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Foreign Cultural Policy in the Interbellum

The Italian Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council Contesting the Mediterranean

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Amsterdam University Press

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Introduction

The early twenty-first century is witnessing a revival of cultural promotion as a factor in foreign policy. A peak in this field of activity was reached during the Cold War decades of the previous century, when most notably the government of the United States of America made intense use of cultural means – ranging from its Voice of America radio broadcasts to so-called 'jazz diplomacy' – to weaken communism in the Soviet block.[1] After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, as the contours of a multipolar world emerged, US expenditure and programmes in this domain were considerably reduced. This trend was reversed by the attacks on 11 September 2001 on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. The conflict laid bare by 9/11 reignited the idea of a 'clash of civilizations' hypothesized in the early 1990s of the world now being divided not by ideologies but by conflicting cultures. This raised the question whether the United States government should once again invest in a cultural programme to 'win the hearts and minds' of people in parts of the world where anti-Western sentiment is brewing.[2] Considerable interest has since emerged for what was coined 'soft power',[3] defined as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments [i.e. hard power]', using culture as well as political values and societal ideals to project an appealing image of one's country.[4] Cultural diplomacy too has become a frequently used term, both in actual policy and in academic study. Originally it referred specifically to the governmental deployment of culture for foreign policy objectives, but nowadays it also applies to the multifarious cultural activities inititiated by non-governmental actors aimed more generally at promoting international understanding.[5]

Within the European Union, the need for a joint cultural strategy in EU external relations has been repeatedly advocated from 2005 onwards. In

1   Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas*; Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War*; Mulcahy, 'Cultural diplomacy'; Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*.
2   Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*; Kennedy, 'Remembering September 11'; Gienow-Hecht, 'The anomaly of the Cold War', p. 33.
3   Nye, *Soft Power*; Melissen ed., *The New Public Diplomacy*.
4   Ibidem, p. 18. Strictly speaking, and contrary to how the term is often used, Nye's soft power does not refer to cultural resources only and is meant to complement hard power, not replace it. (Ang et al., 'Cultural diplomacy', pp. 367-368.)
5   Ang et al., 'Cultural diplomacy', pp. 366-367; Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, 'The Model of Cultural Diplomacy'.

2012, this led to the European Parliament's launch of a Preparatory Action that entrusted the European Commission and an expert consortium with the task of developing such a strategy. As a result, on 31 March 2016, the European Commission together with this same consortium established a European Platform for Cultural Diplomacy. On 20 April 2016, the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Federica Mogherini, presented the first official European Strategy for Cultural Diplomacy, thereby urging the EU to make culture the core of EU foreign policy.[6] It is telling that in this period of mounting attention for the role of international cultural politics, two emerging world powers have resorted to the creation of institutes to spread their respective national language and culture across the world: in 2004, China opened its first Confucius Institutes, followed by Turkey's launch of its Yunus Emre Institute in 2007.[7] These rapidly expanding institutes imitate the model set by their European counterparts, of which the most well known are the British Council, the Alliance Française, the Goethe Institute, and the Dante Alighieri Society.

What were the origins of these first institutes for the promotion of language and culture abroad, and what role did they play in international relations? Scholarly attention for foreign cultural policy has been particularly focussed on US Cold War activities in this domain, thus reflecting the ongoing American dominance in global politics.[8] Research on the history of the British Council, the Alliance Française, the Dante Alighieri Society, or the precursors of the Goethe Institute has been surprisingly scarce.[9] Furthermore, until now, none of the studies have aimed to show how these organizations emerged and functioned alongside and in reaction to each other. Preference has been given to treating each single organization within its own national context and foreign policy.[10] As has been the case for the study of cultural nationalism, a comparative approach that goes

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6   *Engaging the World: Towards Global Cultural Citizenship* (European Union 2014), http://cultureinexternalrelations.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Engaging-The-World-Towards-Global-Cultural-Citizenship-eBook-1.5_13.06.2014.pdf; 'New European Platform for Cultural Diplomacy Launched', European Commission Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, accessed 22 June 2016, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/fpi/announcements/news/20160401_1_en.htm; 'Culture at the very heart of Europe's external action', European Union External Action Service, accessed 22 June 2016, http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2016/200416_mogherini_european_culture_forum_en.htm.

7   Paradise, 'China and International'.

8   Gienow-Hecht, 'The anomaly of the Cold War', p. 31.

9   Martens and Marshall, 'International organisations and foreign cultural policy'; Paschalidis, 'Exporting national culture'.

