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Paul Baxa

Capturing the Fascist Moment: Hitler's Visit to Italy in 1938 and the Radicalization of Fascist Italy

In May 1938, Italians and the world were treated to the spectacle of a diplomatic visit. It was Adolf Hitler's second visit to Italy since becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and the first since the two countries signed the Axis agreement in 1936. Over the course of seven days, Hitler and his extensive entourage were treated to a massive display of fascist spectacle in three cities: Rome, Naples and Florence.¹ The preparations for the visit were unprecedented, providing not only Hitler but also the world with a demonstration of fascist power. The visit came in the days following the *Anschluss* and with the fascist regime still basking in the glow of its new empire. Combined with a reversal of Republican fortunes in Spain, the fascist regimes were on the march and enjoying great prestige both at home and abroad. The Hitler visit captured the fascist moment when the ideology appeared in the ascendant. After the Second World War, long after the illusions of fascist grandeur had ended, Nino Tripodi, a former president of the Italian neo-fascist party, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), had this recollection of the visit:

I had been in the capital only a few months [and] that sudden encounter with the triumphalism of the regime and of a capital overcoming its traditional inferiority with respect to Germany left my fragile youth with my heart in my throat. I believed in everything. I believed that the two revolutions were forged into a common destiny; that indissoluble ideological, political and military links existed between the two leaders and that their concordance would sweep away the old democracies.²

All this, however, was illusion, as the regimes did not use the visit to forge a military alliance, leaving Tripodi disappointed. Although the visit provided superb propaganda and spectacle, it accomplished little in the area of formal diplomacy.³ The Germans had hoped for a military alliance; Italian reluctance

1 Hitler's entourage included some 500 people filling three trains. Paul Schmidt, Hitler's interpreter, noted how the Germans called this the 'German invasion of Italy'. Paul Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter* (London 1951), 80–1.

2 Nino Tripodi, *Fascismo così. Problemi di un tempo ritrovato* (Rome 1984), 279.

3 That German–Italian relations were based on the 'reality' of diplomacy and not public posturing was first argued by D.C. Watt and has remained implicit in the scholarship since. See D.C. Watt, 'The Rome–Berlin Axis, 1936–1940: Myth and Reality', *The Review of Politics* 22, 4 (1960), 522.

to make any commitments meant that the visit was a missed opportunity for formally strengthening the Axis.⁴

For diplomatic historians, the Hitler visit to Italy has become nothing more than anecdote; a lavish example of empty, fascist propaganda.⁵ The visit's importance has been downplayed because of the conviction of many historians that ideology did not play a significant role in shaping foreign policy. Mussolini, the argument goes, was motivated only by practical considerations such as strengthening Italy's position in the Mediterranean, and the regime was even prepared to consider a *rapprochement* with Great Britain. Alliance with nazi Germany was not inevitable and was certainly not ideological.⁶ Yet, if the Italians had no intention of solidifying an alliance with the nazis, the question is why such an elaborate spectacle was created in the first place. Preparations for the event went far beyond those of a normal state visit. Hitler was treated as a truly special visitor and nazism as a sister ideology to fascism, as attested by the ubiquity of swastika flags on the streets of Rome, moving Pope Pius XI to declare the visit an 'apotheosis' of the German dictator.⁷ The pope was not the only wary observer of the proceedings. Italians, fearful of a German claim on the Tyrol after the *Anschluss*, and generally diffident towards a closer relationship with the nazis, must have wondered at the spectacle offered to the German dictator in May 1938. Considering these details, why would the fascist regime extend such a greeting to Hitler if the Vatican, the Italian people and Great Britain stood to take offence? The regime had just signed the Easter Accords with Great Britain a few weeks before, so why did it go to such lengths to celebrate a German state that was increasingly at odds with the British? If the regime was not interested in solidifying an alliance with the nazis, why risk tensions and the consensus that fascism enjoyed at home? If the visit was nothing more than empty propaganda, and if Mussolini's policies were motivated by calculation, then the spectacle threatened to undermine the regime's policies.

Diplomatic historians ignore these ambiguities by focusing on the diplomacy, or lack thereof, of the visit. They have not allowed the spectacle to question their interpretation of Mussolini as a pragmatist who kept his options open. This article will demonstrate how the spectacle of the Hitler visit, if not the primary cause in moving fascist Italy to an ever closer union with nazi Germany, at least provided strong signals of a pro-nazi shift within the fascist regime. The following article will contribute to creating a bridge between

4 Mario Toscano, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel* (Baltimore, MD 1967), 18.

5 The argument that fascist foreign policy amounted to nothing more than empty propaganda was common in the Anglophone historiography led by A.J.P. Taylor and Denis Mack Smith. See Stephen Corrado Rizzi, 'The Historiography of Fascist Foreign Policy', *The Historical Journal* 36, 1 (1993), 187–8.

6 The leader in this school of thought has been Renzo De Felice. A good overview of the question of ideology in the nazi–fascist relationship can be found in Rizzi, 'Historiography', op. cit., 200–2.

