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A Root Which Never Grew

The Fascist Dalliances of the Maltese before the Second World War

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Abstract

Prior to the Second World War, Malta appeared vulnerable to fascist influence due to the connections between the Italian Fascist regime and Malta's irredentist political movement, then led by Nerik Mizzi. In part this Fascist influence was present in cultural propaganda promoting irredentist ideas such as the 'Mare Nostrum', which Mizzi and his conservative political party, the *Partito Nazionalista*, helped propagate. However, previously unseen British documents also reveal significant financial support by the Italian government to Mizzi and his political activities. Mizzi never disclosed this, including the financial support he was granted by Mussolini after having met him personally in Rome on 30 November 1936. Mizzi never openly expounded fascist views, although he consistently supported an irredentist vision of Malta and openly campaigned for Malta to fall under Italy's jurisdiction. Meanwhile, support for domestic fascist organisations was negligible. At the onset of the War, the Imperial Government started to clamp down on the irredentists, eventually exiling Mizzi and most of his collaborators. The author argues that Mizzi's dalliance with fascism was not just a convenient relationship for a greater cause, but also a direct acceptance of fascist politics given that making Malta part of Italy's jurisdiction would also have meant accepting fascist rule.

Keywords

Malta – fascism – British Union of Fascists – Union of Maltese Fascists – Nerik Mizzi (1885–1950)

Malta's most famous fascist was probably Carmelo Borg Pisani who, when in Rome in 1940, renounced his Maltese citizenship at the American Embassy and joined the Italian army. In 1942, Borg Pisani was sent on an espionage mission to Malta to prepare for the German-Italian invasion of Malta. Called 'Operation Hercules', he was found out as soon as he landed in Malta and was later imprisoned and executed.¹ I will not be delving into this case since we know of its facts already, but, instead, I will be examining dalliances with the Italian fascist government and with fascist activity in Malta.

In this article, I will firstly outline the socio-economic background of Malta given that this is crucial for understanding why and how domestic fascism failed to grow in Malta. Following this, I will turn my attention to the two main fascist tendencies in the Islands. The pre-War dalliances of the Maltese with fascism can be categorised in two: the direct relationship of Nerik (Enrico) Mizzi and his irredentist movement with the Italian fascist government, and the very small group of openly fascist Maltese who, although praised in the Italian press, had little or no direct support from the Italian government. Mizzi on the other hand, who was a very powerful political figure, was supported extensively by the Italian government through finance and propaganda. In this paper, I will be quoting key British documents that have so far been overlooked by researchers and which lend weight to my argument that Mizzi was a fascist collaborator who could have potentially supported an Italian-style Vichy government in Malta. Therefore, when we speak about Maltese fascist history, we must speak, first and foremost of Nerik Mizzi. There has been, so far, no research on possible Maltese collaborators with Nazi Germany and I have encountered no material of this sort in my research.

Following my presentation of the historical information that I have gathered, first with a background and then a thematic description which binds the chronological narrative of the paper, I then offer a concise analysis of Maltese fascism. My conclusion rests on the argument that despite the fact that Nerik Mizzi was very resourceful and also politically influential, the economic and political conditions in Malta were not at all conducive to a fascist and hard-nationalist uprising.

1 One can look at Reno Borg, *Malta u l-Faxxiżmu* (Hamrun: SKS, 1991) and Laurence Mizzi, *Il-Każ Borg Pisani—Sittin Sena Wara* (San Gwann: PEG, 2003).

The Socio-Economic Background

In 1800, Malta, an island of around 100,000 people was occupied by the British. Situated in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta's use to its British occupiers was strictly for defence purposes and its main employer was the Royal Navy. The Islands were bereft of natural resources except for limestone and its main industry, which was cotton, had entered a period of severe decline during British occupation.² There was little or no incentive for the economic use of Malta except for when Napoleon Bonaparte ordered a boycott of all British goods in Europe and Malta was used by the British to smuggle products into Italy—this had led to a very short-lived commercial boom.³ Malta's economy during the British period was dependent on the whims of British expenditure which was mostly intended for strategic and naval use. The dearth of jobs and excess labour in the country was mainly offset by migration and from the second half of the nineteenth century tens of thousands of Maltese emigrated to North Africa looking for jobs and a better life.⁴ The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to substantial new economic activity leading to a boom in the 1880s which for the first time in many years was induced exclusively by a commercial interaction, mainly that of victualing and coaling of ships passing through to the Mediterranean in contrast to defence and naval expenditure. When the economic boom subsided at the end of the nineteenth century, new economic and job opportunities were only brought forward thanks to British defence expenditure, namely a large breakwater for the Grand Harbour and eventually the huge demand for shipyard work during the First World War.⁵

Along with the port boom of the 1880s came new political activity namely due to the formation of the main historic political parties and the self-government constitution of 1887 which brought in wider self-government with more elected members. The Reformist Party was created in 1879 by William Savona, an ex-British army officer who saw in the British a potential and progressive parent to Malta under whom Malta could develop and grow. On the other hand, the *Partito Anti-Riformista* was formed by Fortunato Mizzi around a year later and opposed British politics and governance with an irredentist spirit. Given that

2 Mark Camilleri, *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History 870–1919* (Hamrun: SKS, 2016), 91–134.

3 Ibid.

4 Charles A Price, *Malta and the Maltese: A Study in Nineteenth Century Migration* (Melbourne: Georgian House, 1954), 126–185.