10   Eastment, *The Policies and Position of the British Council*; Bruézière, *L'Alliance française*; Donaldson, *The British Council*; Caparelli, *La «Dante Alighieri»*; Pisa, *Nazione e politica*; Salvetti,

beyond the histories of single countries contributes to a better understanding of national projection abroad as a wider phenomenon.[11] In this book I therefore analyze these organizations comparatively, thereby elucidating which developments at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century induced European states to give greater importance to their foreign cultural policy. By subsequently focussing in on the activities of the Italian Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the interwar period, especially in the Mediterranean and Red Sea area, three further aspects are investigated: the extent to which the use of cultural promotion abroad differed between a totalitarian and a democratic country, what values were attached to national language and culture, and how culture was strategically deployed in the rivalry between rising and declining imperial powers.

In the first chapter of this book, I argue that the interwar period was a crucial moment in the history of foreign cultural policy as we know it today. This is demonstrated by looking into the origins of the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein (1881) (later the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland), the Alliance Française (1883), the Dante Alighieri Society (1889), and the British Council (1934), analyzed in the context of broader socio-political changes in Germany, France, Italy, and Britain starting from the end of the nineteenth century. Various factors have played a part in this history: the rise of cultural nationalism, changing military power relations, greater economic rivalry, the growing significance of public opinion accompanying the extension of suffrage, the budding influence of American popular consumer culture, and the use of propaganda in the First World War. The interwar period added another essential dimension – namely ideological conflict. The establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics gave added strength to the communist movement. In response to this and to the societal upheaval after the Great War, Italian Fascism and German National Socialism emerged, both manifesting an ideological and territorial expansionism that threatened liberal democratic states. What followed was a further instrumentalization of culture on all sides, motivated by political – and more specifically imperial – as well as commercial interests.

Looking back at the end of the nineteenth century, we see that in Germany the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums im Ausland was created, which in 1908 was renamed the Verein für das

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Immagine nazionale; Michels, *Von der Deutschen Akademie*; Chaubet, *La politique culturelle française*; Byrne, *«Boosting Britain»*; Corse, *The Battle for Neutral Europe*.

11   Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*, p. 18.

Deutschtum im Ausland. As suggested by the name, the aim was to keep Germanness present in border areas not yet made part of Germany. Similarly, the Dante Alighieri Society was formed to defend the Italian language and culture abroad, primarily in areas that were not yet incorporated into the unified Italian state. What the Dante Alighieri Society furthermore shared with the Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein was attention for the nation's emigrants. In due time, however, targeting foreigners would gain priority. In France, the Alliance Française was set up to carry out the *mission civilisatrice* the French had assigned themselves since the French Revolution, or arguably even as far back as the reign of Louis XIV, and it was characterized by a more colonial orientation. Both the Alliance and the Dante saw commercial advantages in promoting their language, especially in the Mediterranean area. All three private organizations aimed to export their nation's cultural heritage abroad and used similar methods: language classes, lectures, libraries, concerts, and other such cultural activities. In all three cases during the interwar period, the state also became a more active player in this field. This was not only true for Italy and Germany, where the government was taken over by totalitarian regimes.

In 1934, as the above-mentioned ideological tensions of the interwar period accrued, a relative late-comer appeared in the field of international cultural politics: the British Council. This was ostensibly a non-governmental organization whose foremost task was to make British life and thought known abroad, to encourage the study and use of English, and 'to promote a mutual interchange of knowledge and ideas with other peoples', although the reciprocity implied by the word 'interchange' would remain underdeveloped.[12] The British Foreign Office was well aware of the foreign cultural policy that the Germans, the French, and the Italians were engaged in, and tried to obtain information about how much these governments were spending in that field.[13] Government involvement in cultural promotion was deemed unnecessary by most British citizens and even rather disreputable. Nevertheless, when it became clear that British trade relations were threatened by the active cultural expansion of especially the Italians and the Germans, this provided a strong argument in favour of an organization that would promote British culture abroad. It was also evident that the socio-political changes in Italy and Germany affected the Dante Alighieri Society and the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland respectively. These

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12   TNA, BW 151/1, Report by The Rt. Hon. Lord Eustace Percy, M.P. of Activities from 1 April 1936 to 15 July 1937.
13   Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, pp. 135-139.

organizations were increasingly deployed for the spreading of aggressively nationalist Fascist and Nazi propaganda.

