

# ITALIAN FASCISM AND THE MAIL IN MALTA

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D., K.M.

The advent of Fascism in Italy disturbed profoundly the unstable political equilibrium prevailing in Malta. On October 28, 1922, Benito Mussolini led his "March on Rome". Italy became a fascist state and Maltese politics took a nasty turn.

Previous Italian governments had steadfastly shown a benign interest in Malta. Inevitably, the geographical closeness between the two countries, the dominant use of Italian as a written language and the cultural links which history had forged over many centuries, kept our island well anchored to the Italian sphere of interests. This notwithstanding, in Italy there was no important movement towards annexation, nor, in Malta, towards unification.

In fact, diplomatic relations between Italy and Britain generally veered between the correct and the cordial. Malta rarely, and then only marginally, turned into a bone of contention between our colonial ruler and our territorial neighbour.

Of course, Maltese politics had, long before the emergence of Fascism, been bedevilled by the phenomenon of *italianità*. The local anti-colonialist, nationalist movement resented the imposition of a process of anglicisation, devised and directed by British imperial policy. They saw this as an illegitimate attempt on our cultural integrity, as a conspiracy to divest Malta of its historical identity.

The best protection against this 'denationalisation' the populist leaders could think of, was standing firm by Malta's *italianità*. We were not a third-world country where Britain could transplant its language, culture and institutions onto a pre-existing void. Our Island had an ancient cultural heritage of its won, heavily scorched by Italian radiations. If Malta no longer identified with Italian models, anglicisation would, the nationalists believed, debase the island into another obscure colonised territory.

*Italianità*, in the pre-fascist age, had virtually no interest at all in political unification with Italy. If there were any who aspired to change sovereignty, they were few, insignificant and emarginated.

The dramatic appearance of Fascism in Italy revolutionised all that. Mussolini harboured badly-disguised imperialist and expansionist manias; he nursed a grudge against history which, in his view, had treated shabbily the grandeur of Italy. He felt a moral imperative to do something about these territories which he believed should have been part of the mainland, but which the evil designs of rapacious powers had subtracted from its confines. Malta fell squarely into Mussolini's line of vision.

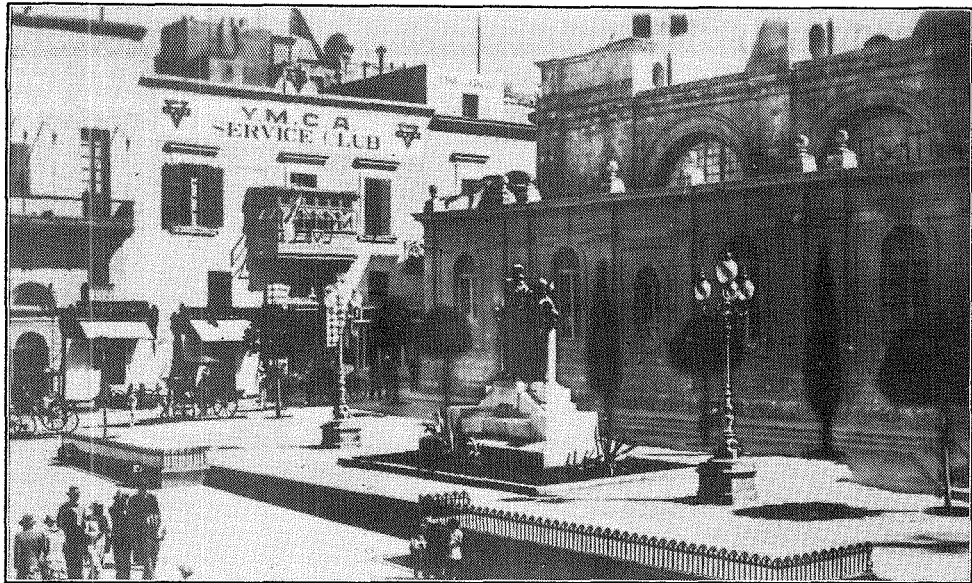
At the Maltese end, a turbulent presence like the Duce's could not go unnoticed. Although mainstream *italianità* preserved its eminently cultural dimension, the veneration or the rejection Mussolini inevitably inspired, started blurring the old political divides. For some, probably a small minority, Italy no longer represented solely an anchor of national identity in the shifting sands of colonialism. It was now perceived as a powerful magnet towards unification. A Maltese *enosis* conscience started to take shape and an indistinct dose of *irredentismo* wormed its way into Maltese politics. The extreme fringes of the nationalist movement were no longer pure of heart.

