During the First World War, Italy laid the foundations of a strategy to be fully developed in the coming years of political penetration into Central-Eastern Europe, a plan in direct competition with the Entente's allied great powers, France and Great Britain. Like them, the Italian ruling class soon understood, as early as the war years, how cultural initiatives and propaganda were indispensable tools for complementing classic diplomacy in order to execute a policy of great power abroad. Italy then began to conceive of a scheme of establishing cultural institutions with the task of bolstering the image of Italy abroad, and starting collaborative relationships with the ruling classes of nations which were finally independent of the Habsburg Empire. During the last year of the war, the government's sensitivity around the topic of propaganda changed, with the turning point being the Italian defeat of Caporetto (Kobarid).


Between October and December 1917, following changes in the top ranks of the government and army, there was a transition to a modern vision of the war effort where the rigid, top-down and coercive element gave way to a more democratic and persuasive approach. The aim was to create a consensus and gain acceptance for the grandiose effort, in terms of men and means, necessary to launch a counter-offensive and achieve victory against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For this purpose, a propaganda office active since 1916 was fortified and the publication of newspapers, leaflets and postcards started, aimed at reigniting the fighting spirit, hatred for the enemy and creating the atmosphere of a “sacred union” in defence of the homeland. Not only was propaganda directed towards the “internal front”, i.e. the civilian population, and the troops, but also towards enemy armies in order to leverage the concept of nationality and to portray Italy as a friendly nation. This would allow for destruction of the “Habsburg oppressor” and liberation of the “oppressed peoples” from Austria.²

Of great importance at this time was the Congress of Oppressed Nationalities held in the capitol of Rome in April 1918. The idea of such a council had initially started with some well-known journalists, like director of the Corriere della Sera Luigi Albertini, writer Giuseppe A. Borgese and Giovanni Amendola, both collaborators of Albertini’s newspaper, who wanted to bring together capital representatives of the national movements of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Representatives of Central and Eastern European national movements attended the Congress of Rome (Romanian, Polish, Czechoslovak and Yugoslav delegations were present), who agreed to division of the Austro-Hungarian Empire according to nationality. Interventionist Italian politicians, both liberal-democratic and nationalist, joined with several parliamentarians, journalists and public figures belonging to the most diverse colour of irredentism, from Gaetano Salvemini to Benito Mussolini. Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino proved to be sceptical, maintaining his anti-Yugoslav position and considering the Italian and Yugoslav claims on the Adriatic incompatible. Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando demonstrated himself to be more accommodating for the moment, probably considering it useful at that stage not to hinder a policy of cooperation between Italy and the “oppressed nationalities” in respect to the war effort against the Empire.³

The Corriere della Sera celebrated the Congress, promoting Italy to the role of political and spiritual guide for the new nations that would achieve independence upon the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the name of Mazzini’s teaching: “The commonality of the supreme vital reasons holds together the oppressed peoples of Austria-Hungary in the great crusade. Y esterday the President of the Conference, in greeting the delegations who came to Rome before the end of the work, remembered a great name: that of Giuseppe Mazzini. He was the prophet of this crusade and of the concord celebrated in these days.”⁴

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Actually, the final resolutions of the Congress, which recognized “in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy the instrument of Germanic domination and the fundamental obstacle to the realization of the [...] aspirations and [...] rights” of the peoples and “the need for a common struggle against common oppressors for each people to achieve total liberation and complete national unity in a free state unity”, were extremely vague in regard to the question of the Adriatic lands. Yet despite these weaknesses, the Congress had an important promotional impact, placing Italy at the forefront of the movement of “oppressed peoples”. It was in this context that the Czechoslovak legion was formed, made up of Czech and Slovak prisoners of war from the Austro-Hungarian army in Italian prison camps, and organized by Milan Rastislav Štefánik in the model of the Czechoslovak army constituted in France in December 1917. Shortly after, a Romanian legion was formed by Romanian Transylvanian professor Simion Mândrescu, president of the Society of Romans from Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina. Similarly, from the spring of 1918 a Polish company was established and recognized as a military unit part of the French army fighting alongside the Italian army.

