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A Late Offensive. Italian Cultural Action in Belgrade in the Last Phase of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1937–1941)

Abstract: After the signing of the so-called Ciano-Stojadinović Pact (March 1937), Italian-Yugoslav relations suddenly improved. The turnaround in bilateral relations between the two countries (destined, however, to remain ephemeral) was clearly visible in the field of cultural relations. This essay aims to show how, after 1937, the Italian authorities tried to promote Italian culture and language in a big style in the capital of the Kingdom, Belgrade, in an attempt to counteract the supremacy enjoyed up to then by the cultural action of other countries such as France, Germany, etc., in order to promote the Italian language and culture. The fascination with the Italian civilization was also meant to contribute to bringing Yugoslavia politically and ideologically closer to the Fascist regime. Despite the invested resources and the success of some major events (for example, the great exhibition of Italian portraits through the centuries) the results were disappointing, showing once again the structural limits of Fascist political and cultural action abroad.

Keywords: Italian cultural action, Yugoslavia, Fascism, Balkans, foreign policy

In this article, I shall attempt to elaborate some questions concerning Italian-Yugoslav cultural relations in the aftermath of the signing of the so-called Ciano-Stojadinović Pact, signed in Belgrade by the two politicians on 27th March 1937. I had the opportunity to discuss the Italian cultural penetration into Yugoslavia a few years ago, and starting from the results of that research, I will try to bring new analytical insights and thoughts about a seemingly secondary issue. However, the papers I have consulted, most of them unpublished, reveal how strongly the Fascist regime wanted to assert itself politically in Danubian-Balkan Europe. It should be stressed, firstly, that the pact signed in 1937 did not succeed in dispelling all the misunderstandings and suspicions that had fuelled bilateral relations between Italy and Yugoslavia in the previous years.¹

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¹ As noted by Renzo De Felice, the signing of the pact with Yugoslavia came almost at the same time as the defeat suffered by Italian forces in the Battle of Guadalajara (8–23 March 1937) against the People's Republican Army and the International Brigades that had come to the aid of the Spanish Republic. Once again, Italy had shown its military weakness and, therefore, although not prejudicing the conclusion of the agreement, the news from Spain made Stojadinović more cautious about distancing himself too much from the allies of the Little Entente and Paris. In any case, Rome was always second to Berlin on the Yugoslav po-

The Karađorđević kingdom appeared to be a borderland but, at the same time, a point of contention with the Western powers and the formidable German ally that had become the dominant power in the region.² Once the political difficulties of the previous years had been overcome, Rome considered it a priority to try to establish a firm friendship with Belgrade, taking advantage of the sympathies that Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović seemed to show towards the neighbouring country and, above all, towards the Fascist regime.³ Suffice it to say that from 1937 to 1941 high officials such as Galeazzo Ciano (twice; in total, the Fascist foreign minister met with Stojadinović five times), Dino Alfieri, Tullio Cianetti, Giuseppe Bottai and Ottavio Koch paid official visits to Yugoslavia.

Just like the political-diplomatic side, the conclusion of that agreement seemed to represent a decisive turning point between the two countries in terms of cultural relations⁴, practically stagnant until then.⁵ Exactly one year after the

litical agenda. Cfr. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. Lo Stato totalitario 1936–1940*, T. 2, (Torino: Einaudi Tascabili, 1996), 403–404.

² Cfr. W. S. Grenzbach Jr., *Germany's Informal Empire in East-Central Europe. German Economic Policy toward Yugoslavia and Rumania 1933–1939*, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1988). On the ambiguous Italian-German relationship in South-eastern Europe, see J. Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini. La difficile alleanza*, (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 1975), 392–394.

³ On the controversial figure of Milan Stojadinović, his political ambitions and alleged 'sympathies' towards the fascist and Nazi regimes, see D. Djokić, 'Leader' or 'Devil'? Milan Stojadinović Prime Minister of Yugoslavia (1935–39) and his Ideology, in *In the Shadow of Hitler. Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Rebecca Hayness, Martin Rady, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 153–168. According to Stojadinović, the pact with Italy had achieved the objective of securing the precarious bilateral Italian-Yugoslav relations but, above all, from Belgrade's point of view, the new course of relations with its Western neighbour seemed to have definitively removed the danger represented by the Ustaša terrorists who, for a long time, had benefited from aid and support of all kinds from Italy. Cfr. M. Stojadinović, *Jugoslavia fra le due guerre*, (Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1970), 172–175.