5 Camilleri, *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History*, 135–159.

claiming that Malta belonged to Italy would have been tantamount to treason,⁶ Mizzi's political programme focused mainly on Italianisation of the education system,⁷ while his politics and ideology were aligned to the right as evidenced with his and his party's opposition to the proposed reforms of Commissioner Rowsell, such as the abolishing grain tax, which affected the poor, and the introduction of taxes which would have hit the rich such as a tax on coal, a tax on habitable properties and also a tax on tobacco.⁸

The new constitution of 1887 provided a larger platform to Maltese politics which was eventually dominated by Mizzi and his party. The self-government constitution provided for a council of ten elected members, six official members chosen by the government and four members of constituted bodies—university students, merchants, the nobility and the clergy. The *Partito Anti-Riformista*, which became known as the *Partito Nazionale* won most elections and used their seats in the governing council as a means of protest instead of actually passing legislative reforms and governing the country. Their main demand was to Italianise the education system, something which the British Governor had always opposed and Mizzi and his party refused to act cooperatively at the council, even resigning their seats various times in protest.⁹

Nonetheless, Mizzi's party was successful insofar as the electorate was restricted to male property owners and high-income earners. With an electoral pool of not more than c. 11,000 men, elections for the Council of Government were a very insular and intimate affair between local elites.¹⁰ Most probably, very few of the working-class would have related to Mizzi's irredentist ideology, especially given the fact that the English language was the means for many to acquire a job.¹¹ Only the highly educated section of the populace could speak Italian, while on the other hand, the majority of the working-class not only had the economic incentive to study English, but jobs were so scarce that the Maltese working-class looked up to the British, especially to the Royal Navy and the

6 Henry Frendo, 'Maltese Colonial Identity: Latin Mediterranean or British Empire?' in *The British Colonial Experience, 1800–1964: The Impact on Maltese Society*, ed. Victor Mallia-Milanes (Msida: Mireva Publications, 1998), 193.

7 Michael J. Schiavone, *L-Elezzjonijiet f'Malta 1849–1992: Storja, Fatti, Ċifri* (Pjèta: PIN, 1992), 37.

8 Camilleri, *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History*, 129–130.

9 *Ibid.*, 30–35.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Mario Ellul, 'Maltese Imperial Mentalities: Subjecting the Maltese Mind to Imperial Rule,' *Storja* 98 (1998).

Admiral, as benevolent patrons.¹² Elsewhere, I refer to this this colonial mentality as an ideology of ‘dependence’¹³—an ideology which often lamented by Malta’s fist Maltese socialist, Manwel Dimech.¹⁴

Fortunato Mizzi died in 1905, leaving behind him Malta’s most effective political force and a son who was still studying at the University of Malta. Nerik Mizzi, Fortunato’s son, was born on 20 September 1885 from a French mother, Maria Sofia Folliero. After graduating with a degree in literature in science, Nerik went on to study law in Italy where he graduated with a law degree from the University of Urbino in 1911. According to a secret dossier compiled by the British intelligence in Malta, while in Italy, Mizzi founded the newspaper *L’Idea Nazionale* along with Senator Roberto Forges Davanzati who later became the editor of *La Tribuna* and the President of the Society of Italian Authors and Editors, and remained one of Mizzi’s closest collaborators.¹⁵ After graduating, Nerik returned to Malta to take charge of his father’s party and gave it even more radical form.

Nerik Mizzi and the Irredentists

Soon after Nerik Mizzi returned to Malta, he immediately took over the reins of his father’s party, and started working on founding the *Società Dante Aligheri*, an Italian state imitation which promoted the Italian language, and the *Circolo Giovane di Malte*. Both organisations promoted irredentism.¹⁶ Mizzi contested the Governing Council elections for the first time, successfully in 1915, but after falling foul of the law, he was disqualified from contesting elections in 1917. Mizzi had been caught with a pamphlet promoting the idea that the British should offer Malta to Italy in exchange for Eritrea. Mizzi was sent to prison, convicted and also barred from practising as a lawyer and contesting elections. Having spent three months in detention during the trial, Mizzi was pardoned

12 Ibid.

13 Camilleri, *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History*, 30–35.

14 Mark Montebello, *Manwel Dimech (1860–1921): Bijografija* (San Gwann: PEG, 2004), 364–366.

15 The dossier is found at The National Archives (Kew, UK) in the records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and predecessors (FCO), Records of Former Colonial Administrations, as part of the file dedicated to Nerik Mizzi. The extensive British file on Mizzi is FCO 141–8780. This file is a collection of assorted letters, reports and colonial despatches related to Mizzi. The file has no table of content and the material spans throughout the time Mizzi returned to Malta from Italy.

16 The National Achives, FCO 141–8740, Nerik Mizzi.

by the Governor Paul Methuen while his political and professional interdiction lasted until the end of the First World War.¹⁷

On 7 June 1919, Malta was rocked by widespread riots which left several people dead. The political turmoil eventually led to the British granting Malta a self-governing Constitution with a Senate elected by around 3,000 voters and a parliament elected by a pool of voters who had property or earned or paid in rent at least £10 a year which amounted to an electorate of around 27,000 voters.¹⁸ Mizzi's party, which contested the 1921 self-government elections, did so under the name *Partito Democratico Nazionalista*, but in 1926 it then merged with the clerical party *Unione Politica Maltese* to form the *Partito Nazionale*, co-led by Mizzi and the counter-party's leader Ugo Mifsud.¹⁹ Later down the line, the *Partito Nazionale* would develop into the *Partito Nazzjonalista*, which in the wake of the 1950 elections, saw Mizzi appointed Prime Minister (he would die in office in December 1950).

During the 1920s, while Mizzi's political party was at the forefront of Maltese politics, it had not been as popular as the *Unione Politica Maltese*, a party backed by the Catholic Church, which practically swept the first government elections with more than fifty-seven per cent of the vote in 1921. Mizzi's party came third with 19 per cent of the vote, trailing the pro-British Constitutional Party. In 1926, the conservative parties were then strongly challenged by a revamped Labour Party, which secured 19 per cent of the vote, while Mizzi and the *Unione* gained 17 per cent and 27 per cent respectively, failing to win the government and eventually occasioning their merger.²⁰ The conservatives were left out of government as Labour and the pro-British Constitutionalists created a coalition government—this was of serious concern to the local clergy who viewed the Labour Party as a Bolshevik threat.²¹ Prior to the 1930 elections, the Church issued a controversial pastoral letter interdicting Lord Gerald Strickland, the leader of the Constitutionalists, and imposing mortal sin on voters of political parties hostile to the Church's doctrine. The mortal sin was a very serious affair in Malta since it prevented reconciliation with God and had a very potent effect on Malta's deeply religious, illiterate and superstitious pop-

17 Ibid.

18 Schiavone, *L-Elezzjonijiet f'Malta*, 61–65.

19 For background information on Nerik Mizzi, one can read two theses: Jamie Curmi, 'Enrico Mizzi and The Partito Democratico Nazionalista' (B.A. thesis History, University of Malta, 2014); Ivan Vassallo, 'Enrico Mizzi: Between Nationalism and Irredentism' (M.A. thesis History, University of Malta, 2012). The former thesis speaks very highly of Mizzi. Both theses have been supervised by Professor Henry Frendo.