7 Pius XI, 'Al Sacro Collegio Cardinalizio: Il Nunc Dimittis del Papa Pio XI', 24 dicembre 1938, in Domenico Bertetto (ed.), *Discorsi di Pio XI* (Turin 1959), III, 871.

diplomatic history and the recent spate of cultural histories of the fascist regime.⁸ While these cultural studies have contributed to a greater understanding of the role of fascist propaganda and spectacle in the consensus-building policies of the regime, none of them, surprisingly, considers the role of spectacle in driving fascist foreign policy. Roger Griffin has recently attempted to synthesize studies on fascist culture with those of ideology. A similar attempt is needed between culture and foreign policy.⁹

This article will examine to what extent the Hitler visit served as a means of furthering what Robert Mallett has identified as the systematic re-alignment of Italian foreign policy towards Germany between 1935 and 1938.¹⁰ The visit came at a critical moment in Nazi foreign policy and fascist domestic policy. Ian Kershaw has argued that the 'spring of 1938 began a phase in which Hitler's obsession with accomplishing his mission in his own lifetime started to overtake cold political calculation'.¹¹ Domestically, the visit marked the beginning of radical policies like the Racial Laws which gave fascist Italy an increasingly Nazi look. The visit was a spectacle which sent some clear messages to Italians and to the world about the intentions of the Axis to remake the world in its own image. Rome in particular was transformed into an elaborate stage which combined the religious, the militaristic, the artistic, and the ideological into a grand spectacle which can properly be called the 'autobiography' of fascism. A close reading of the visit, its symbols, and the reactions from the international media is, in the end, more revealing of the course set by the fascist regime than unsigned diplomatic accords.

Preparations for Hitler's visit began as soon as Mussolini returned from his visit to Germany in September 1937. On that visit, the Duce had been impressed by the image presented to him of the Reich. In January 1938, a planning commission was formed under Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano which included, among others, Fascist Party secretary Achille Starace and the Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri.¹² That this was not to be an ordinary state visit was proved by the depth of planning and detail involved. As soon as

8 Examples of this literature are too numerous to cite in full. The most notable are: Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Bari 1993); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley, CA 1997); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, CA 2001); Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY 1997); and Claudio Fogu, *The Historical Imaginary in Fascist Italy* (Toronto 2003).

9 Roger Griffin has attempted to synthesize these cultural studies with analyses of fascist ideology: Griffin, 'The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies', *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, 1 (2002), 21–43.

10 Robert Mallett, 'Fascist Foreign Policy and Official Italian Views of Anthony Eden in the 1930s', *The Historical Journal* 43, 1 (March 2000), 161.

11 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (New York 2000), 92.

12 Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), PCM. 1937–1938, b. 2405, f. 4.11.3711: 'Lettere da Ciano a Medici'.

Hitler crossed into Italy at the Brenner Pass, an impressive machinery of organization was to take over every minute of the visit. One American journalist did not exaggerate when he reported that 'along every inch of Hitler's route he will get an eyeful of the new Italy at its proudest'.¹³

In the months preceding the visit, commission members inspected different sections of the railroad tracks between the Brenner and Rome and between Rome and Naples. Security was a main concern for these inspections, but even more significant was aesthetics. Commission members were especially concerned about signs of urban degradation. The section of track between Rome and Naples was troublesome in this respect. No less than 16 trouble spots were noted on this line, the worst being an industrial dump near the town of Torricola. 'Indecorous houses' also lined the track between the villages of Campoleone and Cisterna.¹⁴ The track between Rome and Florence was similarly red-flagged because of a series of 'non-aesthetic' buildings.

Special attention was given to the approaches into Termini Station in Rome. On his first night, Hitler was to arrive in the newly constructed Ostiense Station to the southwest of the city, but on his trips to Naples and Florence his train would use the Termini Station. Generally disliked for its garish architecture, Termini was also inconveniently located near the working-class San Lorenzo quarter. Neglected by the regime because of its left-wing character, part of the area had become a slum while the rest of it had been demolished to make way for the University of Rome. The committee that inspected this part of the track urged the city of Rome to clean up the 5–6 kilometres of track leading into the station. According to the committee's report, Rome had to eliminate 'the contrast between the grandiosity of the ancient ruins and the ugly look of certain, rundown houses and of some façades devoid of colour and reduced to desolate mosaics of cracking plaster'.¹⁵

With time running short, the commission proposed different aesthetic solutions to these problems. The worst cases of degradation had to be masked by billboards which carried either propaganda or advertising. The latter solution was preferred as private companies would pay for the expense. In less dire cases, owners were told to repaint their houses to make them worthy of Hitler's gaze. No expense was spared to show Hitler and the Germans an Italy of order and cleanliness.

Another means of masking unpleasant sights was the abundant use of flags, which lined the entire train route. The commission painstakingly detailed the position of every flag on the route, with 'artistically placed' banners adorning every building in Hitler's line of sight.¹⁶ The commission planned for 11,671 Italian flags and 11,264 German flags to be flown along the route.¹⁷ The near-identical number of German and Italian flags sent a clear message of unity

13 'Der Fuhrer to Meet Il Duce in a More Wary Rome', *New York Times*, 2 May 1938.

14 ACS, PCM. 1937–1938, b. 2405, f. 4.11.3711: 'Visita del Fuhrer in Italia. Relazione No. 2.'

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 'Predisposizioni circa la visita del Fuhrer in Italia'.

