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Forget Me Not: Exploring the Rise of the Anti Immigrant Right through the Lens of Historical Amnesia

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Forget Me Not:
Exploring the Rise of the Anti-Immigrant Right in Italy through
the Lens of Historical Amnesia

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction

In recent years, more specifically the past twenty years, the right wing in Italy has taken a hard line approach that is largely against immigrants coming to Italy. At the governmental level, there are many issues between the various parties as to how the immigration influx should be dealt with. Though there is a program set in place to save refugee boats stranded at sea, in practice, it has proven to be extremely difficult and has faced a good deal of criticism from political parties across the aisle. In fact, starting in 2016, the Italian government has been illegally sending back migrant children.¹ On the societal level, fear mongering has turned native Italians against the idea of immigration. Even in the more liberal parts of Italy, such as Bologna, there have been cases of people physically blocking the transportation of refugees in order to keep them from settling in Italy.² Many Italians complain that these immigrants cause strain on the stagnant Italian economy or that Muslim immigrants will take away the strong Catholicism that has been the major religion and culture of Italy for hundreds of years.

There are multiple reasons Italians have reacted so negatively to the arrival of these immigrants: worries that these immigrants are taking jobs away from hard-working Italians, that Italy has been homogeneous in race and religion for so long that it is difficult to adjust the picture of what it means to be Italian, scapegoating and so on.

Throughout this thesis, I will be looking into where this xenophobia has come from and how we can explain it in today's context. After all, other countries in Europe, such as Germany, have opened their borders to refugees and immigrants coming to their country. What I will be

¹ Giulia Saudelli, "L'Italia sta respingendo illegalmente i minori migranti che arrivano da soli," *Vice News*, August 2, 2016, <https://news.vice.com/it/article/minori-stranieri-soli-respingimenti>.

² "In Emilia-Romagna hanno alzato le barricate per impedire l'ingresso ai profughi," *Vice News*, October 25, 2016, <https://news.vice.com/it/article/gorino-barricate-profughi-ferrara>

focusing on is why Italy has had such a negative reaction to these immigrants in a way that has not yet been addressed. The main question I will be answering throughout this project is how we explain the rise of the xenophobia in response to the influx of immigrants in Italy today.

Though most people would not care to admit this, there are tensions surrounding a racially changing population of Italy. Though Southern Italy has experienced slightly more racial diversity due to its proximity to Northern Africa, Italy has remained rather homogenous in its recent history. These recent racial changes have been especially visible in Northern Italy where the lack of diversity in the past is even more evident. Though this thesis will not be focusing on the colonial aspects of the Fascist government, it is worth noting that during his time, in the 1930s, Mussolini colonized certain countries in Africa (mainly Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia). During this time of colonization, Italians were united as a homogenous population due to a newfound sense of nationalism.³ Though these countries were colonized, there is today a relatively low population of immigrants from these formerly colonized countries in Italy. The idea of Italy becoming a multi-racial and a multiethnic country has caused great discomfort among Italians who have only ever known Italy to be a white, Catholic nation.

With the changing face of what an Italian looks like, Italy has recently seen the rise of the alt-right along with the rest of Europe and America. This fear of immigration has seen a spike in the popularity of the Lega Nord which was originally founded in 1991 as a Northern secessionist movement and which is currently lead by Matteo Salvini. Though the original goal of this movement was to have the North succeed from the South due to the North being the more industrialized, richer part of the country, it has now transformed into an almost nationalist party

³ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds. *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005) 22.

aimed at keeping immigrants from entering the country. Though the party refuses the xenophobic label with which it is often associated, it exudes a sense of victimhood, claiming that the Northern League is unfairly characterized as a racist, xenophobic party.⁴

As I already briefly mentioned, there are several possible ways to explain this xenophobic response to immigrants. The most common arguments made by the Italian public are mainly concerned with economic, religious and racial reasons. Due to the fact that the Italian economy has been stagnant for so long and there is a high unemployment rate in Italy (currently 12.4%, or 4 points higher than the European average), many Italians are scapegoating the immigrants claiming that they are taking jobs from national Italians. There is also a fear that, due to the majority of immigrants being of the Muslim faith, the longstanding tradition of Italy's Catholicism is at risk. Since Italy has been such a deeply religious and largely homogenous population for so long, this idea of the "religion of Italy" becoming Islam is a very real fear for many Italians. However, my hypothesis as to why Italy has had its extreme response is more rooted in the past than the present. In the wake of Fascism in Italy, there was a general desire to immediately forget what had happened.

Though there have been articles published about the issue of immigration in Italy, they for the most part address who these immigrants are rather than the response to immigration. There has also been a large debate over where these immigrants are settled within Italy which has caused tensions to rise between the North and the South⁵, which already is a contentious relationship. The main arguments I have heard as to why Italy has been so unwelcoming have mainly come from the news or what is talked about among citizens. As stated before, a lot of the

⁴ Guido Passalacqua, "Bossi si infuria: siete voi i razzisti," *La Repubblica*, November 22, 2000, <http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2000/11/22/bossi-si-infuria-siete-voi-razzisti.html>.

⁵ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988* (Penguin Books, 1990).

reasons are generally related to the economy and religion. However, the one argument that many Italians would refuse to say outloud is the issue of race. For the most part, Italy has been homogenous, not just religiously, but also racially and ethnically. Up until recently, there were very few black people who lived in Italy, and even black people who are Italians in every sense of the word are still not considered Italian due to the color of their skin.

Very few scholars have taken on the idea that the historical amnesia that surrounds Fascism in Italy has contributed to this rejection of immigration. In addition, up until recently, Italy was a nation of emigrants, not immigrants. The idea of immigration is very new to Italy as it was far more common for people to leave Italy than to come to Italy. For many people, this new idea of immigration coupled with the economic and cultural struggles that Italy faces today, is enough of a reason as to why Italy has been xenophobic. The lack of accountability of Italy's actions during Fascism has lead to this rejection of accepting refugees into Italy.

Obviously a combination of factors influence how Italians treat immigrants. However, there has been very little research done on the historical amnesia that Italy has about Fascism even though I believe there is merit to the argument. To begin to think about the issue of integration, I have taken a couple of cases of integration in Italian society. In Italy, Jews have spent hundreds of years slowly becoming accepted into Italian society. Another, less known issue of integration in Italy is the divide between the North and South. Though this issue is far from resolved, there have been attempts at finding ways to make Italy a more cohesive nation. Perhaps if we look at these cases of integration, they may help understand the issue of immigrant integration and acceptance today.

In fictitious or autobiographical accounts of World War II, there is a focus on the division of Italy, and the attempts of integration into Italian society. Before Italy was even united as a country, anti-Semitism was rampant in the city states. The first ghetto was established in 1516 in Venice, Italy.⁶ Ever since then, Italian Jews have fought not just for integration, but also for recognition. Even after Jews were emancipated in 1861, they were still not viewed as equal to the Catholic Italian. Many Italian Jews were slowly integrated into society mainly due to the reform movement which made worship more private than ever before.⁷ As Italian Jews became more integrated into Italian culture, they were further distanced from Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews and their cultures. We see this distance in Primo Levi's account of his time in Auschwitz in his book *Se questo è un uomo*. Once he arrived to Auschwitz, it became clear that as a Jew who didn't speak Yiddish, he was largely isolated from the general population.⁸ In fact, Levi had not been particularly religious before or after his time at the camp, thus showing that he was an integrated Italian.

There is also the issue of integration within Italy itself between the North and the South. During the Fascist period, this rift was quite noticeable. With Fascism being prevalent in the North of Italy, the South remained in the grips of Mafia control. In fact, during his reign, Mussolini tried to end the Mafia rule in the South but failed due to its strong hold over the local government.⁹ This divide was further shown in Carlo Levi's book, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, in which he recounts his experience as a northerner who was exiled in southern Italy during Fascism. In this book, he discusses the extreme poverty and lack of resources southern Italians

⁶ Anna Foa, *Ebrei in Europa: dalla peste nera all'emancipazione* (Bari: Laterza, 1990).

⁷ Gadi Luzzatto Voghera, "La riforma ebraica e le sue articolazioni fra Otto e Novecento," in *Le religioni e il mondo moderno* (Torino: Einaudi, 2008), 125-144.

⁸ Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Einaudi, 1947).

⁹ Ginsborg, *History of Contemporary Italy*, 34-35.

had to endure at the time. Many in the town were illiterate and had no way of escaping poverty.¹⁰ Though poverty still persists in southern Italy today, there have been many efforts of creating a more equal Italy, with the Italian government investing heavily in the south after WWII with little to show for it. One issue that has been addressed in many articles is the fact that many of today's immigrants coming to Italy today are entering through southern Italy, mainly Sicily and Calabria. This has placed an added burden on an already burdened South, but there is little that has been to reconcile this disparity.¹¹ The gap between southern Italy and northern has been an issue since the unification of Italy and still persists today.

There have been articles published speaking to the idea of collective amnesia surrounding the Fascist period in Italy. These articles speak about how this national amnesia is portrayed in the media¹²: The narrative they suggest is that the holding camps were an "oasis" for prisoners of war and Italian Jews,¹³ and that those who were originally Fascists denounced it once Fascism fell in Italy.¹⁴ Though these articles address the issue of national amnesia within Italy and the willingness to forget the very active role it played in the atrocities of the war, they indicate no connection to how this amnesia affects Italy today. Throughout this thesis, my hope is to provide such a missing link between the amnesia of Italy's Fascism during World War II and the xenophobic response Italy has to immigrants today.

¹⁰ Carlo Levi, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Einaudi, 1963).

¹¹ Alessandra Corrado, "Clandestini in the Orange Towns: Migrations and Racisms in Calabria's Agriculture," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4, no. 2 (2011).

¹² Susanne C. Knittel, "A Severed Branch: The Memory of Fascism on Stage and Screen," in *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (Fordham University, 2015).

¹³ James Walston, "History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps," *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 1 (1997).

¹⁴ Rosario Florenza, "Sacrificial Memory and Political Legitimacy in Postwar Italy: Reliving and Remembering World War II," *History and Memory* 24, no. 2 (2012).

In contemporary Italy today, there is a lack of discussion about Fascism in the general public. It has been very difficult to find articles or books not on what happened during the Fascist period in Italy, but there has been little to no link as to how that time period has an impact on today's world. Throughout this exploration, I hope to better link the forgotten past of Fascism in Italy and how it has influenced present day politics. This lack of recognition is deeply troubling, and by the end of this project, I hope to have bridged a type of gap that has existed in the literature surrounding both Fascism in Italy and present day xenophobia.

Throughout this thesis, I hope to show the how nation amnesia has manifested itself both in the rhetoric of self-victimization and the odd relationship both Fascism and the Lega have with the Church and Catholicism in general. By drawing out these similarities between Fascism and the Lega Nord, I will show that these commonalities are more than just mere coincidences, they mirror each other in action and rhetoric.

My argument is that since Italy has tried to forget the role it played in World War II and the wide spread shame of Fascism, this lack of accountability has caused Italy to have a more xenophobic response to immigration. Since there is a strong sentiment of self-victimization within Italy, their active forgetfulness of Fascism has caused their mentality to shift away from reparations to playing the victim once again. This contrasts with the case of Germany, when its constant remembrance of Nazism and the extreme shame that is felt about Germany's actions during the war has caused present day Germany to take a much more welcoming approach to immigrants coming to Europe. However, since Italy had a very different ending to its war and how it is generally remembered, it has had a much more negative response to these immigrants. Since Mussolini fell before the end of the war and with the arrival of the Allies in southern Italy,

by the end of the war, Italy was on the side of the allies. During this tumultuous time, Italy was also in a civil war fought by the partisans (anti-Fascists) and the Fascists. This back and forth just further shows the complicated climate of Italy at the time.

This language of self-victimization can also be found in the Lega's political platform. The Lega was founded on the idea that northern Italy was overcompensating for the agrarian South. To them, southern Italy was draining the industrialized North of its rich economic advancements. Thus, the party was founded on this idea of self-victimization. More recently however, the platform of the party has changed and is now more focused on closing Italy's borders. The Lega's main argument against these immigrants is that they are depleting the resources of an already struggling Italy. Though their focus has shifted away from their secessionist past, the language of self-victimization still persists. This common language is the missing link that has not yet been addressed in Italy. This self-victimization link explicitly connects the historical amnesia of Fascism to the anti-immigrant response in Italy today.¹⁵

Along with the language of self-victimization, both the Lega and Fascism have a complex relationship with the Catholic Church. During his life, Mussolini never considered himself to be a religious man.¹⁶ Even though he was not religious and never had much of an interest in the Church, this began to change when Pope Pius XI realized he could have a beneficial relationship with Mussolini and Fascism. Once Pius XI was the head of the Vatican, he began a symbiotic relationship with Mussolini. Since Italy is a deeply Catholic nation, Mussolini would benefit from a positive relationship with the Church. In exchange, the Church would effectively turn a blind eye to the atrocities committed under Fascist rule in order to try and stay neutral fearing

¹⁵ Stefano Tomelleri, "Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment" in *Ressentiment* (Michigan State University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: a Biography* (Vintage Books, 1983).

that condemnation would further agitate and cause more harm to those affected under Fascist rule.¹⁷ With this relationship, Fascism grew stronger by promoting this relationship with the Church.

