisto di un migliaio di parole tutto al di più, di possedere uno strumento sussidiario linguistico di tipo inglese.”). Hence, the Dante called for the Italian people to assign ever more means to the Dante Alighieri Society to defend the Italian language and culture in this battle. Clearly rampant rivals could serve to reassert one’s own indispensable position.

Superseded by the Istituti di Cultura

Such remained the prestige of the Dante Alighieri Society that in spite of the gradual hollowing out of its independence by Mussolini’s regime and the creation of rival organizations, it did not entirely lose its function. In 1938 a *modus vivendi* for the Dante and its competitors was established. In January that year the Direzione Generale degli Italiani all’estero sent out a circular letter to all Italian embassies, legations and consulates, setting the following guidelines. If a Dante Committee was active in a town where there was no (section of the) Istituto di Cultura, and where Affari Esteri did not intend to create one, the Committee could continue to function and was to be assisted by the Italian diplomatic authorities. In such cases the diplomatic authorities could also help set up a new Dante Committee. Furthermore, the Istituto Interuniversitario Italiano and the Fasci all’Estero were both to refrain from offering courses of Italian language and culture abroad. Such courses were to be left in the hands of the Dante. The Dante Committees were expected to rejuvenate themselves and to provide the ministry with regular reports of their activities. A hint was made at the occasionally mediocre quality of these activities in the words: “All manifestations of pseudo-intellectual and verbose provincialism are to be banished; [...]. (“Dovranno rigorosamente essere bandite tutte le esibizioni di provincialismo pseudo-intellettuale e verboso; [...]”)

However, in the same letter it was explained that if in a given town there was a (section of the) Istituti di Cultura as well as a Dante Committee, the latter was to be dismantled. The Committee’s activities and its members would be handed over to the (section of the) Istituto di Cultura. If the town in question did not have a local section of the Istituto di Cultura, but the country’s capital did have an Istituto di Cultura, the Dante Committee would have to cease to exist and lay the foundations for such a section of the Istituto. Hereby the Dante was officially made secondary to the Istituti di Cultura, though it was still granted a significant function in Italy’s foreign cultural policy.

The consequences of this circular letter are not so straightforward to determine. It depended on the implementation by the local representatives of Affari Esteri and of the Dante. This dependence on the persons involved is well-illustrated by case of the Dante in The Netherlands. Here the Direzione Generale delle Scuole Italiane all'Estero of Affari Esteri had decided against establishing an Istituto Italiano di Cultura. In October 1938 the Dante's President Felicioni agreed with Affari Esteri to instead send M. Ferrigni, the former director of the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in Prague, to The Netherlands as a representative of the Dante. Ferrigni's task was to oversee and co-ordinate the activities of the Dutch Committees and he was paid for this by the Dante. Why the Istituto di Cultura was not thought necessary in The Netherlands could be because the Dante had eleven Committees there, all of them active and self-supporting. It was also less interesting to invest in The Netherlands now that the biggest Dutch Fascist Party, the Nationaal-Socialistische Bond, had lost a considerable number of votes at the general elections a year before and was turning more towards German National-Socialism. When in December 1938 Ferrigni called an assembly of Presidents of Dutch local Dante Committees, he was confronted with considerable opposition to his role. The Committees, mostly made up of Dutch members, refused to give up any of their independence of action.⁷⁰

On the other hand, we know that in Poland's capital, Warsaw, the Dante Committee was closed down once an Istituto Italiano di Cultura was opened there in 1935. The founding of this Institute was attributed to Giuseppe Bastianini, Italian Ambassador in Warsaw between 1932 and 1936. In Athens, where Bastianini had also been ambassador, a similar institute had been created under his care. The addition in 1935 of an Institute of Culture in Warsaw to the existing Institutes in Athens, Lissabon, Brussels and Vienna was presented as a homage that Italy wished to pay to Poland.⁷¹ However, what must have played a role in this decision was that the political situation in Poland appeared favourable for a successful promotion of Italian Fascist ideals and the principles of corporatism. Just as in Italy and in many eastern European states, the "masses proved either apathetic or hostile towards parliamentary forms of government and accepted or welcomed strong leadership."⁷² In February 1935, the President of the Dante Committee in Warsaw, Prince Włodzimierz Czetwertyński, reported to Felicioni that at the last general assembly of the Committee the members had unanimously decided to transform the Dante Alighieri of Warsaw into a 'Poland-Italy Committee'. The recently inaugurated

⁷⁰ Tamara van Kessel, *Tussen italianità en fascisme. De Haagse afdeling van 'Dante Alighieri' en de Italiaanse cultuurpolitiek in Nederland, 1914-1938* (MA-Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1999) 61-64.