20 Schiavone, *L-Elezzjonijiet f'Malta*, 103.

21 Camilleri, *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History*, 38.

ulation. In response to the Church's direct intervention in politics, the British abolished the constitution and cancelled the elections. When the constitution was restored again in 1932 and elections returned, the Church's influence was still very strong on the electorate and the *Partito Nazionale* swept into government with up to 65 per cent of the vote.²² In 1932, Mizzi was made Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and also Minister for Education.

One of the first bills that was enacted by this new conservative government was the introduction of voluntary Italian classes in schools after normal school hours. The new government used the Italian language in any possible communication or event and gradually, instead of Maltese, turned it into the official language of the government alongside English. The *Government Gazette* was now published in both English and Italian and monuments were also erected in Italian.²³ The local government sponsored Italian-themed cultural events at the *Istituto Italiano di Cultura* and the Royal Opera House, which was a hub of Italian opera and theatre. The Labour Party described the Italian language as the *lingwa frustiera* [the language of the whip]²⁴—the language of the upper-classes. The conservative government even floated the idea of introducing a law dictating that Maltese should be written as it is spelled and not with its orthographic rules, implying a removal of the Semitic orthographical elements in the local language, such as 'Għ' which has no equivalent in Italian.²⁵

Mizzi operated in the office of his irredentist organisation, *Giovine di Malta* [Youth of Malta], in Valletta, which was adorned with portraits of the King of Italy, Mussolini and of Ludovico Chigi, the Grandmaster of the Sovereign Order of St. John (Mizzi himself was a Knight). The politics and ideas of Nerik Mizzi were all centered on the *Italianità* of Malta, basically meaning that since Malta had an Italian heritage, politically, culturally and economically, Malta should return to this heritage by forming part of Italy's jurisdiction. The historian Henry Frendo gives a more subdued and moderate description of Mizzi's beliefs. Frendo argues that the *Italianità* of Mizzi's party was more ingrained in the '*forma mentis*', in terms of culture and identity rather than as a political position to bring Malta under Italy's control, in contrast to his father's *Italianità*.²⁶ This meant that the use and adherence of Italian language and culture by Nerik Mizzi was more of an expression of Latin cultural identity, as distinct

22 Ibid. Also in The National Archives, FCO 141–8780.

23 General Assembly Debates October 31, 1932, Strickland on Scott Centenary Memorial.

24 *Il-Cotra*, February 18, 1932.

25 *Il-Cotra*, September 29, 1932.

26 Henry Frendo, *Europe and Empire: Culture, Politics and identity in Malta and the Mediterranean* (Venera: Midsea Books, 2012), 53–54.

from creole or African identity, rather than an irredentist creed.²⁷ This is also how Frenzo justified the consistent aggrandisement of Italy in Mizzi's newspaper *MALTA*,²⁸ claiming that the core principle behind these cultural evocations and aggrandisement was that Maltese national consciousness was principally Italian.²⁹ Frenzo also argues that the British used the term 'fascist' too liberally just for the sake of containing Mizzi and his political activities.³⁰ However, Mizzi's supportive political views on Italy's government were also very explicit, meaning that beyond Frenzo's 'cultural mentis' there was clearly and explicitly, a political streak behind Mizzi's support of Mussolini and his government.

However, Mizzi was often reluctant to agitate strongly for Malta's irredentist cause since doing so would have landed him in trouble with the colonial authorities, so Mizzi always cautiously tread a fine line. Mizzi did, however, openly support Italian imperialism by supporting Italy's war effort in the Abyssinia.³¹ Mizzi's views can be quoted directly and extensively from *MALTA*, the newspaper he edited. This was written in Italian and constantly propagated Italian culture, the cause for the official use of the Italian language in Malta and constant praise for the Italian fascist government and its policies.³² Ivan Vassallo, who describes Mizzi as an Italian imperialist, offers a very comprehensive digest of Mizzi's views, but fails to mention the British documents which show the extensive financial support that Mizzi received from the Italian fascist government.³³

Henry Frenzo states that many Nationalist Party members loved Italy and generally admired Mussolini,³⁴ and we can find many instances of open and public Maltese support for fascist Italy. For example, after the assassination attempt on Mussolini's life in 1926, the Maltese *Casa del Fascio* in conjunction with the Italian consulate organised several religious services to commemorate the event. In a Te Deum ceremony held in Saint Catherine's Church in Valletta,

27 Frenzo, *Europe and Empire*, 55–60.

28 *Ibid.*, 175.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, 176.

31 *Ibid.*, 200.

32 The language question was the legacy issue of Nerik's father, Fortunato, who wrote on it constantly in the newspaper he founded, *Malta: Gazzetta Quotidiana, Politica e Commerciale*. See, for example, *Malta*, November 13, 1883.

33 Vassallo, 'Enrico Mizzi.'

34 Frenzo, *Europe and Empire*, 531. However, Frenzo does not fail to mention the minority of pro-Italian irredentists who were anti-fascists, such as Giuseppe Donati, but Donati and his likes, Frenzo says, were not very popular with the rest of the Nationalists and were eventually ostracised.

a prominent Italian Jesuit, Vincenzo Furci, praised the Duce and extolled his virtues.³⁵ Another example is when several Maltese contributed to the 'Oro per la patria' campaign started in December 1935 after Italy lost a significant amount of gold reserves during the Abyssinian War. They included the son of Arturo Mercieca, Vittorio Mercieca, the Italian Consulate Legal Advisor Dr A. Stilon de Piro (later interned), and Rosa Maria and Anna Mallia who were daughters of Carlo Mallia, once a Nationalist Minister and president of the King's Own Band Club.³⁶ Nerik Mizzi made a donation as well, but his party did not.³⁷