17 ACS, PCM. 1937–1938, b. 2405, f. 4.11.3711/5–2: 'Statistica delle bandiere'.

between the two nations. Significantly, the only place where Italian flags clearly outnumbered the swastika was in the Tyrolean capital of Bolzano, a city which contained a high number of ethnic Germans. Fascist officials were sensitive to the number of flags used, as the more that were put on display, the more important the visit was shown to be. Diplomats had made note of the great number of flags used for the Yugoslav Prime Minister's visit to Berlin the year before, and the great sea of flags which had decorated Vienna in the days of the *Anschluss*.¹⁸

The ubiquity of the swastika along the route liquidated any sense of border or frontier between the two countries and presented to Italians and Germans the image of an unbroken axis. The train route was the physical manifestation of the 'axis' between the two countries, which cut through the Tyrol, thus rendering this 'disputed region' a non-issue. The presence of cheering crowds at all the stations in which Hitler's train stopped amplified this impression of unity. The commission wanted Hitler to see at least one million Italians on the route.¹⁹ As with the flags, a precise number of people for each station was decreed, leaving the local prefects with the responsibility of rounding them up. The traditionally left-wing city of Bologna was asked to provide the largest crowd of 60,000, while fascist-friendly Florence was asked for only 15,000.²⁰ The hope was that this mass of people would offer to Hitler 'the spectacle of one uninterrupted manifestation of enthusiasm and cordiality'.²¹

Hitler's entrance into Rome was compared to the triumphant entrance of the emperor Charles V in 1536.²² The import of the occasion was noted in Galeazzo Ciano's diary entry for 3 May 1938. It stated simply: 'Arrival of the Fuhrer'.²³ It was the only entry for the day — the only one that mattered. On that night, Hitler's train steamed into the new Ostiense Station purposely built for the visit. The station, an example of architectural modernism, was located outside the St Paul's Gate, to the southwest of the historic centre. The site was ideal as it allowed Hitler the chance to ride along the new avenues built by the fascist regime through the centre of the city. In order to welcome the German

18 Min. Degli Affari Esteri (ed.), *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (DDI), Ottava Seria, Vol. 8: 'Il Console Generale a Vienna Rochira, al Ministro degli Esteri, Ciano', 2 aprile 1938, 507–8.

19 ACS, PCM. 1937–1938, b. 2405, f. 4.11.3711: 'Predisposizioni circa la visita del Fuhrer in Italia'.

20 The prefect of Littoria was asked for some 50,000 people on the route between Rome and Naples, perhaps to further mask the unaesthetic houses. Ibid., 'Rilievi fatti lungo il percorso ferroviario Roma–Napoli'.

21 Ibid., 'Visita del Fuhrer: Relazione sull'ispezione di 22 marzo della linea tra il Brennero e Roma'.

22 Luigi Bottazzi, 'Hitler in Italia. Gli ingressi trionfali dell'Urbe', *Vie d'Italia* (maggio 1938), 608–14. For an account of the Imperial symbolism shown Hitler see David Atkinson, 'Hitler's Grand Tour: The Triumphant Entrance to Fascist Rome', Royal Holloway University of London Geography Department working paper no. 8, pp. 1–25.

23 Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943*. Renzo De Felice, ed. (Milan 1980), 132.

leader, the first street Hitler saw in Rome, the one linking the station to the gate, was the specially-named *Viale Adolfo Hitler*. After his disembarkation at Ostiense, Hitler rode into the city in a horse-drawn carriage, accompanied by King Victor Emanuel III. The *New York Times* noted with some irony that 'Chancellor A. Hitler, exponent of the airplane and automobile, will return to the horse and buggy era'.²⁴

The choice of this entrance gave the regime the opportunity to show Hitler a fascist view of the city. Had Hitler entered via the Termini Station he would have seen the less inspiring nineteenth-century quarter of Rome built by the liberal monarchy in the years following the Risorgimento. What Hitler saw instead was the imposing St Paul's Gate flanked by the massive Pyramid of Caio Cestio. Once through the gate, Hitler was suddenly confronted with the Obelisk of Axum, a war souvenir from Ethiopia.²⁵ Beyond that, the majestic ruins of the Imperial palaces on the Palatine Hill appeared. Now on the avenues that fascism built, the Via Trionfale and the Via dell'Impero, Hitler passed through the Arch of Constantine, past the Coliseum and the Imperial Fora. Thus, in his first minutes in Rome Hitler was immediately shown the imperial grandeur of the Eternal City, both of the new fascist empire and the ancient Roman one.

Hitler's night entrance into the Eternal City was choreographed as a religious ceremony. The route was lit up with floodlights and gas canisters illuminating the monuments of the city. Candles placed in the arches of the Coliseum created an evocative atmosphere. Hitler's entrance was accorded the feeling of a religious procession as this new missionary of fascism was carried through the gate named after the Christian missionary St Paul. The slow gait of the horse-drawn carriage perfectly suited this notion of religious pilgrimage.²⁶

After this religious entrance into Rome, Hitler's first full day there was designed to give him a political narrative of Italy within a fascist framework. It was a day of frenetic pace and activity in sharp contrast to the previous night's solemnity. The LUCE documentary made for the visit caught this contrast in a striking manner. After the last frame of Hitler's night entrance there is a quick edit showing the motorcade blasting out of the Quirinal Palace at full speed.²⁷

In an intense schedule of events, Hitler began the day by visiting the

24 'Hitler Will Get a Ride Behind Horses in Rome', *New York Times*, 3 May 1938. In later years, Hitler remembered with contempt 'the badly slung carnival carriage, which hobbled along in a lamentable fashion'. Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944*, Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens, trs (London 1973), 268.

25 This example of war booty was erected on 20 October 1937 in front of the Ministry of the AOI (Italian East Africa). After years of controversy, the obelisk was finally returned to Ethiopia in 2005.

26 French observer Louis Gillet likened Hitler to a religious mystic: 'He is a priest. He's almost God.' Louis Gillet, 'Hitler à Rome. Choses vues', *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1 June 1938), 679-80.

