PRO-FASCIST ACTIVITIES IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA
DURING THE ETHIOPIAN WAR

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In 1935–36 the focus of Fascist infection in Western Pennsylvania lay in the Italian consular service, which exercised its influence on Italo-Americans chiefly through Italian-language organizations and newspapers. It must be emphasized at the outset that the activities about to be described were not spontaneous, but directed. As we shall see, Italo-American newspapers suggested rather than reflected the opinions of their readers. Anyone familiar with Italo-Americans can testify that the great majority of them were predisposed to react favorably to Fascist propaganda primarily because of their latent Italian nationalism and not because of any strong devotion to Fascism.

Immediately following the Italian invasion of Ethiopia on October 3, 1935, the two pro-Fascist weeklies of Pittsburgh, the Unione and La Stella di Pittsburgh, published an announcement made by the Committee of the Friends of Italy to the Italians of Western Pennsylvania. This announcement reported that at the end of September the representatives of more than ninety thousand Italians had decided to organize a committee to combat the press of this country which was accused of daily falsifying the facts concerning Italy. The aims of the committee were to present the truth, correcting any false or unfounded report; to give directions by means of the press, radio, or platform on how to “neutralize the attacks of the adversaries”; and to guide and coordinate individual and collec-

1 Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Italo-American Opinion in the Ethiopian Crisis: A Study of Fascist Propaganda," a copy of which is available in the library of Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. Dr. Norman is now a Supervisor in the Headquarters Training School at the Rome Air Depot, Rome, New York.—Ed.

2 In January, 1935, the editor of the anti-Fascist daily Stampa Libera of New York submitted documents to the State Department charging the Italian vice-consul in Pittsburgh (and in Detroit) with intimidating non-Fascist Italian immigrants and naturalized Americans. To the Labor Department he suggested that it ascertain what proportion of the 154,000,000 lire for propaganda abroad, listed in Italy's 1934 budget, was being spent in the United States—Foreign Affairs, 16:13 (October, 1937). After the Ethiopian war, the consular service was still being cited as the spearhead of Fascist activity in Pittsburgh and Johnstown, Pennsylvania—Martin Dies, The Trojan Horse in America, 334, 335, 340 (New York, 1940).
tive action in order to defend the interests and prestige of Italy. Two weeks after the announcement was published, a staff correspondent of the pro-Fascist New York daily, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, addressed a letter of complaint to the editor of the *Pittsburgh Press*. The letter began by reminding the editor that there were about one hundred and fifty thousand citizens of Italian descent in the Pittsburgh district, and that they had observed with sadness how both his editorials and cable news from abroad were invariably detrimental to the good name and political aspirations of Italy. “In insulting Mussolini, your newspaper insults the entire Italian nation, insults the 5,000,000 Italians living in this country.” *La Stella*, in which the foregoing complaint was reprinted, then told how it was read and approved at a recent gathering of several hundred representative Italians of the district.\(^3\) Later in the month the Grand Venerable of the Order of the Sons of Italy invited all the Pennsylvania lodges of the Order to contribute monthly to a fund for the defense of the Italian name for a period of time warranted by the “exigencies of such propaganda.”\(^4\)

While the efforts to defeat “such propaganda” continued unabated, Italo-American organizations and newspapers also preoccupied themselves with the question of American neutrality. They brought the full weight of their influence to bear when President Roosevelt invoked the Neutrality Act two days after the outbreak of hostilities in Ethiopia. As long as the law did not appear unfavorable to Italy, it was approved; but when it began to operate to Italy’s disadvantage, it was roundly condemned. Immediately before the law was applied, a member of the directorate of the Friends of Italy in Pittsburgh expressed satisfaction with it.\(^5\) At a large convention of the Sons of Italy in the same city a few days later the Grand Venerable of the Order also expressed his approval.\(^6\) However, the leaders of Italo-American opinion soon had occasion to voice opposition to Roosevelt’s foreign policy. This reversal of sentiment will be more clearly understood if we note briefly how the law was applied.

On October 5 the President issued two proclamations. In the first he

\(^3\) *Unione*, October 4, 1935; *La Stella di Pittsburgh*, October 4, 18, 1935.