⁴ At this point, a clarification seems necessary. Compared to the scarce activities carried out in Belgrade and other regions of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Italian cultural and educational presence in Croatia and, above all, in Dalmatia was a completely different matter, mainly due to the existence of a strong Italian ethnic community. In many Dalmatian localities, starting with the main cities (Split, Šibenik, Trogir, etc.) there was a ramified network of Italian schools, as well as newspapers, bookshops, theatres, etc. The works of Italian writers and intellectuals were the result of the presence of Italian culture and education. The works of Italian writers and intellectuals enjoyed considerable fame and were widely circulated throughout the Dalmatian territory. See, in the case of Split, L. Monzali, *Antonio Tacconi e la comunità italiana di Spalato*, (Venezia: Società Dalmata di Storia Patria – Scuola Dalmata dei SS. Giorgio e Trifone, 2007), 187–310.

⁵ On the meaning and political scope of the Italo-Yugoslavian Pact, see M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia (1922–1939)*, (Bari: Edizioni B.A. Graphis, 2006), si veda in par-

signing of the Pact, Belgrade hosted one of the most important art exhibitions ever organised by the Fascist regime outside Italy: “The Italian Portrait over the Centuries”. On the express wishes of Galeazzo Ciano, it was organised by Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata (the influential president of Confindustria and the Venice Biennale) and curated by Professor Nino Barbantini, a distinguished art historian who had already masterminded an important exhibition dedicated to Titian (1935).⁶ From 28th March to 30th April 1938, thousands of Yugoslavian visitors, arriving from places far away from the capital, admired some of the greatest masterpieces of Italian art in the halls of the Prince Paul Museum: works by Titian, Raphael, Filippo Lippi, Lorenzo Lotto, Giorgione, and others, brought in from some of the most prestigious museums in Italy, such as the Bargello, the Pinacoteca di Brera, the National Museum of Naples, etc.⁷ A prestigious catalogue was prepared for the occasion and sold out before the end of the exhibition; even today, it seems that this publication is still sought after by art collectors and art exhibition catalogue archives.⁸ No expense was spared, and all the objections of the directors of the museums selected to lend the selected works, some of a priceless artistic value, were overcome without difficulty. From the point of view of the regime, this was an exhibition with an extraordinary political purpose: to demonstrate to the new eastern “friends” the organisational strength of Fascist Italy, which had been touted in the regime’s propaganda as the direct successor and jealous guardian of the great Italian cultural tradition.⁹ We know that, during the course of the exhibition, other eastern European capitals (Bucharest and Warsaw, for example) requested in vain to host the event. On the contrary, the works were hastily packed up again the day after the exhibition closed and sent back to Italy to be returned to their original museums just

ticolare il VI capitolo alle 327–384. On the Yugoslavian-Italian cultural relations up to 1937, see my paper, “La politica culturale italiana nei Balcani da Mussolini a Hitler. 1922–1933”, *România Orientale*, XVII (2004), 101–122; e S. Santoro, *L’Italia e l’Europa orientale. Diplomazia culturale e propaganda 1918–1943*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2005), in particolare le 140–148 e 258–272.

⁶ See G. Damerini, “Barbantini, Nino”, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 6, 1964, available online all’indirizzo: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/nino-barbantini_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/nino-barbantini_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

⁷ See A. Basciani, *The Ciano-Stojadinović Agreement and the Turning Point in the Italian Cultural Policy in Yugoslavia (1937–1941)*, In *Italy’s Balkan Strategies 19th & 20th Century*, ed. Vojislav G. Pavlović, 203–209. (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, 2014).

⁸ N. Barbantini, *La mostra del ritratto italiano nei secoli: organizzata dal ministero italiano della Cultura Popolare d’intesa con ministero degli affari esteri e con quello dell’educazione nazionale. Belgrado Museo del Principe Paolo*, (Venezia: Officine Grafiche Ferrari, 1938).

⁹ Ibid.

in time for Hitler's decisive visit to Rome, Naples and Florence between 3rd and 8th May 1938.

As mentioned above, before this grand exhibition event, the Italian cultural presence in Belgrade was minimal. As a report drawn up in March 1934 by the local Italian Legation in the Yugoslavian capital tells us, Italy could count on very few initiatives. One of them was the operation of a "little school" (as it was called in the report) run by a priest, Don Ravera, who twice or three times a week tried to bring together children from Italian families living in the capital and give them lessons in the Catechism, singing, Italian grammar and little else. It was an institution with a loose organisation and limited reach, which was perhaps also the reason that it was tolerated by the Yugoslavian authorities who had, to avoid any misunderstanding, placed that "little school" under the careful observation of the local police forces.¹⁰