Unsurprisingly, flirting with Mussolini's government was a very serious matter for the British authorities and these activities never went unwatched. Quite a stir was caused, for example, when the Italian fascist minister Francesco Giunta came to Malta and delivered a speech at the *Casa del Fascio* in 1932. According to the pro-British Maltese newspaper *Il Berka* [The Lightning] Mr Giunta said: 'If England will pull the ropes harder, then all the fleets and the money, won't serve for anything!'³⁸ *Il Berka* also stated that when the Imperial Government contacted the Italian Foreign Office to check whether the speech was official, the Italian Foreign Office denied that Giunta had said those words, while Giunta said he would not have said those words so as not to cause repercussions with the British.³⁹

Open support for fascism was mainly shown by official Maltese fascist organisation, but the tone of the voice of *MALTA* was very friendly to fascism, fully supported Franco's war in Spain against the Republicans, and even supported Hitler himself. Indeed, both Mussolini and Hitler were praised and cast in good light;⁴⁰ complaints were even made about the trade embargo with Germany and Italy in 1940.⁴¹ Nonetheless, supporting Italy remained legally problematic, particularly when the British abolished the 1933 constitution and enacted emergency powers so as to contain Italian influence in Malta and the strong relationship which the Maltese irredentists had established with the Italian government.

35 Ibid., 212.

36 Ibid., 528–529.

37 Ibid., 529–531.

38 *Il Berka*, April 9, 1932.

39 Ibid.

40 *MALTA*, May 5, 1938, and April 3, 1939 and March 22, 1939.

41 *MALTA*, February 20, 1940.

Mizzi's Direct Connections to the Italian Government

Historian Claudia Baldoli has undertaken a study of the influence of the 'Fasci Abroad' in Malta which were the fascists outside Italy whom served a very important function in promoting fascist propaganda in the Mediterranean. Baldoli also reveals how the Italian government used various ways to promote its propaganda, but its base from where to launch its operations was its Italian expatriate community. This community had its own infrastructure through the Dante Alighieri Society, which served as a cultural institution promoting Italian culture and language; the Italian Cultural Institute, which opened in 1932; and even its own official mouthpiece in Malta, *Il Legionario*. The Italian expatriate community in Malta was encouraged to support Mizzi's efforts in pushing for the teaching of Italian in public schools in the 1930s, and also had their own schools and a bookshop in Valletta. Meanwhile, Mussolini's government told Italians in Malta that they were living in 'unredeemed land', which should fall under the jurisdiction of Italy while invoking the old imperial Roman concept of 'Mare Nostrum', or the Roman idea which claimed title to the whole Mediterranean.⁴²

In addition to the Italian community, the Italian government also counted on the Maltese themselves to do their bidding. Claudia Baldoli quotes Italian and British documents to reveal some of the prominent names in the organisation of the *Fasci* in Malta. The organisation was coordinated from Rome by Umberto Biscottini who worked with the *Direzione Generale degli Italiani dell'Estero* [Directorate General for the Italian Citizens Abroad] under the wing of the Foreign Affairs and Nino Correnti. Meanwhile, Vincenzo Bonello, the curator of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta, coordinated with Biscottini and Correnti in laying their groundwork in Malta and facilitating their contacts. Bonello was a friend to Mizzi, but one of his closest local collaborators was Dr A. Hamilton Stilon who visited Rome frequently. Baldoli cites British documents from the Home Office which show that Mizzi and Stilon received funds directly from the Italian fascist government. Other documents of the Foreign Colonial Office which I have found also corroborate Baldoli's findings.⁴³

There has been, until today, very little in-depth research on Mizzi except for the sources mentioned above and it is thanks to the excellent intelligence and

42 Claudia Baldoli, "The "Northern Dominator" and the Mare Nostrum: Fascist Italy's "Cultural War" in Malta," *Modern Italy* 13, no. 1 (2008): 5–20.

43 Baldoli, "The "Northern Dominator" and the Mare Nostrum," 5–20.

security services of the British that we can appreciate the real extent of Mizzi's influence in Malta and the extent of his connections with Rome. According to the British intelligence dossier quoted here, Mizzi's bland appearance was a deceptive cloak that hid a politician who was nothing less than an institutional figure in Malta, wielding both political power in Malta and effective authority in his professional class as a lawyer. Mizzi was so influential and well-connected that he conspired with the Chief Judge, Arturo Mercieca, and the head of the civil service to fill the civil service with political allies and supporters. Mizzi also threatened other lawyers with cutting them off from clients if they did not sign his petitions against the Imperial Government; consorted with known Italian agents; and eventually become a recipient of Italian government funds under the direct patronage of Benito Mussolini himself.⁴⁴ Comparing Mizzi to a communist cell, in terms of underground subversive methodology, it is clear, from the perspective of the British, that Mizzi was a dangerous force that could bend the political scene in Malta at will. This is how the local Imperial Government described Mizzi in an internal document:

Mizzi, known for his rabid pro-Italian leanings, is almost an institution in Malta, and by the very length of time that has been allowed to operate and by his oppennes [*sic*] of his actions it has been gradually assumed that he is harmless. His activities have been so cleverly directed that whilst he was acknowledged as an opponent he was rather admired for his open support of what were considered his 'ideals'.⁴⁵

According to the British file quoted here, there seemed to be an extensive network of Italian agents and Maltese collaborators who together channelled funds to Malta for Mizzi and Italian government bodies to spend on Italian propaganda and pro-Italian activity. It seems that Stilon was the channel through which Mizzi received funds from Italy. Biscottini and Stilon hid some of the funding through pseudo-loans which Biscottini was offering to Stilon, but the British understood the real nature of the funds given to Stilon for he was wealthy enough not to need any loans. Stilon channelled Italian funds to the Dante Aligheri Society and also funded the 200 British pounds deposit for *MALTA* for registration purposes.⁴⁶

The Imperial Government was well aware that Biscottini was responsible for overseeing the fascist cultural penetration of Malta, operating from an office

44 The National Archives, FCO 141–8780.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

in Rome on the via del Tritone, which also housed the office of Franco Adorno who was Stilon's nephew, and also the Rome correspondent to *MALTA*. This office also housed the *Deputazione dei Storia di Malta* and the *Giornale di Politica e di Letteratura*. Mizzi was in regular contact with Italian news agencies and journalists from whom he received news bulletins and exchanged information on Malta.⁴⁷ Mizzi was also in contact with Rodolfo Agora, the secretary of the local *Casa del Fascio*, whom the British suspected was delivering Mizzi's Italian mail through a consular bag.⁴⁸