**Competition Among Victorious Nations in the First Post-war Period**

At the end of the war, Central-Eastern Europe was completely transformed following the disappearance of the Habsburg, German and Russian Empires and, contrary to the expectations of the winning parties at the time of entering the war, new nations had arisen or had drastically reconfigured their boundaries over the entirety of that vast area. In the post-war period with the Peace Conference still underway, the winning powers had to face a threat brought by Russian Bolshevism and attempts to export the revolution to Central-Eastern Europe where from March to August 1919, a Soviet republic was established in Hungary brought by Russian Bolshevism and attempts to export the revolution to Central-Eastern Europe. At the end of the war, Central-Eastern Europe was completely transformed following the disappearance of the Habsburg, German and Russian Empires and, contrary to the expectations of the winning parties at the time of entering the war, new nations had arisen or had drastically reconfigured their boundaries over the entirety of that vast area. In the post-war period with the Peace Conference still underway, the winning powers had to face a threat brought by Russian Bolshevism and attempts to export the revolution to Central-Eastern Europe where from March to August 1919, a Soviet republic was established in Hungary brought by Russian Bolshevism and attempts to export the revolution to Central-Eastern Europe.


was also flanking its continental strategy to reaffirm its role as a great power in post-war Central-Eastern Europe with a series of coordinated cultural initiatives, the crux of which was the Institut d’études slaves in Paris. At the same time, alongside the consolidated network of Alliance française units abroad active since the 1880s, a network of French cultural institutes, the Instituts français, began to be developed. In 1920, the French government decided to found the Service des œuvres françaises à l'étranger (SOFE), which within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had the task of coordinating the actions of French cultural institutes abroad – and therefore, in particular, the Instituts français. Central-Eastern Europe was a privileged field for expansion also from a cultural point of view for France, which could benefit from a post-war German crisis and rely on the tight cultural relations that had been established with all those nations since the 19th century. After the war, France could therefore continue to play the role of “cultural capital” of Eastern Europe, at a time in which political and cultural influence became complementary and constituted two instruments of a vast hegemonic design that would truly unfold in the interwar period.

It follows that since the end of the war, an open rivalry between Italy and France – which England also joined – for hegemony in Central-Eastern Europe began. Of crucial importance for Italy: the question of the border with the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia). It was the Giolitti government, with Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza, that made a change in relations with Yugoslavia. For the time being, the option of an Italian-led, anti-Yugoslav block was abandoned and Italy signed the Rapallo treaty with Yugoslavia on 12 November 1920, obtaining Istria up to Monte Nevoso (Snežnik), Zara (Zadar) and some islands. In return they officially recognized the new Yugoslav state. Sforza, an interventionist of Mazzinian ideals, was confident that Italy had the opportunity to take the place of the Habsburgs, but also of France in the Balkan balances and that to do this, it should carry out a policy of cooperation with the heir countries of the Habsburg Empire, starting with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. In fact, an anti-Habsburg convention between Rome and Belgrade was added to the Rapallo treaty. Thereby Italy opened the way to the Sforza–Beneš note of 8 February 1921, with Czechoslovak accession to the anti-Habsburg convention of November 1920 and to the subsequent conference of the successor states of the Empire in Rome on 7 April 1921, which both the anti-revisionist countries as well as Austria and Hungary attended. More generally, Sforza’s foreign policy
tended to impart a dynamic of cooperation between Italy and all the former Habsburg countries, including Poland and Romania.\(^{16}\)