\(^4\) *La Libera Parola* (Philadelphia), October 19, 1935. The Italian consuls had gradually secured control of most of the organizations embraced within the Order of the Sons of Italy, according to Gaetano Salvemini, *Italian Fascist Activities in the United States*, 9 (Washington, 1940).


\(^6\) *La Libera Parola*, October 5, 1935.
declared a state of war to be in existence between Italy and Ethiopia, thereby calling into effect an embargo on shipments to either belligerent of certain previously enumerated military articles. In the second he warned American citizens against traveling on ships of the belligerents except at their own risk. The President then went beyond the letter of the law by accompanying the proclamations with a statement that any Americans engaged in any kind of transaction with either of the belligerents did so at their own risk.

Thereupon a telegram of protest was sent to the President by the Leonardo Da Vinci Lodge of the Sons of Italy of Washington, Pennsylvania. The following resolution, embodied in the telegram, had been unanimously adopted at a regular meeting attended by 260 members:

Your proclamation warning American citizens from travelling on Italian ships not only constitutes a sanction against Italy, but is consequently contrary to the neutrality mandate as expressed by the American people [.] it is also a flagrant breach of the treaty of commerce signed in the year 1871 between Italy and the United States of America [which] guarantees to every nationality equal rights in the exercise of commerce and industry.7

La Stella carried an item expressing the same opinion on the 1871 treaty.8 A week later a columnist in this paper deplored the fact that the Administration had gone beyond the Neutrality Act in warning citizens against traveling on belligerent ships except at their own risk. What danger was there, he inquired, in sailing on Italian ships when Ethiopia had neither submarines nor warships? The United States, the columnist concluded, was the first nation to impose sanctions on Italy even though it was not a League member.9

Eventually, the hostility to the Neutrality Act, due to expire on February 29, 1936, was transferred to the Pittman-McReynolds Bill favored by the Administration. Italo-American leaders were alarmed at the new bill's proposed grant of discretionary authority to the President to restrict to a normal volume exports of materials useful for war purposes. La Stella was apprehensive lest this meant the limitation of exports of oil and iron, in which case the bill "would redound to the exclusive disadvantage of Italy."10

7 La Libera Parola, November 2, 1935.
8 La Stella, November 29, 1935.
9 La Stella, December 6, 1935. Both the columnist and the Leonardo Da Vinci Lodge were mistaken in regarding the President's warning against sailing on belligerent ships as unauthorized by the law; on the contrary, the law specifically granted him that power.
10 La Stella, January 10, 1936.
The situation was considered so critical that the Supreme Venerable and the Grand Venerable of the Sons of Italy headed a delegation from Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey to testify against the new neutrality legislation at the hearings of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in Washington. The Grand Venerable warned against the danger of granting the President discretionary power in the pending bill, and expressed agreement with a previous Italo-American witness, who had declared himself favorable to the extension of the existing Neutrality Act.\(^{11}\)

Nor was this all. A few days afterward *La Stella*'s front page greeted its readers thus: "Italians, wake up! Italians, protest!!" The paper then proceeded to explain that the Committee of the Friends of Italy in Pittsburgh was distributing form letters of protest which "every good Italian" was urged to send to his congressman or senator. The letter was as follows:

I protest against American association with League of Nations sanctions activities. I protest against statements of members of the present administration in Washington showing cooperation with the schemes of the British Government as regards sanctions and embargoes. I protest against our Government meddling with European sanctions and embargo policies. I am strongly against any modification of the Neutrality Act, which would give the President discretionary power.\(^{12}\)

Apart from the number of these form letters mailed to Washington, it was reported that twelve thousand telegrams of protest were sent to the capital from Pennsylvania alone. Congress finally extended the Neutrality Act to May 1, 1937, and the President signed it at the end of February, 1936. But the Pennsylvania grand council of the Sons of Italy had resolved that the government should be urged to extend the act for an indefinite period.\(^{13}\) It can safely be assumed that all these pro-Fascist activities exerted more than a little influence on the course of American neutrality.\(^{14}\)


\(^{12}\) *La Stella*, January 24, 1936.

\(^{13}\) *La Libera Parola*, February 22, 1936.