According to a document sent by the Italian Secretary of Cabinet to the Director of Tourism, *MALTA* was also provided with funds through paid advertisement. The Italians insisted that the British authorities in Malta should accept the transfer of the funds considering they were not funding political activities, but strictly for advertisement purposes. The Italian government officials would also reiterate to the British that *MALTA* was the only newspaper in Italian in Malta and therefore should be considered an important expression of Maltese culture.⁴⁹

Mizzi's Maltese collaborators were also very helpful to his political cause. The Chief Justice, Arturo Mercieca, never declared his close friendship with Mizzi when he absolved him from charges made against him in court, but the British Governor knew about it. On 13 December, 1933, an anti-British opinion piece was published in *MALTA* which was a modified version of an article entitled 'The Gold Legend' published in the *Il Popolo di Sicilia*. Mizzi was fined ten pounds and the publication of *MALTA* was suspended for two months, but Mizzi appealed the sentence and had his brother registered the newspaper under a different name to continue publication under the title *L'eco di Malta e Gozo* [The Echo of Malta and Gozo]. The sentence was then repealed by Judge Arturo Mercieca at the court of appeal. This event infuriated the British Governor, David Campbell, and led him to contact London asking for permission to enact a law that would give him power to deport citizens who posed a danger to the authorities, starting with Mizzi himself.⁵⁰ However, even if emergency laws were eventually effected, it would take some time before Mizzi was finally exiled in 1942.

Another British file provides detailed information on Mizzi and his connection with Mussolini himself.⁵¹ In 1938, and once again in 1939, Mussolini himself

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 The National Archives, FC0 141-9905. This file includes an assortment of documents com-

purchased fifty copies of the *MALTA* for 1200 Italian Lire, which was the equivalent of £128. In 1937, the Italian government, through the Ministry of Popular Culture, acquired a fifty per cent stake in Mizzi's *MALTA* for 46,500 Italian Lire, the equivalent of £3,000. Eventually, Emmanuele Cossai, a previous Mizzi collaborator, accused Mizzi of not having divulged the details of his salary and the money received by the Italian government.⁵²

It is also clear from the British government's intelligence report that Mussolini himself pledged financial support to Mizzi. We already know that Mizzi had met with Mussolini twice in his lifetime—once in 1931 and again in 1936.⁵³ On 12 November 1936, Mizzi was in Rome and lodged at the Hotel Continental where he requested a meeting with the Duce. Mizzi met Mussolini on 30 November and requested, amongst other things, adverts and subscriptions for *MALTA*, and these demands were met. Mizzi also asked for signed photos of the Duce, of Badoglio and H.E. Debono. The newspaper subscriptions were meant for institutes and bodies such as *Casa del Fascio* (the Italian funded Malta based clubhouse)⁵⁴ and the cultural institutes.⁵⁵

The Official Maltese Fascists

Apart from gathering intelligence on Mizzi, the British also documented the activities of self-declared Maltese fascists.⁵⁶ In 1934, the Malta Branch of the British Union of Fascists was established, which was a rather strange organisation run by Wolsey De Piro, a member of the Maltese De Piro noble family. As we can see from the British file and also the lack of discussion in the Maltese press about this organisation, its influence was marginal and it failed to make political headway. It did, however, have two newspapers which it distributed freely, one called *Id-Dinja* [The World] written in the Maltese vernacular and the other in English called *Mid-Day Views*. A newspaper published in Sicily by the name *Il Popolo di Sicilia* [The People of Sicily] reported on the Malta branch of the British Union of Fascists in very positive light.⁵⁷

piled by the British intelligence in Malta under the direction of the Governor. The file specialises on Mussolini's direct funding to Mizzi.

52 *The Nation*, August 23, 1947.

53 Frendo, *Europe and Empire*, 223.

54 For more information on Malta's *Casa del Fascio* one may read Conrad Thake, 'A Project for a "Centro d'Italianita" in Malta,' *Melita Historica* 15, no. 4 (2011): 433–448.

55 The National Archives, FCO 141–9905.

56 The National Archives, FCO 141–8631.

57 See *Il Popolo di Sicilia*, January 11, 1935 and July 13, 1935.

De Piro tried in vain to solicit British Imperial Government's support, requesting meetings with the Governor and use of government property for meetings of his organisation. He complained about government censorship of fascist films and protested against the banning of his youth movement which tried to emulate the Boy Scouts.⁵⁸ He asked for permission for police officers to join the Empire Football Club and also permission to organise a lottery. The letters came from No. 11 Palazzo Xara, Notabile, a renowned property of the De Piro family, which still exists today, and, naturally, the British Imperial Government denied all the requests.⁵⁹

De Piro believed that trade unions fostered class hatred, wanted Malta to have its own currency, believed that freemasonry was anti-Catholic and therefore wrong, and that fascist corporate organisations should replace trade unions.⁶⁰ De Piro had, however a very convoluted idea on Malta and its relationship with the British Empire, because although he believed that Malta should get significantly more autonomy, he still perceived Malta as a long-term member of the British Empire—and naturally this irked the ire of Mizzi who accused him of servitude as a result.⁶¹ In a way, Mizzi had a point in his accusation, given there is even some contradiction to the fact that that a foreign branch of the British Union of Fascists would have existed given that Mosley stood by the principle that British investment should go strictly to Britain first and not to the colonies and that British interests should come first before the interests of the natives of the colonies.⁶²

The Malta branch of the British Union of Fascists closed in May 1935 and its remnants joined the new Union of Maltese Fascists or *Ghakda tal Faxxisti Maltin* led by Frederick Olaf Sammut along with some ex-members of the Nationalist Party in 1936. Sammut had served in the First World War, married in India when he was posted with Worcester Regiment in 1924 and his uncle was Achilles Sammut, a minister with Strickland's government of 1927. Sammut retired with a pension from the Imperial authorities in 1933 having borne a heavy grudge against the British. Although Sammut professed loyalty to the

58 The Imperial Government also insisted with the Boy Scouts leader in Malta, Teddy Price, to keep an eye on fascist-styled youth groups; however, there seemed to be no evidence or signs that fascist youth groups were practicing drilling. See The National Archives, FCO 141–8631. Eventually, in 1938, the Imperial Government enacted a similar law in Cyprus in 1936, banning the use of uniforms to irregular groups.

