

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Fascist transnationalism during the occupation of Albania (1939–43)

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### Abstract

This article links the study of transnational and imperial fascism in the context of the Italian occupation of Albania by examining how Italian authorities sought to turn Albanians abroad into assets rather than liabilities. Organising and monitoring Albanians occurred through conferences, youth institutions and consular activities. Studying such concrete contacts and negotiations allows us to explore the practical issues latent in expanding fascist political subjectivity in transnational and imperial contexts. On the one hand, Italians hoped to verse Albanians in a fascist identity by using existing organisational strategies while silencing or converting potential anti-Italian critics. On the other, many Albanians expressed and offered support for these Italian efforts, though with reservations and conditions, raising questions as to what it meant to be an Albanian nationalist and/or fascist in the years of occupation. The Albanian case therefore contributes to our understanding of the tensions inherent in ‘universalising’ fascism for colonial subjects.

**Keywords:** Albania; fascism; imperialism; Italy; transnationalism

### Introduction

When the Italian Fascist regime occupied Albania in April 1939, it quickly extended its sovereign claims to Albanians living and travelling abroad. In doing so, it borrowed from an existing panoply of ideas and practices given shape by state policy towards Italians living abroad. Just as the regime sought to organise emigrant Italians through fascist institutions and employ them as instruments of soft power, so too did it seek to exercise control and influence over Albanians abroad. In short, this ‘transnational Albania’ – a collection of those studying, travelling, working and living outside their territorial nation-state – was a central target of Fascist supervision. Albanians responded to this attention in a variety of ways, including outright opposition, hesitant negotiation and enthusiastic co-operation. This article will explore the relationship between the Fascist state and emigrant and travelling Albanians, which allows us to think through questions of fascist imperialism and universalism while also making a contribution towards integrating colonial subjects into the broader history of Italian policy towards emigrants.

The Italian occupation of Albania (1939–43), an understudied imperial project, differed in significant ways from the occupation of other Italian colonies. While Ethiopian and

Libyan rights were restricted on racial grounds, the Albanians were deemed Aryan – a decision which justified the maintenance of Albanian state institutions and the open encouragement of an Albanian national identity. As Davide Rodogno has argued, this ‘Albanian model’ was meant to serve as a basis for future imperial policy while also making Italian imperialism distinct from its liberal and Nazi competitors (2003, 84–88). Although this approach only shifted the ideological grounds of Italian superiority into the language of development, culture and civilisation, it still blurred the lines between imperial inclusivity and exclusivity. As Claudio Fogu has recently argued, fascism oscillated between two visions of national identity projected towards the Mediterranean, which he calls ‘imperium’ and ‘emporion’. Whereas the former proposed that Italy had a historical right and destiny to impose its civilisation and national interests on the Mediterranean region, the latter located Italy in a mutual ‘net’ of relations that resisted narrow ideas of ethnic or territorial nationality (2020, 6–7, 181–234). Italian treatment of and negotiations with ‘transnational’ Albania highlight how the needs of ‘imperium’ sometimes opened up forms of ‘emporion’, even if these were cynical and self-serving. Yet, we should not discount the sincere desire of many fascists to rethink Italian identity, and perhaps Albanian identity as well, along imperial lines. For Emilio Gentile, the long-latent privileging of empire over nation among fascist intellectual circles became openly assertive starting in 1936. Despite the fact that Italian ‘universal’ imperialism posited the Italian nation as a hegemonic and civilising force, this shift from nation to empire, Gentile argues, significantly weakened fascism’s appeal to Italians (2009, 171–182, 198–208). But could it appeal to certain Albanians?

This raises the question of the universality of fascism. To what degree was Italian fascism employed by others as model, inspiration or normative guide for a new kind of politics? As Federico Finchelstein argues, many far-right interwar political actors from outside Western Europe were not pseudo-fascists who fell short of an ideal European standard. Rather, these radical rightists articulated local variants of a universal exchange of ideas and practices revolving around political violence, the establishment of an alternative to liberalism and socialism, and the protection of a defined community (2017, 53–66). The intersection of fascist state expansionism and fascist transnational universalism had the potential to create deeply ambiguous relationships between rightist political actors on a global level. For instance, Deborah Paci has examined how Corsican and Maltese elites sought to protect insular cultural and political sovereignty from the French and British by borrowing from fascist discourses on Mediterranean culture and history. Yet when confronted with fascist irredentist claims on their islands, these elites turned back to Paris and London (2015, 215–225). In short, fascist ideology could be articulated and adapted to many local conditions, and these could either flow with or against the current of Italian regime goals.

The case of Albania is a promising field to further explore this issue. Italians argued that fascism as ideology and organisation would be the key to the national development of Albania. While relations between Italians and Albanian nationalists soon broke down over irreconcilable differences (Villari 2007, 163–167), Besnik Pula has argued that some Albanian nationalists were sincerely committed to working with Italy. While Pula focuses on Albanian intellectuals who articulated their nationalism within Italian imperialism through writings (2008), this study will explore their exchanges in localised and concrete circumstances. These exchanges reveal both how Italians sought to adapt fascist practices to imperial needs and how Albanians negotiated their liminal identity as relatively privileged yet still subservient members of the Italian empire.

Among the Albanians whom Italians sought to court, the importance of those living and working abroad must be stressed. By the Italian occupation, Albanian nationalism had long been as much a transnational as a national phenomenon, with major nationalist

thinkers and activists operating outside Albania (Fischer and Schmitt 2022, 8–9, 125–142; Vickers 1999, 44–48, 95–96). Significant Albanian emigrant communities in places like the Americas and the Balkans, and in Italy, constituted a considerable political force whose influence in formulating modern notions of national identity provided an incentive for Italian control and supervision. In short, emigrants and exiles had been historically critical in recent Albanian history and Italian authorities understood the political potential of these individuals and communities. Furthermore, Italian authorities were eager to identify and counter antifascist activities among these Albanians. Study of Italian relations with Albanian emigrants is currently lacking in the historiography. Bernd Fischer refers to the Italian failure to bring emigrant Albanians into the Albanian Fascist Party (1999, 46), but a closer look at the documents shows that the Italians did meet with qualified successes.

