

Fascist Cultural Internationalism? Intellectual Cooperation in Mussolini's Italy, 1925–1937

Benjamin G. Martin, Uppsala University, Sweden

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In 1922, in the aftermath of the First World War, a cosmopolitan group of scientists and writers met in Geneva to create the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC). Connected to the newly created League of Nations, this organization promoted international education and cross-border cultural exchanges among its various national committees in order to advance what its supporters called "the international outlook." Ironically, however, one of the most active national committees of intellectual cooperation would be the one representing Mussolini's fascist dictatorship in Italy. From 1925 to 1937, Italy sent high-level representatives to the International Committee's meetings, hosted ICIC events, and opened a League-sponsored center for educational cinema in Rome as well as the international legal organization, Unidroit. Italy's National Commission featured many of the country's most prominent intellectuals, writers, architects, and composers, who used the ICIC's events and publications to raise Italy's scholarly and cultural profile, increase the prestige of Mussolini's regime, and promote fascist ideology in front of international audiences. Leading figures in the ICIC, including Marie Curie and Albert Einstein, feared the effect of the fascists' authoritarian nationalism on the committee's work, but withdrew their objections when the Italians threatened to withdraw from the institution.

What did it mean for an ultra-nationalist dictatorship to participate so eagerly in the cosmopolitan world of intellectual cooperation? In this paper, I explore these questions by reconstructing the story of Italy's National Commission of Intellectual Cooperation, from its foundation in 1924 to its dissolution in 1937 (when Italy left the League of Nations). Based on period publications and archival material in Rome, Geneva, and Paris, I reconstruct the origins of the committee, document its work, and analyze how outsiders—including other national committees, League leadership, and the international press—responded to the Italians' activities.

Fascist Italy's engagement with intellectual cooperation is a particularly interesting national case for at least three reasons. First, it allows us to explore an ironic case of the way Mussolini's dictatorship used culture to advance its power and prestige abroad. Scholars have long studied how fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and other dictatorships used culture to mobilize and control their own people, but much less is known about how these regimes used cultural diplomacy to advance their illiberal agendas on the international stage. This international side of fascism's cultural politics was in fact a crucial element of fascism's appeal that deserves careful examination.

Second, fascist Italy's role in the networks of international intellectual cooperation can shed new historical light on the tensions between the theory of interwar internationalism and its practice. The ICIC was the first major institutional effort to put culture and ideas to work for world peace, based on a belief that cross-border intellectual and cultural exchange would necessarily promote international understanding in a liberal spirit. The Italians' effort to subvert this project, using intellectual cooperation as a means of promoting fascist ideology, was an early example of the challenges faced by liberal projects of what the historian Akria Iriye has called "cultural internationalism." For example, the ICIC's strictly apolitical character meant that it could not condemn activities—like Mussolini's 1931 demand that Italy's university professors swear loyalty to the fascist regime—that clearly violated its values. Should the organization have taken a stronger stand? This question is not only of historical interest: today, the resurgence of nationalist authoritarianism in many countries poses related challenges to liberal visions of international cooperation.

Third, the story of the Italian National Commission offers a way to advance our understanding of the varieties of internationalism. I argue that it is incorrect to assume that international intellectual cooperation had a necessarily liberal character. In fact, the case of fascist Italy's engagement with the world of intellectual

cooperation shows that fascism also proposed an internationalism, albeit one based on values (hierarchy, authoritarianism, and cultural nationalism) that seem at odds with what we think of as the international spirit. By analyzing the goals, values, and successes of fascist internationalism, my work seeks to contribute to the dynamic historical literature that is currently reevaluating the history and nature of internationalism in the twentieth century.

In the paper, I briefly trace the history of Italy's National Commission and then, on that basis, explore the first and third of these issues. Regarding the matter of how the fascists advanced a national agenda through international intellectual cooperation, I argue that the *way* the Italians ran their national commission was, itself, an ideological message: led by state representatives in a highly centralized manner, Italy's National Commission embodied fascism's totalitarian emphasis on "the action of the collective." Its insistence that the state-nation mediate any contact between the individual and the outside world expressed the fascist belief that all thought and expression is primarily, essentially national in character. Regarding the third point, I argue that fascist Italy's activities did not subvert the international character of intellectual cooperation, but did attack the *liberal* values of many of its leading supporters. In this way, the case of fascist Italy's National Commission highlights the fact there were multiple internationalisms *within* the sphere of intellectual cooperation. This is part of what made it possible for fascist Italy to use that sphere to advance an agenda that Italian leaders found meaningful. And this is part of what makes the history of interwar intellectual cooperation of continued interest today.