⁷¹ 'Nos Interviews – L'«Istituto Italiano di Cultura»' in: *Echo de Varsovie*, 31 October 1934.

⁷² Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 512.

Istituto Italiano di Cultura had absorbed and concentrated all those cultural activities that had until then been taken care of by the Dante there. The Poland-Italy Committee would focus mainly on events meant to celebrate friendship between the two countries.⁷³ To still have some form of representation in Warsaw, Felicioni made Czetwertynski the local Fiduciary of the Dante Alighieri Society.⁷⁴ This replacement of the Dante by an Istituto di Cultura took place three years before the circular letter, showing that there was already a tendency within Affari Esteri to push forward the Istituti at the expense of the Dante. With the right people in place, such as the particularly active Ambassador Bastianini, this had concrete consequences.

In many respects the position of the Dante in the 1930s was comparable to that of similar Italian organizations in that period, balancing between desired independence and gaining sufficient approval from Mussolini to be able to receive grants and recognition. As has been concisely described in a study on the Istituto di Studi Romani, an international centre for studies on Ancient Roman history, organizations in the cultural field that were not in government hands would have to constantly win the favour of Mussolini. Grants and other forms of support were never sure to endure. Mussolini judged the organization's utility from day to day, on the basis of opportunism.⁷⁵ As long as Boselli was President of the Dante, there was at the head of this Society a man with sufficient prestige and leverage to be able to manoeuvre the Dante into a compromise with the regime. After Boselli's death in 1932 this was no longer the case. Felicioni too would have to continue the tightrope act of keeping this vestige of the Risorgimento erect all through the 1930s.

The British Council: an offshoot of the Foreign Office

Emergence in the age of 'new diplomacy'

Whereas the Dante Alighieri Society with its emphasis on the national genius encapsulated in literature and art clearly originated in the age of Romantic nationalism, when the British Council was launched, in 1934, the cultural and political context was in some respects significantly different. To begin with, the process of democratization that took shape throughout Europe from the mid-nineteenth century onwards was by then undeniably a factor to be reckoned with. Across the continent, the rise of socialism and the human sacrifices of the

⁷³ AS-SDA, 627, Varsavia, Czetwertynski to Felicioni, 20 February 1935, N. 110.

⁷⁴ AS-SDA, 627, Varsavia, Felicioni to Czerwertynski, 15 March 1935; ASDA, Czetwertynski to Felicioni, 24 May 1935, N. 207.

⁷⁵ Romke Visser, 'Storia di un progetto mai realizzato: il Centro Internazionale di Studi Romani' in: *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituute te Rome / Papers of the Netherlands Institute in Rome* LIII, 53 (1994) 44-80, 50-51.

Great War pushed political elites into accepting universal suffrage. In Britain, the Representation of People Act of November 1918 had removed nearly all property qualifications for male voters and for the first time allowed women over thirty who met minimum property qualifications to vote, thereby tripling the electorate. Given that the majority of the British electorate was in favour of peace, it was important for the British Council to emphasize the non-aggressive nature of the British international relations. The awareness of the importance of public opinion in modern democracies also affected the significance given to cultural policy abroad. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 had seemingly left behind the age of secret diplomacy and the presence of some 500 members of the world press was symptomatic of the greater weight now conferred to the public opinion. The so-called 'new diplomacy' made cultural promotion abroad by definition a more valuable instrument in international politics.