At this point, it is interesting to try and see what developments took place in Italian-Yugoslavian cultural relations in the years following the grand art exhibition until the spring of 1941 when, as is well known, Italy attacked its neighbouring country from behind and with which, at least formally, it was on good terms, contributing to the collapse of the Yugoslav military apparatus and the disintegration of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The first immediate consequence was the organisation of a number of trips to Italy for students, parliamentarians and specific professional categories (engineers, architects, journalists and even, as we shall see, labourers). Facilitated financially by the Italian state with discounted transport and accommodation, these trips to the great cities of art but also some of the symbolic places of Fascist Italy (the recent urban settlements in the Agro pontino, the new industrial complexes, famous resorts, etc.) were evidently intended to impress the guests with the regime's achievements.¹¹ In reality, the Italian project was even more ambitious. A few days before a 10-day tour through Italy by 100 Yugoslav workers between 11th and 21st September 1938, a meeting took place in Bled, Slovenia, between Tullio Cianetti, Under-Secretary of State for Corporations (secretary of the National Confederation of Italian Fascist Trade Unions since 1934) and Yugoslav Prime Minister Stojadinović. Cianetti communicated the content of that visit in a report that may have been intended for Mussolini himself. According to Cianetti, the trip to Italy by that

¹⁰ Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero Affari Esteri – Roma (d'ora innanzi ASDMAE), Fondo Archivio Scuole 1929–1935 (d'ora innanzi AS 1929–35), Busta 820, relazione inviata dalla Legazione d'Italia a Belgrado a Roma il 12 marzo 1934.

¹¹ Cfr. A. Basciani, *The Ciano-Stojadinović Agreement ... cit.*, 208–210. On 24th June 1938, Mussolini received a delegation of 20 university students, members of Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović's party, the Yugoslav Radical Union, at Palazzo Venezia. Archivio Centrale dello Stato (d'ora innanzi ACS), Fondo Ministero della Cultura Popolare (d'ora innanzi MinCulPop), Iugoslavia, Busta 144, appunto con firma indecifrabile e senza data.

large contingent of workers could represent the beginning of a profound collaboration. The Yugoslav Prime Minister had not failed to express his admiration for Mussolini and the Fascist system. In the document, the Umbrian fascist leader did not downplay the strength that Germany had acquired in Yugoslavia, but according to the leader of the fascist trade unions, the German social and economic organisation was in contradiction with

[...] the tendencies of the new Yugoslavia as expressed by Stojadinovich [sic!] German social organisation is in fact based entirely on company unity. In a country like Yugoslavia, which, for twenty years, has been painstakingly trying to build national unity in all fields, adopting the German system [...] would mean deepening and multiplying the natural tendencies towards disintegration [...] The Italian trade union system, on the other hand, based on the national organisation of categories, if adopted in Yugoslavia, would be the best way to create [...] solidarity on a national basis [...] Stojadinovich [sic!] is a man who has already understood all this.¹²

However, Cianetti ignored or at least pretended to ignore the fact that, by that time Germany, had been Yugoslavia's main economic partner while, following the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations after the aggression against Ethiopia, the percentage of Italian-Yugoslav trade had dramatically dropped and in the years to come Italy would not manage to regain its lost positions.¹³

The organised trips, however, were more of a pure propaganda tool. It was necessary for Italian culture and language to gain ground in Belgrade's cultural and scientific life. Over the years, Italy had accumulated a huge disadvantage, and now it was necessary to try and catch up with foreign cultural traditions much more deeply rooted than the Italian one, such as the French, German or English, which had been part of the educational, intellectual and academic horizon of Serbian society for many decades.¹⁴ The unquestionable success of

¹² Ibid., Busta 145, Relazione del viaggio in Jugoslavia di Tullio Cianetti del 30 agosto 1938.

¹³ Cfr. A. Basciani, *L'illusione della modernità. Il Sud-est dell'Europa tra le due guerre mondiali*, (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2016), 326–327. In fact, in an undated and unsigned document found among the files of the Ministry of Culture, it was stated in no uncertain terms that '[...] in order to make the friendship with Yugoslavia effective, it would be necessary for the programme of commercial expansion to be carried out rapidly [...] a programme which should be done with a broad outlook and scope [...]'. ACS, Fondo MinCulPop, Busta 144. In his memoirs, Stojadinović writes that one of the reasons that led him to the rapprochement with Italy was precisely the attempt to revive trade between the two countries, which, in the Serbian politician's opinion, was particularly damaging to Yugoslav interests and goods. Cfr. M. Stojadinović, *Jugoslavia fra le due guerre*, 162–164.