Fascist Italy beefed up its crusade of propaganda and infiltration. The new pride which Mussolini instilled in Italians living overseas inspired successive waves of activism. Italian schools and *Casa del Fascio* opened up everywhere, aimed principally at strengthening the ties within the expatriate Italian communities. But Italian Cultural Institutes and the Dante Alighieri homes were directed at beaming Italian influence onto the local populations.

Malta was not spared. A secondary level Umberto Primo Italian school operated in Palazzo Caraffa, Old Bakery Street, Valletta in 1930, followed by the *Casa del Fascio* that started functioning from St Lucia Street, Valletta in 1924 and to which most of the Italian expatriates and about 30 Maltese adhered.

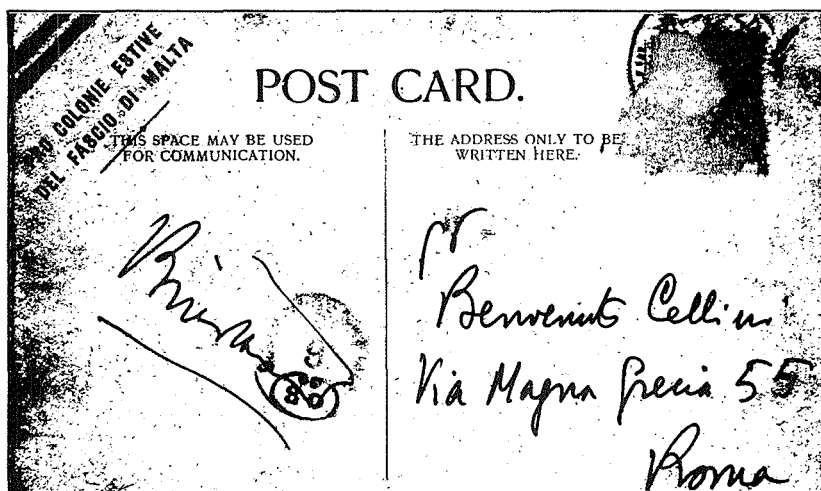
The *Istituto di Cultura Italiana* opened its doors in 1932, as a substitute to the suppressed *Casa del Fascio*. The world-wide *Società Dante Alighieri* for the dissemination of the Italian language, founded in Malta just before the first world war, seems to have been unimportant in the political struggles of the inter-war period. Even the Italian air-carrier serving Malta, the *Ala Littoria*, of clear fascist connotation, did not escape suspicion of being a cog in the Italian propaganda and espionage machine.

Inevitably the postal services played some part in the political barrage directed at, or from, Malta. The scope of this preliminary study is to identify postal material intimately connected with that power struggle. I do not believe this investigation has been carried out before, and most of the material is here published for the first time.



The primary group refers to the *Fascio di Malta* organisation. Fig.1 (above) is a 1920s postcard, showing, on the stairwell turret at the centre, the inscription “*Casa del Fascio*”, next door to the YMCA Services Club in St Lucia Street, Valletta. The Great Siege monument by Antonio Sciortino, had just been inaugurated.

A series of Maltese postcards were overprinted in the Italian colours, red and green, on the top left hand corner, to be sold to raise funds for “*The Summer Colonies of the Fascio of Malta*”. Fig. 2 (below) shows one such card,



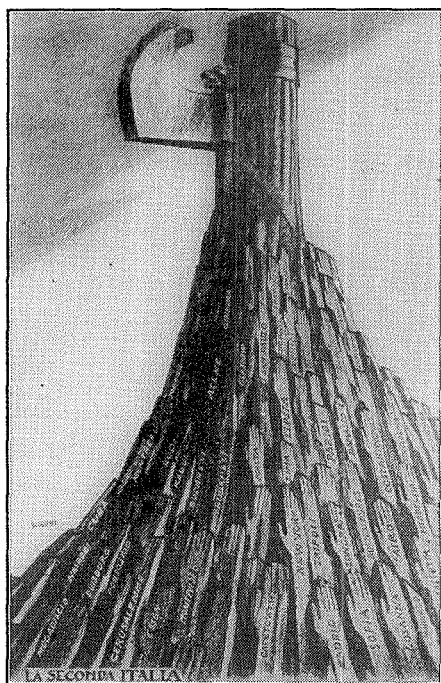
postally used but with stamp removed. It is signed "Biscottini". Umberto Biscottini was the Secretary for Propaganda for the fascist regime, and the dark genius behind the campaign for fascist infiltration in Malta. He later played a sinister role in the sacrifice and execution of Carmelo Borg Pisani.



On the occasion of the "First Congress of Italian Fascists overseas" in 1925, a special handstamp was issued for the Malta participants (Fig. 3, above). This shows the fascist axe surrounded by the circular imprint *Fascio Italiano di Malta*.