However, the British governments' controversial use of propaganda in the First World War left an aversion among the British for anything that could be identified as 'propaganda' and furthermore there was a liberal tradition of seeing culture as something to be left in private hands. This meant that even if the Council pleaded for Britain's active role in stimulating international understanding and securing peaceful relations in a further developing world, the approach to cultural policy was deliberately presented as being modest. Reputedly this was not because of limited means, which was certainly the case with the Council when compared to its other European counterparts, but out of principle. Harold Nicolson, the British diplomat - also well known for creating the iconic gardens of Sissinghurst Castle with his wife Vita Sackville-West - was one of the British Council's frequent lecturers. In one of his many publications, *Diplomacy* (1939), he describes the transition from the old diplomacy to the new and specifically mentions the sums spent by the German, French and Italian government on their propaganda services. He made a point of emphasizing how little is spent on - what he openly alluded to as - propaganda by the British government in the form of grants to the British Council.⁷⁶ Nicolson described "the best antidote to the hysterical school of broadcasters" as being "a policy of truth, under-statement and calm".⁷⁷ By the "hysterical school of broadcasters" he meant the propaganda of the Italians and the Germans, especially Italian anti-British broadcast in Arabic from the Bari radio station.

⁷⁶ "It is estimated that Germany spends some £4,000,000 to £6,000,000 annually on foreign propaganda. France spends some £1,200,000 and Italy the equivalent of nearly £1,000,000. In Britain no sums are allocated for propaganda as such, although grants are given to the British Council as follows:

1935.....£5,000

1936.....£15,000

1937.....£60,000

1938.....£100,000 with a possible addition of £40,000"

Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1939) 171-172. These figures correspond with those given by Donaldson.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 171.

While on the one hand being created at a moment in time when the need to influence 'the masses' was to some extent being recognized in international politics, the British Council still held on to a modest approach and also to targeting the higher echelons of foreign societies. Its activities were explicitly aimed at reaching out to the social groups that were expected to be culturally, financially and politically the most influential.⁷⁸ This elitist attitude was just as noticeable in the composition of the Council's managing bodies and staff. Although the Council's Executive Committee was made up of diverse figures - members of Parliament and the general public, civil servants and representatives of the three main political parties - so as to be viewed as an unbiased organization, the Council was still regularly criticized for being unrepresentative, too traditional and at times simply too upper class.⁷⁹ It is worth noting that the British Council had to deal with parts of British society who were vehemently opposed to such an organization being at all created. The most remarkable attack came from Lord Beaverbrook, who as owner of the newspaper *Daily Express* made sure criticism was constantly levelled at the Council's activities and existence. He claimed the Council was a waste of public money and liked to portray Council staff as "a bunch of effete and ineffectual amateurs, precious cultural dilettantes."⁸⁰

How was the Council organized? To some extent it had a more centralized structure than the Dante Alighieri Society. At the core there was an Executive Committee, with no less than fifteen and no more than thirty members, of which nine were government nominees. This committee met four times a year to discuss financial and policy issues. However, a sub-section of this group, which was known as the Finance and Agenda Committee, met once a month to take care of the day-to-day affairs. The seven members of the Executive Committee that were part of this sub-committee and headed by the same Chairman, would in time become the most important body within the organisation. The Chairman presided over the Council as a whole, was appointed by the Foreign Office and was initially unpaid. Until 1940 the Secretary General was seconded by the Foreign Office.⁸¹ There were also a number of Advisory Committees, dealing with specific tasks: the Books and Periodicals, Fine Arts, Ibero-American countries, Lectures, Music, Students/Universities, Near East and - as of 1939 - Drama and Dance, Films, Resident Foreigners, and with time many more. In turn, the Advisory Committees cooperated with the various departments being managed by the

⁷⁸ In 1935, writing about the educational activities that the Council was hoping to develop in Egypt, Leeper gave clear priority to influencing the educated Egyptians. (TNA, FO 141/624/4, Rex Leeper, London, to Sir Miles Lampson, Cairo, 28 February 1935.) This is one of many examples of how the Council specifically targeted the foreign elite.

⁷⁹ Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 15-16.

⁸⁰ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 63-67.

⁸¹ Eastment, *The Policies and Position*, 36.

Secretary General. Initially these departments were in charge of particular geographical areas (Britain, Middle East, Latin America) or particular products. Functional departments could supply material wherever demand arose whereas the regional departments needed Foreign Office and Treasury approval before embarking on work in a country.