27 Archivio LUCE D312: 'Il viaggio del Fuhrer in Italia: Dal Brennero a Roma'.

Pantheon and laying a wreath at the tomb of King Victor Emanuel II.²⁸ The next stop was the monument dedicated to Victor Emanuel in Piazza Venezia, where another wreath was laid at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A visit to the fascist party headquarters on the Corso Vittorio Emanuele and the monument to fascist martyrs completed Hitler's wreath-laying duties for the day. The morning ended with a private meeting with Mussolini in the Palazzo Venezia.

The structure of the itinerary carefully followed the fascist interpretation of Italian history, beginning with unification and ending with fascism via the Unknown Soldier. The tour began with homage to the Italian king who united the country and ended in the Duce's office — the real centre of power in the new Italy, or so Mussolini wished. This ideal tour through Italian history was continued in the afternoon when Hitler was taken to the airfield in Centocelle (a suburb of Rome) to watch a massive parade of 50,000 fascist youth. In order to reach the airfield, Hitler was taken along the ancient Roman Appian Way, the route used by triumphant Roman armies marching back from distant conquests. In one stroke, Hitler moved from the current leader of fascist Italy to its future via the frame of Rome's ancient glory. This was a masterful use by the regime of Rome's various historical associations.

The youth rally set the stage for the militarist side of the visit beginning the next day, 5 May, in Naples, where Hitler witnessed an impressive display by the Italian navy. The next day, back in Rome, Hitler reviewed a colossal parade by the combined armed forces on the Via dei Trionfi, one of the boulevards constructed by the regime, at the foot of the Palatine Hill. The next day, at Furbara outside Rome, Hitler watched a display by the Italian air force where actual bombs were dropped on the empty field. Later that day, he was taken to another field at Santa Marinella to watch an infantry exercise, which also involved real artillery fire. Designed to show Italy's military might, these exercises undoubtedly appealed to Hitler's love of war.²⁹

Juxtaposed with militarism was art, which Hitler saw in abundance. Although Mussolini had little love for art, he knew of Hitler's passion for it and ensured that the German leader was provided with a full tour of Italy's artistic heritage. In Rome, Hitler took in the Borghese Museum and the Museo delle Terme, located in the bowels of the Diocletian baths. Hitler was also shown the Capitoline museums next to the city hall. Bernini fountains and palazzi designed by Michelangelo filled his days as well. The guidebook given to fascist and nazi officials for the visit amply outlined the archaeological and

28 Hitler was far more interested in the Pantheon as architectural marvel. Later in his visit to Italy he made a second, private visit, when he reportedly stared at the domed ceiling in silence. The Pantheon would serve as a model for Hitler's own architectural dreams for Germany. See Alex Scobie, *Hitler's State Architecture: The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park, PA 1990), ch. 1, and Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (New York 1970), 153.

29 Overall, the Germans were not impressed by the Italian armed forces. The parade on Via dei Trionfi gave the Germans an opportunity to see military equipment that was, for the most part, antiquated. See Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London 1976), 129.

artistic artefacts which confronted Hitler. Even while reviewing the military parade on the Via dei Trionfi, his gaze would be met, according to the guide, by the 'frontal view of the Palatine Hill' and its majestic ruins.³⁰ Art and war were thus seamlessly combined.

The art and architecture of fascist Italy also featured prominently in Hitler's tour. Not only did he see the legacy of Italian art; he was also shown the present architectural and urban accomplishments of the regime. In his final day in Rome, Hitler saw the Foro Mussolini, the complex of buildings and sports stadiums built at the foot of Monte Mario and dedicated to the March on Rome. Inaugurated in 1932, the Foro Mussolini also included an obelisk with the words 'Mussolini Dux' emblazoned on it. His motorcade route on the final day ensured that Hitler also had a look at the Marcello Piacentini-designed University of Rome in the San Lorenzo quarter. Combined, the Foro Mussolini and the University provided the best examples of fascist architecture in Rome. The itinerary made extensive use of the new roads built by the regime under the Master Plan of 1931, which had subjected Rome to massive demolitions aimed at revealing the architectural legacy of the Roman Empire and improving traffic circulation. At various times in the visit, Hitler saw the recently excavated Teatro Marcello, the Tomb of Augustus, and the Imperial and Republican Fora. The Via del Mare, the Via dell'Impero and the Via dei Trionfi provided the highways and theatres for the visit. Hitler, who had a great love for open roads, no doubt appreciated these wide boulevards carved out by the regime amidst the ruins of antiquity.³¹ Road building was fascism's art *par excellence*, and Hitler's entourage was made to see every kilometre of roads laid down by the regime in the Eternal City.

Designed to appeal to Hitler's political, artistic and militarist sensibilities, the tour worked perfectly. In later years, Hitler recalled fondly the visit to Italy, expressing a desire to live there in anonymity as a painter.³² During the visit he frequently commented on 'sunny Italy' and the elegance of the ladies walking on the Via Veneto.³³ 'Rome captivated me', recalled Hitler.³⁴ Urbanist Antonio Muñoz saw Hitler as a German artist following in the footsteps of Goethe coming to Italy for inspiration.³⁵

Another feature of Hitler's tour was its intensity. Although Paul Schmidt, Hitler's interpreter, described the visit as an 'Indian summer interlude' in the stormy year of 1938, rarely did Hitler's entourage get a chance to rest during their seven days in Italy.³⁶ Only inclement weather allowed some of the itineraries to be cancelled, giving Hitler free time to revisit some of the galleries and

30 ACS, M.C.P., b. 63, 'Itinerario'.

31 Hitler, *Table Talk*, op. cit., 537.

32 Ibid., 10–11.

33 Renuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, *Hitler e Mussolini 1938. Il viaggio del Fuhrer in Italia* (Rome 1995), 32.