Concerning the Lega, there is also a complicated relationship between the Church and the past and current leaders of the Lega. The founder of the Lega Nord, Umberto Bossi, has always considered himself a secular Italian though he does participate in the Church at the baseline level such as having his kids baptized and occasionally attending church services. While Bossi was the leader of the Lega, he did not have much of a relationship with the Church due to the fact that the Pope was conservative and did not care to comment on the actions of the Lega. However, in recent years this relationship has changed due to the fact that there is now a new leader of the Lega and a new Pope. Matteo Salvini, the current leader of the Lega, has commented on religion in Italy often using Islamophobia to argue against immigration. In addition, he has had some public clashes with Pope Francis due to the Pope's pro-refugee stance. Just last year, Salvini took to Twitter to publicly denounce the Pope's call for assisting refugees. In his tweet, Salvini stated that the Pope supported an "unprecedented invasion" of immigrants coming to Italy for refuge.¹⁸ Before this outburst against the Church for its pro-immigration stance, Salvini gave some leeway to accepting immigrants into Italy. However, he was still focused on religion claiming that, "If we really must welcome immigrants, let them be Christians. While waiting to

¹⁷ Frank J. Coppa, "The Papal Response to Nazi and Fascist Anti-Semitism: From Pius XI to Pius XII" in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule 1922-1945* (Cambridge, 2005).

¹⁸ Luca Romano, "Salvini contro il Papa: 'Favorisce l'invasione,'" *Il Giornale*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/salvini-contro-papa-favorisce-linvasione-1247495.html>. "Un'invasione senza precedenti."

block this organized invasion.”¹⁹ Though the Lega is not a religiously affiliated group, they toe a careful line with the Church due to the deep Catholicism within the country.

There is also a sense, both in Italy and abroad, that Mussolini was a puppet of Hitler who followed along with his ideologies and laws, due to Mussolini’s implementation of Hitler’s racial laws, even though this is not the case.²⁰ The idea that Italy was less proactive in coming up with these racial laws and this sense of nationality is wrong and pushes much of the blame away from Mussolini and the Fascists. Italy’s willingness to downplay its involvement and forget the very active role it had during the war has contributed to Italy to have a very anti-immigrant response. Since there is no palpable sense of culpability within society for Italy’s role during World War II, many in the population are turning away from refugees in a way that is very different to the response in Germany. Since Italy has largely taken the role of being a victim of Nazi Germany, rather than an offender, during World War II, there is no sense of needing to welcome those it once turned away. However, Germany has made it very clear that it is open and happy to accept refugees. This acceptance is largely tied to its sense of national shame and memorialization of its history during Nazism. My hypothesis is that Italy’s lack of accepting responsibility for its role during the war has contributed to the hands off, anti-immigrant approach it has taken when it comes to accepting refugees into the country.

Throughout this thesis, I will show that due to the failure to right past wrongs, Italy is in a cycle that is bound to repeat itself. Through the rhetoric and language used by both Mussolini

¹⁹ Raffaello Binelli, “Immigrazione, l’ultima idea di Salvini: ‘Usiamo le piattaforme dell’Eni in disuso,’” *Il Giornale*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/immigrazione-lultima-idea-salvini-usiamo-piattaforme-delleni-1162150.html>. “Se proprio dobbiamo accogliere immigrati, che siano di religione cristiana. In attesa di bloccare questa invasione organizzata.”

²⁰ F.W. Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini* (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1966).

and the leaders of the Lega, I will show that there is a similar vein of self-victimization and blaming the world around them for their shortcomings as leaders. In addition, this language is used as a way to unite groups of people under the impression of imminent danger or under the impression of being in a subservient position. The lack of accountability Italy faced post World War II for its war crimes further allowed this amnesia to take root within the culture of Italy.

Thus far, there has been a gap in the literature concerning the memories of the past, or lack thereof, and the connection to the political climate today. As I mentioned before, much of the literature about immigration in Italy today primarily focuses on the sheer number of immigrants and where they come from. These articles also ponder why there has been a rise in anti-immigration sentiment across Italy, however the reasons listed are ones that do not address the particulars of Italy's reaction and response but rather more generalized, superficial reasons. What I hope to achieve is to open up a new line of discourse that is lacking in the literature in order to begin exploring other ways of explaining Italy's xenophobic response. I believe that by addressing the active amnesia many Italians have over the actions of Fascism during WWII, it will be easier to understand and respond to why Italy has had such an anti-immigrant response and may bring to light other issues clouded by this amnesia.

*Chapter 1***Fascism and Self Victimization**

“Fascism is considered a period of dictatorship to erase.”²¹ -My nonna, Catterina Marchetti

The rise of Mussolini in Italy was largely focused on the idea of Italy restoring its former glory as a Roman state. This idea further propelled support for Mussolini when he called for the “reclamation” of former Roman colonies to recreate a scaled-down version of what once was the Roman Empire. Though the League of Nations now forbade colonization, Mussolini began using a rhetoric of self victimization in order to drum up support for colonizing Africa. His use of this type of rhetoric proved to be quite successful at deflecting any kind of culpability as well as at uniting the population in favor of colonization. This language continued beyond this particular instance, however this time, it was not just Mussolini who employed self victimization but the entire population. When Italy was forced to give up its colonies after the war ended, a similar political rhetoric was used not only by Mussolini when he justified Italy’s need for colonies, but also by the Italian population which argued that it was unfair that Italy was the only nation to lose its colonies. Meanwhile, they were not being further punished for the crimes that Fascism had committed during the war.

Beyond colonialism, the language of self victimization was used by the Italian population after the fall of Mussolini as a way to deflect any accountability for the crimes Fascism had committed. Towards the end of the war, Mussolini began what would become his habitual diatribe of pushing the blame onto others. Since he had already fallen from power, he began this trend by blaming Hitler and the Germans for his political demise. It was not until Mussolini had

²¹ “Comunque il fascismo è considerato un periodo di dittatura da cancellare.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

joined Germany in the war that Italy began to start losing power according to Mussolini. This language was also used by the general population which was slightly more credible since Germany invaded northern Italy after Mussolini fell. This is not to say that the Germans are to blame; Italy was the first nation to elect a totalitarian dictator to power before Germany followed suit some years later. This discourse continued after the war with Italy from blaming Mussolini to blaming Yugoslavia, which was largely a victim of Italian aggression, to blaming the Nazis. Fascist Italy was never truly held accountable for crimes committed during the war thus perpetuating an air of self victimization. After the war, the Allies largely let Italy go unpunished mainly due to the very real possibility of Italy becoming a Communist country after the war. Since this was the time of the Red Scare, the Allies, especially America, were determined to keep Italy in front of the Red Curtain. By not turning Communist, Italy was able to dodge the prosecution and trials that Germany faced after the war. Since they were not held accountable for the war crimes committed, this further allowed Italy to be insinuate the language of self victimization within the population. Because of this, Italy remained virtually absolved of any crime it had committed during the war, thus reinforcing the myth of the “good Italian.”

During the rise of Mussolini’s Fascist Italy, it became apparent that there was one major aspect that set Italy apart from the rest of Europe: its lack of colonies. Mussolini desired to restore Italy to its original Roman roots and reestablish its empire.²² However, by the time Mussolini had decided to recreate this idea of an Italian empire, the League of Nations had already written a clause preventing more colonization. Undeterred by the this deliberation, Mussolini continued to pursue the dream of having Italian colonies in Africa along with the rest

²² Nicola Labanca, “Il fascismo e le colonie,” in *Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana* (Il Mulino, 2007) 155.

of Western Europe.²³ Mussolini was able to use this argument of Italy not being allowed to have colonies to his advantage. By painting the League of Nations in an adversarial light, he was able to rally national support for Italy invading Ethiopia. He claimed that the League of Nations was punishing Italy unfairly by invoking this rule since many other European countries already had colonies.²⁴ Luckily for Mussolini, the majority of the Italian population rallied behind him, and with public support, Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935.

The particular covenant that was invoked by the League of Nations is one that recognizes invasion of another country as an act of war and that aims to punish the invading nation through trade restrictions. Mussolini admitted that he was breaking this covenant, but found it to be unfair. He claimed that the League of Nations was attempting to humiliate Italy by stating that Ethiopia was equal to Italy. Italy claimed that it was trying to civilize the uncivilized peoples of Ethiopia, a statement that was readily accepted by the excited Italian public. Although Mussolini was able to put a positive spin on the act of colonization, in reality he was only able to do so by using the language of self victimization when referring to Italy's right to colonize. The kind of language he used is quite hypocritical since Italy was in the position of power in this situation. Since he used self victimization to justify his reason for colonizing, he denied the African communities any sense of legitimacy to their suffering. This language which is used to portray Italy as a victim when it indeed was acting as the aggressor is just an instance of the nationalistic narrative used during the Fascist time period.

Fast forwarding to the end of Mussolini's regime and the tortured ending of World War II, the language of self victimization was still in use. Though there are many example of this

²³ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 197.

²⁴ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle* (University of California Press, 2000) 164-173.

rhetoric used post WWII in an attempt to absolve Italy of any wrongdoing, this section will focus on how this language was used in reference to colonization. After the war, Italy was forced to give up its colonies as part of its punishment for the war crimes committed in the name of Fascism. Though this punishment barely begins to compensate for all the acts committed by Italy during WWII, a segment of the Italian population still considered themselves as being the victims on this issue. In 1947, the Paris Peace Treaty forced Italy to turn over all the territories it had conquered during the war despite their hope that they would be able to keep them. Although Italy was forced to give up these colonies, they were able to avoid any other punishment regarding what they had done to the colonies during the war.²⁵ The fact that other European countries were able to keep their colonies while Italy was forced to give them up only served to substantiate self victimization. This view that Italy was being unfairly punished by being forced to give up its colonies was blown out of proportion due to the fact that other than giving up its colonies, Italy did not face the same kind of punishment as the other Axis powers post WWII.

By avoiding the kind of high-profile trials that marked the post-WWII reckoning in Germany and Japan, the Allies allowed Italy to go largely unpunished for their war crimes and later continue the narrative of self victimization. In this way, the Allies exempted Italians from feeling any sense of guilt for the horrendous acts committed during Fascism. Such acts were committed both on Italian soil (where a civil war ensued), and abroad. With no sense of guilt or wrongdoing, Italy was able to continue this trend of not acknowledging their own actions during the war. This lack of discourse only furthered the amnesia of Italy's true actions. There has been an overwhelming lack of public acknowledgement about Italy's colonial past as well as the

²⁵ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Epilogue" in *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 2015) 297.

“absence of a collective consciousness of the country’s African colonies.”²⁶ With this amnesia, the victims of Italy’s colonization are not remembered and their stories are not heard beyond the border of their country.²⁷ In fact, Ethiopia made an attempt to have Italy pay for the war crimes it had committed during WWII, but it was blocked by Britain in order to preserve British interests and its ability to influence Italy. Since Britain was a powerful force within Europe, it wanted to maintain control over the Western European block. At this time, there was also the threat that Italy could become a Communist power after the fall of Mussolini. For these reasons, Britain wanted to prevent any possibility of Italy destabilizing and turning to Communism under the threat that Communism would overtake Western Europe starting with Italy.²⁸ This silencing of the grievances from Italy’s former colonies further reinforced the idea of Italy remaining blameless for its own actions during the war.

The lack of accountability Italy faced beyond simply for its colonial crimes, was largely due to the Red Scare. The idea that Italy might turn into a Communist state, which was a very real possibility, is what caused the Allies to back off from punishing Italy so that they would stay in front of the Iron Curtain. This is one of the reasons Britain refused to punish Italian war criminals for crimes committed in Ethiopia during WWII.²⁹ Britain largely thought that by prosecuting Italian war criminals, this process would only further destabilize a precarious Italy. Though Britain was pressured to prosecute these criminals, they were able to successfully hold

²⁶ Jacqueline Andall, “Italian Colonialism: Historical Perspectives Introduction,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2003) 371.

²⁷ Paolo Jedlowski, “Memories of the Italian colonial past,” *International Social Science Journal* 62, no. 203-204 (2012) 34-35.

²⁸ Effie G. H. Pedaliu, “Britain and the ‘Hand-over’ of Italian War Criminals to Yugoslavia, 1945-48,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 4 (2004) 506-507.

²⁹ Pedaliu, “Italian War Criminals,” 507.

off doing so.³⁰ However, Britain was not alone in trying to prevent Italy from becoming a communist nation. The U.S. was also very involved in trying to prevent the inevitability of Italy falling behind the Soviet curtain. The main motivation for the U.S. was to show to the rest of the world that it was able to control the Soviet Union from further spreading its communism.³¹ While Britain refused to punish Italy for its war crimes, America got involved in the Italian elections and ironically, both governments shared the same goal: to use any means necessary to prevent Italy from becoming a Communist stronghold.

The Soviet campaign to turn Italy into a communist nation largely divided the Italian population. Although there was significant support from certain groups of the Italian population, there were also former Fascists who were very wary of a communist government. Memories of World War I and acts committed by the Russians against Italians further played into the idea the Italy was the victim of Russian aggression.³² Although many Italians shared memories of being victimized at the hands of the Russians during WWI, many Italians were still pushing for a communist government, and the Allied countries were trying desperately to prevent such a turn of events. Since the fall of Fascism, many Italians wanted to return to Italy's Socialist roots which were emerging post-WWI before Fascism took control of the government. Though the Allies wanted to stop this transformation, there were many factors to be considered. One major issue was that by prosecuting Italian war criminals, the relationship the Brits had with the Italians could be jeopardized and more importantly, further strengthen the PCI (the Italian Communist Party).³³ The pressure that Britain faced from both sides of this debate lead to a strain on their

³⁰ Pedaliu, "Italian War Criminals," 510-511.