In foreign countries the Council had three forms of representation. In areas where the educational infrastructure was scarce, the Council set up its own Institute. In some countries where Anglophile societies already existed, especially in South America, such societies maintained an autonomous administration but received subsidies and teaching staff from the Council. In educationally well-organized countries like those in the Scandinavian area, the Council would set up an office that could support local organizations such as anglophile societies, extramural departments of universities, or other British-oriented associations. The preferred arrangement for the Council was to have a Representative working in close contact with the British Mission, with an administrative assistant at his side and possibly a number of officers for the targeted distribution of information material.⁸² The first Representative to be was C.A.F. Dundas, who was appointed in 1938 to co-ordinate all activities in the Middle East from his base in Cairo. Even if the economic malaise meant that the Council had to keep safeguarding the grant from the Treasury, its number of permanent staff grew from two in 1934, to over forty by 1939 and 333 by February 1941, half of which based abroad.⁸³

The leading men

Despite never being a Chairman of the Council, one of the key figures in the existence of the Council was Rex Leeper. Leeper's full conviction of the need for such cultural policy and his good connections within the Foreign Office were crucial to obtaining a grant from the Treasury that would make the creation of the British Council possible. Leeper's own career had taught him which steps to take to gather sufficient political backing for his plans. Brothers Reginald (Rex) and Allen Leeper (the elder by one year) were born in Australia and had worked in the wartime propaganda machinery.⁸⁴ Rex had been in charge of the Russian section of the Political Intelligence Department and Allen of the Balkan section. Allen after the First World War became assistant private secretary to Lord Curzon and became close friends with Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs. In 1933 Allen was appointed head of the League of Nations and Western Department of the Foreign Office but he died

⁸² *Ibidem*, 17-18.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 22; Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 177.

⁸⁴ Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 28.

suddenly in 1935. It was through this brother that Rex had built an excellent relationship with Vansittart and with Eden.⁸⁵ These contacts were useful in his lobbying for the Council. Given Leeper's background, the Council was more or less born under the aegis of the Foreign Office.

The first two Chairmen of the British Council were Lord Tyrell of Avon (from 1934 to 1936) and Lord Eustace Percy (from 1936 to 1937). Both of these men had held important political posts. Lord William Tyrell of Avon had served the Foreign Office since 1889. Between 1916 and 1919 he was head of the Political Intelligence Department, where Leeper was then also working. After a few years as Permanent Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs (1925 to 1928) Lord Tyrell became British Ambassador to France. Returning in 1934, he took on the Chairmanship of the Council with a rich diplomatic experience. Lord Eustace Percy had less connection to the Foreign Office. He was in the diplomatic service during the First World War. Thereafter, in 1921, he became Conservative Member of Parliament for Hastings. During the first Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin (1924-1929) it was education that was entrusted to Lord Percy. He was made President of the Board of Education. When Baldwin in 1935 again became prime minister, Lord Tyrell joined the cabinet for a year as Minister without Portfolio. Having such high-ranking civil servants at its head, meant that the Council could not distance itself entirely from government policy.

The person who is praised for having given the Council its solid basis is Lord George Lloyd, who was Chairman from 1937 to 1941. Lord Lloyd was successful in putting pressure on the Treasury to increase the grants, in defending the purpose of the Council and in obtaining a Royal Charter that would secure the Council's independence from government.⁸⁶ "It was Lloyd who moulded the British Council into the embodiment of those ideas conceived in the minds of Rex Leeper and Stephen Tallents, and it was his dynamism which inspired the council's work in such a way as to inject a sense of real purpose and direction into the concept of national projection."⁸⁷ As Governor of Bombay (1918-1923) and High Commissioner in Egypt (1925-1929) he had often proved to be a convinced imperialist, critical about the principle of self-determination and in favour of a hard-line colonial administration.⁸⁸ As a result of his Egyptian experience, Lord Lloyd saw British control of the Eastern Mediterranean as vital for the Empire and was in favour of developing the Council in this area and in the Near East, with which was meant Egypt, Palestine, Turkey, Irak and Transjordan. He personally toured the Near East 1937, 1938 and 1939 to assess what needed to be done. An anonymous donation

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 28-31.

⁸⁶ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 46 and 55; Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 178.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *ibidem*.