34 Hitler, *Table Talk*, op. cit., 268.

35 Antonio Muñoz, 'Gli artisti tedeschi a Roma', *L'Urbe*, 4 (aprile 1938), 1–31.

36 Paul Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter*, op. cit., 79.

the Pantheon. As a result, serious diplomatic discussions were impossible as Hitler was kept busy sightseeing. Schmidt noted that while Hitler and Von Ribbentrop were anxious to discuss business in private meetings, Mussolini and Ciano constantly deferred any serious discussion on diplomatic matters.³⁷ When Von Ribbentrop took advantage of a brief respite to present Ciano with an accord, the Italian foreign minister politely refused. No doubt wary of signing a binding agreement and alienating Italians, the fascist regime let the spectacle of the visit speak for itself.

From the moment the visit was conceived it was designed as an experiment in ideology, not diplomacy. Despite Von Ribbentrop's initiative, archival sources suggest that this was understood by both sides. German diplomats used the ideological character of the visit in order to justify Hitler's refusal to make a courtesy call on the Pope.³⁸ The Italian media portrayed the visit as doctrinal, focusing on the role played by the Eternal City as the site of a new destiny forged between the two regimes. Significantly, in an attempt to inflate the importance of the event, the Italian papers covered the visit as a sacred rather than a diplomatic occasion.³⁹ The dominant motifs of the visit were not agreements or diplomatic protocols but history, monuments, roads, crowds, and motion. *Il Giornale* described Rome as a massive theatre into which thousands of Romans came from all parts of the city to the centre in order to partake in the 'festival'.⁴⁰

Central to this effect was the elaborate lighting put in place by the regime. According to *Il Messaggero*, some 3500 KW of light pouring out of 300 candelabra awaited Hitler's carriage in his entrance to the city.⁴¹ The results shocked even Romans, long accustomed to political and papal pageantry. The writer Leo Longanesi noted years later that Romans were left with their 'mouths open wide' at the sight of the 'spacious imperial avenues, incredulous at our richness, admiring our splendour'.⁴² Rome was 'transformed into a vast opera stage in which at night, the Führer could admire a spectacle worthy of Nero'.⁴³

While it was important to impress the visitor and Italians, the fascist regime also designed the visit for foreign eyes. Bianchi Bandinelli, the Italian art professor assigned to be Hitler's tour guide, noted how Mussolini was conscious

37 Ibid., 81.

38 DDI, Ottava Serie, Vol. 8: 'Il Consigliere dell'Ambasciata a Berlino, Magistrati, al Ministro degli Esteri, Ciano', 24 febbraio 1938, 271–272. The 'special nature' of the visit was also emphasized by the German Foreign Office to the German ambassador at the Vatican. See *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D (1937–1945), Vol. 1: From Neurath to Ribbentrop (September 1937–September 1938), 1023, 1026.

39 On the sacralization of politics in Fascist Italy, see Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, op. cit.

40 'Giubileo di una città', *Il Giornale*, 5 May 1938.

41 'Dalla stazione Ostiense al Quirinale', *Il Messaggero*, 4 May 1938.

42 Leo Longanesi, *In piedi e seduti, 1919–1943* (Milan 1968), 212.

43 Ibid., 211.

of foreign opinion.⁴⁴ Because of Hitler's visit, Rome had become the centre of international attention.⁴⁵ After the visit concluded, *Life* magazine published a photo spread of the naval and military exercises fascism put on for Hitler. The exercises were impressive for their 'realism' and for demonstrating the 'awful patterns of death and destruction that thousands of men and hundreds of guns can paint on a field of battle.'⁴⁶

While sceptical of Hitler's popularity amongst Italians, the *New York Times* remarked upon the military exercises, which seemed like 'dress rehearsals, more terrifying as they become more perfect.'⁴⁷ The *Times* had already realized that the Hitler visit was 'not merely show' and that the impressive retinue of military officials who accompanied Hitler was an ominous portent.⁴⁸ A month before the visit, *Harper's* magazine had noted a 'thesis abroad in the land . . . that militant fascism as embodied by the states of the Rome-Berlin Axis is about to overwhelm the "decadent" democracies of Europe.'⁴⁹ While the *Harper's* piece was sceptical about the real power of the Axis, American diplomats were more wary in the days following the visit. In a speech given before the American Chamber of Commerce in early May, US Secretary of State Harry H. Woodring deemed it necessary to issue a warning to the Axis regarding military rearmament.⁵⁰

The visit provided much fodder for the illustrated magazines. The *Illustrated London News* provided a lavish layout of photographs, capped by an enormous photograph of Mussolini and Hitler on the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia gracing its cover.⁵¹ The *News* emphasized what it called the 'personal side' of the visit, documenting Hitler's excursions to various museums and galleries. The naval demonstration in Naples received special attention across the Channel. The Italian ambassador to Great Britain, Grandi, noted how impressed the British were by the naval and military demonstrations.⁵² An important detail noted by a caption in the *Illustrated London News* was the insignia of corporal of the fascist militia given to Hitler by Mussolini and worn by him over his usual swastika armband. This was a hint of the growing identification between the two regimes, as was the 'goose-stepping' Italian army.