¹⁴ For example, the English cultural background of Prince Regent Paul (Pavle) was well known, and Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović, the main protagonist of the policy of rapprochement with Italy, an economist by education, had spent several years studying in England and Germany.

the great exhibition had aroused great expectations and, already by the end of 1938, the Italian Legation in Belgrade, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had begun to think about setting up a new art exhibition in 1939, mainly dedicated to modern Italian painting and sculpture, which, once it left Belgrade, would also be hosted in Sofia and Bucharest. In reality, the project was shelved shortly before the end of 1939, with the main reason apparently being the high costs of organising the event. The Italian minister in Belgrade, Mario Indelli, seemed relieved by the decision taken in Rome; according to the diplomat, if an exhibition of Italian art had to be organised in Yugoslavia, it would have been politically more appropriate to hold it in Zagreb. In fact, the Italian Minister was informed that in the Croatian capital there was “[...] great disappointment at not having taken part in the last major Italian cultural events in Yugoslavia [...] and where, among other things, the economic conditions, as well as the environment and culture, would be immensely more favourable”.¹⁵ After the project was shelved, however, the Italian desire to consolidate the Italian cultural presence in the Yugoslavian capital did not diminish. In the preceding months, steps had already been taken to increase the circulation of Italian books, music and films through the donation to cultural institutions, schools and universities of many recently published volumes ranging from fiction to historiography. As can be imagined, the most welcome but also most difficult gift to obtain was the complete collection of the prestigious Treccani Encyclopaedia.¹⁶

In any case, strengthening cultural ties with Yugoslavia and, even more so, with the intellectual circles of Belgrade had become a matter of necessity that had to involve also some of the most prominent Italian Slavists: we will see later that some scholars played very important roles, such as Giovanni Maver (of Dalmatian origin), and eminent Slavists, such as Enrico Damiani.¹⁷ In January 1938, the Royal Legation of Belgrade took action in this regard. In a dispatch sent by Minister Indelli, it urged the authorities in the country, first and fore-

¹⁵ ACS, Fondo MinCulPop, Iugoslavia, Busta 143, Dispaccio del 28 dicembre 1938 inviato a Roma dalla Legazione d'Italia a Belgrado.

¹⁶ On 13th June 1938, the General Directorate of Propaganda at the Ministry of Popular Culture (MinCulPop) informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Italian Legation in Belgrade of the decision taken by the Ministry of Education to donate to the National Library in Belgrade the National Edition of the Works of Galileo Galilei, after a well-known local astronomer, Professor Djordje Nikolić, had requested to consult it. ASDMAE, AS 1929–35.

¹⁷ On 2nd March 1939, Enrico Damiani, at the invitation of the director of the Italian Seminar at the University of Belgrade, Professor Skerl, held a literary conference at the university in the Yugoslavian capital, which was given great prominence, at least on the Italian side. ASC, Fondo MinCulPop, Iugoslavia Busta 145, Dispaccio del ministro Indelli, inviato da Belgrado a Roma il 15 febbraio 1939.

most the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to take steps to ensure that Italian scholars would establish contact with the Balkan Institute in Belgrade (which in turn had called for collaboration with Italian scientific and cultural institutions), which was seen as a very serious and prestigious institution. According to Indelli,

[...] the new relations between Italy and Yugoslavia and the part that Italy plays in the activity and developments, not only political but also economic and cultural, in the Balkans should lead us to establish relations with the Balkan Institute and allow our authors to contribute to its publications [...].¹⁸

The cooperation between Italian and Yugoslav academics was taken up some time later directly by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which on 20th July 1938 sent a message to the Ministry of National Education, the Academy of Italy, the Institute for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and, of course, the Italian Legation in Belgrade to improve coordination of the Italian participation in the 3rd International Congress of Slavic Philology planned in Belgrade for October 1939. The message made it clear that the inspirer was Mussolini himself and that Italian participation in the event was of the utmost importance.

[...] also for practical reasons [...] in order to try to intensify as much as possible the cultural ties between Italy and Yugoslavia as well as to demonstrate the Slavic knowledge that had become so well established [...] in our scholarly circles [...] it is considered appropriate that our representatives should in any case be relatively numerous [...].

It would be a good idea, the note continued, to send to Belgrade not only tenured professors of Slavic philology but also lecturers in Slavic subjects, glottologists dealing with Slavic languages, history and philosophy teachers specialising in Slavic history and philosophy.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in November 1938, the first Italian language courses for foreigners ever organised in the Yugoslavian capital began at the *Casa degli Italiani* in Belgrade. The operation and development of these courses would later be entrusted to the local committee of the Dante Alighieri Society, which was set up – not without some difficulty – only in the spring of 1939.²⁰ According to a report of 18th January 1939, after a timid start, the number of enrolments exceeded 300, with most of the students being “[...] clerks, state officials, students, professionals, tradesmen and even soldiers”. The initiative was supported by government funds, as the registration fee was kept extremely low for political

¹⁸ Ibid., Busta 142, Telespresso del 18 gennaio 1938.