Examining Italian policy towards these Albanians also allows us to link imperial history to the rich historiography on fascism and Italian emigrants. These studies have advanced our knowledge of how radical fascist activists and diplomatic functionaries aspired to foster fascist organisations and consciousness among emigrants, maintain Italian national identity abroad and wield Italian emigrant groups and individuals for soft power purposes (Franzina and Sanfilippo 2003; Pretelli 2010). As this article demonstrates, Italian officials applied these lessons to Albanians outside Albania. In doing so, we can learn about the ways in which existing fascist practices and institutions were adapted to imperial contexts. Of course, this entailed differences. Whereas fascists portrayed their movement to emigrant Italians as one that represented an existing national identity, making fascists out of Albanians posed a trickier challenge. These Albanians had to be convinced that it was in their interest for their nation to be integrated into a foreign empire. As objects of extraordinary Italian attention, their various responses take on a special significance for understanding how Albanians navigated the relations between their own national and private identities, the Italian imperial state and fascist ideology.

In order to examine these relations, this study relies largely on documents from the *Sottosegretariato di stato per gli Affari Albanesi* (Under-Secretary for Albanian Affairs, SSAA), which operated under the Italian foreign ministry. Headed by Zenone Benini, the SSAA was responsible for, among other things, Albania's foreign affairs, press, propaganda and tourism. As such, the SSAA was a critical instrument for aligning policy in Albania with Italy's broader expansionist aims. Although this limits our view to a state-based perspective, a critical reading of the documents provides enough glimpses into policy flaws and Albanian responses to serve the purposes of the central arguments. Given the relatively undeveloped historiography of Italy's occupation of Albania, a short chronological summary of Italian–Albanian relations precedes a synchronic examination of Italian attempts to make Albanians fascist and to encourage a nationalism suited to Italy's imperial goals.

### Albania and Italy: 1912–43

Despite a declaration of independence from the Ottoman empire in 1912 and the promises of the Wilsonian order after the First World War, Albania's path to self-determination was difficult. First, the territorial state did not encompass all Albanians, many of whom lived in other Balkan states. Second, significant internal issues loomed large: Albania was an extremely poor country, with half of all arable land in the hands of a conservative Muslim landowning elite. Furthermore, religious, regional and linguistic differences contributed to differing communal priorities and identities (Fischer and Schmitt 2022, 181–182; Vickers 1999, 101–102). In the early 1920s, the large landowners resisted the efforts of the reformer and anti-Italian politician Fan Noli to engage in drastic social and

economic changes, opting to support the authoritarian and pro-Italian Ahmed Zog (Pula 2008, 580). Ultimately, Zog secured his own power and cast aside opposition, becoming king of Albania in 1928.

From 1928 to 1939, Zog ruled Albania with Italian support, though their relationship was frequently tense. Zog's modernisation agenda required Italian assistance while his nationalist ideology and personal interests inspired him to resist excessive Italian influence. Zog's Italian-backed reforms brought moderate economic progress that favoured Italian interests. Broader social reforms to challenge the largely Muslim landowners were rejected by Zog, and by his Italian advisers. The existing social tensions, exacerbated by Italian-dominated economic development and Zog's authoritarian regime, necessitated further reforms in the late 1930s. With Italian blessing, Zog began to introduce institutions modelled after those of the Fascist regime, most notably the youth organisation *Enti Kombëtar*, which was run by Italian advisers (Fischer 1999, 7; Pula 2008, 575; Vickers 1999, 118–130).

Despite Italy's hegemonic position in Albania, Zog's regime was still independent enough to concern Mussolini and his foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano. Hitler's seizure of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 presaged more direct German influence in the Balkans and heightened the Italian sense of urgency in securing total control over Albania. On 7 April, Italian troops disembarked in Albania, facing little opposition, while Zog fled the country (Fischer 1999, 8–25). Days later, a collection of pro-Italian Albanians under Ciano's guidance granted the country to Vittorio Emanuele III, who subsequently ruled through a viceroy, Francesco Jacomoni. This odd legal situation ostensibly asserted the continued integrity and sovereignty of the Albanian nation while effectively rendering it a protectorate. The Albanians enjoyed their own government and ministries, although decisions were subject to Italian approval. Albanian ministers were supervised and ultimately subservient to Italian permanent advisers (Villari 2007, 159–160). This legal duality was mirrored by an ideological one. With control over the country, Italians felt comfortable encouraging Albanian nationalism – though within certain limits. Italians hoped that developing parallel versions of their core fascist institutions, most notably an Albanian Fascist Party, would forge an Albanian nationalist subjectivity favourable to membership in an Italian empire. Consequently, the Italians aimed to generate consensus and support from Albanian nationalists. This policy allowed Albanian nationalists a certain leeway in pursuing their goals within the context of the Italian occupation and the fascist ideology it intended to export.

Jacomoni and company aimed to straddle several possibly conflicting interests while governing Albania. First, Albania was an imperial possession meant to strengthen Italy's economic and geostrategic position. Second, the Italian administration would highlight the universalism of imperial fascism to Albanians and foreign observers. In this sense, Albania was a test site for what Reto Hofmann has called fascism's alleged ability to foster capitalist development with internal social peace through a disciplined politics of nationalism (2017). Third, Italy would have to balance a plethora of Albanian interest groups. Large landowners were embraced rather than erased through land redistribution. Without a socio-economic revolution, many poor and rural Albanians would have to content themselves with the 'development' typical of interwar imperialism – a higher possibility of accessing education, transportation infrastructure and medical assistance (Fischer 1999, 62–70). The nationalist elites and middle classes willing to work with Italy were split between those who had opposed Zog and those who had supported him. Italy tried to appeal to both, which created inevitable tensions. More radical nationalists also hoped to leverage the Italian empire into Albanian irredentist expansionism at the expense of Balkan neighbours. Upon entry into the Second World War, Italy sought to justify its own expansionist agenda through Albanian claims while ensuring that a 'Greater

Albania' coincided with Italian interests. Finally, Albanian nationalists increasingly chafed at their institutional lack of power and poor quotidian treatment by Italians, as well as at the corruption and incompetence of Italian officials tasked with running their country.