⁸⁸ John Charmley, *Lord Lloyd and the decline of the British Empire* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).

of 50,000 British pounds for the Council's work in this region proved that Lord Lloyd was not the only one to see this area as a priority.⁸⁹

An aspect that has never been commented upon is the fact that Lord Lloyd, although coming from a Quaker family, was Anglo-Catholic. Brothers Reginald and Allen Leeper are also known to have been "devout Anglo-Catholics".⁹⁰ It remains an area of speculation what influence this might have had on their view on 'Britishness' and their sense of mission. Britain had a long tradition of anti-Catholicism. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the so-called Oxford Movement brought about a theological re-examination of the Anglican Church religious practice with the aim to restore its bond with the Catholic tradition. Inspired by this movement, the Anglo-Catholics reinstated much of the Catholic liturgical practice and the sacraments, without thereby returning under the fold of the Roman Catholic papacy. The popularity of Anglo-Catholicism reached its peak in the interwar years. By then Leeper and Lord Lloyd would presumably not have to fear being seen as less loyal to 'British' values. Yet feeling part of the 'universal' Catholic faith may well have strengthened their belief in the missionary purpose the Council could have through its spreading of certain moral codes. Though deserving further research, the complexities in the distinctions between Anglo-Catholics and the relation to Low and High Church would at this point take us further than the scope of this book.⁹¹



*Sir Reginald ('Rex') Leeper
Founder of the British Council*

Gendering the Council

Unsurprisingly, the social background of most officials working for the British Council was similar to that of Foreign Office recruits, who in the interwar period still nearly all came from the pool of Eton and 'Oxbridge' as well as belonging for a large part to the British aristocracy or gentry. It is said of Vansittart's view of diplomacy that it was "relentlessly Edwardian", perceiving the international arena "as a vast extension of London's clubland, where all the members obeyed certain accepted rules."⁹² This image fits with the

⁸⁹ Taylor, *The projection of Britain*, 171.

⁹⁰ Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 28.

⁹¹ W.S.F. Pickering, *Anglo-Catholicism: A Study on Religious Ambiguity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, revised edition, 2008); Ian Bradley, *Believing in Britain: the spiritual identity of 'Britishness'* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007).

⁹² Paul W. Doer, *British foreign policy, 1919-1939. 'Hope for the best, prepare for the worst'* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998) 137.

representation of 'Britishness' that the British Council promoted, where certain codes of conduct were encouraged. Curiously, the above-mentioned accusation of being "effete" was something that would endure through time. In Egypt this suspicion appears to have played a role in the political and generational gap that was perceived between on the one hand the British civil servants and businessmen already established there, and on the other hand the relatively young, educated men that were sent by the Council. C.A.F. Dundas, who became the Council Representative in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean region, in October 1940 complained to the headquarters in London that:

[...] some of the Council's Greek staff have gained (and a few deserved) a reputation which makes their position untenable in the especially delicate circumstances of the present time. It is variously said they are indiscreet, extravagant, lack any serious purpose, do not consider the public effects of their personal behaviour, or are irresponsible in financial matters. It is, too, repeatedly said, however slanderously, that they are 'pansies', 'long-haired', or 'soft'.⁹³

According to Dundas, this reputation had also reached Egypt and Cyprus. However, this comment dates from the war period and by then all the able-bodied men working for the Council were being called back to Britain to join the armed forces. Possibly those staff members who could remain abroad were quickly negatively judged for not serving the war effort and for the lack of masculine virtues associated to this. It is also worth pointing out that this reputation concerned the Council representatives and teachers abroad, and did not necessarily coincide with the staff in London. The question how 'effeminacy' came to be associated with the Council's cultural policy deserves more research and could be part of a broader investigation into the gendering of cultural policy in different countries.

Because of the many men that had died in the First World War, Britain had become a country where a notable number of women worked and played an active part in society.⁹⁴ Was increased participation of women reflected in the composition of the British Council's paid staff or its advisory committees? In December 1936 a countess from Dublin, Lady Gwendolen Iveagh, saw reason to write to the Secretary General of the British Council on account of the organization's presumed lack of women. "It occurred to me (though far from being a feminist!)," she wrote, "that it might be helpful if you had a woman on your committee [intending the Council - TvK]. There must be directions in which one could be useful." This was no attempt on her part to canvas for a job,

⁹³ Quoted in Roger Bowen, "Many Histories Deep". *The Personal Landscapes Poets in Egypt, 1940-45* (Cranbury, London & Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 1995) 43.