¹⁹ Ibid., Busta 145 doc. senza data.

²⁰ Ibid., Busta 144, Comunicazione ufficiale inviata dalla Presidenza della Società Dante Alighieri al MinCulPop il 12 aprile 1939.

reasons. It was a start that, in order to be successful, would need a whole series of collateral support activities, such as the organisation of film and music festivals.²¹ Indeed, in the following weeks and months, there was no lack of Italian cultural events. On 22nd January 1939, at the same time as Ciano's new official visit to Yugoslavia (to which the local press gave exceptional prominence)²², a large Italian book fair opened in Belgrade with about 3,000 titles and a special section dedicated to books by Yugoslav authors translated into Italian. During the same month, an Italian tourist-book office opened for the public in one of the main streets of the Yugoslavian capital. On 5th April, a real Italian bookshop opened at 16 Prestotolonasledik Trg, through an agreement with the Popović bookshop, then considered the most important in the city. The bookshop was to become a sort of "[...] permanent exhibition of Italian books [...] to foster, with a prudent and timely propaganda action, every possibility concerning the dissemination of our culture and our most representative book production".²³

As already mentioned, in June 1939, after a few vicissitudes, the Belgrade Committee of the "Dante Alighieri Society" was finally set up and Corrado Sofia, the correspondent of the "Stefani" from the Yugoslavian capital, was appointed President.²⁴ The following July, a cultural trip to Italy was organised for the students from Belgrade who had shown themselves the most diligent in learning the language.

In short, relations between the two countries seemed to be going through an extraordinarily good phase – but obviously not so good as to allow the signing of a cultural agreement²⁵ – and from this point of view, the most significant event in the sphere of cultural relations was the decision to proceed with the opening, in September 1939, of the Italian Institute of Culture, the inauguration of which cancelled a glaring anomaly produced by the fraught bilateral relations of previous years, given that for years similar institutes had been fully operative

²¹ Ibid., Busta 144, Telespresso of 18 January 1939 sent by the Legation of Italy to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MinCulPop.

²² See B. Simić, "La visita del Conte Ciano in Jugoslavia nel gennaio 1939", In *Un mestiere paziente. Gli allievi pisani per Daniele Menozzi*, eds. Andrea Mariuzzo, Elena Mazzini, Francesco Mores, Ilaria Pavan, (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2017), 235–246.

²³ ACS, Fondo MinculPop, Jugoslavia Busta 145, Report of 10 May 1939 by Dante Benedetti on the first month of the Italian bookshop in Belgrade.

²⁴ Ibid., Busta 144, Telespresso della Legazione d'Italia a Belgrado al MAE del 2 giugno 1939.

²⁵ Although the Yugoslav authorities did not openly refuse, they ensured that the negotiations aimed at concluding a cultural agreement never reached a conclusive stage. According to Minister Indelli, this was more of a reflection of Yugoslavia's desire to prevent the establishment of political propaganda centres in the country, which were difficult for the Yugoslav state to control, rather than a concrete aversion to Italy. ACS, Fondo MinCulPop, Busta 144, Dispaccio inviato da Belgrado a Roma il 1° aprile 1938.

in all the other capitals of South-Eastern Europe. It should also be pointed out that Stojadinović's fall in early February 1939 (practically days after Galeazzo Ciano's second and seemingly triumphant visit to Belgrade) put a damper on any further moves to intensify political relations between Italy and Yugoslavia.²⁶ However, at least in appearance, the forms of bilateral friendship seemed to have been safeguarded, and therefore, cultural relations between Rome and Belgrade continued to benefit from new opportunities for contact and exchange. On 14th February 1940, in the presence of the Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, and Ottaviano Koch, representing the Ministry of Popular Culture, the Italian Institute of Culture in Belgrade was officially inaugurated; one of the most distinguished Italian Slavists, Prof. Giovanni Maver,²⁷ was its first director. These few years that still separated Italy and Yugoslavia from the war brought many cultural activities, some of which we will discuss later in more detail. What I want to highlight for the moment is that all these demonstrations were marked by an overriding political necessity. For the MinCulPop, cultural expansion went hand in hand with propaganda dissemination: Fascist Italy, its strength and its achievements were to be constantly glorified in newspaper articles, radio programmes and the information bulletins of cultural societies, contrasting with and possibly surpassing more deeply rooted cultural traditions, such as those of France or Germany.