³¹ Robert A. Ventresca, "Guns, Butter, and Good Ole Yankee Know-How: America's Crusade to Defeat Italian Communism" in *From Fascism to Democracy*, (University of Toronto Press, 2004) 62.

³² John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 98.

³³ Pedaliu, "Italian War Criminals," 512.

relationship with the emerging Italian government. Once this strain reached an all time high in early 1946, the U.S. intervened, and after much consideration by the State Department, the U.S. decided to stall and “not implement any policy decision” relating to Italy so as not to further destabilize it.³⁴

After the end of the war, in 1946, the Allies came to a compromise that would neither thoroughly punish Italy nor completely absolve them of guilt. However, this idea failed in practice in large measure due to Italy stubbornly refusing to accept any form of responsibility or indeed, blame for what they had done. This was caused and exacerbated by a few different actions. First, Italy was not mentioned in the “Moscow Declaration of Atrocities.” This document only cited the German war criminals with no reference to Italian war criminals whatsoever. In addition to this, Italy stated that most Fascists who had entered Italy into the war in 1940 had either been killed by partisans or would be tried by the Italian courts. This attempt to deal with post-war reckoning internally further strengthened the official position that Italy was not just an aggressor, but also a victim of war crimes itself.³⁵ Italy also made it clear that they would not cooperate in any extradition process of war criminals. This prevented them from sending such criminals back to the country where war crimes were committed which, during this period, was typically Yugoslavia. Since the Allies were hesitant to hold Italy accountable due to its instability, the Allies further distanced themselves from the calls from the Slavic government to punish Italy for its war crimes when Yugoslavia shot down two U.S. planes in 1946 which caused the Allies to treat Yugoslavia as a pariah state.³⁶ These different factors all played into the

³⁴ Pedaliu, “Italian War Criminals,” 516.

³⁵ Pedaliu, “Italian War Criminals,” 519.

³⁶ Pedaliu, “Italian War Criminals,” 523-524.

tacit agreement that the Allies were not to go to make Italy pay for the war crimes committed in order to keep the country as stable as possible.

This overly generous act of forgiveness was not only present in the actions of the Allies, but was also evident within Italy itself. After Mussolini fell from power, many of the partisans were able to come out of the shadows and carry out personal vendettas against former Fascists. Though these killings were not celebrated as one may be led to imagine, they were seen as something that had to be done in order to move on.³⁷ Many of these vendettas were in fact carried out, but they proved to be unsuccessful in expunging every single Fascist who was involved in the war effort. Italy had previously claimed that they would try war criminals in an Italian court of law yet history shows that this never happened. In June 1946, the Communist Party leader, Palmiro Togliatti, acting as provisional justice minister, granted general amnesty for crimes committed by the Fascist regime in order to integrate the former fascists into a newly democratic Italy. This act was meant not to forgive the crimes but rather to forgive those who perpetrated them. Yet this lack of accountability only reinforced the idea that the Fascists had done nothing wrong and should not pay for what they had done.³⁸ This act of pardoning only added to the increasing amnesia that followed Fascism and has remained to this day.

There was also a sense by many Italian partisans who survived German concentration camps that one must forget in order to move on. This notion was made most famous by the Italian Jewish author and concentration camp survivor, Primo Levi. Levi insisted that those who could not forget would be “tormented by nightmares,” but that those who could “dismiss everything ... have begun to live.” Though Levi was not suggesting forgetting what happened,

³⁷ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 170-171.

³⁸ Rosario Florenza, “Sacrificial Memory and Political Legitimacy in Postwar Italy: *Reliving and Remembering World War II*,” *History and Memory* 24, no. 2 (Indiana University Press, 2012) 89.

he was focused on putting the “past aside and transcend[ing] it.”³⁹ Despite Italy not calling for a complete blackout of its wrongdoing, its willingness to put the past behind them without analysis or open acceptance furthered the concept of historical amnesia in that Italy could be seen not as the aggressor but rather the victim of the war.

Italy’s Fascist amnesia was also exacerbated by the act of forgetting about and neglecting to memorialize Italian war camps. These camps were not only in Italy but also in Yugoslavia and Croatia which were under Italian rule during the time of the war. These camps were not necessarily all concentration camps; some were camps to hold people made prisoner for myriad reasons. Most of the time, they were used to hold prisoners of war, usually Croats or Slavs who were fighting against the Italians colonizing their land. However, Italy also housed Jews and Italian partisans who had been captured.⁴⁰ Most of these camps were ignored after the war ended because there were many other more “important” atrocities to focus on. In addition, many of the prisoners were foreigners who had no ties to where they were kept, and many of those who created and ran the camps were still in power and were more than happy to let that memory fade.

⁴¹ These camps were not set up the same way German concentration camps were yet similarly the prisoners were still heavily reliant on the guards to give them food and water. Because of this, there were deaths at the camps, sometimes at rates similar to German concentrations camps. However, since there was the idea that Italy had ended the war siding with the victor, no one was held accountable for the deaths of those who died while they were detained.⁴² There was a lack

³⁹ Florenza, “Sacrificial Memory,” 90.

⁴⁰ Thomas Fuller, “Survivors of war camp lament Italy’s amnesia,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/29/news/survivors-of-war-camp-lament-italys-amnesia.html>.

⁴¹ Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 73.

⁴² Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 79.

of guilt in the Italian population for those who suffered in the camps due to the fact that the prisoners' own actions is what got them arrested in the first place.⁴³

In addition to all of this, there was no accountability whatsoever on the judicial front for these actions until the 1990s when information came to light that had been deliberately covered-up by the Italians, in what is now called the “archive of shame.”⁴⁴ Lastly, in what could be described as a self-serving argument designed to exculpate their own actions, the Jews who had been held at these camps were told that they had been saved from the German concentration camps that were much more brutal than Italy's. In this way, the Italians were able to portray themselves as helping the Jews, saving them from a much worse situation.⁴⁵ Adding to the twisted perception, most of the time, the Jews were treated better than the others in the camp, allowing the Italians to make the argument that they were saving the Jews from a horrible fate.⁴⁶ These camps have largely been forgotten both in and outside of Italy, and the memories that do remain tend to twist reality to portray the Italians in a positive light.

After the war, Italians scapegoated as many different groups as possible in order to deflect any sense of blame by the Italian government and people. The first and most obvious target of this deflection involved blaming the Germans for the unspeakable massacres they had committed during the war. Even prior to the end of the war Mussolini had already begun this trend. He claimed that had he not joined forces with Hitler in 1940, Fascism may have been able to be successful in much the same vain as Franco's regime in Spain. After his fall from power in 1943, Mussolini blamed Hitler for the fall of Fascism. While he did admit that he was the one to

⁴³ James Walston, “History and Memory of the Italian Concentration Camps,” *The Historical Journal* 40, no.1 (Cambridge University Press, 1997) 181.

⁴⁴ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 86.

⁴⁵ Walston, “History and Memory,” 182.

⁴⁶ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 77-78.

join Hitler in 1940, he blamed everyone around him, including Hitler, for Italy's loss. He claimed that he only chose to join Hitler due to pressure from the Germans to join their cause. He blamed German generals, asserting that they did not strategize well and did not listen to him and his strategies. According to him, the Germans didn't understand politics, and if they had let Mussolini lead the Axis powers they would have won the war.⁴⁷ Mussolini was not the only one who felt this way about Germany. It was almost a universal belief that Germany was the main aggressor towards Italy during and after the war.

After the war ended, there was a common belief that the Germans were at fault for much of the pain inflicted upon the Italians. Immediately after the war, the state had decided to give assistance to those who were affected by German aggression in Italy. Hence, Italy was able to shift the focus from its own wrongdoings to the wrongdoings of the Germans. For example, families of loved ones who had been killed by Germans when they invaded Italy were rewarded with 20,000 lire (a significant compensation in those days) to support them after their loved one had died.⁴⁸ In this way, the deaths of Italians who had died while fighting the war were not only memorialized, they were also politicized. They had become people who died fighting for their country no matter the real motivation. The state very publically and purposefully spoke about its citizens who had suffered through the war in order to further reinforce this idea of a "victim identity."⁴⁹ Further contributing to this idea of Italy being a victim of Nazi aggression was the fact that Italy was the country that suffered the most civilian massacres on its own territory in Western Europe. From this perspective Italy was not portrayed as an accomplice of Hitler but

⁴⁷ Smith, *Mussolini*, 314-315.

⁴⁸ Victoria C. Belco, "Restitution, Reparations, and Rewards" in *War, Massacre and Recovery in Central Italy, 1943-1948* (University of Toronto Press, 2010) 166.

⁴⁹ Belco, "Restitution, Reparations, and Rewards," 171.

was instead seen as a victim of his aggression.⁵⁰ Thus, the myth of the “evil German” and the “good Italian” was born perpetuating the myth that Italy was the victim of an aggressive force and never a perpetrator.

Though much of the blame was placed on Nazi Germany for the atrocities committed during the war, the partisans in Italy were blamed for provoking the attacks carried out by the Germans. Partisans were civilians who joined the fight against Fascism and Nazi Germany once the Germans invaded northern Italy. Since partisans were part of the local community, yet often lived on the fringes of the community, they became secondary scapegoats for the atrocities committed by the Nazis and Fascists during the war.⁵¹ Partisans were not only seen as provoking the Nazis to commit massacres, but also as having failed to protect the victims or even offer their lives in place of those who died no matter how unrealistic it truly was.⁵² This blame largely came from the fact that many who were neither partisans nor Fascist soldiers were witness to other citizens dying in their place. Since partisans were living within Italian society, they were the easiest to blame for the violence of the Nazis who killed without differentiation. This blame gave rise to the questioning of the Resistance movement of the war. The logic of those who experienced these massacres was focused largely on the fact that if there was nothing to fight against in Italy, the Germans would not have killed innocent civilians who did not want to take part in any aspect of the war. This then led to a debate within Italy about whether or not the Resistance did more harm than good in terms of the killings of innocent Italians during that time. Many blamed the partisans for acting more politically than with a military strategy and thus did

⁵⁰ Filippo Focardi, “Italy’s Amnesia over War Guilt: The ‘Evil Germans’ Alibi,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2014) 21.

⁵¹ Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 126.

⁵² Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 129.

not necessarily take into account how their actions would impact the populations around them. In what could be described as the domino effect, this then caused many Italians who were not part of the Resistance movement to blame the partisans for the collateral damage that would occur while fighting the Germans.⁵³ Further adding to their argument, much of the time these massacres were carried out after the killing of German soldiers, as acts of retaliation. This further provided “proof” to Italian civilians that partisans were not only provoking attacks but were also getting innocent Italians killed by failing to protect them from the Nazis.⁵⁴ Not only were the Nazis blamed for attacking Italy, the Italian partisans were blamed for causing this violence within Italy in a never ending cycle of fingerpointing.

In addition to those who were justly blamed, less likely scapegoats also became part of this victimhood rhetoric in Italy. After the fall from power, Mussolini and the Fascist government were blamed for the pain that they had caused Italians. It was at this time that the Allies began creating very forceful propaganda that drew a distinction between the innocent Italians and the Fascist regime. Mussolini was solely blamed for having dragged Italy into the war and Italy’s support of Nazi Germany.⁵⁵ This idea was further fostered by the Allies who used radio broadcasts to spread the message that Mussolini was single handedly responsible for involving Italy in Germany’s war. These claims from the Allies were cemented into the population’s memory when they accepted the story that Mussolini had betrayed Italy by dragging them into a war that Italians “neither wanted nor felt”.⁵⁶ This concept of blaming Mussolini only really began when addressing the entrance of Fascist Italy into the war with the Germans. During

⁵³ Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 139.

⁵⁴ Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 146.

⁵⁵ Focardi, “Italy’s Amnesia over War Guilt,” 10.

⁵⁶ Focardi, “Italy’s Amnesia over War Guilt,” 12.

this time, Mussolini was exclusively blamed for joining the war on the side of the Nazis. This way, Italy was able to absolve itself of any wrongdoing and further play as “a political victim of Fascism.”⁵⁷ Adding to this idea that Mussolini and Fascism held all the power, crimes that were committed during the war would not be considered “Italian crimes,” but rather “Fascist crimes” that were committed only by Fascists, not by ordinary Italians.⁵⁸ In this way, Italy was able to accept certain atrocities so long as they could blame it on a higher power that supported the notion that it was beyond their control.

During the time of the war, Italy had claimed Yugoslavia and parts of Croatia as occupied territories. Unsurprisingly, this did not sit well with many who lived in these countries leading to many skirmishes and casualties on both sides. However, these clashes have become ingrained in Italian society as massacres which further reinforced Italy’s status as a victim. These massacres, or *foibe* in Italian, were seen as unprovoked attacks on the part of the Slavs who wanted to export Communism to Italy. There was an exaggeration of the numbers of those killed in the *foibe* perhaps to further this sense of victimhood within Italy.⁵⁹ In fact, this idea was propagated through several TV series that dealt with the *foibe*. On these television shows, the *foibe* were portrayed as as the “Italian Holocaust” further allowing this narrative to continue on into the early 2000s.⁶⁰ Slavs were seen as the aggressor who had genocidal ambitions against the Italians and were threatening Italian democracy.⁶¹ Despite innocent people who died in the *foibe*, the majority of those who were fighting the Slavs were Italian Fascists who had hoped to colonize

⁵⁷ Belco, “Restitution, Reparations, and Rewards,” 180.