⁹⁴ Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out. How Two Million British Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

she immediately added, as she had no time for any “public work” these days. But it had occurred to her “that unless the Committee is misogynist, it might be a want.” The Secretary General replied two days later, claiming to have been amused by the countess’ letter as he had “pressed for the inclusion of ladies on the Council from the outset.” Two women, the Principal of Bedford College and a member of the Victoria League, were part of the Students Committee. Lady Austen Chamberlain had just joined the Executive Committee, so the Council was in his view not quite so misogynist as the Countess of Iveagh thought. He remained open for any names she could suggest for the Comité d’Accueil in London.⁹⁵

Critical of appeasement

Although the structure of the British Council and the professional background of its core staff would suggest that the Council’s views on British foreign policy could be equated with those of the British government, this cannot be automatically assumed. The interaction between Cabinet, Foreign Office and British Council was, needless to say, riddled with the complexities of party politics. This was especially so when the Council was confronted with the ‘appeasement’ policy under Neville Chamberlain’s premiership (1937-1940). On the eve of the Second World War civil servants of the Foreign Office were making extensive assessments of the different political ideologies endangering Britain: Communism, Italian Fascism and National Socialism. Essentially, the position of the Foreign Office was not based on ideological grounds but on what was at that moment being perceived as the most direct threat to peace in Europe, and consequently in Britain.⁹⁶ Generally, the Communist ideology was seen as the greatest evil. Varying degrees of animosity were directed towards National Socialism and Italian Fascism, some arguing that Germany was far more efficient and had more worldwide ambitions. As Hitler began to put in effect his expansionist ambitions, defusing the threat National Socialism posed became the first priority. Hereby rapprochement with Mussolini could even serve to isolate Nazi Germany.

In 1938, after Germany annexed with Austria and subsequently threatened to occupy Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia populated mainly by Germans, Chamberlain negotiated with Hitler. The result was the Agreement of Munich, with which the partition of Czechoslovakia was settled. Robert Vansittart, who was then still Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign

⁹⁵ TNA, BW 2/55, Gwendolen, Countess of Iveagh in Dublin to Colonel Charles Bridge in London, 2 December 1936; Charles Bridges to the Countess of Iveagh, 4 December 1936.

⁹⁶ Donald Lammers, ‘Fascism, Communism, and the Foreign Office, 1937-39’ in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, 3 (1971) 66-86.

Office, was unequivocally against such an appeasement policy, believing that the aggressive Third Reich needed to be squarely dealt with, a position he defended to the extent of being removed from his post.⁹⁷ Leeper too put his position within the News Department at risk by openly criticising the Munich Agreement. This appears to contradict evidence showing that to him, like to most of his other Foreign Office colleagues, it was not the ranking of enemy ideologies that mattered but the degree of concrete danger. Leeper is said to have conceded that the trend of the times was for states to gain more control everywhere, but to have nonetheless denied “[...] any distinctive newness to the regimes in power in Russia, Germany, and Italy – the messianic universalism of communism, the racialism and militarism of the nazi movement, the Italian recourse to dictatorial rule, all were [according to Leeper] thoroughly typical of the societies which produced them.”⁹⁸ National interests and ambitions posed the most immediate threat to peace, not the ideologies, and for the time being Germany and Italy were a graver concern than faraway Russia. If Leeper had an underlying equal aversion to all three ideologies, this would indeed coincide with the image of ‘Britishness’ that was divulged by the main publications of the British Council, *Britain To-day* and the *British Life and Thought Series*. These publications presented a general dichotomy between on the one hand British democracy and defence of individual freedom and on the other hand those political systems that handed absolute power to the State and bureaucratic control, without further specifying the ideological “colour” of such States.⁹⁹

Battling for independence from the Ministry of Information

As early as October 1935, the British government began to prepare plans for the creation of a Ministry of Information so that it could be put into place in the event of war. This was being done under secrecy by a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, made up of various civil servants (from the Cabinet, the Treasury, the Home Office, the Dominions Office, the Foreign Office, Naval and Military Intelligence, and Air Staff) and the directors-general of the General Post Office and of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All members of the sub-committee were working on these plans in their spare time, on top of their regular functions, making it a lengthy process. Leeper was also member (until early 1938), both as Foreign Office representative and because of his experience with wartime propaganda in the First World War. His proposal to make the Foreign Office News Department the nucleus of the impending Ministry of Information until the actual outbreak of war was one of the many

⁹⁷ Michael Roi, *Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934-1937* (Westport: Praeger, 1997).

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 72-73.