At first, Italy pursued these goals by investing heavily in Albanian modernisation while restructuring Albanian society along fascist lines. But these policies lasted only 14 months before war significantly reduced Italian investment capacity. The invasion of Greece in October 1940 infamously unravelled, heightening distrust between Italians and Albanians. By the time Germany bailed Italy out in April 1941, Jacomoni was prepared to concede more power to the nationalists. Yet these reforms were too little too late, as all but the most loyal Albanians had lost any faith they had in Italy. Nationalist and communist groups emerged as Italian authority declined, ultimately leading to the Italian exit from the country in September 1943 (Villari 2007, 163–168). Despite the Italian failure, we should not analyse the occupation teleologically as destined to end with the triumph of Albanian sovereignty. Albanian actors had to keep in mind several possible futures – and Italy played a considerable role in many of these. Negotiation was as important as resistance in these years. Now we can turn to examples of these negotiations over Albanian political subjectivity in concrete and specific transnational cases.

### Conferences and travelling intellectuals

While much has been made of the cultural politics of fascist exhibitions (Fogu 2003, 184–189; Stone 1998, 128–133), regime-sponsored or -supported conferences have received less attention. Yet, as Francesca Cavarocchi has pointed out, conferences organised by institutions directly or indirectly controlled by the regime in foreign nations were a key means of propaganda. These conferences often utilised Italian intellectuals located in or travelling abroad (Cavarocchi 2010, 167–184). Conferences were also frequently sites of transnational intellectual contact between rightists eager to articulate claims about European culture outside liberal and socialist discourses (Martin 2016, 7–11). In the Albanian case, conferences were held in Italy and Albania to foster intellectual contacts between the two nations and formulate new forms of imperial consciousness.

Italy was no exception to the interwar trend of expanding imperial awareness in the metropole. However, fascism gave this emphasis more direct state support. Mussolini's definition of empire as being a mental capacity to command went hand in hand with his desire to 'remake' or '*bonificare*' (reclaim) Italians through empire and war (Ben-Ghiat 2001, 4–6). For imperial bureaucrats working to justify Italian rule in Albania, there was a clear need to make good the claims that annexation was going to create a fraternal union in which Italians would become more cognisant and appreciative of Albanian history, culture and desires. Imperial consciousness of Albania therefore aimed to educate Italians and Albanians about each other, albeit through approved themes and narratives.

The most notable attempt to familiarise Italians with Albania through conferences occurred in the spring of 1942, when the Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista (National Institute for Fascist Culture, INCF) sponsored a series of lectures by Albanians in cities with a major INCF section.<sup>1</sup> The lecture topics aimed to present Albania in three lights: as part of an economic and political imperial system led by Italy; as a nation already historically shaped by Italy; and as an authentic culture in need of protection.<sup>2</sup> Critically, all of these themes emphasised Italy in one way or another, despite being communicated by Albanians. But how successful were the conferences in practice?

Despite the outlay of 40,000 lire (about \$65,000 today) for the conferences,<sup>3</sup> problems abounded. Jovan Adam, an Albanian working at the ministry of the Albanian national economy and scheduled to present on the ancient Roman road through the Balkans, the Via Egnatia, preferred to let an Italian student speak as a surrogate since he was

uncomfortable with Italian.<sup>4</sup> The Brindisi INCF member tasked with accommodating Adam expressed frustration that he was taking advantage of the Italians' generous hospitality.<sup>5</sup> In Ferrara, the writer Filip Fishta disappointed his audience by failing to connect the theme of Italian interest in Albanian culture to current events.<sup>6</sup> Even the more explicitly political theme of 'Albanian Fascism' presented by Vangjel Koça in Viterbo, and attended by local fascist hierarchs and members, was deemed 'monotone and of little interest'.<sup>7</sup> Some of those responsible for the organisation of the conferences viewed them as a success and looked forward to another cycle in the autumn,<sup>8</sup> but Jacomoni recognised the flaws. In the future, he urged that audiences be more inclined to the subjects and promised that his staff would choose which presenters would go to Italy.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the events focused solely on Albania, national conferences had to make space for Albania. Just weeks after the Italian occupation, the president of the Comitato Nazionale Italiano per le Arti Popolari (Italian National Committee for Popular Arts, CNIAP) invited the Albanian minister of education, Ernest Koliqi, to the committee's September 1940 congress.<sup>10</sup> The theme of the congress, following the desires of the Fascist Party, was the unity of arts and culture in the 'Italian seas'. Redefining Italy as a Mediterranean nation in preparation for the regime's broader geopolitical goals had cultural implications. And with the annexation of Albania, the culture and history of that country would have to be interpreted in this light. The CNIAP itself was not strictly a Fascist institution, and many of its members hoped to reconcile their anti-modern rural and regionalist interests with the centralising and nationalist goals of the state. By highlighting how a supposed Roman Catholic core unified the disparate regional cultures of Italy, the CNIAP aimed to maintain its original goals while placating the regime. This reading of popular culture also enabled the CNIAP to align itself with fascist imperialism. Areas such as Malta, Corsica, Dalmatia and Albania were also imbued with a Roman identity, as the argument went (Cavazza 1987, 110–112). In the case of Albania, the study of 'folk' culture would therefore appeal to conservative Albanian nationalists in search of traditional and popular identities as well as to Italian imperialists who hoped to rebuild a community of nations historically linked to a Roman centre.