⁵⁸ Focardi, “Italy’s Amnesia over War Guilt,” 19.

⁵⁹ Susanne C. Knittel, “A Severed Branch: The Memory of Fascism on Stage and Screen,” in *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (Fordham University, 2015) 226.

⁶⁰ Chiara Bonfiglioli, Andrea Hajek, and Monica Jansen. “Introduction: Television and the Fictional Rewriting of History in Italy’s ‘Second Republic’” *The Italianist* 34, no. 2 (2014) 149.

⁶¹ Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny*, 23.

Istria. The Istrian peninsula has a long history of much contention between Yugoslavia and Italy. During the *foibe*, Italian Fascists had wanted to reclaim the Peninsula as a part of Venezia Giulia.

⁶² Throughout this time of massacres and constant fighting, the Slavs and Italians were in competition to declare who the “real” victim of the *foibe* was. While it is true that both sides suffered greatly, it was the totalitarian regimes of each country that caused this nationalist fight.⁶³ Both sides suffered from their governments mutual aggression but Italy exaggerated their sense of victimhood to sustain the myth that they had done nothing wrong.

The Italians have proven to be masters of scapegoating which ultimately lead to the myth of the “good Italian.” This myth stems from the idea that the Italians were not the aggressors in the war, but rather were often the victim of aggression from others. The myth is a recurring theme has been accepted by the various different countries and people that Italy blamed for the war which ties everything together. When Italy was fighting with the Germans, Italy placed the sole blame on Mussolini despite his wide ranging popularity at that time. Once Mussolini fell, much of the blame unsurprisingly was directly and vehemently aimed at the Germans for overtaking northern Italy. Surprisingly, there was a good amount of pressure put on the partisans, by non partisan Italians, who were fighting the Germans. Many viewed the partisans as provoking the attacks by the Germans, and that the partisans failed to protect the innocent from the Germans. Italy also blamed Yugoslavia for the *foibe* which were horrible attacks carried out against ethnic Italians living in the area, forgetting and forgiving the brutality of their colonization of the region much as they had done in Africa. Although their self victimization on the side of the *foibe* is not without merit, their victimization denies any wrongdoing on the side

⁶² Gaia Baracetti, “Foibe: Nationalism, Revenge and Ideology in Venezia Giulia and Istria, 1943-5” *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 4 (2009) 665.

⁶³ Baracetti, “Foibe.”

of the Italians in Yugoslavia. This common idea of “*il bravo italiano*,” the good Italian, has further reinforced Italy’s argument that they were the victim of outside aggression and did no wrong during the war. This common narrative virtually absolved Italy from any culpability of their own aggression during the war.

Chapter 2

The Lega Nord and Self Victimization

“I am the savior of Italy.” -Umberto Bossi⁶⁴

The language of self victimization and use of historical amnesia was not only prevalent during and post Fascism, but has also carried forward into modern day Italy. Immediately after Fascism fell in Italy, there was an urge to forget what had happened and what Fascism had done in the name of national unity. Even as recently as the late 2000s, there was still an active desire as a people to ignore Italy’s involvement with Fascism during World War II in order to continue the narrative of being the victim.⁶⁵ This was further evidenced by the split between public and private memory in the years following the war. The public and state funded monuments often clashed with local memories of events. As John Foot writes in his book, “The state failed to acknowledge different narratives while local people contested the versions of history presented down to them in their town squares and history books.”⁶⁶ This clash between the government and the locals only exacerbated a more bitter divide between the two. These debates concerning the varying memories most often occurred within churches. In the years following the war, there was a general consensus on what narrative would be accepted into the mainstream. These stories were further legitimized by appearing in films, song books and even in public commemorations. By carefully choosing what memories of the war to keep, Italy continued to propagate a sense of victimization with no push back for many, many years.

⁶⁴ Hans-Georg Betz, “The Two Faces of Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe,” *The Review of Politics*, 55 no. 4 (1993) 665. Translation by Betz.

⁶⁵ John Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) 167.

⁶⁶ Foot, *Italy’s Divided Memory*, 130.

It wasn't until the 1980s that much of the narratives previously accepted about the war era came under scrutiny. During this time, many historians were called upon to reveal the truth of what had really happened during the war. With these contestations of public memory, much of the public was in crisis about what to believe. These historians were seen as a way to resolve these disputed memories.⁶⁷ However, this was not an easy proposition for many Italians to accept. As the truth about the atrocities committed by Italians began to emerge, many citizens were not willing to accept this as fact. In one particular case during which a massacre was carried out by the Nazis in 1945, in Collegno, many Fascists along with partisans died. Since this town was ashamed that there were still Fascists in Italy even after Mussolini fell, this massacre was actively forgotten by the townspeople. It wasn't until 1999 that an historian, Bruno Maida, began to uncover the truth about this massacre and set about reminding the citizens of this town of its painful past. He was set to present on his book dedicated to the findings of the true nature of that massacre but was met by a boycott by the locals who were not yet ready to acknowledge their Fascist past. This only served to continue the "silent memory" and defensive attitude of the town.⁶⁸ This is but one example of the willful ignorance chosen by many towns when confronted with the memories of the war.

Not only were events that occurred in Italy buried with the hope of never being uncovered, but atrocities that happened abroad were also carefully vetted in order to decide which ones should be brought to light. Naturally, the consequence of picking and choosing historical tragedies only served to sustain Italy's role as that of the victim. On a Greek island, Cefalonia, in 1943, right around the time that Mussolini fell, there were many clashes between

⁶⁷ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 130.

⁶⁸ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 173-174.

Italian and German armies. These clashes mainly happened because Italy had changed sides first as allies to the Germans to then becoming enemies. During this time, many Italian soldiers were killed or taken prisoner by the Germans who viewed the Italians as traitors who had suddenly turned on their former allies. These events were largely debated within the public arena and often manipulated in order to produce a specific narrative of being a political act when in reality, it is not so clear. Despite the events in Cefalonia being heroic acts against Germany, they were the exception rather than the rule of Italians who were abroad when Mussolini fell and Italy joined the Allies. During this time, many other Italians either gave up fighting or deserted the war effort entirely. It was as though the war was completely over for them. The events of Cefalonia were carefully chosen to be remembered in order to portray Italy as the hero of the war rather than changing sides after Mussolini fell. The events at Cefalonia were not forgotten in quite the same way that other massacres have been, yet there have been debates over whether or not it has been overlooked. Since it has become so politicized, the true reality of what happened there overshadows what has happened in other places outside of Italy.⁶⁹ By cherry picking which events would be remembered Italy and its government have effectively erased the truth behind what went on abroad after the fall of Mussolini. This serves to sustain the myth of the “good Italian” and presents Italian soldiers as being on the right side of the war.

This current day amnesia surrounding the events of World War II has created the opportunity for political parties to use the same language of self victimization that Fascism had used. In the early 1990s, a new party, called the Lega Nord, was created that focused on the riches of northern Italy. This party, created by Umberto Bossi, was founded as a secessionist

⁶⁹ Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory*, 114-117.

party whose ultimate goal was for northern Italy to become its own republic. The main argument was that southern Italy, a historically agrarian community, was draining the more business oriented north of its resources. Initially, the party had little support, mainly in certain alcoves in the north.⁷⁰ However, over the years, it has grown more and more popular nationwide, especially due to Italy's struggling economy. Today the party is run by Matteo Salvini after Bossi resigned under corruption allegations. Salvini has turned the party's original platform from secessionist to nationalist. Although there has been no official comment on why the Lega made the shift, the recent influx of immigrants coming to Italy has provided the party a fresh new ideological battle front, reviving a previously faltering Lega.⁷¹ This nationalist shift has created a stronger Lega than in years past giving the party overall a more serious profile nationally. Within the Lega's platform, one can find many rhetorical parallels to Fascism, including using the language of self-victimization. Within this chapter, I hope to link the case of historical amnesia to the rhetoric of self-victimization, drawing a parallel to Fascism.

When the Lega was founded by Bossi in the early 1990s, he was advocating for an option that northern Italy had never considered before in modern day politics: a chance to secede from the rest of Italy. The fundamental platform of this party was that northern Italy was being held back by southern Italy due to the widespread poverty of the south. This divide largely stems from northern Italy being much more economically advanced in large part due to their technological advances and proximity to the rest of Europe. Southern Italy remains comparatively agrarian and rural with fewer sophisticated economic opportunities. The party's main argument, that the south

⁷⁰ Damian Spruce, "Empire and Counter-Empire in the Italian Far Right: Conflicting Nationalisms and the Split between the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale on Immigration." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 5 (2007) 100.

⁷¹ Stefano Tomelleri, "Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment," in *Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society* (Michigan State University Press: 2015) 123.

was holding northern Italy back, formed an interesting rhetoric which seemed almost counterintuitive. The party began to focus on how much more prosperous northern Italy would be if southern Italy were forced to support itself instead of relying on the north. From the moment it was created, the Lega Nord used this idea of northern Italy being the victim of southern Italy: “The deep-rooted foundations of *leghismo* cannot be understood unless we recognize its great ability to make a political use of Northern Italy’s victim-playing.”⁷² Thus with the creation of this new political party, the language of self victimization was once again being used in Italian national politics.

This idea that northern Italians had a separate “ethnic” identity from other Italians set up the new direction the party was headed in. As Tomelleri writes:

Toward the end of the 1990s, this localism and the demand for an ethnic identity for the ‘northern people’ situated in the mythical ‘Padania’ also became a way to channel the growing racism relating to the immigration of non-EU citizens that, at that time, was turning into an unheard-of social phenomenon, in terms of both the quantity of flows, with respect to the recent past, and the cultural and political debate to which it gave rise.⁷³

As the party began to gain in popularity and recognition, a simultaneous shift in the rhetoric began to take place, as well. Southern Italy was still being held accountable as the main culprit for draining northern Italy’s resources, while a parallel grievance began emerging with the rise of non-EU immigration in Italy. The novelty of this immigration gave the Lega an opportunity to expand its ideology from that of a secessionist party to a nationalist one. In this way the Lega would not only gain more national attention, it would gain national support as well, legitimizing it as a national political party rather than a fringe group. With this new party platform, Bossi

⁷² Tomelleri, “Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment,” 104.

⁷³ Tomelleri, “Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment,” 103.

turned the attention to the new influx of immigrants as possible scapegoats for Italy's struggles.⁷⁴

The Lega was still able to maintain its original populist platform but consequently gained a bigger and broader group of supporters. This language and new anti-immigrant ideology of the Lega continued throughout Bossi's time as the leader of the party.

With this rhetoric and ideological change, Bossi's party began to invoke language of self victimization at a national level, much like they had done before with southern Italy. Now instead of focusing on southern Italy as the culprit for draining Italy's resources, the focus shifted to new immigrants, especially those of color. His focus on the "invasion of blacks and Arabs" was gaining attention from the rest of Italy.⁷⁵ By harnessing the rising fear among Italians of a changing Italy, Bossi was able to successfully begin transforming the party into a nationalist party that was to be taken seriously. Additionally, the Lega was able to maintain such an openly anti immigrant, and at times, racist rhetoric based largely on the fact that it was still considered a fringe party with no serious ties to already well established parties. By not being held to the same standard as other parties, the Lega was able to continue this rhetoric largely unchallenged by other parties within Italy. In fact, Bossi has gone so far to accuse "established parties of wanting to transform Italy into a 'multiracial [*multirazziale*], multiethnic, and multireligious society' which 'comes closer to hell than to paradise.'"⁷⁶ Again, the fringe status of the Lega allowed it to get away with critiquing all other mainstream parties in Italy. This type of language, though shocking in its overt racism, was nothing new for this group. Bossi constantly made headlines for his crass and unhindered way of speaking. As he played on the fears of Italians who for

⁷⁴ Tomelleri, "Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment," 123.

⁷⁵ Betz, "The Two Faces of Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe," 682.

⁷⁶ Hans-George Betz, "The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe," *Comparative Politics* 25 no. 4 (1993) 417.

generations have enjoyed a more or less homogenous society, he was able to focus the blame not only on others such as immigrants, but also on mainstream Italian parties, who he felt were complicit or ineffective. By framing the party's platform in this way, he was able to gain support for his general claims blaming those around him for Italy's hardships while managing to avoid any real solutions to these supposed problems.

Notwithstanding Bossi's targeting of immigration as the new source of Italy's problems, he also attacked the mainstream government as a way to continue to blame those around him. Remember, the party was originally founded on the idea that southern Italy was draining northern Italy of its resources. And now the party also blamed mainstream government parties for the middle class's problems and lack of upward mobility. He was able to convince his supporters that "the Italian lower middle and middle classes imagine themselves imprisoned by the centralist bureaucracy of the nation-state" since the national debt created economic hardships.⁷⁷ Since the Lega was focused on a more localized approach to government, they were able to appeal to Italians who felt left behind by the centralist government. Even though this obscured the fact that many small to medium sized companies profited from the corruption of local politicians and tax evasion, the Lega was able to convince those around them that this was better than having the stagnant central government be in control.⁷⁸ In this way, the Lega was once again able to focus the blame on others when in fact, the Lega did little to help decrease the actual frustrations of the middle class.

