

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Fascism in Italy Project

Interview #2

O. H. 446

MARIO A. VECCIA

Interviewed

by

Elisa Calabrese

on

May 8, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: MARIO A. VECCIA

INTERVIEWER: Elisa Calabrese

SUBJECT: Foreign Policy of Mussolini, Ethiopia, Imperial policies, German-Italian relations

DATE: May 8, 1986

C: This is an interview with Dr. Mario Veccia for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on May 8, 1986. This is the second interview on Fascism in Italy.

Pertaining to the foreign policy of Mussolini, did fascism and Nazism operate with the same methods?

V: In retrospect, both Mussolini and Hitler pursued a very aggressive type of foreign policy. Italy and Germany had been involved in World War I and both of them had come out somehow short of their goals! Germany, because she was defeated and lost all of its colonies; Italy because she was on the winning side, but had not received the expected rewards. The only gain was the acquisition of the peninsula's northeast corner bordering Austria. That did not represent a just reward for Italy's contribution to the victory. Hitler, on the other side, having been defeated--when I say Hitler I mean Germany--had perhaps a large size chip on his shoulder. He wanted to regain the lost prestige, the lost colonies, and more. This dissatisfaction, I believe, was the basis of his aggressive foreign policy. It was not a mystery when Hitler tried to annex Austria during the early 1930's. Mussolini objected to that and, temporarily, Hitler did not attain the territorial gains contemplated. He had to wait for the right opportunity.

The opportunity presented itself very shortly afterwards, first, with the Ethiopian War in which Mussolini was engaged, and later on, when he joined hands with Mussolini in helping Franco in the civil war in Spain. I do remember the

participation in the Spanish war by the so-called "militia," who were nothing else but a voluntary militia that Mussolini had established. The monetary rewards were appealing, and I remember a few people from my hometown that participated on the side of Franco's forces in the war in Spain. As a matter of fact, in my hometown, even today there is a street named after the only man from there who fell in Spain. He was awarded the second highest decoration for military bravery.

The Ethiopian War, according to Mussolini, was nothing else than some sort of revindication of Italy's rights to a colonial expansion. Italy already controlled Libya and Tripolitania, all along the northern border of Africa on the Mediterranean. It was called, in Italian history books, the Fourth Shore. The Ethiopian War was a very costly war as far as I can remember. Because of Italy's dependence on imports, it was hit terribly hard with economic sanctions, which were imposed in 1935 by the countries that belonged to the Society of Nations in Geneva. Hitler provided some assistance for the Italians, so Mussolini had a made-to-order situation to join in politically with him. In May 1936 the war in Ethiopia ended and about a few months later the sanctions were lifted. The friendship between the two leaders had been established. It had been created with the Ethiopian War and welded in Spain. Later on, in order to create a better way to control the Mediterranean, Albania was taken over and made an integral part of Italy.

In very quick succession we saw a war in Ethiopia, the participation in the Spanish Civil War, the takeover of Albania, and finally the preparation for the last conflict, World War II. When Hitler took over Austria in 1938, there was no longer objection on Mussolini's part. Hitler started having his own free way and the assistance from Mussolini. That was the preparation for the Munich meeting with the representatives of France and England.

- C: You mentioned in your discourse that there was a difference between Mussolini and Hitler in politics.
- V: Yes, until the Ethiopian War in 1935; then, beginning with the Civil War in Spain, they pursued the same policy. I can see this in retrospect. When you live in a country and are exposed only to certain ideas, you grow up accepting things. We saw that Mussolini was doing what appeared to be great things for the country. Also, where is the desire to change things if you don't know any better? What does the word "election" mean to you if you don't know that government representatives can be

elected? You may have ideas, but when these ideas are not shared by many people, who are you going to share them with?

The history and civilization books we used in our schools did not contain any references to people leaving Italy for political reasons. For example, take the episode of the assassination of Matteotti; we didn't know who Matteotti was. Later on we found out. I remember my grandfather talking of free elections. I don't remember my parents voting. Senators serving before Mussolini were selected by the king. They were there to defend certain ideas and philosophies.

C: When you look in retrospect, how did you view the philosophies of Hitler and Mussolini?

V: There was a false aspect of common goals, because they pursued these goals for different purposes. Mussolini saw the need for territorial expansion only because the Italian peninsula was too small for its population. When one does not have enough to provide for his people he turns to expansion. He turned to territories in Africa where Italy already had colonies: Eritrea and Somalia, Libya and Tripolitania. Maybe he expected to find gold in Ethiopia. (Laughter) He had school, churches, hospitals, and roads built there in Africa. At the same time Hitler had in mind territorial expansion for reasons of prestige and power, but I don't think he would have limited his conquests to Europe and all Germany's former colonies. Once Mussolini was out of the picture he (Hitler) did not hesitate to take over the Italian peninsula. Also I don't think Mussolini would have tried to conquer Europe nor would he go against Hitler. Mussolini would have resisted communism anywhere. He wanted to provide the Italian manpower with extra land where to build and live.

C: Do you remember the Concordat with the Vatican in 1929?

V: Yes, I remember it because February 11, the date it was signed, became a national holiday. I think Mussolini wanted to be remembered as the leader--Duce--that made peace with the pope. In 1861, Italy had almost completed its territorial unification. There was one area that was dear to all Italians; Rome. It belonged to the pope. It was only natural that the peninsula, the way it was, with the strict texture of its population, one country without Rome, was like one body without heart. It was only natural to think of Rome as the capital.

Eventually on September 20, 1870, Rome was taken by storm

and Italy had the capital of its dreams. The Lateran Pact signed on February 11, 1929, was an agreement reached by Mussolini and the Pope, whereby Rome was recognized as part of Italy and the Catholic religion was recognized as the religion of the Italian state.

END OF INTERVIEW