The circulation of Albanian intellectuals and nationalists in Italy to raise awareness about Albania echoes strategies already employed by the Fascist regime. As Tamara Colacicco has argued, Italian intellectuals in Great Britain aimed to generate pro-Italian and possibly pro-fascist sentiments among non-Italians while keeping contact with Italian emigrant communities (2018). Such soft power cultural politics thus aimed to shift perceptions and create personal bonds to Italy. Now, it was Albanian intellectuals drawing the attention of Italians to a combined Italian–Albanian heritage and to a 'Mediterranean' Italian consciousness. Their efforts demonstrate how imperial cultural politics were not just directed at Albania by Italians, but at Italians by Albanians as well, even if under close supervision.

### Albanian students in Italy

The Italian occupation of Albania not only opened up new avenues for imperial movements; it also altered existing arrangements. Visiting Albanian students and military officers had long been embedded in Italian institutions. Thanks to their contacts with family and friends both in Albania and abroad, Italian authorities viewed these communities as possible vectors of pro- and anti-Italian propaganda. Students were especially subject to close scrutiny. In late April 1939, the pro-Italian Albanian nationalist Mustafa Kruja advised that these students were opposed to Italy's actions but could be swayed by intense and careful propaganda efforts.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, just before Kruja's warnings, three anti-Italian Muslim Albanian students argued with a pro-Italian Albanian at a café in Rome in front



of other Albanians.<sup>12</sup> Yet, a few weeks later, such opponents appeared to have softened. Furthermore, the Albanian students now considered joining the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (Fascist University Groups, GUF). Despite Italian offers of rewards, they had been reluctant to do so in the past, allegedly because of pressure from the Albanian legate in Rome.<sup>13</sup> The trend was similar in Padua, where informants alerted the Italians that Muslim Albanian students opposed the Italian occupation at first, due to their economic ties to Zog supporters. But, after a month, the students began to sympathise with Italian aims, partially due to public statements by Muslim leaders in Albania.<sup>14</sup>

Despite progress in soothing Albanian students, Italian authorities remained wary. The case of the 84 Albanian students residing in Turin is particularly instructive. These students were believed to be nationalists opposed to Zog's regime who hoped to see exiled Albanian nationalists return and wield power at the expense of Zog's supporters. Yet they were wary about Italian intentions and willingness to purge the former regime. More importantly, their contacts with both Albania and exile communities in Western Europe allegedly allowed them to pass on sensitive information on Italian troop movements to foreign journalists.<sup>15</sup> In mid-May 1939, shortly after the annexation of Albania, Mussolini visited Turin. The local prefect determined that the Albanian officers and students should be removed for the occasion. Yet doing so would reveal Italian distrust of Albanians and undermine their claims of respect. The question was then how to proceed with such a delicate matter. The answer was to send the students on a free trip to Italian-controlled Tripoli, a model of Italian imperialism under the rule of the charismatic Fascist hierarch Italo Balbo. Upon arrival, representatives of the government along with members of the GUF welcomed them. They toured Tripoli, one of Balbo's new settler villages, and the excavations of the Roman city of Sabratha.<sup>16</sup> Benini even asked the minister of education, Giuseppe Bottai, for a 15-day extension to the students' exam schedule.<sup>17</sup> Although the students understood the real reason for their 'pleasure' (*divertimento*) trip, they were reported to have eventually accepted.<sup>18</sup> The case of the Tripoli excursion exemplifies how fascist transnationalism could function practically. In this case, there was an attempt to police and regulate Albanians without resorting to forceful measures. Additionally, an Italian imperial possession was employed as a politically safe zone and propagandistic model for Albania's future as the Italians oddly combined a repressive measure with a curated appeal to Albanian youth.

If Albanian students in Italy were viewed with suspicion, those abroad appeared to pose a more serious threat, with those in Paris causing the most concern. With this in mind, the Albanian minister of national education, Koliqi, ordered that all Albanian university students abroad come to Italy to continue their studies for the 1939–40 school year. The resulting influx threatened to make the student communities less manageable, especially in Turin, which made room for students previously in France. In order to better monitor the students, Koliqi urged that they be assigned to universities in small cities.<sup>19</sup> Despite this order, Albanian informants told the Italians that many students in Paris refused to come to Italy. Furthermore, their loss of Albanian study grants had been offset by French state support.<sup>20</sup> Those who came to Turin or remained there appear to have tried to negotiate with the regime by December 1939. Support for Zog had declined, although many complained that certain fascist political appointees in Albania were notoriously corrupt. While an intelligence report stated that many of the students were willing to join the GUF, they hoped to do so as a separate Albanian section of the organisation. The author of the report supported this desire, since the Albanians had to express their national pride. The better students also allegedly urged some of their cohort to be sent to smaller universities, echoing Koliqi's concerns about surveillance. If this was the case, the students may have feared that subversive acts on the part of some could sour the Italian view of them all – especially given that the students felt they had to distance

themselves from pro-Zogist Albanian military officers in Turin.<sup>21</sup> Others outside Turin also hoped to come to terms with their new rulers. By February 1941, the 21 Albanian students in Perugia pleased local Italian authorities. They were involved with the GUF despite not having money for the uniforms required for official events. The students also complained that their GUF membership dues had not been reduced to ten lire, as they had been for Albanian students in other cities.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the Albanian students felt unsupported in their GUF membership speaks to both their willingness to work within fascist institutions and the weaknesses of those institutions in carrying out their task of incorporating Albanians into the imperial community.