Beyond this, the Lega was able to focus on the narcissism and privilege that many of their constituents have and was able to successfully use this to their advantage. Tomelleri writes,

⁷⁷ Tomelleri, "Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment," 120.

⁷⁸ Tomelleri, "Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment," 121.

“Umberto Bossi and the *leghista* movement fueled the belief that an inner circle of people possessing an enormous amount of power used ‘dishonest’ means to hold back and marginalize those below them who were aspiring to greater social prestige.”⁷⁹ In this way, Bossi was able to convince the majority of his voter base that those who currently held the power were holding back those who wanted to have the chance of upward mobility. By blaming the centralist government for the middle class’s problems, the Lega was able to avoid offering any plausible solutions while gaining support for their populist movement. In their success, the Lega was able to make their voter base feel superior when, in fact, they were in the same situation as other Italians. Tomelleri adds, “The victimization stirred up by the Lega Nord movement requires an instrumental use of those who consider themselves superior or privileged.”⁸⁰ Since he was able to convince his constituents that they were the ones being oppressed due to their “superiority,” Bossi was able to attract well educated yet narcissistic people to his party. By having a fairly well educated voter base, the Lega was beginning to be taken more seriously within the world of politics instead of being viewed as simply a fringe group in northern Italy. By convincing these citizens to blame the central government for their lack of economic status despite being superior, Bossi and the Lega were able to gain legitimacy in the political world while offering no real solutions to Italy’s stagnation.

This push towards a more nationalist type of party goes hand in hand with forgetting the wrongdoings of the past. In order for nationalism to flourish there must be “strong emphasis on law and order, a return to traditional values, and an end to the confrontation with the past,” and instead focuses on blaming others for their own country’s hardships.⁸¹ Within the rhetoric put

⁷⁹ Tomelleri, “Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment,” 119.

⁸⁰ Tomelleri, “Toward a Sociology of Ressentiment,” 118.

⁸¹ Betz, “The Two Faces of Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe,” 680.

forth by these kinds of parties, there is always a desire to forget the past, especially when it is similar to the path that these nationalist parties take must take in order to be successful. Especially in Italy, we see a lack of confronting the nationalist rise of Fascism which is quite similar as that of the Lega. A big part of the similarities between the rise of these two groups has been the use of self victimization terminology when discussing Italy's difficulties. By employing this type of language, both parties were able to gain popular support while simultaneously avoiding any blame for the consequences of their own actions. Since they were both able to pinpoint the blame of Italy's hardships on those around them, they were able to avoid any meaningful way of addressing the deeper issues the country faced. This method has proven to be quite effective when dealing with any critique of Italy such as being portrayed as weak or lesser than other countries within Europe.

After Bossi resigned following a corruption scandal in 2012 that rippled throughout the Lega Nord, the party was then overtaken by Matteo Salvini.⁸² After Salvini took over, the party moved closer than ever before to becoming a nationalist party. In doing so, Salvini began to implement a new way of using a similar language of self victimization to his benefit. He took office just as the immigration crisis in Europe was at an all time high. He was able to use this fear of immigrants to his political benefit. Although Bossi had begun heading in this direction with the Lega prior to his fall, Salvini fully abandoned any type of lingering secessionist agenda and fully embraced the Lega as a nationalist movement. He has taken on the same trend as Bossi by using the same type of rhetoric blaming the influx of immigrants for Italy's difficulties. Not only is he using the language of self victimization by directly implicating poor and uprooted

⁸² John Hooper, "Umberto Bossi resigns as leader of Northern League amid funding scandal," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/05/umberto-bossi-resigns-northern-league>.

immigrants, he has also been blaming the European Union for their lack of support. He regularly makes sweeping claims that Italy has been abandoned by the EU and left to deal with the influx of immigrants on their own. By carrying on this legacy of using self victimization, he is also able to continue to gain supporters despite the fact that the Lega remains by en large a protest party without a realistic plan for bettering the lives of their constituents.

Along the same lines as Bossi, Salvini has used anti immigrant, and at times, racist language when claiming Italy is the victim of organized mass immigration. He has been known, much like Bossi, to say whatever is on his mind no matter how “politically incorrect” his views may seem. When speaking about the problem of immigration in Italy, Salvini often uses language reminiscent of conspiracy, almost as though this influx of immigrants arriving in Italy as a gateway to the rest of Europe is somehow purposeful and malicious in intent. In August 2016, Salvini spoke in front of a crowd of Lega supporters during which time he blathered on about how Italians were being unfairly harmed due to the influx of immigrants. Matteo Pucciarelli, a journalist for *La Repubblica*, wrote, “The secretary of the Lega is speaking about ‘controlled and financed ethnic cleansing’... Italians are suffering, oppressed by ‘illegal immigrants.’”⁸³ This thinly veiled way of blaming immigrants of color for Italy’s hardships is just another footstep following in line of his predecessor, Bossi. He is claiming that these immigrants are causing great harm to Italians while offering no meaningful solutions as to how to deal with this influx. He is also subtly attacking the government claiming that, by allowing large numbers of immigrants into the country, they are allowing a “controlled” cleansing of

⁸³ Matteo Pucciarelli, “Salvini incita la platea leghista: ‘Ripuliamo le città dagli immigrati,’” *La Repubblica*, August 15, 2016, http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/08/15/news/salvini_incita_la_platea_leghista_ripuliamo_le_citta_dagli_immi_grati_-146054272/. “Il segretario della Lega parla di ‘pulizia etnica controllata e finanziata’...stanno subendo gli italiani, oppressi dai ‘clandestini.’”

Italian people. In this way, much like Bossi, Salvini is using the language of self victimization in dealing with immigration while focusing on the misdoings of the current government. He is able to gain popular support for blaming those around him while failing to offer a way to deal with this influx of immigrants.

Salvini has harnessed this anti immigration rhetoric and used it to undermine support for the European Union within Italy. He did not want to ally his country with other members of the EU simply because they were somewhat more welcoming to refugees pouring into Europe. In addition to Greece, Italy has been a major entry point for many immigrants coming to Europe. Many in Italy have felt as though the European Union has not adequately helped Italy in dealing with the influx of these immigrants. The Lega has used this sentiment to its advantage, openly bashing the EU whenever possible. In a recent vote to change the Italian Constitution, the Lega and other anti establishment parties voted against this referendum, partially due to the fact that it would strengthen Italy's ties with the EU. When the referendum failed, Salvini touted it not only as a win for the Lega, but also a "big slap to the EU since we were left alone with immigration."

⁸⁴ In this way, Salvini was able to place the blame not just on the current government within Italy, but also on the EU for ignoring the plight of Italy having become overwhelmed by immigrants. In fact, he went so far to say the the EU was supporting this influx of immigrants due to the shared laws within the European Union as well as the shared currency of the Euro. In an interview with *Geopolitika*, he said, "This crisis, this disaster, has been artificially induced and in essence this artificial cataclysm consists of four letters: e-u-r-o."⁸⁵ By blaming the EU beyond just the Italian government, Salvini was able to harness much of the displeasure many

⁸⁴ Matteo Salvini, "Salvini, vittoria del no anche messaggio per Ue," SkyTV video, December 6, 2016, <http://video.sky.it/news/politica/salvini-vittoria-del-no-anche-messaggio-per-ue/v314489.vid?pagt=3>.

⁸⁵ Matteo Salvini, interview by Srdjan Novaković, *Geopolitika* no.73, April 2014. Translation by David Djordjevic.

have had with the workings of the EU in relation to Italy. Many have embraced this anti EU sentiment and have turned to populist parties within Italy to fix what they see as an injustice to their country. Since Salvini and the Lega have been able to garner support in their displeasure for the EU, they have been able to maintain this “anti” approach while offering no real solutions. Though Salvini claims to be in favor of Italy leaving the EU, he has offered little to no explanation as to how that would happen. In this way, he is still able to continue this rhetoric of Italy being treated unfairly by those around them while offering no solutions to what he perceives to be problems.

This language of self victimization has begun to move beyond the politicians within the Lega and leach into the general public. Naturally, this causes an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment as well as the corresponding feeling of being victimized by the very same immigrants. This issue has largely been prevalent in southern Italy due to its geographical location as a fairly accessible entry point for many immigrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Lampedusa is an Italian island in the middle of the Mediterranean which has dealt with the brunt of these African arrivals due to its location: it is only 70 miles from Tunisia but over 120 miles away from Sicily. Lampedusa has felt a great economic and social burden dealing with the sheer number of immigrants who pass through regularly. Many of those who live on the island were born and raised there, creating a deep sense of community and culture that is particular to the island. As a result, many who live there have had a difficult time dealing with this new turbulence and strain on the island. As a result of the influx, the islanders have been quick to blame the immigrants for the cause of all their problems. However, this language profoundly echoes a similar rhetoric of self victimization. One woman in her 50s said, “So it is right that we are stingy with those who

land here. And also, I am opposed to crime because these arrivals are violent, they kill each other, and we, in Lampedusa, want to rest easy because they come at night, entering homes and we are frightened.”⁸⁶ These fears have largely been unfounded as many who enter the EU through Lampedusa only use the island as an entry point and actually do not stay for very long. Yet since many immigrants do pass through Lampedusa, one can understand that this sense of fear exists amongst native Lampedusians.

As is true elsewhere in Italy, the Lampedusians feel that they have been left to deal with the immigration situation while they are facing longstanding problems of their own. One woman who has lived on the island her whole life stated that, “Now there is too much confusion with all these Turks. The tourists, I don’t mind, but all these Moroccans, Tunisians...I do not like it! There's too much mess, Lampedusa has become a wreck.”⁸⁷ This woman speaks for many who feel that many outsiders either do not or cannot see the struggle that Lampedusa is facing. Furthermore, the racial component of her dissatisfaction cannot be overlooked: she uses the derogatory term “Turks” to refer to all the immigrants coming from North Africa to Lampedusa. A supporter of the Lega who lives in Lampedusa wants the island to focus on solving its own problems, such as its economic hardships, before helping immigrants. For this supporter the current emergency is not the fact that there are immigrants coming to shore, it is that there has not been enough fresh water for those on the island. He feels as though the city has only partially remedied the problem when in reality he is losing business because he can not open his

⁸⁶ Alessandra Dino, “Clandestini a Lampedusa. Isolati, segregati, invisibili,” *Meridiana* 56, (2006) 134. “Allora è giusto che anche noi siamo pignoli con quelli che sbarcano. Poi, io sono contraria alla delinquenza perché questi sono violenti, si ammazzano tra di loro e noi a Lampedusa vogliamo stare tranquilli perché arrivano di notte, entrano nelle case e noi ci spaventiamo.”

⁸⁷ Dino, “Clandestini a Lampedusa,” 140. “Ora c’è troppa confusione con questi turchi. Per i turisti, non fa niente, ma per tutti questi marocchini, tunisini...non mi piace! C’è troppo macello, a Lampedusa diventò un bordello, un casino.”

restaurant.⁸⁸ Many islanders do not view themselves as racists for not wanting the immigrants there. They simply feel as though the immigrants are not part of their culture and add great strain to the island infrastructure. As one native simply put it, “They are not like us.”⁸⁹ This particular woman points out that these immigrants are trying to come to Italy yet are not Italians. So, like so many of her neighbors, she does not see “the other” as having the right to live there and add to their burden. She purports that it is the work of God when some of them do not make it to the island alive. Thus, the focus of the crisis is thrust back onto the Islanders, who identify as the victims of this situation instead of those fleeing their home countries in desperation.

This anti immigration sentiment is not unique to Lampedusa, but is clearly prevalent throughout Italy. Calabria, the region located at the toe of the boot of Italy, has similarly been faced with rescuing migrants coming to their shore. Yet, how they address this “problem” is quite devious and immoral. In Calabria, there is a very powerful organized crime group called the ‘Ndrangheta, which has been controlling much of the local economy and criminal activities for several decades. Recently the ‘Ndrangheta have taken on this new and vulnerable population by taking advantage of them. The group has begun setting up orange groves in order to gain state subsidies, and in turn hiring illegal immigrants to work for them. Naturally, they can pay below wage and because they are illegal immigrants, there are no possible protections for them.⁹⁰ Since these immigrants are willing to take these jobs, many locals see it as the immigrants stealing jobs that rightfully belong to Italians. However, since there has been a negative population growth, especially in southern Italy, this influx of immigrants is actually vital to counteract this negative

⁸⁸ Dino, “Clandestini a Lampedusa,” 143.

⁸⁹ Dino, “Clandestini a Lampedusa,” 141. “Loro non sono come noi.”

⁹⁰ Alessandra Corrado, “*Clandestini* in the Orange Towns: Migrations and Racisms in Calabria’s Agriculture,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4, no. 2, (2011) 197-198.

growth. In southern Italy there is high demand for harvesters during the summer months, but the local labor force cannot sustain the amount of work there is.⁹¹ Therefore the idea that these immigrants are taking away jobs from Italians is simply untrue. However, this belief is shared among many in southern Italy who see the ‘Ndrangheta taking advantage of cheap labor. In addition to exploiting these immigrants, the ‘Ndrangheta has also recently taken to harassing these immigrants as a way of forcing them to join their group. As Corrado writes, “‘Hitting niggers’ is interpreted as an ‘initiation rite’ for young people aspiring to become members of the ‘Ndrangheta.”⁹² It is a very disturbing relationship. The immigrants need money and the ‘Ndrangheta exploits this need because they also rely on the immigrants to work for them. They take advantage of the fact that they cannot go to the police. This emboldens them to wield their power over the perhaps naive immigrants and harass them for initiation. Since the ‘Ndrangheta has been so powerful in Calabria for so long, it has not seemed possible for non members to challenge them into hiring legal Italian citizens. In this way, the citizens of Calabria, as well as the illegal immigrants, both lose to the power of the ‘Ndrangheta and its ability to manipulate a situation to its benefit.