The picture side of this postcard (Fig. 4, right), has a symbolical mountain made up of hands raised in the fascist salute, each representing an overseas territory in which a *Fascio* was functioning. The most central is the 'Malta' hand.

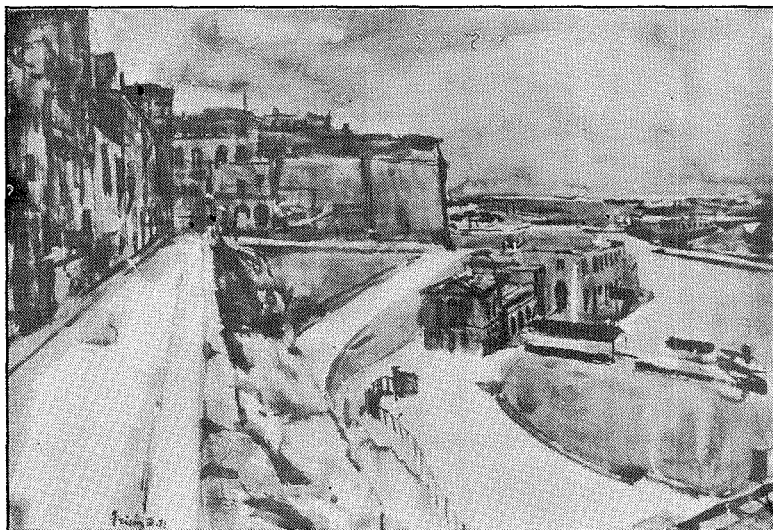
Enrico Mizzi was the leader of the integralist wing of the Nationalist Party. Although like some other exponents of *italianità* he may have been in sympathy with the fascists, it is doubtful whether he



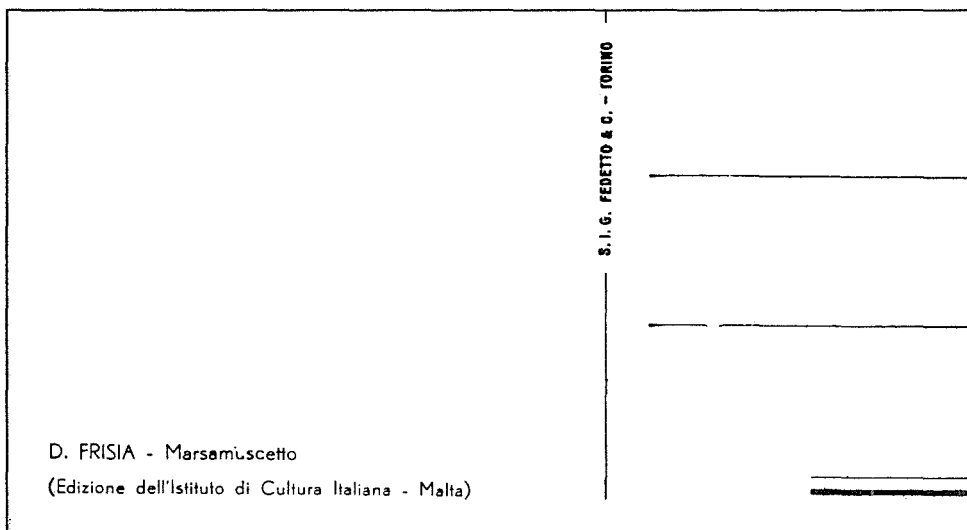
subscribed to their anti-democratic ethos; almost certainly he did not see a change of flag as the ultimate political solution. This rare postcard (Fig. 5, right) shows the front page of an Italian supplement, *L'Italia Coloniale*, dated October 1924, with a portrait of, and an article by, Mizzi. Called "Malta and the defence of Italianità", the new fascist institutions are referred to in it with a certain admiration.

One of the focal points of the Italian propaganda drive was the Umberto Primo school in Old Bakery Street, Valletta. A scarce postcard (Fig. 6, below) records a gathering of Italian fascists in the auditorium of the school. In the front seat is the Italian Consul General – probably Marquis Ferrante, *persona non grata* to the British intelligence services for his alleged role in coordinating the fascist espionage ring in our Islands. In 1936, he was hurriedly withdrawn from active service in Malta. Curiously, at the end of the hall in which this inherently anti-British activity was held, hangs a Union Jack.