### Albanian youth trips to Italy

Italian policy in Albania consistently borrowed from practices in Italy itself. A telling example of this was the extension of *colonie estive* (summer camps) to Albanian children. These camps had long been employed by the regime for two main purposes. The first was to strengthen its hold over the youth. Second, the camps aimed at therapeutic and prophylactic intervention, especially for working-class children. The regime continually expanded the programme. In 1939, over 800,000 Italian children participated in a camp. Italian children living abroad were also included – 15,000 of these attended camps in 1935 (Dogliani 2014, 181–182). Despite their questionable results, bringing emigrant Italian children to Italy, often for the first time, was a key component in the broader Italian attempt to maintain institutional supervision and ideological sympathy among Italians abroad (Pretelli 2010, 123–126). Albania offered an opportunity to expand the inclusion of emigrant Italians to an imperial population. Not only did the Italians immediately apply this programme to Albanians, but they did so ambitiously, sending 10,000 Albanian children to beach camps in Bari, Ancona, Rimini, Venice and Trieste in the summer of 1940. The goals were to teach Albanian children hygiene, elementary Italian, basic weapons training for boys and fascist songs while instilling a sense of pride through the wearing of uniforms.<sup>23</sup> The Italian representative in the Albanian Fascist Party, Piero Parini, argued that the programme was a success, highlighting the fact that the children came from all over Albania and served as local representatives of the benefits of Italian rule. According to Parini, the Albanian children looked like Italian fascist youth on the exterior.<sup>24</sup> For Parini, this was a start. Some Albanian parents also sent letters of thanks, including one signed by 22 parents from the village of Ocisti. While the official documents skew our view of these camps, an analysis of the records reveals some of the concerns raised by Italian administrators.

First, the camps had to adhere to the regime's religious policy in Albania. The main objective was to avoid upsetting Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims, and to highlight the fair treatment of the latter for an international audience of Muslims. To this end, planners ensured that three Orthodox priests and 11 Muslim officials were available to visit the camps. Of the children, 50 per cent were Muslim, 40 per cent Orthodox and 10 per cent Catholic, demonstrating that the regime did not use the camps to privilege Albania's Catholic minority. However, some Albanians were not convinced. A fascist inspector in Tirana warned that recruiters appeared to be placing an 'imposition' on families, thus inciting rumours that the Italians wanted to use the camps to convert Muslims to Catholicism.<sup>25</sup> The inspector's concern provides a glimpse into the potential pitfalls of how the regime's policies were culturally received.

The Orthodox and Muslim religious authorities who visited the camps did so together, although it was suggested that they be accompanied by an Albanian-speaking fascist. What particular measures were taken to respect religion are not outlined, though the Muslims assigned to the camps proposed that the children be given a special treat to



celebrate the evening holiday of Laylat al-Raghib.<sup>26</sup> The Vatican, however, was unhappy with the religious policy and demanded that the camps separate Catholic children from both their Muslim and Orthodox compatriots. All the administrators could say was that each group was given proper religious instruction.<sup>27</sup> When the Vatican insisted again that any future camps separate the children by religion, Benini urged that they be split up by camp rather than within individual camps. This would satisfy the Vatican while avoiding the appearance that the children had to be kept from interacting with one another. Parini argued that he would try but could not make promises, given time limitations.<sup>28</sup> This was all moot, as the plans to send another 10,000 children, as well as 2,000 Albanian members of fascist youth organisations, to Italy in the summer of 1940 were cancelled by Ciano just days before Italy's entry into the war.<sup>29</sup>

Some youth trips did go ahead on the eve of Mussolini's momentous decision. In March and May 1940, two groups of 200 students travelled to Italy for a brief tour. They were accompanied by a large number of teachers, with the minister of education Koliqi leading the first group. This group visited Bari, Florence and Naples under the guidance of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (Italian Lictor Youth, GIL) and was deemed a success for having shown the Albanian students both the regime's accomplishments and Italian goodwill towards their country. Interestingly, Jacomoni reported that 50 to 200 students in Scutari protested against 'alleged injustices' in how participants for the trip were chosen. According to the resident-general, this was a sign that Italy had won over many students.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, he did not describe what the specific complaints of the students were. Given the regime's suspicions of Albanian middle-class youth, we can also question Jacomoni's interpretation of this student 'strike'.

The second group, consisting of female students chaperoned by 23 middle-school teachers, spent ten days visiting Bari, Naples, Florence and Rome. Despite complaints that the teachers from Tirana were more interested in pursuing their own pleasures than watching the students, the officials responsible viewed the trip as a success.<sup>31</sup> Fortunately, an account from one of the participants, Meliha Çoçoli, provides a non-official view. Çoçoli describes her nervousness at the prospect of going to Italy for the first time and recounts their visit to the Albanian pavilion at the Mostra d'Oltremare (Overseas Exhibition). An important programmatic statement of the regime's expansionist aims, the exhibition had opened just two weeks before the arrival of the Albanian students. It would close a month later with the start of the war. The architecture of the pavilion recalled the Albanian *kulla* tower houses, while the exhibit on the inside stressed Italy's influence on Albanian history (L'Abbate and Moscardin 2017, 341–343). The directorate of the Albanian Fascist Party enjoyed their visit to the pavilion,<sup>32</sup> as did the young Çoçoli, who was particularly impressed by the sword and helmet of Skanderbeg, a fifteenth-century opponent of Ottoman expansion who served as a suitably pro-Italian national hero for Albanians. Her group also visited 'the quarter inhabited by the Abyssinians', though she did not remark upon her feelings about these other members of the Italian 'imperial community'. The welcome provided by Florentine students was appreciated, and in Rome she pointed to the 'grandiosity of the monumental buildings' and the zoological gardens as worthy of note. But these faded into the background when compared with their 'great fortune to be saluted by the Duce', presumably from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia. Upon seeing him, they fell into 'frenetic acclamations of "Duce! Duce!"'<sup>33</sup> Çoçoli's account highlights the value of these trips in encouraging young Albanians to personally bear witness to the modernity of Italy and to their own inclusion in its imperial programme. Finally, the young Albanian's trip culminated in her subsumption into the acclaiming crowd that was the model of fascist political subjectivity.

By bringing Albanian youth to Italy, the regime could showcase its institutions in their most developed forms. Since the implanting of fascist organisations in Albania itself had

only just started, the experience of Albanians in Italy served as a preview of what could be expected in the future. In this sense, Albanian youth visits mirrored the future-oriented time of the regime, though in an imperialist variant defined by lag. What Italy was, Albania would be. This also constituted a political promise to the most highly valued (and suspected) sector of the Albanian population – its student youth. The message was that the regime would particularly cultivate them as the new leaders of a fascist Albania. While more work must be done on studying Albanian youth during the Italian occupation, these trans-Adriatic crossings constitute an important aspect of youth–regime relations.