Further north in central Italy, Rome has experienced an uptick of abuse against immigrants. Recently, a Moroccan family was moving into their new apartment when they were met with racist epithets from other inhabitants of that complex. A family of native Italians began shouting, “Go away from here Negroes, we don’t want foreigners, go back home with your rubber dinghy!”⁹³ While this situation was met with public criticism from many powerful

⁹¹ Corrado, “*Clandestini in the Orange Towns*,” 195.

⁹² Corrado, “*Clandestini in the Orange Towns*,” 198.

⁹³ Rinaldo Frignani, “San Basilio, residenti in piazza: ‘Fuori i negri dagli alloggi Ater,’” *Corriera della Sera*, December 6, 2016, http://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/16_dicembre_06/san-basilio-residenti-piazza-fuori-negri-alloggi-ater-7c56eef

officials, this is not new behavior within Italy. There has been a slew of documented outbursts in which people have shouted hateful slurs such as, “We do not want Negroes nor foreigners here, but only Italians.”⁹⁴ It is true that these Italians are not necessarily invoking a specific rhetoric of self victimization, yet their racist views only hint at a deep and pervasive feeling of being oppressed and burdened themselves. Their language closely mirrors that of the Lega and other anti immigrant political groups who, in turn, take this type of rhetoric one step further implying that it is these immigrants, and these immigrants only, who are harming Italy and its culture.

The issues of self victimization and selective memory regarding Fascism has allowed Italy to paint itself as the victim of outside forces. As recently as present day, Italy has carefully selected only particular memories of the war to study or commemorate and just as carefully suppressed or denied others in an effort to maintain its sense of victimhood. Perhaps the shame and guilt of having sided with one of the most heinous war criminals in history has caused Italy to conveniently forget the wrongs they, too, have committed and instead focused on the few massacres they experienced after joining forces with the Allies. This rhetoric of historical amnesia surrounding the events of World War II further legitimized its use when the Lega Nord was founded in the 1990s. The Lega fully embraced this language in order to gain popular support for their new party and to lay the foundation of the party’s main goals which was to have northern Italy secede from the south due to their impoverishment and lack of resources. They employed this language of self victimization to illustrate how southern Italy was draining

0-bbae-11e6-a857-3c2e3af6f0b6.shtml. “Via da qui i negri, gli stranieri non li vogliamo, tornatevene a casa vostra col gommone!”

⁹⁴ “Roma, a San Basilio barricate dei residenti: ‘Non date la casa ai marocchini,’” *La Repubblica*, December 6, 2016.

http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/12/06/news/roma_a_san_basilio_barricate_dei_residenti_non_date_la_casa_a_i_marocchini_-153573175/. “Non vogliamo negri né stranieri qui, ma soltanto italiani.”

resources and money from the more economically prosperous north. However, the Lega enjoyed a much broader support base once they switched focus away from just the south of Italy to the new problem of immigrants flocking to Italy. In the mid to late 1990s, Italy began facing a new immigration coming from Northern Africa by way of the Mediterranean Sea. With this new development, the Lega began to transform from its secessionist roots to focus on keeping Italy “Italian.”

This new change caused the Lega to embrace a very similar rhetoric to that of Fascism. Knowingly or not, the Lega largely borrowed from Fascism’s similar language of blaming those around them for issues beyond their control. This technique became particularly popular in terms of addressing the immigration crisis in recent years. The Lega was able to modify the rhetoric they had originally used for secessionism to now blame immigrants coming from Third World countries. This method of self victimization has proven quite effective for the Lega. In this way, they are able to garner public support by placing the blame on those around them, such as the EU and the immigrants themselves, while failing to better the country’s situation. This rhetoric has proven to be so effective, in fact, that it has had a trickle down effect into the general population. Amongst native Italians, there has been an increase in hateful and fearful language against immigrants which mirrors that of the Lega. This fear has lead to hate crimes and calling out racial epithets against new immigrants in Italy. This self victimization that has been perpetuated by the Lega has only further caused this historical amnesia of Fascism to continue: “Asking questions about the state in this way, through immigration, ultimately means 'denaturalizing,' so to speak, what is considered 'natural' and 'to re-historicize' the state, or what in the state seems to

have been hit by historical amnesia.”⁹⁵ In this way, the language of self victimization used in Fascism is inextricably linked to that used by the Lega today.

⁹⁵ Evelyne Ritaine and Katuscia Floriani, “Spagna e Italia: lo straniero come metafora delle incertezze politiche,” *Meridiana* 56, (2006) 71. “Interrogarsi sullo stato in questo modo, attraverso l’immigrazione, significa in ultima analisi ‘denaturalizzare,’ per così dire, ciò che viene considerato ‘naturale’ e ‘ri-storicizzare’ lo stato, o ciò che nello stato sembra colpito da amnesia storica.”

Chapter 3

Religion

“Fascism is a religion.” - Benito Mussolini⁹⁶

Christianity has always been the religion of Italy. When one thinks of Italy or what it means to be Italian, Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, has always been essential feature. During the time of Fascism, this fact was no different. In his youth, and into the early beginnings of Fascism, Mussolini had considered himself to be atheist and anti-religion. He was originally so against religion that when he first founded the Fascist Party, he called for an end to state subsidies to the Church and published articles in his Fascist newspaper about his hatred of Christianity.⁹⁷ However, after an abysmal performance in the first round of elections after the party was founded, Mussolini realized he would have to change his relationship with the Church in order to gain any kind of public support. After this realization, he began to speak out publicly in favor of Catholicism and the Church. He made sure to emphasize the fact that Catholicism was a large part of Italian culture and an integral part as to what it meant to be Italian.⁹⁸ After he came to power, he began meeting with the Pope to ensure that the Church would endorse Fascism and continue on with a symbiotic relationship throughout the period of Fascism.⁹⁹ Once Mussolini was able to accept this as part of his party’s platform, Fascism became unstoppable in its rise to power.

Similarly to Fascism, the Lega and its leaders also have a complicated relationship with the Church and the Pope. However, since the relationship between the two is still in flux to this

⁹⁶ George Seldes, *Sawdust Caesar: The Untold History of Mussolini and Fascism* (Ams Pr Inc, 1978) Chapter 4.

⁹⁷ David I. Kertzer, *The Pope and Mussolini* (New York: Random House, 2014) 20, 25.

⁹⁸ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 27.

⁹⁹ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 65.

day, it has been more difficult to find a clearly linked path of communication between the them. While Umberto Bossi was in power, he was rather elusive and nonchalant when asked about his religious beliefs. Though he considered himself Catholic, he identified more as an agnostic than anything else.¹⁰⁰ In more recent developments, Matteo Salvini has found himself in a rather precarious situation in dealing with the current Pope's pro immigrant and refugee stance while trying to maintain the Catholicism that is so closely held to Italian society. Though there is not as much explicit evidence of the Lega dealing with this complex relationship, they have addressed the issues of religion in Italy through proxy language, especially when discussing the issue of immigration in Italy. Throughout this section, I will draw comparisons between both Fascism's and the Lega's complicated connections with Catholicism and its embeddedness in Italian culture. This specific connection between the Church and the political parties has shown how integrated Catholicism is in Italian culture. It also shows how necessary it is for these parties to acknowledge its importance in order to have a strong following.

As a child, Mussolini had identified as atheist due to his father's disdain for religion.¹⁰¹ As he grew up, his father's influence proved to be quite powerful on the young man. His father was a staunch socialist who was anti-religion, almost the complete opposite of his wife, who herself was deeply religious. Once Mussolini moved on from his early socialist beliefs, he turned to Fascism and found his passion. During this time, he was still anti-religion, and therefore, anti-Catholicism. However, he quickly learned that in order to succeed on the larger scale, he must accept the fact that Italy was a mostly Catholic nation with strong, long held beliefs. Once Mussolini was officially elected into power, it seemed as though they would have a difficult time

¹⁰⁰ Umberto Bossi, "Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE)," YouTube video, 10:14, posted by "ladygroove71b", August 30, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XvS15IDihXA>.

¹⁰¹ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 1.

dealing with the Pope, Pius XI, since he very openly wanted to protect the Italian Jews within Italy.¹⁰² Mussolini was able to avoid this potential problem by meeting with the Pope in the early days of Fascist rule in Italy. In these meetings, they mostly negotiated what each side would do for the other. Thanks to his change in tune regarding the Church before Fascism gained enough power, Mussolini was forced to continue to keep up appearances with the Church. He claimed that Fascism would restore a Catholic state, nation and society after the messy ending of the last government in charge.¹⁰³ As a result, Mussolini was able to manipulate the Church into supporting him in order to establish a symbiotic relationship between the two. Mussolini threatened violence against the Church should they come out against Fascism, but if the Church complied, Fascism would hold back the black shirts from committing acts of violence against the Church.¹⁰⁴ This instance began the long lasting relationship between the Church and Mussolini.

Once elected, Mussolini continued to keep up appearances that he was a good Catholic who respected the Church. As Prime Minister, he forced his Cabinet members to pray in order to show the Pope that he was a good Catholic and that Fascism supported the Church. Though this act was more for show than anything else, this method proved effective with Pius XI. Many within the Church were surprised that this obvious attempt to get the Pope's support was actually working. Many in the Church at the time believed Fascism to be a violent and anti-Christian party. Yet, none of them were able to sway the Pope's desire to form a positive connection between the Church and Fascism.¹⁰⁵ Mussolini was also able to continue to prove to the Pope that he would make good in his promises to protect the Church. When there was a spell of

¹⁰² Frank J. Coppa, "The Papal Response to Nazi and Fascist Anti-Semitism: From Pius XI to Pius XII," in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman (Cambridge University Press: 2005) 271.

¹⁰³ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 29.

¹⁰⁵ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 34.

anti-clerical violence within Italy, Mussolini was able to manipulate the situation in his favor and promote himself as a defender of the Church. Though this violence was committed by Fascists, Mussolini was able to successfully and quickly put an end to it.¹⁰⁶ Once this bridge had been crossed, it was all but final that the Church and Fascism would have a long and symbiotic relationship together.

After the relationship solidified between the two, both the Church and Mussolini used this new connection to their benefit. On the Church's side, they received a new library from Mussolini and the Italian government while he was still "courting" the Pope, so to speak. Since the Pope was a former librarian in one of the Vatican's many libraries, this gift payed off handsomely for Mussolini when it finally came to the elections in 1924.¹⁰⁷ The Church publically endorsed Mussolini after his generous gift giving. This proved to be extremely valuable for the Fascists; since they were able to win the election with the Church's endorsement, amongst other things, they were inclined to continue this relationship beyond its current state. Along with these gifts, there were also promises made between the two parties. Mussolini promised to control those who wanted to commit violence against the Church, and in return, the Church promised to not only endorse Mussolini, but to help him uphold this desired image of the Duce as a good, Catholic Italian.¹⁰⁸ With these generous gifts to one another and the promises made, both the Church and Mussolini had officially entered into a committed relationship.

Though the relationship between the two men surprised many, both the Pope and Mussolini had many characteristics in common. Both men were known to be stubborn, difficult

¹⁰⁶ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 65.

¹⁰⁸ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 56.

and demanding until they got their way.¹⁰⁹ Also, both were vehemently anti Socialist and Communist. This is more than just a superficial connection between the two men. Though Mussolini began his political career as a Socialist due to his father's socialist beliefs, once he changed his political affiliation, he viewed both Socialism and Communism as weak ideologists and became vehemently opposed to them. Similarly, the Pope and the Church were very much against any chance of a Communist or Socialist party gaining power in Italy linked by anti Socialism. At the time when Mussolini was coming to power, there was also a very real threat from the far left due to popular disdain for the parties that had been in power for so long before the government was dissolved. A factor in the Church's decision to support and openly endorse Fascism was to prevent a Communist government from taking hold.¹¹⁰ After Mussolini was elected, Giacomo Matteotti, a very prominent Socialist in Italian politics, was murdered. Though there were no direct ties to Mussolini, many suspected that he played a role in it. However, the Pope stood by Mussolini and warned Italian Catholics to never cooperate with Socialists.¹¹¹ With the support of the Pope, Mussolini was able to hang onto power and prevent any possibility of being overthrown. After this bump in Mussolini's rule, Fascism's grip on Italy took full effect.

With his relationship with the Pope strong and solid, Mussolini decided to fully embrace his newfound appreciation for the Church. To prove to the Pope how seriously he was taking their new alliance, he forced his wife to have a religious wedding ceremony even though she was against it.¹¹² Also during this time in office, Mussolini received almost constant assassination attempts. Every time, he was able to survive them, and every time, he publicly thanked Christ for

¹⁰⁹ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 68.

¹¹⁰ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 59.

¹¹¹ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 76.