To this end, from 1940 onwards, MinCulPop tried to promote the distribution of Luce newsreels translated into Serbo-Croatian, which were to be shown not only in Belgrade but also in some of the Kingdom's other main cities. The Belgrade public, which had previously shown very little interest in the Italian propaganda articles that Rome had tried to put in the local press,²⁸ did not

²⁶ Prince Regent Paul's move took Ciano completely by surprise. In his diary, he wrote of the enthusiastic welcome he had received in Belgrade from the population and of a generic, long conversation with Prince Regent Paul, who had offered lavish praise on his prime minister. Considering that Yugoslavia was now effectively lost, his main political reaction was to accelerate plans to conquer Albania without taking into account the Yugoslav position. Vedi G. Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943*, (Milano: BUR – Storia, 1999), 242 e 249. Si veda anche G. Bruno Guerri, *Galeazzo Ciano. Una vita 1903–1944*, (Milano: Bompiani, 1979), 372–373.

²⁷ Born in Korčula in Dalmatia on 18th February 1891, Giovanni Maver, a philologist by vocation, is considered the father of Italian Slavistics. His studies in Polish literature are of great importance, while his studies on Serbo-Croatian literature contributed to placing it within a precise European literary context. In 1952 Maver founded the journal *Ricerche slavistiche*. For a profile of the scholar see E. Sgambati, "Maver, Giovanni", in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 72, 2008.

²⁸ "[...] even friendly periodicals have little enthusiasm for the articles, which are not always of a particularly topical nature [...]. ACS, MinCulPop, Busta 143, confidential sent on 21st December 1938 by the Italian Legation in Belgrade to the MinCulPop. Available online: [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-maver_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovanni-maver_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

seem to react with much enthusiasm either towards these newsreels or, more generally, towards Italian cinema. Moreover, the dissemination of such openly Axis-linked film material could only cause concern to the Yugoslav authorities, a country desperately trying to remain neutral between the warring sides. So much so that a dispatch from the Italian Legation sent to the Ministry of Culture on 4th December 1940 states:

[...] the Belgrade police have summoned the owners and directors of cinemas over the last few days and have informed them that all scenes of war or politics likely to provoke reactions must be avoided, even when such scenes had been previously authorised by the censors [...] in these conditions the cinema management was forced to withdraw the weekly Luce newsreels.²⁹

A few days later, the director of the General Directorate of Propaganda of the MinCulPop, Ottaviano Koch, at the urgent invitation of the Legation, had to urge the immediate suspension of the Luce newsreels because “[...] they often arouse contrary responses from the public.”³⁰

What we are dealing with here seems to have been a cultural action that was at times bold but short-lived, unsystematic and not carefully planned; it aimed at chasing and trying to limit the actions of other countries and, above all, it had to go hand in hand with parallel political action. In this way, one of the basic principles of any cultural action in a foreign country was lost sight of, namely, helping the popularisation of the Italian language and culture outside the official circuits directly managed by the Italian State through the organisation of non-episodic cultural events and, above all, through well-thought-out collaborations with academic institutions and local intellectuals. For Italy, on the other hand, it was always a matter of chasing other countries’ initiatives and trying to emphasize the differences with the cumbersome German ally. In a document sent to Ciano the day after his visit to Yugoslavia on 26–28th March 1938, the Minister of Popular Culture Dino Alfieri wrote that Italian cultural-diplomatic action would ultimately result in “[...] that Italian-German collaboration could not, in the end, create in the Yugoslavs the conviction of a German predominance in Axis policy”.³¹ In October 1938, the Italian Legation had to apply to the Foreign Ministry for authorisation to organise Italian language courses at the ‘Casa d’Italia’, since other foreign organisations had already organised language courses for the Belgrade public. The same applies to donations of books, cinema and musical events, development of tourist exchanges, etc. Moreover, the start of an initiative often coincided with the abrupt interruption of a previous

²⁹ Ibid., Busta 146, Dispatch of 4 December 1938 sent by the Italian Legation to the MinCulPop.

³⁰ Ibid..

³¹ Ibid., Busta 144. Undated document.