⁹⁹ See Chapter Three.

contentious issues that would occupy the committee. All parties involved were anxious not to hand over tasks that so far were under their control.¹⁰⁰

In February 1939 it was decided that the Council would be taken over by the Ministry, which from then on would be responsible for all cultural promotion abroad - in enemy and in non-enemy territory - that could serve as a tool for political propaganda. Only the Council's name and idea would remain, as a guise for any purely cultural or educational activities that the Ministry would be engaged in. This would also make it easier for the Council to be reinstated after the war should that be necessary. Lord Lloyd at first accepted this decision but in second instance, together with the Secretary General Charles Bridge, firmly presented his objections to this plan. Leeper could not be of much help at this point, being already heavily burdened with the Political Intelligence Department that would also need to be revived and brought in line with the other wartime preparations. Furthermore, he had fallen out of grace at the Foreign Office as had Vansittart. Lord Lloyd managed however to prevent the merger of the Council by convincing the Foreign Office that cultural activities would raise far more suspicion abroad if identified as coming from the Ministry of Information, making it thereby less effective. At the same time Lord Lloyd submitted a request for a Royal Charter to be granted to the Council. This would give the organization recognition as a legal person and make it harder for it to be disbanded.

On the 3rd of September 1939 Britain together with France declared war on Germany. The Ministry of Information was launched the next day while being still very much in construction. Though it was soon agreed that the Council could remain independent and in liaison with the Foreign Office, a prolonged negotiation remained concerning the precise delineation of its tasks. Leaving the Council in charge of only the strictly cultural and educational activities left too much room for confusion, as practice proved. In addition to this ambiguity, the Council could benefit from the advantage that it had already acquired contacts, experience and material such as film and photographs. Lord Lloyd is quoted as having said to his staff:

It is important ... never to admit, in our correspondence with M of I [Ministry of Information], that it is not possible to distinguish the borderline between cultural and political propaganda in wartime - that has always been their contention on which they based their attack on the Council, and we have always denied their thesis with the result that we are distinct.¹⁰¹

John Reith, the former BBC director who for a brief period was Minister of Information understandably questioned the functionality of the distinction:

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, 'Propaganda for war' in: idem, *The projection of Britain*, 260-292.

¹⁰¹ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 71.

Lloyd said that the duty of the British Council was the propagation of British culture; and it would never do to have the taint of propaganda about it. And where, I asked, does the propagation of culture end and the propagation of propaganda begin?¹⁰²

Reith's attempts to have all technical sections of the Council, such as the Film Committee, transferred to the Ministry were to no avail, and that despite having considerable support from the Treasury in the process. Throughout these months Lord Loyd doggedly held on to the argument that the Council had its own irreplaceable function by being apparently non-governmental and in doing so found the support of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. By mid-October 1940 the Council also obtained the Royal Charter.

Duff Cooper, Reith's successor after the fall of Chamberlain's government in May 1940, was equally unable to surmount the Council's refusal to relinquish its activities. Even if organising purely cultural propaganda in a country Britain was at war with immediately called into question the 'purity' of such activity, Cooper failed to obtain the political leverage necessary to claim at least propaganda in enemy territory for the Ministry of Information alone. In January 1941, Cooper wrote to Anthony Eden, by then once again Foreign Secretary:

There is no real division between cultural and political propaganda since the ultimate object and, indeed the sole justification for cultural propaganda, must be political and commercial.¹⁰³

Less than a month later, on the 4th of February 1941, Lord Lloyd passed away unexpectedly after contracting a rare disease. Churchill, then prime minister, seized this most unfortunate moment in the Council's existence to fundamentally question the necessity of its continuation. He was inclined to see it as unnecessary luxury given the war and the already existing Ministry of Information, but above all wanted an end to the constant disputes between the Ministry and the Council. Eden continued to defend the Council's legitimacy and proposed Malcolm Roberston as new Chairman. Churchill subsequently entrusted Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Supply and archenemy of the Council, with the task of reaching an agreement with the ministers of the War Cabinet. In July 1941 the conclusion was that the Council would continue its cultural and educational work, whereas anything it organized that could be considered propaganda would require prior approval by the Ministry of Information. To

¹⁰² Eastment, *The Politics and Position*, 28, quoting from John Reith, *Into the Wind* (London 1949) 366-367.