44 Bianchi Bandinelli, *Hitler e Mussolini*, op. cit., 32.

45 'Roma e il Führer', *Roma Fascista*, 5 May 1938. Awed by the spectacle of the visit, the foreign press recognized the scepticism some Italians held towards the German visitors. *Life* magazine remarked on the lack of conviction and enthusiasm amongst the workers installing the light standards for the visit. A caption noted that the body language of the workers was proof that fascism had failed to regiment Italians. See 'Fascism: A New Street — Viale Hitler', *Life*, 9 May 1938, 41.

46 'Pattern of War', *Life*, 13 June 1938, 30–1.

47 Anne O'Hare McCormick, 'Uncertain Future Drives All Nations to Pile Up Arms', *New York Times*, 7 May 1938.

48 'Rome Thinks Visit Will Oil the Axis', *New York Times*, 2 May 1938.

49 George Fielding Eliot, 'Italy's Over-estimated Power', *Harper's Magazine* (April 1938), 511.

50 'Woodring Warns Dictators of War', *New York Times*, 6 May 1938.

51 'The Führer in Italy', *Illustrated London News*, 14 May 1938, 845–9.

52 DDI, Ottava Serie, Vol. 9: 'L'Ambasciatore a Londra, Grandi, al Ministro degli Esteri, Ciano', 125–7. Grandi noted how the 'growing and intimate vitality' of the friendship between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy had been reinforced in the eyes of the British public.

The preparations and setting of the visit awed other foreign observers like Louis Gillet, member of the Académie Française in Rome. Gillet was taken aback by the candelabras used for the pyrotechnic displays. In a comment that would have pleased the regime, Gillet wrote that this lighting created a 'powerful effect in truly Roman style'.⁵³ Gillet was also impressed by the entourage which accompanied Hitler. It was rumoured that the mother of Horst Wessel was among them. If true, this was increasing evidence of the ideological affinity between the two regimes. While Gillet was aware that Romans were not embracing Hitler wholeheartedly, he recognized the diplomatic importance of the visit in providing an opportunity to solidify the Axis. In his three years in Rome the international situation had mutated radically: 'Three years! Thirty-six months! What events in the interval!'⁵⁴ The significance of the visit was thus found in its timing, coming as it did in the midst of European events displaying the triumphant march of fascism.

Another French observer was even more explicit in this respect. Viator, writing in the pages of the *Revue de Paris*, was certain that Hitler's visit marked a significant step toward closer friendship between the two regimes.⁵⁵ While no formal agreements had been signed, Viator reminded his readers that this old-fashioned diplomacy was not practised by totalitarian states. For Viator, the spectacular success of the visit rendered appeasement efforts by Paris and London more difficult, as Italy and Germany appeared to be marching as one toward war. This impression was confirmed a few days after the conclusion of the visit in a speech given by Mussolini in Genoa, where he spoke of a common bloc between the two peoples.

Aside from impressing foreign opinion, the visit served as a catalyst for developments within Italy, especially with respect to the two institutions which caused a thorn in the fascist side: the church and the monarchy. Fascism aimed to be the new faith radiating from the Eternal City, but in doing so it was bound to clash with that other faith inextricably woven into the Roman cityscape: Christianity. In order to spread the new religion of fascism, the old faith had to be replaced.⁵⁶ In 1922, Mussolini envisioned fascism conquering Rome in the same manner as Christianity had conquered it in late antiquity.⁵⁷ The presence of the Catholic Church in Rome was both an inspiration and a challenge to the fascist dictator. It was an inspiration because it showed how Rome could become the centre of a new universal political faith; and a challenge because of the strained relationship between the church and both regimes in 1938.⁵⁸

53 Gillet, 'Hitler à Rome', op. cit., 670.

54 Ibid., 670.

55 Viator, 'Hitler en Italie', *Revue de Paris* (1 June 1938), 639–45.

56 On fascism as a 'political religion', see Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, op. cit.

57 Benito Mussolini, 'L'Azione e la dottrina fascista dinanzi alle necessità storiche della nazione', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 21 September 1922, 226.

58 After the signing of the Lateran Accords in 1929, Mussolini had claimed that Rome was responsible for making Christianity into a universal religion. Without Rome, argued Mussolini,

Since the release of *Mit brennender Sorge* (With Burning Sorrow) in March 1937, the Vatican and Nazi Germany had been engaged in a 'cold war', while the relationship between the fascist regime and the Vatican had been rocky since the dispute over Catholic Action in 1931.⁵⁹ Mussolini and Hitler shared a barely concealed antipathy towards Christianity in general, and the Catholic Church in particular. While visiting the Diocletian Baths Museum, Hitler pointed out an early Christian sarcophagus, exclaiming that Christianity had been the world's first Bolshevism that had used Rome to become universal while at the same time destroying the city.⁶⁰

The Hitler visit had immediately raised tensions when Pope Pius XI announced his intention of leaving the city for the duration of the visit, literally turning off the lights of the Vatican. In the months preceding the visit, the Vatican, through its Secretary of State Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, expressed a desire to set up a meeting between Hitler and the Pope. The Germans refused, arguing that the purpose of the visit was an ideological one and that a meeting would be 'impossible'.⁶¹ In order to smooth things over the Italian government had attempted to mediate, but this effort was half-hearted and accomplished little.