59 The National Archives, FCO 141–8631.

60 See for example *Id-Dinja*, July 24, 1934 and July 25, 1934.

61 The National Archives, FCO 141–8631. The exchange was published in *Id-Dinja*, June 13, 1934.

62 Colin Cross, *The Fascists in Britain* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), 39.

Crown, he was a good friend to Mizzi and was pro-Italian. The office of this new fascist organisation was at 22, Strada Federico, Valletta. Sammut died on 19 March 1937 and was replaced by Captain Victor Savona. The Union of Fascists also had its own priest, a certain Father Paris who was also known to the British authorities as a fascist.⁶³

The Union of Maltese Fascists had forty enlisted members. Their secretary was Vincenzo Cassar Borg Olivier of 195, Strada Reale, Valletta. They had a weekly newspaper in English called *Marching On*, which was distributed by its members in the streets of Valletta who wore arm-bands with fascist emblems. Although the fascists professed loyalty to the Crown, they often made incendiary declarations, such as the ones they used to make during their commemoration of the Seventh June Riots: 'If need be, we will do a repetition of the Seventh June Riots.' Some of the most notable speakers were Edgar Soler and John Warraington who, in 1937, was accused of making a seditious speech.⁶⁴ From the press and the primary evidence gathered by British intelligence, it seems that this fascist organisation was an object of ridicule. The fascists had no public support and the pro-British *Times of Malta* called them a joke.⁶⁵

During the 7 June Riots celebrations of 1937, the Maltese Union of Fascists issued a call to fly the Maltese flag half-mast. Only three heeded this call: Salvatore Żammit Hammet's Photographic Studio, Mizzi's seat of power, the *Circolo La Giovine* Malta, and another person who removed the flag after realising that no one else was doing so. However, a demonstration staged by the fascists later, on 8 September, which happens to be Victory Day or Saint Mary's Feast, would

63 The National Archives, FCO 141–8631.

64 Ibid.

65 *Times of Malta*, December 28, 1936. For example, Joseph Xuereb, 23, who lived in an apartment in Pietà, was selling the fascist newspaper *Marching On* in Strada Reale, Valletta, and on offering a copy to Carmelo Costa, 61, of Valletta, Costa told Xuereb that 'Dawn iridu jagħmlulna ilsira' [these [fascists] want to make us slaves] to which Xuereb replied 'Aħna irridu nehilsu mill-jasar tal-ideat tiegħek u ta' min hu bhalek' [we want to liberate ourselves from the slavery of your own ideas and of those who are like you]. Then Costa replied, 'Intom tridu tagħmlulna is-sarima bħal m'għamlu t-Taljani' [you want to censor us just how the Italians have been censored]. Finally, Xuereb replied, 'Inti beghet lill-pajjiżek' [you sold your country]. It also seems that it was the young members of the organisation who mostly had the zealotry to sell the newspaper in Valletta. This was probably a hard task given all the abuse and ridicule they would have probably encountered. Often the fascists themselves couldn't handle all the ridicule they were being subjected to. Joseph P. Xuereb of 146B, Salita Guardamangia, Pietà, reported that Giuseppe Gerada of 52, Bishop Street, Valletta, forty-four years of age, had insulted him. Xuereb was walking in Valletta distributing pamphlets when Gerada asked him, pointing at his ribbon 'what is that?' with Xuereb replying 'the fascist emblem', to which Gerada responded in sheer laughter and ridicule.

prove more eventful. Victory Day in the 1930s⁶⁶ was celebrated for the victory of the Maltese and the Order of Saint John in 1565 against the Ottoman invasion, a celebration which today is popular with contemporary fascist groups for the obvious anti-Islam and racial overtones. On 8 September, around fifteen fascists gathered at a demonstration in Hamrun where they started chanting fascist songs. A crowd of street children soon gathered and starting molesting them, with the leader Victor Savona injuring his forehead in the process, probably from being hit or pushed to the floor.⁶⁷ The *Times of Malta* claimed that 4,000 people counter-protested and stopped the fascists from marching through Hamrun,⁶⁸ although this figure is most probably inflated given that few Maltese would have had an interest in such an event, even as a counter-protest. There may have been socialists and dedicated anti-fascists who confronted them, but nothing of the sort of number the *Times* were saying, and probably the number of counter-protesters would have at best been a couple of hundred people, and some people nearby who would have joined spontaneously. On the same day, three other fascists, also wearing uniforms, had successfully laid a ceremonial wreath at the Victory Monument of Republic Street, Valletta. The *Times* also lamented the fact that a law in the UK banning uniforms was not enacted in Malta.⁶⁹ According to the police report, the fascists were twelve in total and their Union Flag with Maltese colours was taken by the police during the melee. The fascists went on foot to pick up their colours from the Police Headquarters and, while they were walking to Valletta, they were again accosted by the children and the crowds.⁷⁰

Sammut's pamphlet *The Corporate State and the Union of Maltese Fascists* provide us with an excellent digest of their politics. Sammut starts from the premise that every fascism has its own particular national characteristics. According to Sammut, the core and universal principles of his own permutation of Maltese fascism was the concept of the benevolent dictatorship in contrast to the imposed dictatorship of British rule or a Stalinist dictatorship. For Sammut, an Italian, German or Austrian dictatorship was a benevolent one. Naturally, free speech would be limited as it should serve the interests of the state. More specifically, Sammut demanded suspension of the 1921 constitution

66 Today, Victory Day also marks the day when a food convoy entered Malta and saved it from starvation in 1942, and ironically also marks the day when Italian forces surrendered to the Allies in 1943.

67 *Malta Chronicle*, September 9, 1937.

68 *Times of Malta*, September 10, 1937.

69 *Ibid.*

70 The National Archives, FCO 141-8631.

and the installation of a Corporate State to 'solve all the local and social problems'. Under the Corporate State, Maltese society would have been divided into different unions and associations, such as the employers, workers' unions and others. Every association would have a number of members in the Union of Maltese Fascists and would be officially recognised by the state. Sammut also demanded the development of industry and agriculture, a controlled migration programme to British colonies, new Maltese colonies abroad, and avoided the language question.