It was in those years that the Italian government led by Giovanni Giolitti deemed it appropriate to continue its work collaborating with the new ruling classes of the new nations. In particular, Italy looked at the heir countries of the Habsburg Empire, which due to their geographical proximity and traditional historical, economic and financial ties, constituted the preferred field for Italian expansion. They faced some formidable competition, however, especially from France but also from the other victorious powers like England and the United States, who also sought to strengthen their presence in the new nations. To this end, in addition to the usual political and economic penetration, each of these states began a new form of influence, experimented with during the war, which hinged on propaganda. In turn, in the first post-war period, a more refined form of propaganda was developed in an increasingly widespread manner, above all directed at the educated classes and the leadership circles. It was a more distinctly cultural propaganda, which took the form of a real cultural diplomacy. With this in mind, an institute was founded in Italy that would play a leading role in Italian cultural diplomacy. In January 1921, the Istituto per l’Europa Orientale, (IPEO, Institute for Eastern Europe), was born in Rome. The process that led to the creation of this institution shows the tight relationship between politics, diplomacy and culture during the first post-war period.

In effect, the initiative to found the Institute began with the head of the press office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amedeo Giannini, a scholar of international relations and in particular of the new Central-Eastern European nations. He took steps to ensure that Italy had organizations specialized in the study of Eastern Europe similarly to other European powers, believing that only a close collaboration between the political and cultural milieus would allow Italy to keep its channels of collaboration with the successors of the Habsburg Empire alive.\(^{17}\) The Foreign Minister Sforza, an assertor of decisive change of the Italian line in its relations with the former Habsburg nations, supported this initiative which he believed could bolster his policy of cooperation with the heir states on the cultural side. Moreover, Giannini included the main exponents of the nascent Italian Slavistics. It was this convergence between the interests of diplomacy and the interests of culture and politics that led to the establishment of the Istituto per l’Europa Orientale.\(^{18}\)

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Cultural Institutions as a Complement to Political and Economic Penetration

An additional component of Italian cultural diplomacy taking shape then was a network of cultural institutes that gradually took hold in Central and Eastern Europe, and served as a framework for the successful cultural penetration effort of Italy between the two World Wars. The institutes were initially called “Institutes of Italian Culture”, but the names were changed in the mid-1930s, redefining themselves as “Italian Institutes of Culture” – this slight alteration being evidence of the fascist desire to underline the Italian core of these institutes. They served as outposts of Italy in the countries where they operated, becoming “cultural ambassadors” for the homeland. Initially, the Institutes sprang up spontaneously thanks to autonomous initiatives by Italians connected to academic circles abroad, and supported in turn by Italian diplomatic authorities – and by the Foreign Ministry – who viewed the increased cultural commitment of Italy with a positive eye.

The first Institute of Italian Culture in the former Habsburg area – and, apparently, the first ever – was founded in Prague in October 1922 after several months of preparation. It was the result of a policy of opening up to the heirs of the Habsburg Empire desired by Foreign Minister Sforza. From a financial point of view, Italian banks and insurance companies immediately seized new opportunities offered by the new markets, resuming a penetration policy that had already begun at the beginning of the century. After WWI, Italy’s economic strategy progressing eastward experienced a revival, always benefiting from the support of the major Italian banks. From Comit to Credito Italiano, to Banca Italiana di Sconto, they were ready to finance, in particular, the opportunities that opened up to some Italian business groups regarding the exploitation of raw material. Besides banks, insurance and shipping companies such as Assicurazioni Generali, Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà (RAS) and Lloyd Triestino, were opening new branches throughout the former Habsburg area.

In the immediate post-war period, Czechoslovakia played a strategic role for Italian trade, especially the port of Trieste. At the Peace Conference, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk had confirmed that the Czechoslovak delegation would not contest the “Italian-ness” of Trieste and Pola (Pula), while the Czechoslovak minister of Foreign Affairs, Edvard Beneš, had expressed to Sonnino the hope that Trieste would continue to be as in the past: “the southern outlet of Czechoslovak trade.” M. R. Štefánik played an equally important role in regard to the establishment of closer economic and commercial relations between Italy and Czechoslovakia in those same years until his death. However, from the first

23 CACCAMO, Francesco. L’ultima missione di Milan Rastislav Štefánik alla luce delle nuove fonti. In CAPUZZO,
post-war period, the French presence in Czechoslovakia was instantly considerable and well regarded by the government of Prague. In fact, France was the only great power capable of guaranteeing the territorial integrity of the country and preventing a Habsburg revival in Hungary. At the same time, bilateral Italian-Czechoslovak relations went through a cooling period due to the growing closeness between Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in the name of common Slavic heritage, plus Prague's overall solidarity with Belgrade on the Adriatic problem.  