Acknowledging the vexed relations with the Vatican, Hitler's Roman itineraries studiously ignored the Christian heritage of the city. Not mentioned once in the official guide was the dome of St Peter's, even though Hitler's car passed close to it on several occasions. In fact, very few churches made it into the tour guide and the few that did were there only for artistic, not religious, reasons. Hitler did not visit the interior of any church in Rome except for the Pantheon, converted to a church and a mausoleum for the royal family. All this did not go unnoticed, as the thick tension between the Nazi regime and the Papacy was obvious to all observers. 'One could enter any parish', wrote Louis Gillet 'and listen to the long prayers of the rosary offered in reparation of this outrage.'⁶² The Quirinal Palace, where Hitler stayed, was also full of Christian imagery. Now the residence of the king, the Quirinale had been, before 1870, a Roman residence of the Pope. Religious paintings hung on the walls of Hitler's apartments, leading Gillet to write gleefully in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* that it

Christianity would have remained a Palestinian 'sect'. Benito Mussolini, 'Il Discorso di Mussolini alla Camera' (13 maggio 1929), in P. Scoppola (ed.), *La Chiesa e il Fascismo. Documenti e Interpretazioni* (Bari 1971), 207–9.

59 In this encyclical, Pope Pius XI denounced what he perceived as violations of the Concordat signed between the Vatican and the Reich in 1933. The encyclical was published in German and proclaimed to German parishioners in the spring of 1937. The impact caused a deep rift in the relations between the two states. On the problematic relations between the Vatican and the fascist regime, especially in the days of the Hitler visit, see D.A. Binchy, *Church and State in Fascist Italy* (London 1970), 658–63. On the crisis of 1931 over Catholic Action, see Arturo Carlo Jemolo, *Chiesa e Stato in Italia* (Turin 1977), 183–310.

60 Bianchi Bandinelli, *Hitler e Mussolini*, op. cit., 27.

61 DDI, Ott. Ser., Vol. 8: 'Il Consigliere dell'Ambasciata a Berlino, Magistrati, al Ministro degli Esteri, Ciano', (15 marzo 1938), 380–1.

62 Gillet, 'Hitler à Rome', op. cit., 683.

was 'the revenge of piety on paganism'.⁶³ In a caption of a photograph showing Hitler, Mussolini, and the king waving from a balcony of the palace, *Life* magazine noted the large statues of SS Peter and Paul on the balustrade. While this Christian symbolism served as a counterpoint to the 'pagan' character of the fascist regimes, they also sent out the message that Hitler was following in the footsteps of the Christian missionaries. Just as the Christians had appropriated many pagan symbols of ancient Rome, these new pagans were appropriating Christian imagery.

The Quirinal Palace not only reminded Hitler of the city's Christian heritage; it also served as a constant reminder of a more immediate problem — the monarchy. In later years, Hitler remarked on the sour note provided by the king and the aristocracy during the Italian visit.⁶⁴ Hitler was never comfortable in the king's presence and he was contemptuous of the courtiers.⁶⁵ Hitler's entourage in turn let their distaste for the monarchy be known. Von Ribbentrop told Ciano, for example, that the only positive thing the Weimar Republic had ever done was to dispense with the monarchy. The monarchy, after all, was a 'mouldy' institution, which disliked revolutionary regimes like the fascist one and 'parvenus' like Hitler.⁶⁶ Even the higher officials in the nazi entourage showed their annoyance at the king's presence. Pointing at the throne in the Quirinal Palace, Goebbels told Ciano that the king was 'too small' to occupy it, while Rudolf Hess and Heinrich Himmler likened the atmosphere of the palace to an 'old film set' when compared with the 'air of revolution' sweeping through Palazzo Venezia.⁶⁷ This disdain did not pass unnoticed in the Italian court, which took offence at how female consorts of nazi officials refused to bow to royalty, and that Germans seemed to know nothing about Italy except Mussolini.⁶⁸

The presence of the king was a discordant note in an otherwise triumphant fascist spectacle. Writing years later as the head of the Italian Social Republic, Mussolini recalled the visit as decisive in revealing the strained workings of the 'diarchy' in the Italian state. Remembering how difficult it was to establish protocol for the visit, Mussolini took comfort in the fact that the 'Führer intended to visit the Duce's Rome above all'.⁶⁹ For Mussolini, the most difficult thing to swallow was the ride he took through the jagged and narrow back streets of the working-class Testaccio quarter after having greeted Hitler at the Ostiense station, while Hitler and the king rode triumphantly into the centre of Rome via the regime's boulevards. The royal party's refusal to salute the fascist flag at the military parade on the Via dei Trionfi came as a further insult

63 Ibid., 676.

64 Hitler, *Table Talk*, op. cit., 268–9.

65 Coming out of the opera in Naples, Hitler was embarrassed to be seen next to the king, who was in full military regalia, while he wore a tuxedo. See Kershaw, op. cit., 98.

66 Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., 132–3.