The second chapter of this book contains an in-depth analysis of the two organizations that are central in this study, the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council, with an emphasis on the relationship with their respective governments. In so doing, this chapter illustrates the need to look at the use of foreign cultural policy beyond a simplistic a priori dichotomy between totalitarian propaganda and democratic promotion. The spokesmen of the British Council were keen to underline that the Council was not in charge of propaganda but of diffusing information for the benefit of greater international understanding and world peace. However, the 'factual' information was not free of ideology either. It consistently emphasized the love of freedom, the liberal and democratic values, and the social justice that Britain was said to embody. All too easily the British Council, functioning within a democratic state, could be viewed as being of a different, more 'neutral' nature than its German and and Italian rivals. But does this really prove to be the case when we compare the Council with the Italian Dante Alighieri Society, which was increasingly embedded in Mussolini's Fascist regime? Both organizations risked being incorporated by the state and hence to serve political interests: the Dante Alighieri Society by being merged with the Italian Institutes of Culture, and the Council through incorporation by the Ministry of Information that was created shortly before the Second World War broke out. Attention is paid to the arguments used by the Dante and the Council to plead for their independence. Furthermore, I identify which interest groups in society backed the activities of the Dante and the Council. I hereby show how they determined the image of the national language and culture that was being exported and what their intentions were. What emerges from this comparison is that the British Council was much more geared towards the ideological battle of the interwar period than the Dante, and that the Council was from the start more closely tied to the state.

The third chapter examines how the Dante and the Council defined their respective concepts of *italianità* and 'Britishness' and what relevance to the wider world they attributed to national culture. What understanding of culture and society underlay these two concepts? Did these concepts also offer specific visions of modernity and progress? Was it primarily an elite culture that the Dante and the Council were presenting or were they reaching out to larger segments of society? Here we explore in what way these self-representations helped to legitimize Italian and British international political interests, but also how internal processes of nation-building

affected the way in which foreign cultural policy was shaped. Moreover, differing models of imperialism were formulated in the 'Italianness' and 'Britishness' that the Dante and the Council propounded. This brings us to a significant point of tension: the claims that both countries made on the Mediterranean and Red Sea area.

Crucial for the growing importance of foreign cultural policy during the interbellum was the changing imperial power relations. Trade and political ideology were central concerns for the British Council. But just as important – if not even more so – was the diminishing political and military control over the Empire, caused by Britain's considerable military and financial losses in the First World War and by nationalist uprisings destabilizing Ireland, India, and Egypt. The Council's cultural activity was meant to help protect British geopolitical interests. In a fundamental policy document that lies at the origins of the British Council, the non-governmental model offered by the Dante Alighieri Society was explicitly recommended as the example to follow.

> Some central direction from London would, of course, be necessary, and I suggest that it might be more advantageous if the direction were rested in some unofficial body, similar to the Dante Alighieri Society, with, however, Government representation on the Managing Board.[14]

In this specific case, the British high commissioner to Egypt was uttering concern about the cultural influence that France already had and Italy was rapidly gaining in Egypt whilst the British neglected that field of power. Similarly, the British were confronted with Italian cultural and political influence in Malta. For the British, control over the Mediterranean was of vital strategic importance: it gave access to the Suez Canal and the Red Sea – the shortest route to its major colony India. Also, from the moment that Churchill as first lord of the admiralty (1911-1915) provided for the transition from coal to oil as fuel for the British Royal Navy, it became indispensable to secure the supplies of oil being discovered from 1910 onwards in the Middle East. At the same time, Mussolini – like his liberal predecessors – expressed in his colonial ambitions his vision of the Mediterranean as being Italy's *Mare Nostrum*, belonging to the country's age-old sphere of influence. Since the Italo-Turkish War (1911-1912), Italy was in possession of the Dodecanese Islands and the Libyan regions of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, and Fezzan. The

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14   TNA, BW 29/3, Extract from despatch by Percy Loraine, British high commissioner to Egypt, 9 November 1933, in British Council report 'British Cultural Propaganda in Egypt', March 1935.

latter three were unified in 1934 to form Italian Libya. In the 1930s, Mussolini's rhetoric increasingly referred to the revival of the Roman Empire that he envisaged, and anti-British propaganda was being broadcast across the Mediterranean area by Radio Bari. If in the 1920s relations between Italy and Britain had been cautiously dealt with so as to remain cordial, this was primarily out of pragmatism on both sides. Italo-British tensions were emerging in the Mediterranean and in the Red Sea even before Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935 and Mussolini's expansionist policy became more blatant. Here British and Italian cultural, economic, and political ambitions were most evidently incompatible.[15]