In this setting, the French position was much more condescending towards Czechoslovak requests and as such, increasingly bolstered at the expense of the Italians. This led to positive outcomes for Paris in the industrial and commercial fields. In addition, France made massive use of culture to support its penetration policy in Czechoslovakia and throughout former Habsburg Europe by sharply coordinating the activities of its Instituts français. The Institut français of Prague, founded in 1920 thanks to the contributions of the famous linguist Antoine Meillet, did not come to be accidentally in the capital of a country which was the cornerstone of the Little Entente: an anti-revisionist alliance comprised of Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia and supported by Paris through a system of alliances with the contracting countries. The Institut français in Prague had experienced success with the Czechoslovak people from the outset and counted numerous members. It offered free French courses, created scholarships for Czechoslovak students in France, set up libraries and organized conferences. For its endeavours, the French Legation was provided with adequate funds to support the cultural activities of the Institute and the diplomatic staff was supported by an academic scholar whose specific task was developing cultural activities. 

The new plenipotentiary minister of Italy in Prague, Antonio Chiaromonte Bordonaro, who in October 1919 replaced chargé d'affaires Mario Lago, aware of the difficult Italian situation as compared to France had strengthened the Italian press agency in Prague and established an information service between the two capitals. During Sforza's tenure as Foreign Minister, Italy intensified its initiative in order to contend France's positions, taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the Czech-Polish rivalry for the Teschen area – and therefore also the French difficulties in creating an anti-communist alliance with both countries – and rapprochement between France and Hungary, which was frowned upon by Prague, naturally. The possibility of resuming dialogue with the Slavic countries seemed to reappear, ideally similar to the experience of the Pact of Rome.

The notion of establishing an Italian Institute of Culture in Prague met the favour of Amedeo Giannini and could count on the support of the exponents of Italian culture residing in the Czechoslovak capital, including the renowned writer from Trieste, Giani Stuparich, and the Friulian scholar Bindo Chiurlo, both lecturers at the Charles Universi-
ty of Prague. On the other hand, awareness that culture was an important tool on which to focus was also shared by the Italian finance world in Czechoslovakia. The local branches of Assicurazioni Generali and RAS contributed to the development of the Institute, as well as the shipping company Lloyd Triestino. From an ideal point of view, the Institute was born based on the Italian-Czechoslovak friendship which was strengthened during the last phases of the war in the common struggle against the Habsburg Empire; ideal references to the Czechoslovak legion in Italy were constant. In spite of anti-Slavic positions shown by Italian nationalism, this strand of Italian-Czechoslovak friendship had prevailed within interventionist circles.28 The policy of collaboration between the two countries – and more generally with the heirs of the Habsburg Empire – also continued at the beginning of Mussolini’s government. At first, it brought forward Sforza’s policy thanks to the influence of the Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry Salvatore Contarini, who was linked to Sforza and continuator of his anti-Habsburg cooperation policy.29 It was in this context that Mussolini surprisingly pursued Sforza’s idea of collaborating with the Slavs. In January 1924, the Treaty of Rome was signed in which Italy and Yugoslavia committed themselves to supporting an anti-revisionist policy, defending the status quo produced by the treaties of Saint-Germain, Trianon and Neuilly. In exchange, Italy could obtain the city of Fiume (Rijeka).30 The Italian-Czechoslovak anti-revisionist collaboration agreement of July 1924 marked a continuation of this policy, and at the same time encapsulated the moment of the greatest proximity of fascist Italy to the Little Entente, whose foreign ministers delighted in the signing of this treaty.31 The Italian minister in Prague reported: “Benes [Beneš] informed the allies of the conclusion of the pact of cordial collaboration with Italy. Foreign ministers welcomed this by noting that this agreement lays on the line of conduct of the Little Entente and Duca [the Romanian Foreign Minister] declared in this regard that economic divergences with Italy will soon be settled.”32 However, the Italian-Czechoslovak friendship treaty did not seem to bear fruit from the beginning, which was also due to strained relations between Mussolini and Beneš. In any case, the Italian-Romanian treaty of friendship of 1926, which was part of Mussolini’s attempt to form a “Danubian-Balkan Locarno”, could therefore still be included in this context, whereby Italy as a great power would have to guarantee the stability of the countries of that area. Romania was probably the one country of the Little Entente that had better relations with Italy and less prejudice against the fascist regime, and whose support it needed to obtain Italian recognition of the annexation of Bessarabia at the end of the war. From that moment on, however, the policy of collaboration with the heirs of the Habsburg Empire went into crisis from the end of the 1920s, and Mussolini decidedly took the path of support for revisionist requests present in Central-Eastern Europe.33 The general change in