67 Ibid., 134.

68 Luigi Federzoni, *Italia di ieri. Per la storia di domani* (Milano 1967), 235.

69 Benito Mussolini, *Storia di un anno* (Florence 1984), 127.

to the Duce in front of his guests. The regime had hoped that the Hitler visit would put the king in the Duce's shadow, in the same manner in which the memory of the Habsburgs had been erased during Hitler's triumphal entrance into Vienna in March.⁷⁰

The tensions between the nazis and the court threatened to turn the visit into a diplomatic catastrophe. Reading Ciano's diary accounts gives the impression that, far from re-creating the Roman Empire at its peak, the visit resembled Fellini's *Satyricon*. Behind the scenes of the spectacle, Hitler's stay at the Quirinal Palace was marred by insinuations and rumours of his bizarre needs and possible drug use. Ciano believed that the king was spreading tall tales about his unwanted guest in order to undermine the impact of the visit.⁷¹ Giuseppe Bottai wrote in his diary that these series of gossip and breaches of protocol, while not important in and of themselves, could give rise to serious problems inherent in the awkward constitution of the fascist state.⁷²

Whatever the truth of these allegations, the fascist regime began to move against the monarchy in the months following the visit. Magregor Knox has argued that the progressive radicalization of the regime in the late 1930s entailed the undermining of the monarchy. Nazi Germany was increasingly the model the fascist regime looked toward. Giuseppe Bottai remarked in his diary in July 1938 that 'Nazi Germany appears to have become the benchmark for our fascist faith. A trip to Germany is a feather-in-cap for party functionaries hoping to advance.'⁷³ As early as June, Bottai wrote that the 'problem of the relationship between king and Duce has regained a certain vogue'.⁷⁴ This trend was also noticed by monarchist and fascist sympathizers outside the government. Luigi Federzoni, a monarchist and former fascist minister, became increasingly disillusioned with the regime in 1938 when it began moving against the monarchy.⁷⁵ Undoubtedly, Hitler's presence in Rome in May aggravated already difficult relationships within fascist Italy, especially with the crown and the Pope.

Conclusion

On one of Hitler's final days in Rome, he was treated to a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* at the Foro Mussolini. Wagner was Hitler's favourite composer and the theorist of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or 'total art'; a fitting metaphor for the Hitler visit.⁷⁶ In seven days, the nazi leader was treated to a comprehensive picture of fascist Italy which included religious spectacle, art, and

70 DDI, Ott. Ser., Vol. 8: 'Rochira to Ciano' (2 aprile 1938), 507–8.

71 Ciano, *Diario*, op. cit., 134.

72 Giuseppe Bottai, ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Diario 1935–1944* (Milan 1997), 124.

73 Ibid., 123–4.

74 Ibid., 122.

75 Federzoni, *Italia da ieri*, op. cit., 222–38.

76 On the importance of *Gesamtkunstwerk* see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring. The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto 1989), 24–5.

war, surrounded by the Italian landscape. Meticulously designed to appeal to Hitler's preferences as an artist *manqué*, the visit followed the tradition of the German artist-intellectual going south for spiritual and intellectual nourishment.

Hitler's visit to Italy was more than a spring holiday, though. It was designed to send a message to the rest of the world about the character and destiny of fascism. Coming as it did in a triumphant moment in fascist history, the visit reinforced the notion of fascism as the *avant-garde* of political movements. The trip was designed as an exposition of the movement, beginning with Hitler's train journey as a metaphor for the new friendship between nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The Roman portion of the tour highlighted the works of the regime in the Eternal City, especially the roads built and the ancient ruins revealed. Fascism's remaking of Rome found an apotheosis in the days of the visit.

The lack of any diplomatic agreement was negated by the spectacle of the visit. One observer aware of this was the Italian-Jewish antifascist Max Ascoli. Born in Ferrara, a centre of *squadrismo* before 1922, Ascoli understood better than most the real nature of fascism. In 1938, Ascoli published *Fascism for Whom?*. Written as a warning to those sceptics who denied the existence of international fascism, Ascoli's book emphasized the Hitler visit as evidence that, even if the people of Germany and Italy had little stomach for an alliance, the Axis was bound to hold because the 'two regimes understand each other'.⁷⁷ When the fascists did insist on diplomatic principles, wrote Ascoli, it was only for the sake of destroying those principles. The real impact of the visit, and of Mussolini's visit to Germany the previous September, was found in Mussolini's implementation of the goose-step or *passo romano* and Hitler's new-found desire to rebuild Berlin in the image of Rome.⁷⁸

The Hitler visit of 1938 showed that something profound, beyond the personalities of its leaders, united the two regimes. In those seven days in May of 1938, nazi Germany and fascist Italy found each other and recognized in one another a kindred spirit. Consecrated amidst the ruins of Rome was the slowly evolving friendship between the two countries. The visit has been largely ignored as a catalyst for bringing the regimes closer together, since it emphasized the similarities rather than the differences between nazism and fascism. Regardless of the mechanics of diplomacy or of superficial differences between the two regimes, the visit sent clear messages that the two regimes shared a deep affinity.⁷⁹ Using Rome as an altar, the ideologies were sacralized through a series of ceremonies.

77 Max Ascoli and Arthur Feiler, *Fascism for Whom?* (New York 1938), 25.

78 Ibid., 25.

79 In a recent article, Hans Maier has noted that the focus has been on differences for so long that we no longer have a consensus on what the dictatorships had in common. Hans Maier, 'Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships: Totalitarianism and "Political Religions"', in H. Maier (ed.), *Totalitarianism and Political Religions*, Vol. 1: *Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships* (London 2004), 199.

Perhaps the most perceptive observer of this deep identification between the two regimes forged in the 1938 visit was the French thinker Simone Weil. In 1939, Weil wrote that 'Hitlerian Germany resembled not the ancient Germans, but ancient Rome'.⁸⁰ If true, then the fascist regime, which had exalted *romanità* as its own tradition, had brought nazi Germany back to its true origins in the midst of the ancient ruins of Rome, thus setting it off on its future destructive path.

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80 Simone Weil, 'Quelques réflexions sur les origines de l'Hitlerisme', *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 2 (Paris 1989), 176.