### Albanians abroad

On 3 June 1939, Albania's diplomatic sovereignty was transferred to the Italian foreign affairs ministry. One consequence of this was that the Italian state was now responsible for the protection and well-being of Albanian citizens residing in foreign states. By the 'express order' of Mussolini, these Albanians were to be treated as equals to Italians, with the same duties and rights to assistance.<sup>34</sup> These foreign Albanians constituted a potential liability for the regime – if they opposed the regime, they could fan the flames of anti-Italian sentiment in places as distant as Buenos Aires and Cairo. This was no new problem. Since the early 1920s, Italians living abroad had been organised through hundreds of *Fasci all'Estero* (Foreign Fasces) groups. Their purpose was to inculcate fascist values into emigrant Italians, turn such Italians into advocates for Italian national interests and advertise fascism as a universal political programme (Baldoli 2003, 1–5, 9). Italians hoped that by integrating Albanians into the existing network of institutions designed for Italians abroad, they could highlight the superiority of the new imperial order to an international audience.

Italian diplomatic officials were insistent on the value of treating Albanians as members of an expanded Italian body politic. In Yugoslavian Skopje, the Italian consul Roberto Venturini bragged that the distribution of food packets to indigent Albanian families highlighted 'fascist solidarity' and, more importantly, was received 'extremely favourably' by Albanians with Yugoslav citizenship.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the consul in Beirut favoured the carrot and the stick. An Albanian student at the American University 'showed himself remorseful' when denied subsidies for his anti-Italian comments among friends. The consulate also made sure to dispense largesse as propaganda 'to those friendly to us, especially Muslims'.<sup>36</sup> In Bucharest, where the regime feared various forms of transnational antifascist propaganda,<sup>37</sup> there were several techniques for keeping the Albanian community loyal to Italy. One was cultural – the consulate hoped to use a local Albanian choral group to perform Albanian songs at an event of the fascist leisure institution *Dopolavoro* (Afterwork). At the behest of Albanians leaders, the consul asked the SSAA for popular songs from Albanians living in Italy and for Albanian popular songs written after the Italian occupation.<sup>38</sup> Naturally, this absorption of culture into a fascist institution would ensure that 'popular' culture aligned with regime needs. Travelling Albanians also served to boost pro-Italian morale. In January 1940, two Albanians residing in Rome visited the Bucharest consulate, where they proclaimed their joy as Albanian patriots encouraged by the new regime. This gesture supposedly 'resonated' with the local Albanian community.<sup>39</sup>

The Albanians who assisted the Bucharest consulate were not alone. Convincing foreign Albanians to accept Italian sponsorship often required the support of mediating Albanians with pro-Italian sentiments. In this regard, the case of Albanians in Egypt is instructive. Home to a significant Italian population<sup>40</sup> and a burgeoning range of anticolonial nationalisms, Egypt was a prime target for fascist Mediterranean revisionism. An anti-Italian

Albanian community would certainly be a liability from an Italian perspective. Fortunately for the Italians, they had support from Albanians in ensuring the loyalty of this community. In Cairo, the Albanian community had its own state-recognised organisation led by a council. By December 1939, the local Italian consul, Saffi, was already working with pro-Italian Albanians to ensure that this body was run by likeminded community leaders. In particular, Saffi worked with the head of this community, the lawyer Carlo Dimitriu, to turn Albanians away from a certain Sula, the former Albanian state representative in Cairo. Saffi opened up the new Italian Dopolavoro centre for a meeting of Albanian community leaders, and after a short speech by Dimitriu, promised them access to the Casa d'Italia as a facility. Furthermore, Saffi reported that 'many' members of the community asked for the creation of an Albanian Fascio in Cairo.<sup>41</sup> For his efforts, the Italians gave Dimitriu a stipend of 70 Egyptian lire in the spring of 1940.<sup>42</sup>

Dimitriu also played a key role in founding the Albanian section of the Cairo Fascio on 23 March 1940, a date shared with the founding of the first Fascio in Milan in 1919. Saffi called it an 'auspicious coincidence for the destiny of Albania'. It is hard to tell whether such language points to an ideologically charged vision of universal fascism or of bombastic regime-speak, especially since the meeting took place in an Italian schoolroom. Also present was Don Lazer Shantoja, an Albanian nationalist Catholic priest then visiting Egypt. Here was another useful mediator between the Italians and the Albanian community. Saffi reported enthusiastically about Shantoja, whose goals were to strengthen the pro-Italian sentiments of those already sympathetic to Italy while convincing those still opposed by countering propaganda from Zog loyalists 'too complacently tolerated by the local government'. At the founding of the Albanian Fascio section, Shantoja enumerated the accomplishments of the fascist regime in Albania.

More importantly, Shantoja also served as a mediator between the Italians and the Albanian students at the prestigious Islamic Al-Azhar University. According to Saffi, these students, breathing the air of Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, were the most radical anti-Italian Albanians. Yet Shantoja was able to meet and 'convince' them, although this curt description does beg suspicions. Furthermore, Shantoja promised to talk to Muslims in Tirana responsible for providing scholarships for such students. They would be encouraged to reward pro-Italian students. Finally, Saffi used this potential opening with the Al-Azhar students to start a House of Albanian Students, which would help them materially and allow the consulate to better 'control and guide them'.<sup>43</sup> Again, gathering Albanians into Italian-sponsored organisations was the key step in creating a fascist political identity. Yet there are signs that Albanians in Egypt sought to maintain a degree of autonomy. A short note from March 1940 indicates that, when the Albanians of Alexandria were organised into a Fascio, their request to meet outside the Casa d'Italia was rejected.<sup>44</sup>