¹⁰³ Eastment, *ibidem*, 32, quoting from TNA, T161/1104, S35581/03/41, Duff Cooper to Anthony Eden, 11 January 1941.

this end a liaison officer was to be appointed.¹⁰⁴ The distinction between cultural and political propaganda remained a conundrum.

What is shown by the tug-of-war between the British Council and the Ministry of Information is the interest that the Foreign Office had in maintaining a separate Council and, ipso facto, in remaining closely involved in cultural promotion abroad. Under the guidance of strong-minded figures such as Leeper and Lord Lloyd, the Council had a certain degree of autonomy in its activities. However, even then, the Council had to make sure it remained on good terms with the Foreign Office. Under the aegis of the Foreign Office, the Council made more chance of getting grants from an interwar Treasury that had tightened the strings of its purse. It also proved essential to have Halifax and Eden's support in remaining separate from the Ministry of Information.

Conclusion

The Dante's balancing act

We have seen how the Dante Alighieri was an organization led by nineteenth-century men and ideals, not all of which remained viable in the 1930s under Mussolini's more totalitarian grip on Italian society. The reverence for the Italian nation that the Dante divulged was one of the components also integrated in Fascism, so that in this respect the Dante could easily legitimize its continued existence. Its Masonic roots were more problematic. However, these had already weakened when the rapprochement between Catholicism and the Italian State culminated in the Lateran Accord of 1929. Furthermore, the generation connected to Freemasonry died out and was replaced by members who had outspoken sympathy for Fascist ideals. Hence in terms of ideology the transition was smooth.

In terms of its relation to the State, the Dante had to reposition itself in the interwar years. Because Italian Fascism was presented as the completion of the process set in motion by the Risorgimento, it was useful for Mussolini to have good ties with an institution like the Dante. On the other hand, in the 1930s his regime further developed and established Italy's propaganda apparatus, thereby aiming also at Italians abroad and international recipients. It was part of Mussolini's strategy to keep several organizations at his disposal and to decide opportunistically when to use them for his own purposes. At the same time, for an organization like the Dante that relied so frequently on its cooperation with Italian diplomatic representation abroad, it was impossible to continue without some form of state approval. Hence the Dante's leadership was trapped in a balancing act, trying to maintain the organization's own

¹⁰⁴ Donaldson, *The British Council*, 77-81; Eastment, *The Politics and Position*, 32-33.

identity and freedom of movement, while securing enough endorsement by Mussolini and his Cabinet for the organization not to have to fear disbandment or absorption.

The Janus face of the Council

The British Council had the benefit of being created in the midst of the 1930s and under the leadership of persons like Leeper and Lord Lloyd who were extremely aware of the new significance that cultural promotion was gaining. There was also a greater homogeneity in its leadership and a long-established code of conduct that was part of the Foreign Office environment it had sprouted from. As will be illustrated in the next chapter, this can be seen also in the consistent image of Britishness that revolved around specific British institutions and values. Leeper's experience with British propaganda during the First World War no doubt helped too in developing clear guidelines for the Council's communication strategy, though it was this same propaganda that in the interwar years raised suspicion among the British about the ethical boundaries of the Council's work.

While in no way wishing to equate Mussolini's totalitarian regime in Italy, which was responsible for many a trespass of human dignity and rights, with the democratically-chosen British government at that time, I would like to argue that it is still possible to compare the Dante's precarious position under the regime with that of the Council. In many respects the Council was from the start less autonomous than the Dante. It relied almost entirely on government grants and many of its key-figures came from the Foreign Office, most importantly Leeper, who guided the organization while continuing his career as civil servant. Yet even if the Council was closely connected to the Foreign Office, it still had to compete for recognition. If at first its problem was that the British government did not always recognize its utility, as the prospect of another war drew close there followed a ceaseless power struggle between departments and persons who wanted greater control over the propaganda machinery. The creation of a Ministry of Information put in danger the Council's very existence and the protection of the Foreign Office was needed for it not to be absorbed by the new Ministry. It was obvious that the Council's work had political significance. Making a distinction between political and cultural propaganda was an argument that worked both ways, like Janus' face. It could be used by those who felt that the Council should leave all propaganda activity to the Ministry of Information. But it also strengthened the notion that an organization could hide its political propaganda behind the facade of dealing only with innocuous cultural propaganda, thereby favouring the Council.