¹¹² Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 79.

saving him.¹¹³ After the Pope offered Mussolini more opportunities to strengthen his regime with further endorsement from the Church, Mussolini returned the favor by doing everything in his power to further the idea that Catholicism was an integral part of Italian identity.¹¹⁴ Around this time, the Pope and Mussolini were in talks of creating a never before made Vatican - Italian Accord with the Church. The so-called Lateran Accord specifically stated that Catholicism was “the only religion of the state” which in turn expanded the reach of religion even further into daily life in Italy.¹¹⁵ This Accord further showed the Church’s support for Fascism and publicly endorsed the Fascist Party as the party of the Church. Now, “Italian Catholics could have no doubt that in supporting Mussolini, they were following the pope’s wishes.”¹¹⁶ Although this was an unprecedented win for both the Church and Fascism, it was still obvious that Mussolini felt very uncomfortable on a personal level with the Church and with priests. Despite both sides getting their desired outcome, it was clear to both the Pope and Mussolini that Mussolini would never fully feel like a true Catholic Italian.¹¹⁷

With all of this discomfort, Mussolini wound up putting his foot in his mouth on several occasions which only enraged the Pope. When addressing Parliament freshly after the “elections” in 1929, Mussolini was up against the impression that he was a patsy for the Pope.¹¹⁸ In an effort to dispel the idea that he was a puppet for the Pope, he reiterated his power and control which happened to overlook the role of the Church in Italian society. This speech enraged the Pope who saw Mussolini as distancing himself from the Accord they had just agreed

¹¹³ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 87.

¹¹⁴ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 99-100.

¹¹⁵ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 106-107.

¹¹⁶ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 110.

¹¹⁷ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 112.

¹¹⁸ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 120.

on. This moment sent Mussolini into a tailspin about what was to be done. He rushed to try to calm the Pope, but the Pope did not take his pleas seriously. The Pope was known for his bouts of rage, and in this moment, Mussolini saw firsthand how bad they really were. After many many meetings between the Pope and a special envoy chosen by Mussolini, the two eventually got back onto sturdy, albeit precarious, ground.¹¹⁹ After this almost disastrous moment for Mussolini, he became much more delicate with his approach in dealing with the Church and the Pope to ensure that their relationship would continue.

Even after the signing of the Lateran Accord, there were strains between the Pope and Mussolini. A large reason for this tension was due to rising anti Church sentiments and rebellions against the Church from young Fascists. Mussolini responded to the Church's outrage by suspending all Catholic Action youth groups since he could not understand why he was being held accountable for these young men's actions.¹²⁰ Even in this time of serious tension between the two parties, the Pope continued supporting what he called "good Fascism" and realized that there were "bad Fascists" who did not support the Church.¹²¹ Eventually the Pope gave in and ended the conflict with Mussolini because he had decided that "too much was at stake" for the two of them to continue down this path that would eventually lead to their relationship being severed.¹²² This once and for all put the matter to bed as to whether or not Mussolini, who was still uncomfortable around churches and priests, would uphold this relationship between Fascism and the Pope. The Accord was finally seen as set in stone, and their alliance continued.

¹¹⁹ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 125-127.

¹²⁰ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 158-159.

¹²¹ Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 161.

¹²² Kerzer, *The Pope and Mussolini*, 162.

An important part for the success of Italian Fascism is due to Mussolini's image as a leader for the movement. The main reason Mussolini wanted to have a successful close tie with the Church was to ingratiate the more religious Italians. Many devout Catholics had always held their faith very close to them and expected to see that reflected in their government. This is most likely the reason why Mussolini went to such great lengths to prove to the Italian people that he was serious about Catholicism and religion in the Fascist government. When he released his autobiography in 1928, he wrote at length about his strong ties to religion as a young boy. Even though he was never particularly religious at any point in his life, he wanted to portray to his constituents that he was a religious man and make Catholicism a priority in his government. He claims that when his mother died as a young man he found comfort through his faith in the Church.¹²³ Though he spoke about his own faith, he also spoke of how Catholicism is closely tied to the "Italian race." When speaking of fighting in World War I, Mussolini addresses the fact that he felt it necessary to participate in the war to preserve its Catholicism, which is an important aspect to the Italian race.¹²⁴ Though Mussolini was not religious, or found religion to be particularly important to him at the time, he wanted to show his supporters that he was always a religious man who found the Catholic Church to be an extremely important aspect of Italian culture.

Similarly to Fascism, the Lega Nord has had a strained relationship with the Church though they consider themselves to be Christian. When Bossi founded the party, he made it clear that though he considered himself "secular," he got his children baptized and identified with

¹²³ Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928) 11.

¹²⁴ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, 25.

Christianity. At his rallies, he would proudly shout, “We, the Padania, white and Christian!”¹²⁵ In this way, he was able to capitalize on the accepted notion that being an Italian means both being white and Christian, a fact that perfectly fits in with the party’s original message of Northern Italian superiority. However, though the Lega proudly proclaims its Catholic identity, there are tensions between the Church and the Lega, specifically with Pope Francis. The Lega has exploited this feeling of Catholicism as being an essential part of what it means to be Italian and used this to point out one more way in which Italians differ from the majority of immigrants. In a book called *Padroni a Chiesa nostra. Venti anni di strategia religiosa della Lega Nord*, the author, Paolo Bertezolo wrote about the connection between the Lega and the Church. He writes, “The Lega uses the Church and Catholicism by bending both to its own strategies.”¹²⁶ By manipulating the relationship between the Church and their own party, the Lega is able to show to its supporters that Catholicism is an important part of the party even as it clashes with the Pope and the classic idea of what it means to be Catholic. For example, the author of this book continues, “The Lega, however, the author explains, has a religious identity that is completely different than that of the Gospel.”¹²⁷ Since the Lega is more traditionalist than anything else, it makes sense that they would focus on the social traditionalism rather than the religious traditionalism of the Catholic canon.

¹²⁵ Umberto Bossi, “Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE),” “Noi, la Padania, bianca e cristiana!”

¹²⁶ Fabrizio Mastrofini, “La religione etnica della Lega,” *La Stampa*, October 3, 2011, <http://www.lastampa.it/2011/10/03/vaticaninsider/ita/recensioni/la-religione-etnica-della-lega-hKhykK25h3DGAuBLEOLh6K/pagina.html>. “La Lega utilizza la Chiesa e il cattolicesimo piegando entrambi alle proprie strategie.”

¹²⁷ Mastrofini, “La religione etnica della Lega.” “La Lega però – spiega l’autore – porta una religione identitaria, completamente diversa da quella del Vangelo.”

Though Bossi always claimed that the Lega had Christian roots, the Lega has always had a strained relationship with a number of Popes throughout his history.¹²⁸ Bossi had many negative feelings towards Pope John Paul II and the direction he moved the Church towards. Bossi did not hold back when John Paul II was in charge, and in fact said, “With the Polish pope, the church is going backwards...the people of Padania should cut the cord with the Church and Unions.”¹²⁹ His feelings toward this Pope were largely negative due to his slightly more progressive view than Bossi had wanted from the Church. In fact, he even threatened to change relations with the Church due to its ideals. The Padanian newspaper published a quote stating that, “The church must change or we revise our covenants” with the Church and the Pope.¹³⁰ Despite all of the difficulty Bossi faced with balancing both embracing a Christian identity while slamming the Pope for not being traditional enough, Bossi was able to pull it off with his followers. Bossi was able to use the beginnings of the current immigration crisis to further highlight the idea of Italy being Catholic and white. Bossi was well known for being outspoken, and often even openly racist, while leader of the Lega. In 2003, Bossi proclaimed that there would be “no house for the ‘bingo-bongo.’”¹³¹ He later explained what a “bingo-bongo” was by using rather racially insensitive terms. Bingo-bongo was a character on in a movie released in the early 1980s who Bossi described as “a kind, little Negro.”¹³² In this case, Bossi is using a movie which portrays a black character to make clear that Italy will not house immigrants of color who hope to live in Italy. According to the platform of the Lega, besides Catholicism being an

¹²⁸ Umberto Bossi, “Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE).”

¹²⁹ Umberto Bossi, “Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE).” “Con il papa polacco la chiesa va indietro...il popolo padano basta che faccia ‘zac,’ taglia le bretelle di sindacato e chiesa.”

¹³⁰ Umberto Bossi, “Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE).” “Chiesa cambi o rivedere i patti.”

¹³¹ Umberto Bossi, “Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE).” “Niente casa a ‘bingo-bongo.’”

¹³² Umberto Bossi, “Il Cristianesimo secondo Bossi e Padani (PRIMA PARTE).” “Un negretto simpatico.”

important part of Italian identity, there is also this idea of Italy as a white nation. Though Bossi was not in power for much longer after the immigration crisis began to grip Italy, he already began to show how the Lega negotiated its Catholic identity due to the slightly more progressive Pope.

By the time Salvini came to power, in 2012, Italy was dealing with an influx of immigrants while dealing with one of the most progressive Popes in recent history, Pope Francis. With this new Pope and his high approval within the Catholic community, Salvini has faced many difficult situations in denouncing the Pope's favorable attitude towards immigrants coming to Italy while maintaining this idea of Italy as a Catholic nation. Salvini has so far been successful in denouncing the liberal Pope without denouncing Catholicism as a whole. In a post written on Facebook, Salvini said, "The Pope wants to invite thousands of immigrants in Italy? One thing is to accommodate the few who run away from the war, another to stimulate and fund an unprecedented invasion. Dear Holy Father, the catastrophe is a stone's throw away from the Vatican, it is in Italy!"¹³³ Though Salvini is seemingly denouncing the Pope and his favorable views of immigrants coming to Italy, his is pulling the focus back onto Italy. As the Lega transformed itself into a more nationalist party since Salvini took over, the focus of the party has changed from northern elitism to nationalism. By focusing on Italy's problems, Salvini is able to criticize the Pope without directly affecting his stance on Italy being a Catholic nation.

Salvini continues to push even further with the Pope continuously, and publicly, stating that Europe should be doing all they can to help these immigrants. He uses the widely accepted

¹³³ Luca Romano, "Salvini contro il Papa: 'Favorisce l'invasione,'" *Il Giornale*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/salvini-contro-papa-favorisce-linvasione-1247495.html>. "Il Papa vuole invitare altre migliaia di immigrati in Italia? Un conto è accogliere i pochi che scappano dalla guerra, altro conto è incentivare e finanziare un'invasione senza precedenti. Caro Santo Padre, la catastrofe è a due passi dal Vaticano, è in Italia!"

idea that Italy is a Catholic nation to call attention to the Pope's position of accepting non Christians into Italy. He has said, "The Pope is wrong to promote a dialogue with Islam," adding: "Peace is right, but you are the spokesman for Catholics, you should worry about who is exterminating your brethren around the world."¹³⁴ By making these statements, Salvini is pushing the blame onto the Pope for not denouncing Islam while also bringing up this idea of Catholic extermination. In using this type of language, Salvini is clearly pointing to the idea that there is a larger conspiracy which is causing these issues. He is directly attacking the Pope but in such a way that he is still promoting Catholicism while making the argument for why non Catholic immigrants should not be allowed in Italy. He continues this idea when he stated, "If we must welcome immigrants, they must be Christian. While we are waiting to block this organized invasion."¹³⁵ By not necessarily banning all immigrants, Salvini can not be portrayed as simply racist, but rather as a protector of the Catholic aspect of the Italian culture. In this way, he is not necessarily against people because of the color of their skin, but is instead interested in keeping Italy a Catholic nation. By criticizing the Pope in this way, Salvini, in fact, puts himself on a pedestal as protecting the Catholicism while accusing the Pope of not caring to uphold this important, nationalist value.

Salvini and the Lega have continued on this trend of propping up the traditional aspects of Catholicism that support their argument while denouncing the Pope for his progressive views.

¹³⁴ Francesco Peloso, "La Lega sfida il Papa: il sogno di una chiesa del Nord," *Linkiesta*, January 31, 2015. <http://www.linkiesta.it/it/article/2015/01/31/la-lega-sfida-il-papa-il-sogno-di-una-chiesa-del-nord/24488/>. "Il Papa sbaglia a promuovere il dialogo con l'Islam", ha detto il leader leghista, che poi ha aggiunto: "Va bene la pace, ma sei il portavoce dei cattolici, preoccupati di chi ti sta sterminando in giro per il mondo."

¹³⁵ Raffaello Binelli, "Immigrazione, l'ultima idea di Salvini: 'Usiamo le piattaforme dell'Eni in disuso,'" *Il Giornale*, August 21, 2015. <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/immigrazione-lultima-idea-salvini-usiamo-piattaforme-delleni-1162150.html>. "Se proprio dobbiamo accogliere immigrati, che siano di religione cristiana. In attesa di bloccare questa invasione organizzata."