\(^{14}\) *La Libera Parola*, February 8, 1936; *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, February 20, 1936. Representative Maury Maverick of Texas declared in a speech to the Foreign Policy Association in Philadelphia that the major political pressure in Washington was being exerted by Italo-American organizations. He later asserted in the House that the act was
Meanwhile, Italo-American organizations and newspapers throughout the country were conducting anti-British boycotts in order to help counteract the League's sanctions against Italy and to vent their resentment against Great Britain for having taken a leading role in the application of sanctions. In Pittsburgh the *Unione* enjoined its readers not to purchase articles of British origin such as liquors, medicinal soaps, cigarettes, textiles, and tea; not to deal with English insurance companies; not to transact business in sterling or Canadian dollars with English or Canadian banks; not to buy gasoline from the English Shell Oil stations; and not to patronize English-made motion pictures. Instead, the readers were exhorted to use Italian products as much as possible and to sail on Italian ships to and from Italy. They were further advised to boycott those newspapers and cinemas carrying anti-Italian propaganda. Also, they were asked to give enthusiastic support to the Italian Red Cross.\(^\text{15}\)

Appeals for contributions to the Italian Red Cross were indeed given enthusiastic support. The first drive launched in Pittsburgh by the Committee of the Friends of Italy was a financial success. The Pennsylvania lodges of the Sons of Italy competed with one another for subscriptions to the cause. In Johnstown the Italian American Federation unanimously approved the opening of subscriptions. In Donora the Victor Emmanuel III Society, before which the vice-consul spoke, collected three hundred dollars to be sent to the Committee of the Friends of Italy in Pittsburgh.\(^\text{16}\) These contributions ultimately reached Italy through the consular authorities.\(^\text{17}\) In Braddock various organizations contributed to a fund designated as "Pro Patria."\(^\text{18}\) Indicative of the scope of the Red Cross campaign was the number of societies expected to participate in

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\(^{15}\) *Unione*, November 15, 1935.

\(^{16}\) *La Stella*, October 11, December 6, 1935, January 3, 1936; *La Libera Parola*, November 2, 1935.

\(^{17}\) U. S. House of Representatives, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, Hearings before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities, 75th Cong., 3rd Sess. on H. Res. 282, 2:1195 (Washington, 1940). The editor of *La Stampa Libera* testified before the Dies Committee that the Fascist movement in America raised $1,000,000 during the Ethiopian war "supposedly for the Italian Red Cross but actually for the military campaign of the aggressor." Asked how he knew the amount, he replied that the figures were published in the Fascist papers; and asked how he knew the money was really for the military campaign, he answered that it was sent through the consuls.

\(^{18}\) *La Stella*, February 14, 1936.
Pittsburgh alone such as the Sons of Italy, the Sons and Daughters of America, the Sons of Columbus, the Tuscan League, the Sicilian League, the Calabrian League, various professional and business societies, and the Committee of the Friends of Italy which was organizing a concert rally at the Syria Mosque for the benefit of the Italian Red Cross. Mussolini was not unmindful of these activities. In a message to the Italian ambassador in Washington he thanked the Italians of America for their generosity and patriotism.19

Other rallies were subsequently scheduled in Pittsburgh, notably one at Motor Square Garden and another at the Syria Mosque. Early in March, 1936, Signor A. Ferrero, the consular agent, addressed a notice to all the Italians of Western Pennsylvania announcing a "Patriotic Reunion" to be held on the 15th at Motor Square Garden under the auspices of the Committee of the Friends of Italy. On the program were to be motion pictures of the Italian army in Ethiopia and a speech on the Ethiopian question by Count Casagrande di Villaviera. About twelve thousand were reported to have been present at the rally. After the Italian victory in Ethiopia in May, 1936, the Italians of Pittsburgh planned an elaborate celebration to take place on June 14 at the Syria Mosque.20 Such victory celebrations were held in practically all Italo-American communities.

It would be wrong to conclude from this study that the loyalty of Italo-Americans to their adopted country cannot be counted upon in the present war with their country of origin. What they are now saying and doing stamps them definitely as Italo-Americans and not American-Italians. One example will suffice. The Order of the Sons of Italy has undertaken to do for America what it once did for Italy. In Philadelphia the Supreme Council of the Order announced that a drive was to be launched to have its members buy $10,000,000 worth of Defense Bonds.21

19 La Stella, January 10, 1936; La Libera Parola, May 2, 1936.
20 La Stella, March 6, 27, May 29, 1936.