Italian foreign policy towards the Balkans was greatly influenced by the reigniting of the Italian-Yugoslav rivalry over control of Albania, which between 1926 and 1927 became increasingly closely linked to Rome at a time when the removal of Contarini from his position as Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1926 and the arrival of Dino Grandi led to a further fascistization of the Ministry and also caused the definitive abandonment of cooperation with the heir states and the start of the revisionist option.\textsuperscript{34}

**Culture as an Instrument of Fascist Italy’s Great Power Ambitions**

The ties of anti-Habsburg collaboration between Italy and the Central-Eastern European national movements in the last phase of the war, which climaxed with the “brotherhood of arms” of the legions, had provided the ideal driving force around which Italian political and cultural penetration initially developed in the former Habsburg area. It is therefore no coincidence that the only other properly titled “Institute of Italian Culture” in Central-Eastern and Danubian-Balkan Europe until the mid-1930s was, in addition to that in Prague, in Bucharest. It was founded in the early 1920s with a similar dynamic: the support of the Italian political and business world was superimposed on an initiative launched by advocates of culture.\textsuperscript{35} Relations with both countries proved difficult in the following years as mutual interests conflicted. With Romania however, the myth of “Latinity” which Italian cultural diplomacy was articulated and implemented around, allowed Italy to maintain a solid presence – at least from a cultural point of view – despite everything else that was happening.\textsuperscript{36}

Regarding Yugoslavia, although political relations had improved in 1924 for a short period of time, cultural relations were never particularly easy either, having to face decades of Italian-Slav conflict starting from the end of the 19th century.\textsuperscript{37} Until the mid-1930s, Yugoslavia was subject to the destructive attention of Italian publications, emphasizing Italian rights in Dalmatia and condemning Serbian centralizing policy towards the Slavic Catholics, Slovenians and Croats. Despite this, a considerable part of the Italian diplomatic personnel – for example the Italian ambassador in Belgrade in the early 1930s, Carlo Galli, and Dino Grandi, Italian Foreign Minister from 1929 to 1932 – was more willing to reach an agreement with Belgrade, considered convenient to Italy, and similar ideas were shared in parts of the Italian north-eastern business world.\textsuperscript{38} It was in the second half of the 1930s that, especially with Milan Stojadinović coming to power, being the latter well disposed towards Mussolini, relations between the two countries improved. Following the Italian-
Yugoslav friendship treaty of March 1937, the two countries also signed a cultural agreement, which provided for the creation of an Institute of Italian Culture in Belgrade. It was established in October 1939 and inaugurated in February 1940. Subsequently, in April 1940 an institute of culture was opened in Ljubljana, while another was present in Zagreb since February. In particular, the institutions of Zagreb and especially Ljubljana carried out the crucial task of pushing Italian propaganda towards the Slavic element after the occupation of Yugoslavia by Axis forces and the creation of the “province of Ljubljana” in April–May 1941.