Catholicism is universal by its nature and thus the Pope, as the head of the Church, seeks to be a leader for the entire Catholic community. In contrast, the Lega is a nationalist movement which attempts to use religion as a political and populist tool. Even before Salvini took office in 2013, the Lega was already upholding the idea of blocking any and all kinds of immigration. As Peloso wrote, “the Lega has built a significant part of its own consensus on the refusal of immigration without any kind of mediation; a strategy that has been steadily and successfully pursued for at least thirty years since the migratory phenomenon has become stable and irreversible.”¹³⁶ Much of the Lega’s platform has been focused on immigration since it was founded around the time that immigration was becoming an issue in Italy. Though this is not an original pillar of Catholics who follow the Gospel closely, it has been embraced by those who wish for Italy to stay Catholic more than anything. Peloso continues, “For many years, the *Leghisti* have been in dialogue and allied with the ultra traditionalist sects of Catholicism, those who find themselves between a rejection of the Holy See and the Pope and an uncomfortable allegiance with the Church of Rome in spite of everything.”¹³⁷ Those who are traditional Catholics, but not necessarily religious Catholics, have aligned themselves with this party in order to maintain the traditions of Italy. These followers are also against the Pope and his liberal acceptance of immigrants due to the fact that many are not Catholic. These people, along with the Lega, are focused on the traditional aspect of Catholicism in Italy more than the religious part. In this way,

¹³⁶ Peloso, “La Lega sfida il Papa.” “La Lega ha costruito una parte significativa a del proprio consenso proprio sul rifiuto dell’immigrazione senza mediazioni di sorta; una strategia portata avanti testardamente e con successo da almeno un trentennio, da quando cioè il fenomeno migratorio è diventato stabile e irreversibile.”

¹³⁷ Peloso, “La Lega sfida il Papa.” “Da molti anni ormai i leghisti dialogano e si alleano con i settori ultratradizionalisti del cattolicesimo, quelli sempre a cavallo fra disconoscimento della Santa Sede e del papa e una permanenza incerta all’interno della Chiesa di Roma nonostante tutto.”

they are able to denounce the Pope and his progressive views while still feeling Catholic due to their participation in its traditions.

It is no surprise that this difference in opinion between the Pope and the Lega, specifically Salvini, has created such a tense relationship between the two. The Pope has been promoting this idea of accepting immigrants no matter what their faith, while the Lega has held onto this idea of opposing those who do not fit the criteria for what it means to be “Italian.” Though the Lega has been criticized for not being “Catholic” in the true, religious sense of the word, they have managed to hold on to their traditionalism. Peloso writes, “And so as the Lega Nord looks at these almost heretical currents of Catholicism, with Pope Francis there could only be an open clash: ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, the very concept of religious freedom in which all faiths are respected, are unbearable concepts for Lega executives and at least part of the people who follow them.”¹³⁸ The Lega refuses to consider any kind of compromise between the Pope and their own sense of Catholicism and nationalism. They have had no desire to even conceptualize what religious freedom would look like within such a Catholic nation. Even within other Christian sects, arguments have been made against uniting them closer together. The Lega’s main priority is to keep Italy a traditionally Catholic nation, and Salvini feels as though the Pope is directly threatening that goal.

Though he is not always confronting the Pope, Salvini continues with his anti immigration rhetoric on a regular basis. He uses this platform as a way to further promote this idea of an Italian ethnicity which is intertwined with religion. He has stated before that “there is

¹³⁸ Peloso, “La Lega sfida il Papa.” “E così se la Lega nord guarda a queste correnti quasi eretiche del cattolicesimo, con papa Francesco non poteva che essere scontro aperto: l’ecumenismo, il dialogo interreligioso, lo stesso concetto di libertà religiosa in cui tutte le fedi sono rispettate, sono concetti insopportabili per i dirigenti in camicia verde e per una parte almeno del popolo che li segue.”

an ongoing ethnic replacement” of Italians due to the influx of immigrants.¹³⁹ In this way, Salvini is not so subtly implying that he considers white Italians to be their own ethnicity and is claiming that anyone who does not fit that description is purposefully trying to “replace” native Italians. He continues, “This is an organized, financed immigration and a type of genocide.”¹⁴⁰ Not only is Salvini claiming that there is a conspiracy as to why Italy has been receiving all these immigrants, but he is making the even more pointed claim that a white, Italian genocide is taking place. Though he is not specifically pointing to religion as a part of this anti immigration interview, he is using a more subtle way to address this idea of Italy as a white, Catholic nation. Using this assumption, he is implying that anyone who does not fit this specific image of what it means to be an Italian is not welcome. Not only are they not welcome, they are also causing a great amount of harm to Italian natives and are trying to change what it means to be an Italian. Salvini continues to use this type of proxy language to uphold the idea that Italy is a Catholic nation.

This push for Italy to keep its Catholic roots is not singular to Italy. Throughout Europe, we have seen the rise of nationalist parties using religion as one of their reasons for their xenophobia. This push is most prevalent in Italy for multiple, and fairly obvious, reasons. Due to the fact that the Vatican is inside Italy, there is obviously a much closer connection between the Church and the rest of Italy. In addition, Italy has now become the main arrival point for many immigrants fleeing from Africa. Both of these reasons combined has caused a spike in xenophobic nationalism, not just in Italy, but all throughout Europe. This “xenophobic

¹³⁹ Matteo Salvini, interviewed by Maria Latella. *Intervista con Maria Latella*. Sky TG24, May 29, 2016. “C’è una sostituzione etnica in corso.” <http://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2016/05/29/matteo-salvini-migranti-sbarchi-austria.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Salvini, *Intervista con Maria Latella*. “Questa è un’immigrazione organizzata, finanziata e un tipo di genocidio.”

nationalism” within Italy is intertwined with this sense of traditional Catholicism. As Peloso so eloquently writes:

“So it happens that a phenomenon within the Church or its borders is met with a long-standing political trend at a European level and is increasingly materializing in these xenophobic, sometimes racist, xenophobic nationalisms - bearers of spurious Christianity, more linked to an ideological issue than to the Gospel message.”¹⁴¹

This “spurious Christianity” is exactly what Italy is currently experiencing in terms of how it is dealing with this wave of immigration. As Peloso puts it, this idea of Christianity is more a question of ideology than a question of religion. In Italy, there is an accepted notion that Catholicism is part of the Italian identity. The religious aspect itself is less essential than the traditional aspects of being Catholic. This traditional sense of what it means to be a Catholic is so ingrained in Italian identity that the Lega has been able to successfully manipulate it to their benefit. Though this has become a European wide phenomenon, the most important manipulation of Catholicism is currently being used by the Lega as cause for their xenophobia.

Though tensions between the Church and the Lega could cause some issues with their constituents, they have been able to avoid this situation by picking and choosing what aspects of Catholicism are important to Italians. Since Catholicism is such a big part of Italian identity, the threat of non Catholic immigrants coming to Italy has caused fear among more traditional Italians. By the Lega harnessing the traditional aspects of Catholicism, and using using it to their benefit, they have been able to sidestep any possibility of being perceived as anti Church despite their public disagreements with the Pope. Since Francis became the Pope, he has come out overwhelmingly in support for immigrants and refugees coming to European shores. Though

¹⁴¹ Peloso, “La Lega sfida il Papa.” “Così avviene che un fenomeno interno alla Chiesa o ai suoi confini, s'incontra con una tendenza politica ormai consistente a livello europeo e che si sta materializzando sempre di più in questi nazionalismi identitari, xenofobi – a volte dichiaratamente razzisti - portatori di un cristianesimo spurio, più legato a questione ideologiche che al messaggio evangelico.”

Europe, and especially Italy, is generally Christian, there have been clashes with the Pope due to his pro immigration stance. The rising xenophobia in Italy has played right into the hands of the Lega. Though they denounce the Pope for his pro immigration attitude, they are still able to maintain this idea of Catholicism within Italy by embracing its traditional and cultural aspects instead of its religious core. The Lega may have a complicated relationship with the Church, however they are able to continue the idea of Italy as being a Catholic nation while using this manipulation to their benefit.

Similar to the xenophobic right, Fascism also grappled with their relationship with the Church and specifically the Pope. Though it initially appeared as though Mussolini would not get support from the Church due to his past proclamations of atheism, both he and the Pope realized that they both needed each other for their own gain. With this in mind, the two men struck up a deal between the two that would solidify their relationship. However, this did not come without its own set of issues. Since Mussolini was so uncomfortable around priests and churches, he often put his foot in his mouth when speaking publicly about faith. Yet Mussolini was persistent, he knew that in order to get enough public support, he had to have a positive relationship with the Church. After many close calls, the agreement between the two was signed and put into place. From there on out, both Fascism and the Church supported each other publicly, however privately, there were still issues between the two men. This idea of Italy being a Catholic nation is a longstanding one with ample evidence. What I have tried to show here is how this Catholicism has lead to the Lega repeating the same tactics of Fascism and has continued this idea that Catholicism is an essential part of Italian identity.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to bridge a gap between two similar political moments in Italian history in a way that has not been attempted before. As I was doing my preliminary research for this project, I kept finding similarities between Fascism and the Lega Nord. What interested me the most about these similarities was seeing the language each used to promote their political platform. In both parties' rhetoric, we see this similar use of self victimization throughout the various stages of power. Both Fascism and the Lega have used this rhetoric to blame those around them for Italy's hardships instead of looking at the root of the problem. Fascism was able to manipulate this rhetoric in such a way that Mussolini was able to maintain power, and generally to be quite popular, for 20 years. The Lega also followed suit and used self victimization to blame the recent influx of immigrants as the source of all of Italy's social and political problems today. In addition to the use of self victimization, both Fascism and the Lega have interesting relationships with the Church. Fascism had an understanding with the Pope in order for both the Church and Fascism to gain power though Mussolini personally felt uncomfortable with religion in general. The Lega has had a slightly different relationship with the Pope largely because of his progressive attitude with immigration. The Lega has made an effort to retain the traditionalist aspects of Catholicism while distancing itself from the rhetoric of the Pope. I have shown throughout this thesis that due to these connections, historical amnesia has helped shape the current political and social climate throughout modern in Italy.

The similarities I found between Fascism and the Lega's use of self victimization is almost uncanny. In both cases, the main rallying call to amass their popular support has largely been done through this rhetoric. By creating a natural enemy against all Italians, both Fascism

and the Lega were able to successfully garner support for their platforms. Mussolini used the language of self victimization to justify some of the least likely aspects of his desires for Italy. By using it to deter blame from Italy's entrance into war with Hitler, Mussolini claimed that Hitler dragged him into war, and that he had never wanted to actually go to war. With this blatant use of self victimization, Mussolini allowed for Italians to continue this rhetoric and avoid any sense of culpability for the acts Italy committed in the war. This language continued and became one of Lega's tactics to gain support for their party. When the party was initially founded in the early 1990s as a secessionist one, Umberto Bossi used this language as a justification for why Northern Italy should succeed from the South. When Matteo Salvini took over the party in 2013, he strategically transformed the party from secessionist to nationalist in light of the influx of immigrants coming to Europe through Italy. By uniting Italy against these immigrants through the same rhetoric of Mussolini, Salvini was able to launch the Lega into the political arena as a populist, nationalist party. The impact of the self victimization trope has been repeated due to the amnesia of Fascism and the hardship it caused Italy during its 20 years in power.

In addition to self victimization espoused by both Fascism and the Lega, they also have in common their complicated relationships with religion and the Church. Historically, Catholicism has been an integral part of what it means to be Italian. Though Mussolini was an atheist himself and always felt uncomfortable around members of the clergy, he began a symbiotic relationship with the Pope in order to gain the support of the more religious Italians. This relationship was often tumultuous as both Mussolini and the Pope were trying to determine the best course for their relationship. Both men were eventually able to come to an agreement in which both could strengthen their respective power within the Italian population. However, the Lega has had a

much more contentious relationship with the Pope. Ever since Bossi came to power, he has been against the current Pope's more liberal, progressive approach to religion in general. This tension between the Lega and the Pope increased even more so when Francis became the Pope. At this time, Salvini was in charge of the Lega and had begun scapegoating the immigrants as the source of Italy's problems. Salvini has been able to not alienate more conservative Catholics by focusing more on the traditional aspects of Catholicism rather than the religious ones. In this way, he is still able to reach Italians who believe in this idea of Italy as a Catholic nation and at the same time, denounce the Pope's desire to let refugees into Italy. Through my research, I have largely come to the conclusion that by Italy actively forgetting their Fascist past, Italy has allowed the Lega to repeat this rhetoric and relationship with the Church.

These are just two major connections between Fascism and the Lega Nord which clearly show the prevalence of historical amnesia in Italy. This particular connection between Fascism and the Lega has yet to be made in the academic world, and I believe it is worth exploring more in depth. Though there are obvious differences between the two parties and time periods, I think it is worth looking at the trajectory of the Lega, and what can be done to change its course. I initially set out to look at the influx of immigration in Italy and how and why Italy is reacting the way that it has. However, as I began to sift through all the information I noticed many troubling parallels between these two time periods and these two parties. Although many explanations were presented as to why Italy was reacting the way it was, not a single one seemed to address problems of the past. These parallels raised a very interesting and quite challenging question: what caused this to happen again? It is my belief that this connection is worth exploring as it has

not been accounted for when looking at Italy's xenophobic response. My hope with this thesis is to bridge a gap in the literature in order to try and answer this question through a different lens.

I have begun to tackle unexplored territory, and I have only been able to begin to scratch the surface of these two major connections, but given more time and more resources, this is a subject ripe for further analysis. My hope would be for this research to continue in order to contribute to the wider literature of Italy's, and in fact Europe's, xenophobic response. I believe that by adding this specific argument to the literature, we can come to a deeper understanding of how and why this has been the reaction and potentially build a more just and kind sense of nationhood. In addition, there are many more connections between the Lega and Fascism that I simply did not have the time to explore. I hope that in the future, more extensive work will be done on this topic to find all the similarities between the two. My main goal with this project was to show a significant connection between these two, and I sincerely hope I have done what I set out to do. I realize there is more research to be done, and I hope that I have inspired that.

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