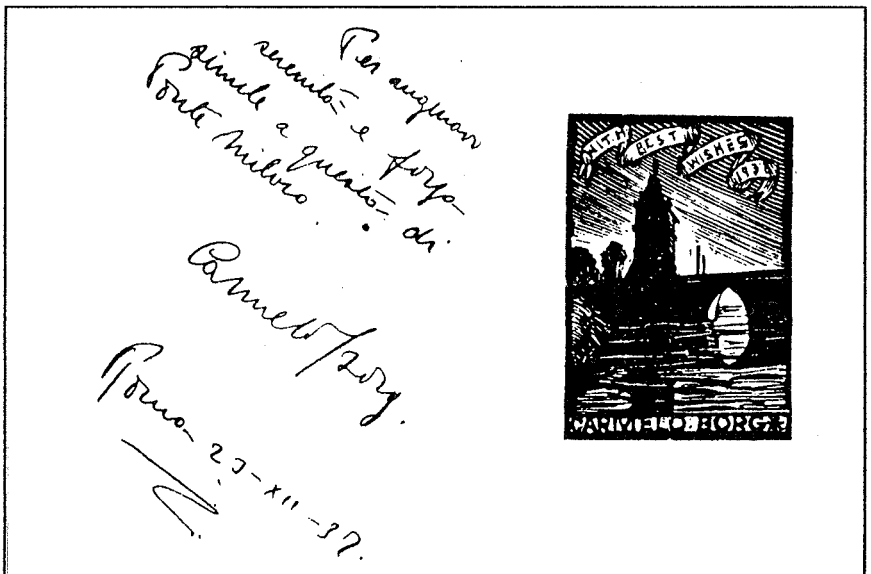


The *Istituto di Cultura Italiana* distinguished itself by making available locally the most dazzling display of Italian performing talent. In 1932 three promising Italian artists, Raffaele de Grada, Enrico Paolucci and Donato Frisia were sent to Malta on a painting expedition. A set of postcards showing six of their Malta views was printed in Turin as a special edition of the Italian Cultural Institute of Malta (Fig. 7, above and below). I have seen very few of these sets around.



When the war broke out in June 1940, a "Comitato d'Azione Maltese" was formed in Rome by Umberto Biscottini. All those Maltese who had been trapped in Italy by the sudden outbreak of hostilities were invited or coerced into participating. Fig. 8 (right) shows a postcard of the monument of the *Sette Giugno* anti-British riots, described as "The Monument to the fallen of the 1919 Revolution". This card was printed in Milan during the War, and was published by this "Action Committee".

That same war brought to a tragic end the life of the art-student Carmelo Borg Pisani, who was persuaded by Biscottini to cross over from Italy to Malta by submarine on a suicidal espionage mission. Borg Pisani was soon captured, tried and hanged for high treason. Fig. 9 (below)





CARMELO BORG PISANI

eroe e martire dell'Irredentismo maltese, ucciso a Senglea (Malta) nel 1915, pittore, membro del Direttorio del fascio di Malta, volontario di guerra, combattente in Grecia e nel Mediterraneo, catturato dagli inglesi durante una rischiosissima missione di guerra, cui si era offerto volontariamente, condannato e morto, affronta il plotone di esecuzione al grido di "Viva l'Italia!"

reproduces a postcard, hand engraved by that same young artist, sent to a friend in Malta when on a scholarship in Rome, while Fig. 10 (left) is a postcard printed in Milan by Rizzoli, with the traitor/martyr in a fascist army uniform. The legend speaks of Borg Pisani's execution by firing squad, while in reality he died on November 28, 1942, by hanging. A reflection on the sad state of the Italian intelligence services during the war. This postcard was published by the now phantomatic *Fascio di Malta*.

Finally, a postal curio. *Ala Littoria*, the Italian air passenger company, accused of military spying, issued a large handstamp for mail carried from Italy to Malta. Fig. 11 (below) shows this cachet in red on newspaper post. The very word *Littoria* had a fascist connotation; the

dictator's ace which Fascism adopted as its symbol.

no 1937 — Anno XV

Trasporto per via Aerea

EDIZIONE DEL MATTINO

a mezzo Ala Littoria S.A.

# ELLA SE

Avv. S. Mierob

83, Strada Mercanti

Valletta.

PREZZO DELLE INSEZIONI per mese, d'altro biletta Commerciale (pagina di testo 4, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, 85, 90, 95, 100). E' pagata in contante. Niente di depositare. E' pagata anticipata. Tasse governative in più. Tutto al Pubblico, questi ordini che a suo giro. Il "Corriere", gestisce anche la

La prossima visita del Duce in Libia

Necessaria della poesia

Fervida attesa dei musulmani

Roma 26 febbraio.

Chi può non essersi fermato un istante, interessato e commosso, leg-

(Except for Fig. 9, all the other illustrations come from the author's collection)