The Clampdown

The early 1930s had started with Britain tightening its grip over Malta, but it was first the socialists who were purged before the British authorities turned towards Mizzi and the irredentists. In 1932, the Prevention of Seditious Propaganda Ordinance was passed. This was a bill enacted by the Imperial Government to prevent the possession and dissemination of any radical and political material and, in 1933, this bill would be used to purge socialists. The socialists were also charged with the importation of foreign propaganda and trials led to the dissolution of the Socialist League. Mizzi and his collaborators were in government, however, and their widespread support meant that it would have taken more work to purge them. The British started clamping down on Mizzi with the fundamentals: by abolishing the constitution and self-government once again. The reasons given by the Imperial Government over the suspension of the self-government was that government ministers were adamant on promoting Italian propaganda and the Italian language and also because of their close association with the Italian government.⁷¹ Nonetheless, the British didn't start rounding up the irredentists right away and were careful not to stir public unrest; Mizzi was even given a seat on the consultative Council of Government.⁷²

Security dispatches from the early 1930s show Kenneth Strong as Defence Security Officer saying that the Nationalists did not pose a security risk to Malta, but this view changed completely in 1936 as Malta began clearly preparing for war.⁷³ Strong's position was also the same as that of Downing Street,

71 Dominic Fenech, 'How Malta Lost Self-Government, 1930–1933,' in *Malta Historical Society Proceedings of History Week 2011*, eds. Joan Abela, Emanuel Buttigieg, Krystle Farrugia (Valletta: Midsea Books, 2013), 141–155.

72 The National Archives, FCO 141–8780.

73 Frenco, *Europe and Empire*, 556.

as evidenced by a letter sent to the Governor himself on 24 December 1934.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, preparations for internment camps in Malta dedicated to suspected foreign enemies and their local collaborators had already started in 1935.⁷⁵ In April 1935, three alleged Italian spies were expelled from Malta. Later, on 21 September 1935, arrests and expulsions of Italian nationals were made and, on the same day, fifteen Maltese were arrested but later released. The Italians were expelled immediately on grounds of public security. One of these was Maestro Cardenio Botti, who lived in Malta for many years. He was the conductor of the pro-Nationalist La Valette band and had also helped set up the *Caso del Fascio* in 1924.⁷⁶ Mazzone and his sons were also deported; the manager of the Banco di Roma, Nicola Parodi, and his accountant, Leonardo Fusco, were also expelled.⁷⁷ 1936 opened with more expulsions of Italians, some of them university professors, but soon expulsions turned on the Maltese too.⁷⁸

Max Farrugia, who has researched the expulsion of the Maltese irredentists from the Maltese local archives, says that the deportation action focused on expelling Mizzi and dismantling his network.⁷⁹ Mizzi and his local collaborators were not expelled until after the British had already expelled most of the prominent Italian collaborators. As soon as the War started, that British Governor, David Campbell, argued that Mizzi had to be deported given that he was working for Italian intervention in government policy and was using religion to rally his cause.⁸⁰ The Imperial Government also believed that as long as Arturo Mercieca was Chief Justice, Mizzi would not be controlled by the law and hence Mercieca's containment was also necessary.⁸¹ At least 260 people were interned during the War—180 men, 80 women. Eighty-eight of these men were Maltese, forty-three Italian and twenty-five German. Amongst the women, thirteen were Maltese, twenty-seven Italian and twenty-four German. Most of them were interned in Palestine and Uganda. Others, like Arturo Mercieca and his family, were kept under house arrest in Malta.⁸² Mizzi was arrested in May 1940 while at the *MALTA* office in Valletta, expelled in 1942, but returned to Malta

74 The National Archives, FCO 141–8780.

75 Max Farrugia, *L-Internamernt u l-Eżilju Matul l-Aħħar Gwerra* (Valletta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2007), 5.

76 Farrugia, *L-Internamernt u l-Eżilju Matul l-Aħħar Gwerra*, 515.

77 *Ibid.*, 516.

78 *Ibid.*, 541–544.

79 *Ibid.*, 62.

80 *Ibid.*

81 *Ibid.*, 65.

82 *Ibid.*, 68–69.

from Uganda in March 1945. Once returned, a rehabilitated Mizzi re-took his post in the Council of Government.⁸³

When the War was over, many internees returned to Malta without any problems but those who returned from Italy were charged with being enemy collaborators. Seventeen were charged, eleven of whom risked death by hanging. These included Willie Apap, who was an artist, and Giuseppe Gonzi (Archbishop Michael Gonzi's nephew), who was also a representative of Banco di Roma. Others were Dr Albert Xerri De Caro, Paolo Ignazio Chetcuti, Roberto Mallia, Paolo Frendo, Manoel Mizzi, Edoardo Frendo, Tancred Mercieca, Vincent Cachia, Ġużeppi Gatt, Albert Briffa, Romeo Samuele, Paolo Pace, Ivo Leone Ganado, Antonio Cortis and Antonio Vassallo. They were all acquitted of the charges.⁸⁴ The British did not let their guard down after the war, though, especially due to the new communist hysteria. When, in May 1948, the British Prime Minister issued the executive order to purge communist and fascists from the civil service, Labour Prime Minister Paul Boffa promised the Governor that the Maltese authorities would comply.⁸⁵

Is There a Historical Maltese Fascism?

Fascism is a form of aggressive nationalism which favours the authoritarian state and is staunchly against liberalism, but unlike communism it does not have a set of uniform ideals or doctrine and every nation's fascist movement was particularist in its own way.