one, no matter how well it had worked. Funds were never sufficient, and the choices made penalised all those institutions that were not immediately traceable to official state or fascist party bodies. For example, in December 1938, the Italian Legation decided to suspend the funding it had previously granted to the People's Library operating within the "Dom Kulture" in Belgrade, which in the second half of 1937 had shown willingness to open a designated "Italian Room" on its premises. The sum allocated up to that point was entirely devolved to the Casa degli Italiani which, as we have seen, was responsible for setting up the first Italian language courses for foreigners in the city.³² It is worth pointing out that the previous operation had been carried out precisely in consideration of the abundant and qualified intellectual and student attendance boasted by that Belgrade cultural institution. During the first half of 1939, an attempt was made to increase the number of scholarships for Yugoslav students, especially "[...] in view of the large number of scholarships granted by the French government to Yugoslav students". In other cases, it was discovered that valuable economic resources were being wasted in activities that were not always very clear. For example, on 7th May 1940, the Director-General of Propaganda, Koch himself, wrote to the Italian Legation in Belgrade to obtain clarification on the people who were involved in the "Ital-Jug" magazine, which was financed by public money and also had close associates in the entourage of Minister Alfieri, because "[...] recently, doubts have been raised about the aims of the magazine, which, in reality, are mainly inspired by the private family interests of a small group of businessmen".³³ But beyond these problems, in some ways typical of Italian cultural action abroad (at least in South-Eastern Europe), in the specific case of Yugoslavia, there was another negative factor. The building of a strong cultural presence, in preparation for a penetration that would have made Italian culture and language privileged instruments in the manoeuvre aimed at making Yugoslavia an ally or, even better, a subsidiary of Fascist Italy, passed mainly through the close relations between the regime and the person who, until February 1939, seemed to be the strongman of the country's politics: Milan Stojadinović. After the latter's sudden political demise, which had blindsided the Italians, the prospects of the Italian presence slowly began to decline. In this regard, I find interesting a long letter sent from Belgrade on 8th June 1939 by the local envoy of the Stefani Agency to its president. The author of the letter, Corrado Sofia, a journalist and member of the local committee of the Dante Alighieri Society, noted how both a football match between the Italian and Yugoslavian national teams (which was also marred by clashes) and Prince Paul's visit to Rome sometime earlier had – certainly not incidentally – been under-reported in the media

³² Ibid., MinCulPop note for the minister of 16th December 1938.

³³ Ibid., note of 10th May 1940 by Octavian Koch.

of the capital in particular and of the country in general. According to the journalist, this was due, on the one hand, to the surprise, not yet fully processed, of the Belgrade political circles at the Italian occupation of Albania,³⁴ which had evidently contributed to altering the already fragile Balkan equilibrium, but even more so, the fall of Stojadinović, which had weakened the Italian positions in favour of the West and, above all, the British.³⁵ Moreover, it is worth emphasising that, as early as the beginning of the spring of 1940, Mussolini was already contemplating a definitive attack on Yugoslavia. The Fascist leader had once again allowed the Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić to resume work on the plan to stage an insurrection in Croatia and ordered Ciano to speak to Hitler about the need to put an end to the existence of Yugoslavia, which he described as a typical anti-Italian “[...] Versailles creation”.³⁶

At this point, it is interesting to try to understand the cultural activities undertaken by the Italian Institute of Culture in Belgrade after its grand opening in a ceremony attended by Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of National Education.³⁷ On 30th March 1940, Giovanni Maver gave an account of what had been achieved in those first months in a report to the Ministry of Culture. In the meantime, the Institute in Belgrade had been joined by another in Zagreb, and a third in Ljubljana was soon to be opened. In total, about 1,400 people regularly attended Italian language courses. Maver’s report, however, made it clear that these satisfactory results could only be consolidated and improved by an even broader action of disseminating Italian books, promoting

[...] and checking translations from Italian into Serbo-Croatian [...] maintaining the closest contacts with the press [...] awarding the most willing students with encouragement prizes, that is to say, carrying out, as Maver concluded, “[...] an activity which, although partly outside the more direct and immediate

³⁴ Apparently, the Yugoslav reaction to the Italian occupation of Albania was calm and unreserved acceptance of what had happened. Prime Minister Svetovar Cincar-Marković stressed that the Yugoslav attitude was clear proof of the friendship between Belgrade and the governments in Rome and Berlin and demanded a public declaration by Germany of the German interest in maintaining a strong and united Yugoslavia. Cfr. J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis 1934–1941*, (New York – London: Columbia University Press, 1962), 143–144.

³⁵ ACS – MinCulPop, Busta 146. Letter sent by Corrado Sofia to the Stefani presidency on 8th June 1939.

³⁶ Cfr. L. Monzali, *Il sogno dell'egemonia. L'Italia la questione jugoslava e l'Europa centrale*, (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2010), 83.

³⁷ In his Diary, Bottai left very few notes of his trip to Yugoslavia, which took him not only to Belgrade but also to Zagreb. However, the Fascist hierarchy derived the idea that, in general, the Yugoslav political circles assigned to Italy “[...] an ‘intermediate’ function in the conflict, in the sense of dialectic mediation between opposing principles rather than any kind of compromise [...]”. See G. Bottai, *Diario. 1935–1944*, (Milano: BUR – Storia, 2011), 176–177.

obligations of the Institutes, assumes, in the current conditions, an equally great importance".³⁸

The increase of resources requested by Professor Maver represented only part of the problem. In reality, as an undated report (presumably drawn up between mid-1939 and the first months of 1940) clearly showed, the greatest obstacles to the popularisation of the Italian language and culture in Belgrade and, more generally, in Yugoslavia lay in other factors which we can summarise as follows: 1) the preponderant economic power of Germany "determined to carry out, as it did at any cost, a well-organised action of economic propaganda in order to monopolise the Yugoslav market" 2) the fierce resistance of France, which tried to defend its positions in parliamentary, university and army circles etc. at any cost 3) England, which boasted a rock-solid relationship with the circles of the Court and in particular with Prince Paul.