In the absence of documents, it is unclear whether Albanians were appreciative of Italian sponsorship and, if so, for what reasons. But we can at least explore the nature of the Italian integration model in these communities. As Dylan Riley has argued, Italian fascism succeeded when it could build on civil society foundations (2019, 51–71). This same process was replicated among Italian organisations abroad, most notably in the case of the Dante Alighieri Society, which was subordinated to the regime in 1931 (Cavarocchi 2010, 130–140). Furthermore, Dopolavoro leisure sections abroad, of which there were 332 by 1936, allowed Italians to participate in less explicitly political organisations (Pretelli 2010, 39–40). Italy employed these strategies to recalibrate emigrant Albanian civil society along imperial lines. We have already seen such integration attempts in Egypt. Similarly, in Sofia, the local Albanian Society was dissolved and reconstituted as an Albanian Dopolavoro section, even remaining in the same place.<sup>45</sup> It is also worth noting that this Dopolavoro section opened on 23 April, the 'Birth of Rome' holiday,

which was important in the fascist calendar. Although in Sofia, as elsewhere, Albanians were not integrated directly into the local Italian institutions, they were symbolically placed within fascism's celebratory time. Also, 50 Albanians in and around Sofia joined their own section of the local Fascio and 'participated with lively enthusiasm in all of the local fascist activities'.<sup>46</sup>

Yet differences in motivations clearly existed. Days after Italy's entry into the Second World War, the fiduciary of the Sofia section, Jani Spiro, sent a message to the Italian legation, asserting that the Albanians of Bulgaria were faithful to Italy and ready to serve. However, the particular phrasing Spiro employed reveals that Italian imperialism was a vehicle for Albanian irredentism. Albania, in Spiro's view, would 'participate in the struggle for the liberation from inadmissible hegemonies that have created unfair borders that separate entire regions from the fatherland [*Patria*]'. Before Italy even initiated military operations in the Balkans that directly opened the possibility of Albanian border revisions, Spiro had already declared that this was the real war that the Albanians thought worth fighting. The 'greatness of the Italian empire' was a means to a Greater Albania.<sup>47</sup> By December 1940, when Albanians were fighting alongside Italians in Greece, Spiro was even more assertive. When the Albanian community gathered at the Casa d'Italia to celebrate the new fascist-backed Albanian independence day, the Festival of the Flag, Spiro asked that a message be sent to the Duce and king that they were 'ready to spill their blood for the greatness of Albania and the empire'. Such claims were not the only way in which Albanians could insist that Italian narratives become imperial. Just days before, members of the Albanian community deposited a wreath at the monument for the Italian dead of the First World War in Sofia's military cemetery. But they insisted that this gesture was 'meant to also honour the fallen Italian and Albanian soldiers on the Greek front'. A highly nationalist ritual had now taken on more imperialist and inclusive connotations, as the Italian dead of the First World War now stood as forerunners of an Italian and Albanian expansionist programme.<sup>48</sup>

There were many ambiguities at the heart of the Italian attempt to organise Albanians abroad. By taking over existing civil society foundations and offering modest assistance, Italian consuls provided material incentives for Albanians to engage with the new regime. Pro-Italian Albanian nationalists and community leaders also offered their support in encouraging a new Albanian imperial and fascist political subjectivity. Yet, these communities also had access to competing narratives and perspectives on fascism. And attempts to make Albanians fascist assumed that they would understand and appreciate entering fascist notions of time and history. When Albanians did publicly embrace fascism, they did so as nationalists holding Italian claims to account.

## Conclusion

The Italian occupation of Albania may have been inspired by the usual colonial motivations – national prestige, access to resources and geopolitical competition. However, the administration of Albania and Albanians necessarily took on specifically fascist characteristics. Albania was a testing ground for the universality of fascist imperialism. Vague theories of protecting the culture of small nations within the larger fascist empire had to be given concrete forms. Certain sectors of the Albanian population, undoubtedly frustrated by the difficulties in modernising their country, were willing to work within this fascist project.

As this study has demonstrated, integrating Albania into the empire required considerable surveillance and control over what we could call transnational Albania – Albanian emigrants, students studying abroad, and travelling politicians, businessmen, bureaucrats and academics. These Albanians were viewed in numerous ways. They were potential converts to a fascist

political subjectivity, subversive agents, mediating figures and future propagandists for empire. The established means of forging fascist identity among emigrant Italians were employed in these transnational spaces. Albanians were variously invited to participate in conferences, the Fasci all'Estero, summer youth camps and tours of Italy. Although our documentation of these events comes from official fascist sources, we can still make out the tensions and ambiguities in the project of making Albanians into fascist imperial subjects. The core issues in defining the Albanian nation – its history, relation to other peoples and cultures, geographical borders and, most importantly, sovereignty – were all openly brought up by Italian authorities. The transnational enacting of a new Albanian political identity was riven by tensions and paradoxes, thus demonstrating the historical contortions of putting imperial and universalist fascism into practice.