From the second half of the 1930s, Italian cultural diplomacy was put at the service of the revisionist policy of fascist Italy in Central-Eastern Europe, oriented in an anti-Yugoslav sense, and supported the clerical-fascist and nationalist movements in Austria, Hungary, Croatia and Bulgaria in order to weaken the Yugoslav kingdom. Anti-Habsburg solidarity had now given way to the myth of Latinity and Rome as the sentinel of civilization against the assaults of Asian Bolshevism. In terms of propaganda and cultural penetration, the slow decline of French influence, begun well before June 1940, had given way to a new formidable rival of fascist Italy: the Third Reich. Nazi propaganda showed great organization immediately and could count on huge state funding as well as on large German Volksdeutsche communities scattered in all the former Habsburg countries. To respond to the intense competition exercised by Nazism among the so-called moderate bourgeoisies and right-wing nationalist and radical circles, Mussolini decided to strengthen the Italian cultural institutes, centralizing their organization with an office created ad hoc at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In actuality, the function of the Italian cultural institutes had already been regulated in 1926, especially concerning the foundation rules of these institutions which otherwise risked developing in an impromptu and uncoordinated way, essentially by individual initiatives as happened for the Institutes of Italian culture in Prague and Bucharest in the early 1920s. Under the direction of Galeazzo Ciano, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decidedly focused on the Institutes of Italian Culture in the former Habsburg territories, increasing their funding and issuing guidelines in the second half of the 1930s explicitly recommending underlining the primacy of Italy as a dispenser of civilization among the peoples of Eastern Europe. In the mid-1930s, Institutes of Italian Culture were established in all capital cities of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, with a network of affiliates operating in provincial towns. Moreover, in the second half of that decade, through a growing centralization of cultural and propaganda activities abroad, Italy aimed to stem German propaganda, asking the Institutes to underline the spiritual superiority of Christian Italy towards “Teutonic racist paganism”.

The Institute of Italian Culture in Vienna played a strategically important role here in the time of rapprochement between fascist Italy, Austria, and Hungary formalized through the Rome protocols of March 1934. In this way, Mussolini planned to contain German expansionism towards Danubian-Balkan Europe and especially towards Austria. Even in this case, the means offered by culture flanked traditional diplomacy. In February 1935, Italy signed cultural agreements with Austria and Hungary that would lead to the founding of Italian cultural institutes in Vienna and Budapest. Direction of the Institute in Vienna was entrusted to the Istrian historian Francesco Salata, plenipotentiary minister in the Austrian capital in 1936–1937 and a deep connoisseur of the Austrian world. He was on good terms with Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg – who took over for Dollfuss in July 1934 after his assassination at the hands of the Nazis – and a staunch supporter of Austrian independence. The Institute then carried out the important function of guarding the Italian presence in Austria and Central Europe. Following the Italian–German rapprochement resulting from the Ethiopian war and the international sanctions to which Italy was subjected, Italy’s role in Austria declined and the Institute charted a similar descending parable, underlined by the dismissal of Salata.

The Crisis of Mussolini’s Hegemonic Project in Central-Eastern Europe

Italy therefore had to gradually give up its political-economic expansion towards Danubian-Balkan Europe, preferring to concentrate on the Mediterranean and colonial sector. This was due also to the consequences of the economic crisis that had affected the entire area in the early 1930s. The Italian financial and commercial retreat, in fact, gave way to powerful German economic penetration, however, it is significant that this did not entail cultural abandonment for Italy, which was an attempt to counter the creation of a new German-led central Europe, at least on a propaganda level. In order to support these pursuits, which increasingly took on political flavour with conferences on the achievements of fascism (corporatism, land reclamation, “battle of wheat”, policies in favour of birth), other institutions were deployed such as the CAUR (Action Committees for the Universality of Rome), which aimed to unify intellectuals and politicians of the European right around the myth of Latinity played in an anti-Nazi key.