The months between the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941 saw a constant increase in pressure from Germany (by then definitively established as the dominant power in the Balkan Peninsula) for Yugoslavia to move away from its neutral position and join the alliance with the Axis. Finally, on 25th March 1941, the Yugoslav government decided to bow down and sign the country's accession to the Tripartite Pact. The now clear preponderance of the Axis powers had inevitable repercussions in the constant increase of the German, but also Italian, cultural presence throughout the Kingdom. Particularly striking was the increase in the number of Italian professorships and teaching positions, not only in universities but also in high schools and the main secondary schools. One month before Belgrade's accession to the Tripartite Pact, on 19th February 1941, a dispatch sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Culture highlighted that "at the beginning of the present school year this Ministry has obtained, following appropriate approaches to the Yugoslav government, the introduction of compulsory Italian classes in about 70 real grammar schools (of a technical and classical nature) and optional classes in about 90 establishments of the same type [...]". From secondary schools, the operation spread to universities, where new Italian departments were being opened, and they, like the schools, needed the necessary Italian libraries, the opening of which, however, was delayed by the usual lack of funds.³⁹ Another dispatch, dated a few days earlier, again from the Foreign Office but this time addressed to the Belgrade Legation, underlined with satisfaction the increase in the number of secondary schools that taught Italian. In short, the gradual slide of Yugoslavia into the political orbit of the Axis had clear repercussions on the contextual increase in the Italian

³⁸ ACS, MinCulPop, Busta 144. Memo sent by Giovanni Maver to the Director-General of Propaganda, Ottaviano Koch, on 30th March 1940.

³⁹ ACS, Fondo MinCulPop. Iugoslavia Busta 144.

cultural and linguistic presence in the Kingdom and even in its capital, where, on the other hand, until 1937, the Italian presence had been secondary at best.

There is no doubt that this was an artificial growth, overbearing and vigorous as it was. Lacking solid foundations, rather than fostering love for the Italian culture among the Yugoslav and Belgrade elites or motivating them to accept the fascist educational models, it found its reason for existence in the attempt made by the Yugoslav government to please a momentarily powerful neighbour, at times threatening and fickle, and whose good graces seemed important in trying to gain time and room for manoeuvre – in a truly complicated context – vis-à-vis Germany, the major partner in the Tripartite Pact and, as has been said many times, the real dominant power in the Balkan region. In a dispatch sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 9th September 1940, the new Italian Minister in Belgrade, Mameli, pointed out that, although he could boast of some progress in the teaching of Italian in Yugoslav schools, the Italian language still lagged behind German, which was mandatory in 138 state secondary schools compared to only 11 where Italian was compulsory. Despite Mameli's reassurances, this difference could not be attributed solely to a shortage of Italian teaching staff, nor could it be remedied solely by obliging "[...] Professor Maver and all the teachers in the Italian schools [...] to return to Yugoslavia as soon as possible."⁴⁰

In short, in Belgrade and many other parts of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Italian presence seemed in some ways artificial, and the pro-Western coup d'état of 27th March 1941 by General Simović, which removed Prince Paul and his government from power and proclaimed King Peter II Karađorđević of age, revealed the precariousness of the Italian presence. A report drawn up in Rome on 23rd April recounted how, on that same 27th March, a crowd of 7,000 people gathered in Terazije in front of the Italian Bookshop and immediately

[...] began to manifest their animosity towards Italy and Germany, whistling, throwing invectives and hurling large stones at the windows of the store. At 8 a.m., the first of the vandalistic raids by the crowd took place, raids which were repeated at short intervals and led to the destruction of books and decorative art objects on display in the hall on the ground floor [...] even the troops assigned to a fictitious security service took an active part in the raids [...] On the 30th, the Royal Minister ordered the management of the Office to leave by the special train made available to Italians living in Belgrade[...].⁴¹

Very shortly, the war and the destruction of the Yugoslav state as it had appeared after the First World War put a definitive end to that experience. The rebirth of the Italian cultural presence in Belgrade in a very different guise and

⁴⁰ Ibid., Despatch of 9th September 1940.

⁴¹ Ibid., Busta 145. Report sent by the head of the Italian Office in Belgrade, Dante Benedetti, to the MinculPop.

with different objectives would come in another era and completely different political systems in both Italy and Yugoslavia.

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