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## Notes

1. The INCF president, Camillo Pellizzi, had long defended the position that fascism needed to understand itself as imperial and universal rather than simply nationalist (Gregor 2005, 176–177).
2. MAE, SSAA B. 212. Conferenze di albanesi presso gli Istituti di Cultura Fascista, 'Conversazioni di personalità albanesi'.
3. Ibid., 'Appunto', 25 June 1942.
4. Ibid., 'Stralcio della lettera inviata dalla sezione di Salerno'.
5. Ibid., Pellizzi to MAE, 'Sezione di Brindisi'.
6. Ibid., Padovani to Pellizzi, 25 May 1942.
7. Ibid., Pellizzi to MAE, 'Sezione di Viterbo'.
8. Ibid., Beratti to Corrias, 11 May 1942.
9. Ibid., Jacomoni to Corrias, 14 June 1942.
10. MAE, SSAA B. 136. Congresso Nazionale di Arte e Tradizioni Popolari (Sardegna), Bodrero to Benini, 15 May 1939.
11. MAE, SSAA B. 27, Notizie Riservate, 28 April 1939.
12. Ibid., Notizie Riservate, 21 April 1939.
13. Ibid., Notizie Riservate, 6 May 1939.
14. Ibid., Notizie Riservate, 14 April 1939.
15. MAE, SSAA B. 3. Gita a Tripoli degli studenti albanesi residenti a Torino. Notes from Turin, 12, 13, 16 May 1939.
16. Ibid., Ministero dell'Africa Italiana to SSAA, 'Crociera Tripoli studenti Albanesi', 3 June 1939.
17. Ibid., Benini to Bottai, 4 June 1939.
18. Ibid., Note from Turin, 11 May 1939.
19. MAE, SSAA B. 27. Notizie Riservate. Note from Rome, 9 October 1939.
20. Ibid., Note from Rome, 14 October 1939.
21. Ibid., Note from Rome, 17 December 1939.
22. Ibid., Note from Rome, 28 February 1941.
23. MAE, SSAA B. 19. Athos Poli report for GIL, 7 August 1939.
24. MAE, SSAA B. 53. Piero Parini to Ettore Muti, 25 January 1940.
25. DPA, V. 1939, D. 23. Giovanni Giro to Achille Starace, undated.
26. MAE, SSAA B. 19. Athos Poli to Comandante Federale GIL, 8 August 1939.
27. Ibid., Benini to Jacomoni, 'Assistenza religiosa presso le colonie estive', 9 September 1939.
28. MAE, SSAA B. 53. Parini to Benini, 5 June 1940; Benini to Jacomoni, 28 May 1940; Ciano to Borgoncini, 3 June 1940; Borgoncini to Ciano, 8 May 1940.
29. Ibid., Jacomoni to Benini, 19 April 1940; Scammacca to Comando Generale GIL, 19 June 1940.
30. Ibid., SSAA B. B. 53. Jacomoni to Benini, 'Sciopero della studentesca di Scutari per mancata partecipazione viaggio in Italia', 30 March 1940.
31. DPA, V. 1940, D. 311. Lina Pizzanelli to Maria Carla Danovaro, 18 May 1940.
32. MAE, SSAA B. 19. Giacomo Lojuccho to Benini, 13 May 1940.
33. DPA, V. 1940, D. 311. Meliha Çoçoli, 'Impressioni sul nostro viaggio in Italia', undated.
34. MAE, SSAA B. 20. 'In seguito all'accordo ...', undated.
35. MAE, SSAA B. 31. F. Fasci Italiani all'Estero. Scammacca to Jacomoni, 'Assistenza ad indigenti albanesi', 19 February 1941; Roberto Venturini to MAE, 27 January 1941, 18 December 1940.

36. MAE, SSAA B. 62. F. Fasci italiani all'estero: Collettività albanese all'estero-Organizzazioni. Scammacca to Jacomoni, 'Rapporto semestrale sulla collettività albanese a Beirut', 3 February 1941.
37. Ibid., R. Legazione Sofia to MAE, 'Propaganda anti-italiana fra gli albanesi', 28 February 1940; Benini to Bucharest Legation, 18 April 1940.
38. Ibid., 'Appunto per SSAA Ufficio III', 25 February 1940.
39. Ibid., Straneo to Jacomoni, 'Avv. Thimache Valaori e sig. Nuci Emandil', 28 January 1940.
40. In the 1930s, about 50,000 Italians lived in Egypt, with about 18–24,000 in Cairo. MAE, Rapp. Egitto, B. 243, F. Scuole 3, Rapporto 3931/374, 12 June 1930.
41. MAE, SSAA B. 31. F. Fasci italiani all'estero. Saffi to MAE, SSAA, 'Riunione collettività albanese', 7 December 1939.
42. Ibid., Scammacca to Italian Cairo Consulate, 'Avv. Carlo Dimitriou', 20 April 1940; Saffi to MAE, SSAA, 'Avv. Carlo Dimitriou', 27 March 1940.
43. Ibid., Saffi to MAE, SSAA, 'Missione del Rev. Don Lazzar Shantoja al Cairo', 16 April 1940.
44. Ibid., Muti to De Cicco, 'Sezione Fascista Albanese Alessandria d'Egitto', 14 March 1940; SSAA 'Appunto', 14 March 1940.
45. MAE, SSAA B. 20. F. Civita Savino. Massimo Magistrati to MAE, 'Inaugurazione Dopolavoro Albanese', 23 April 1940.
46. MAE, SSAA B. 31. F. Fasci italiani all'estero. Scammacca to R. Luogotenenza Generale, 'Sezione fascista albanese di Sofia', 8 September 1940.
47. Ibid., Spiro Jani to Massimo Magistrati, 13 June 1940.
48. Ibid., Massimo Magistrati to MAE, 'Manifestazioni attaccamento Collettività Albanese', 2 December 1940.

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### Italian summary

Questo articolo collega lo studio del fascismo transnazionale e imperiale nel contesto dell'occupazione italiana dell'Albania esaminando come le autorità italiane cercarono di trasformare gli albanesi all'estero in risorse piuttosto che passività. L'organizzazione e il monitoraggio degli albanesi sono avvenuti attraverso convegni, istituzioni giovanili e attività consolari. Lo studio di tali contatti e negoziati concreti ci consente di esplorare le questioni pratiche latenti nell'espansione della soggettività politica fascista in contesti transnazionali e imperiali. Da un lato, gli italiani speravano di dare agli albanesi un'identità fascista utilizzando le strategie organizzative esistenti e al contempo mettendo a tacere o convertendo potenziali critici anti-italiani. D'altro canto, molti albanesi hanno espresso e offerto sostegno a questi sforzi italiani, anche se con riserve e condizioni, sollevando interrogativi su cosa significasse essere un nazionalista e/o fascista albanese negli anni dell'occupazione. Il caso albanese contribuisce pertanto alla nostra comprensione delle tensioni inerenti all'"universalizzazione" del fascismo per i soggetti coloniali.