This was the golden age of “fascist international”, which in the name of a frequently unclear pan-fascist ideology and of the myth of the “Third Rome” aimed to confederate all European fascist and corporate movements as well as parties under the direction of Italian fascism. At the heart of this strategy was still the use of Italian culture and history for...
propaganda purposes, for example through the recovery of the Mazzinian myth representing Italy as a spiritual guide for nations of the former Habsburg Europe. As previously mentioned, this myth was at the centre of the first post-war initiatives and remained the ideal point of reference for many intellectuals operating in Italian cultural institutes. It is interesting that one of those institutes, founded in 1937 by the publicist Pietro Gorgolini, was called Istituto Europa Giovane and evidently still referred to Giuseppe Mazzini with its name. Adhering to the Institute of Fascist culture, this establishment referred to corporatism and opposed communism and “Asiatism”, while its program aimed to “reinvigorate in the intellectuals the awareness of the great Western civilization, essentially Greek-Roman, Catholic, Fascist.”

Between the end of the 1930s and the war years, Italian cultural institutes in the former Habsburg space, and more broadly in Central-Eastern Europe, came to be on the front line and were increasingly involved in the war effort. German authorities often saw the Italian institutes as dangerous competitors for propaganda and attempted to limit their activity. In October 1938, Ettore Lo Gatto, Slavist and professor of Italian literature at Charles University of Prague since 1936, was appointed director of the Institute of Italian Culture in Prague. Lo Gatto, who enjoyed undoubted esteem in local intellectual circles – and who was the first Slavist to direct the Institute – managed to relaunch the institute, though he soon found himself in a very difficult phase after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. In particular, after the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, German authorities showed a growing diffidence towards the activities of the Institute, which appeared to be enjoying great success, and also of Lo Gatto himself, perceived as a natural “friend” of the Slavs, whereby the German authorities let the Italians know that they would prefer a “non-Slavist” as director. Lo Gatto returned to Rome in October 1941, officially for health reasons but probably also because the Italian diplomatic authorities of the protectorate wanted to avoid friction with the Germans, and was replaced by an Italianist.

This “surrender” of Italian cultural diplomacy to the Germans in Prague can be considered paradigmatic of the overall exhaustion with the experience of cultural penetration of fascist Italy in the former Habsburg territories. Whilst the appeal of alma mater Rome and of the myth of Latinity in Central-Eastern Europe had undoubtedly allowed Italy to win the sympathies of a part of the local educated and bourgeois classes, overall, Italian cultural diplomacy showed its objective limits compared to the much more aggressive German propaganda machine, which could rely on the impressive economic and military resources of Third Reich.

In the early second post-war years, Italy would attempt to continue its presence in Central and Eastern Europe, also through cultural institutions even within a radically changed political framework, reopening numerous Institutes of Italian Culture between 1947 and

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1948. However, it was clear that the rhetoric of Latinity, which had been the basis of Italian cultural activities, would find a great obstacle in the Soviet presence leveraging the theme of pan-Slavism and aiming to Slavicize – culturally speaking – even non-Slavic nations like Romania. It was also clear that after WWII, Italy would no longer be in a position to pursue a policy of great power in general, and even less towards Central and Eastern Europe. From the main target of Italian expansionist policies in the interwar period, former Habsburg Europe became an almost marginal and forgotten area by both the Italian ruling classes and public opinion, while all attention was focused on the birth of the new bipolar equilibrium.\textsuperscript{50} According to available documentation, by 1948 in Central-Eastern Europe, Italian cultural institutes continued to operate in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, while the Institute of Vienna was being reconstituted. Furthermore, regarding Italian chairs and language classes in foreign universities and schools between 1947 and 1948, they were working, albeit in small proportions, in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania.\textsuperscript{51}

Despite the Italian will to keep these cultural institutions alive, the beginning of the cold war and especially the outbreak of the Korean war in 1950 saw a hardening by the USSR and satellite countries towards the presence of western cultural institutes, and consequently of Italian institutions, which were forced to close.\textsuperscript{52} Only the Italian Institute of Culture in Budapest was allowed to continue, while the others were only reopened starting from the 1960s with the beginning of the détente between East and West.\textsuperscript{53}


\textbf{Cite:}


Stefano Santoro
Università degli Studi di Trieste
Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici
Androna Campo Marzio 10, 34123 Trieste, Italy
email: ssantoro@units.it