Fascism in Malta came in two different versions. The most obvious fascism was that of De Piro, Sammut and Savona, who openly advocated a fascist State. The other version of fascism was Mizzi's fascism, which meant the stealthy acceptance of a fascist regime under the pretence of making Malta part of Italy and returning Malta to its Italian heritage. Mizzi rarely spoke of economic affairs and was most probably financially illiterate given the total lack of political engagement on serious economic and social issues. The Union of Fascists with their theatrics and fascist uniform-pomp had at least some sort of economic vision for the islands other than just making Malta part of another country. The irony is that although Mizzi's fascism was as dangerous and equally as consequential as the fascism of the Malta Union of Fascists, it was the latter

83 Ibid.

84 Frendo, *Europe and Empire*, 757–760.

85 The National Archives, FCO 141–10006.

and not the former that garnered ridicule from the rest of society. Mizzi may have been financially and economically illiterate, but he was an exceptional master of the word and an astute politician who could manipulate his way and obtain excessive power, probably more than Prime Minister Ugo Mifsud himself, despite being simply Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries and Minister of Education. Mizzi, calculating and resourceful, could manage his political project without jeopardising his egoistical ambitions to become Prime Minister himself. For this alone, Mizzi was a political mastermind. Why, then, would Mizzi focus so much on the language question?

What was called 'The Language Question' was the main battlefield of the whole irredentist cause of Mizzi and his supporters. It was from geographic proximity that Mizzi could create an idealist, irredentist cause which served to cascade of a series of political implications, including the idea of becoming part of Italy and adopting, by default, fascist rule. Frendo tries to whitewash the language question as a genuine call for Malta's return to its Italian heritage, but, as a historian, Frendo should have first started by locating this Italian heritage in its essence, which was a top-down history of rulers speaking Italian who had nothing or very little in common with the Semitic-speaking people who they ruled. It is also incorrect to assume that there was a collective cultural consciousness with a shared Italian heritage between the working class and the upper class given that these classes were divided by a huge chasm of social conditions that engendered different cultural mind-sets.⁸⁶ The vast majority of the Maltese people did not speak Italian, did not go to the opera, and neither did they discuss Caravaggio or Italian literature. For the working masses, the cause of turning Malta into an Italian jurisdiction was totally out of their political, economic and social priorities and the idea could not be relatable to them in any way possible, especially when the language of money and jobs was English and not Italian.⁸⁷ Italian was merely the language of a very small professional and land-owning elite who did not amount to more than a very small fraction of the population.⁸⁸ Apart from the fact that the vast majority of the people did not even know how to read and write in English, they knew little or no Italian.⁸⁹ Putting things into context, the print run of Mizzi's newspaper *MALTA* in the 1930s was around 500–800 copies,⁹⁰ which, considering a population of 241,000 people, was an insignificant number. In addition, the British

86 Camilleri, *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History*, 91–134.

87 *Ibid.*, 123–127.

88 *Ibid.*

89 *Ibid.*

90 The National Archives, FCO 141–8780.

even believed that this number was inflated, and, one should also consider the copies that were bought and distributed to the Italian-related institutes and to Italy itself.

Italianising Malta through language was an indirect but major route to bringing Malta under direct Italian rule. The political position for Dominion Status that Mizzi adopted with the merger of the *Unione* also served the same and original purpose of Mizzi's ultimate goal: bringing Malta closer to Italy until eventually it unified with its old home. From such a perspective, where was Mizzi's nationalism after all if he even denied his own native language? However, bringing Malta back to Italy's fold under all costs, even when Italy was run by the Fascists, cannot be dismissed as simply a compromised political position with a genuine end. Nerik Mizzi may have well believed that Malta had an Italian heritage that should have been reclaimed, but Mizzi also knew very well that bringing Malta under the jurisdiction of Italy would have required direct acceptance and adoption of fascist politics. And, after all, if Mizzi had had his way, he would have been installed as a sort of dictator over an autonomous Italian province, Malta would have ended up on the wrong side of the War. It could only be naivety or sheer deception to argue that, if Malta became part of Italy in some way or another, then, under Mussolini, Malta would have had its own democracy and independent political course. The only thing standing between Mizzi's political dreams and Italy's fascist largesse was the British fleet, which had by then appreciated the use of Malta so much that they were willing to ensure they kept it under their possession. This is why the legacy of Mizzi should not be whitewashed. After all, Mizzi's irredentism was also the reason why his party was totally rejected by the majority of the electorate with the first universal suffrage elections held in 1947 when the Labour Party swept into office with up to 60 per cent of the vote. In order for Mizzi to gain traction in politics, he had to completely abandon his ideas of irredentism. Then party leader, Mizzi was finally and eventually elected Prime Minister in 1950 with a hung parliament, only to die three months later. Mizzi was replaced by Gorg Borg Olivier who had a more contemporary pro-Western vision and led Malta to Independence in 1964.

In conclusion, Mizzi was so focused on promoting Italy that at face-value he seems more like a fascist subject doing Mussolini's bidding than a nationalist fighting for his country. This contradiction of Mizzi supporting a fascist government but acting so indifferently to tangible politics is bridged by my theory of dependency. In my two-volume work *A Materialist Revision of Maltese History*, I argue that the Nationalists' *Italianità* was irredentist and strongly political, insofar as it was an 'ideology of dependency' by convenience, meaning that Mizzi's irredentism was rooted in an innate belief that Malta could not

have made it by itself. And, Italy was the obvious patron simply due to the geographic proximity and its historical links. This 'ideology of dependence' was so strong that Mizzi even espoused it with the practical consequence of accepting fascist rule.

Therefore, Mizzi was a fascist: witting or unwittingly, but a fascist by proxy who accepted Malta's faith as a small country dependant on a bigger patron, in this case a fascist government. It is indeed a unique and subtle form of fascism, different from other fascisms elsewhere. But this kind of fascism was nearly impossible to grow effectively in Malta given that the majority of the people acknowledged Britain as their official and formal patron. Mizzi's success was mostly down to his strategising and the support of the Church and clerics and not because a significant part of the population actually believed in his irredentist ideal. The indirect acknowledgment that Malta would have had a fascist regime if Malta was to become part of Italy was overlooked simply for the reason that the working masses were not engaged with this issue—they were instead trying to survive and such an issue was too remote for them to even contemplate. Mizzi had electoral influence thanks to the priests and clerics who supported him as an ideal anti-Bolshevik candidate, and also thanks to his networks in the legal profession and in the university. The Church wielded the largest influence and, once the mortal sin was issued on Labour and the Constitutionals, Mizzi had a free ride to power. It was in these circumstances of economic backwardness, religious superstition and great illiteracy that Mizzi would cloak himself as a legitimate politician while selling something as dangerous as the self-declared fascists.