Hence, the fourth chapter of this book deals with the case of Malta, a chess piece in the Mediterranean around which British and Italian interests clashed. Malta was key to having control over the Mediterranean Sea. In this former stronghold of the Crusaders, the Dante and the Council participated in a political conflict that hinged on cultural influence. In the 1930s, the governor of Malta banned the use of Italian in education and public administration. The concern was that if the Italian language were to gain too much ground on the island, given the already pervasive presence of the Roman Catholic Church, Malta would fall under Mussolini's sphere of influence. This caused indignation at the Dante headquarters in Rome and led to accusations of hypocrisy towards the British, who had always purported to defend the freedom and stability of the Maltese. In reality, Italy's cultural initiatives were significantly curtailed, and in 1938 the Council launched a charm offensive through the creation of a British Institute in Valletta. The interventions of both the Dante and the Council reveal to what extent political concerns were enmeshed in a full-fledged cultural conflict.

The fifth chapter brings us to Abyssinia and Egypt to further illustrate the role of the Dante and the Council in the imperial projects that revolved around the Mediterranean area and access to the Red Sea. After the Italian army invaded Abyssinia in 1935, the Dante hastened to establish itself in Addis Ababa, the newly proclaimed capital of Italian East Africa. How did the Dante envision its own role in Italy's imperial project? In Egypt, the British were experiencing difficulties in maintaining control over their protectorate. The limited self-rule granted in 1922 had not placated the nationalist uprisings. Hence, the British government came to realize that it needed to buttress its military and political power with an effective cultural policy. What was the Council's contribution to this revised strategy?

15   Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle-East,* pp. 1-8, 33-34.

These case studies again make clear how the activities of the Dante and the Council reflected the imperial models that the Italians and the British had adopted.

On the whole, the period covered by this book extends from the last two decades of the nineteenth century up to the outbreak of Second World War, with a focus on the interwar period. During the war years, the foreign cultural promotion of the countries taking part became easily conflated with war propaganda, making a strict distinction between the two particularly difficult. However, the ambiguity of the terminology is no less problematic for the interwar period or for current scholarly research on cultural policy. The British Council dealt cautiously with the pejorative connotation attached to the word 'propaganda' and in its external communication usually preferred to speak of cultural promotion or national projection. Generally, propaganda implies a biased selection of information communicated to a targeted audience with the aim of shaping these people's opinions or ideas and thereby their actions. It was until recently associated with the ideological indoctrination practiced by communist, Nazi, or fascist regimes. Following today's trends in media and communication studies, it is argued that propaganda ought to be used as a neutral term for the process of persuasion and must no longer be seen as extraneous to democracies.[16]

Yet the complexity of the question cannot be resolved by merely using 'cultural propaganda' as a general term. It is true that the terms 'propaganda', 'publicity', 'promotion', 'projection', and even 'provision of information' all imply to some degree the desire to influence the recipient's way of thinking. However, what needs further qualification in each situation is the political context in which the promotional activity takes place (whether the recipient has access to other information), to what extent the information spread is intentionally false (conscious deception of the recipient), and whether it is meant to damage the image of others (defamation). The desire of governments or (semi-)private organizations to influence public opinion leads to different degrees of manipulation, but relativism should not make one forget that the ethical boundaries of such manipulation can be better monitored in democratic countries. Also, it is worth paying attention to how the actors themselves choose to label their activities. Consequently, in this book I generally use the less tainted terms 'cultural promotion' and 'foreign cultural policy', whereby 'policy' is understood as a strategy for action that guides an organization, be it governmental or not. I hereby acknowledge

16   Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, pp. 3-6; Byrne, *«Boosting Britain»*, pp. 16-23.

that national culture was exported for reasons of cultural prestige, political interest, and economic advantage, and rarely, if ever, just for culture's sake. There are two instances in which I will instead apply the term 'cultural propaganda': when the term occurs in primary sources that I am quoting or when I am dealing with the spreading of information with the evident intention of deception or defamation.

Altogether, the chosen cases in this book allow a close study of the practice of foreign cultural policy. Through these cases, I demonstrate the rising use of culture in international politics during the interwar period, explain the differences as well as the similarities in approach between the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council, and show how Italy and Great Britain fought over their imperial sphere of influence around the Mediterranean through cultural means. The conclusion will offer some reflections on the implications of this history for the role of culture in today's international relations. There appears to be no such thing as the neutral and disinterested promotion of a national language and culture abroad – whether undertaken by governmental or non-governmental organizations or by democratic or non-democratic states. Acknowledging this might enhance global cultural exchange.