Antisemitic Intellectuals in Fascist Italy: Promoting ‘Spiritual Racism,’ 1938-1945

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The history of European anti-Semitism on the eve of the Holocaust is sometimes depicted as a straightforward narrative of increasingly biological forms of racial ideology culminating in Nazi extermination policy. As useful as this historical construct can be, it tends to obscure equally important but neglected dimensions of anti-Semitic thought in the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter examines one of the less typically studied facets of this history: the emergence of an unconventional and virulent form of anti-Semitism in the later stages of Italian Fascism, called “spiritual racism” by its proponents. Directed against the “Jewish spirit” that supposedly pervaded modern life, this species of anti-Semitic thought presented itself as respectably Western and scientific while incorporating putatively Eastern spiritual traditions into its framework. Advocates of spiritual racism drew selectively on South Asian sources refracted through an orientalist lens. Its Italian variant revolved around an esoteric contrast between “Semitic” and “Aryan” values and invoked ancient Roman ties to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds. By linking biological and spiritual aspects of anti-Semitic animus, spiritual racism formed an unusually potent worldview during the ascendency of Fascism.1

When Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) came to power in 1922, the Fascist movement lacked an anti-Semitic program. Italy’s small Jewish community was highly assimilated and generally respected, while Mussolini’s racial views were inconsistent. Jews were welcome as members of the Fascist party, and several of them achieved high positions in the regime. But there was a vociferously anti-Semitic fringe to Italian Fascism from the beginning. Its most vociferous spokesman was journalist Giovanni Preziosi, a defrocked priest who published the journal *La Vita Italiana* and was the chief promoter of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” in Italy. Based on this notorious anti-Semitic forgery, Preziosi (1881-1945) developed an elaborate conspiracist cosmology centered on Jews as the prime carriers of modern decadence. He claimed that Jews, aided by the freemasons, spread democracy, plutocracy, and Bolshevism through covert means.2

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1 Like many other historians of anti-Jewish thought, I reject the spelling “anti-Semitism” and instead normally use “antisemitism.” The concern in part is that the term “anti-Semitism” can reinforce anti-Jewish stereotypes by suggesting that there really is a “Semitism” which anti-Semites oppose. This distinction is particularly important in translating from Italian and German sources, which do not hyphenate the term. After consultation with the editors of this volume, however, I have agreed to adapt my usage here to fit the book as a whole.

2 Giovanni Preziosi, *Giudaismo Bolscevismo Plutocrazia Massoneria* (Milan: Mondadori, 1941). Preziosi’s ongoing obsession with such conspiracies is amply doc-
publications preached an anti-Semitic message throughout the early Fascist era, and his journal “had a great intellectual impact in the 1920s.”

With the establishment of the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936, Italian Fascism began to shift toward the anti-Semitic faction. The emerging alliance with Nazi Germany provided a crucial opening for the circle around Preziosi, who spelled out the basic elements of an anti-Jewish program in 1937. A year later the Fascist regime officially adopted an anti-Semitic policy with the publication of a “Manifesto of Race” and the promulgation of a new series of racial laws aimed against Italy’s Jews. From 1938 onward, racial anti-Semitism became a hallmark of Fascist ideology and practice.

For exponents of spiritual racism, the increasing proximity between the official Italian line and Nazi policies represented a double-edged sword. Preziosi had praised Hitler in his journal as early as 1930, and his fellow spiritual racists found much to admire in Nazism even before Hitler came to power. But they also engaged in polemical debates with Nazi versions of racist theory in the mid-1930s, and were keen to differentiate their own form of racism from German models: “the delineation of a peculiarly ‘Italian’ brand of racial thought, which conceived of race as a mostly cultural and spiritual construct, became a point of pride for fas-


4 Giovanni Preziosi, “Dieci punti fondamentali del problema ebraico,” La Vita Italiana (August 15, 1937), 210-211.


cists who wished to assert their autonomy within the Axis alliance." Their concern was to defend the "originality of Italian racism." This yielded a contradictory stance toward Nazi racism as part of an effort to define a specifically Italian racist viewpoint that could undergird the Fascist anti-Semitic campaign.

Preziosi was primarily a publicist rather than a theorist, and he depended on more systematic thinkers to elaborate the principles of spiritual racism. Foremost among these was Julius Evola (1898-1974), a celebrated author in esoteric circles today. Evola was one of Preziosi's chief collaborators in disseminating the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" and staked out a forceful and detailed anti-Semitic position long before it was officially sanctioned. He quickly became "a key figure in Fascist racism." From 1932 onward he was a chief contributor to the journal La Nobiltà della Stirpe, an early platform for spiritual racism, and he published aggressively anti-Semitic articles in a variety of venues throughout the decade. In 1936 he declared the Jews responsible for "the decadence of the modern world." He published a comprehensive analysis of "the Jewish problem" the same year, emphasizing the virtues of a spiritual form of anti-Semitism. A subsequent work explicating the tenets of racism warned against the "the international Jewish conspiracy." Writing to the Minister of Popular Culture in 1937, Evola boasted that he had been try-

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10 Julius Evola, "La guerra occulta: Ebrei i massoni alla conquista del mondo," *La Vita Italiana* (December 1936), 645-655. See also Evola, "Gli ebrei in Italia e il vero problema ebraico" *La Vita Italiana* (June 1937), 659-668.
Evola and Preziosi both worked with the “School of Fascist Mysticism” established in Milan in 1930. Dedicated to training a new generation of Fascist leaders in a heroic mythology, a sacred mission to renew civilization, the School of Fascist Mysticism emphasized “the life of the spirit” as a central focus of the new Italy. Its monthly journal, *Dottrina Fascista*, celebrated Nazism from its earliest issues. With the official turn to a racist policy in 1938, the School made “the Jewish problem” a principal concern and initiated a series of courses on racial education. In a 1939 pamphlet titled *Why We Are Antisemites*, the founder and leader of the School of Fascist Mysticism declared that “spiritual anti-Semitism is a duty of every Italian.” Jews, he explained, were the “common denominator” behind all the things that Fascism opposed: democracy, socialism, plutocracy, Bolshevism, rationalism, liberalism, individualism, atheism, internationalism, and above all materialism.¹⁴

In 1940 the School of Fascist Mysticism sponsored a contest for the best new publication on Fascist racial thought, with the goal of exploring the spiritual aspects of racism without ignoring the biological aspects. The winning volume, on the *Mysticism of Fascist Racism*, denounced the “ruinous influence of Judaism” and exhorted Italians to defend themselves against “Jewish contamination.”¹⁵ Aside from the winning title, there were more than two dozen other entries in the contest, an indication of the widening popularity of spiritual race discourse under Fascist auspices. A veritable flood of such texts appeared after 1938.

Many of these publications promoted “spiritual” forms of racism as a vague alternative to “materialist” approaches to race. One book titled *Race and Fascism* offered the bland pronouncement: “Our racism is spiritual. It is the polar opposite of materialist racism.” Another proclaimed that “the race problem is above all a spiritual problem.”¹⁶ These platitudes matched the official stance of the regime. The April 1940 “Race Exhibit” in Rome, sponsored by the Ministry of Education, announced:

> The rise of Fascism has opened a new era of greatness for the Italian people, a greatness which finds its truest expression not only in the

¹³ September 1937 letter from Evola to Dino Alfieri quoted in Dana Lloyd Thomas, *Julius Evola e la tentazione razzista* (Brindisi: Giordano, 2006), 144.
¹⁴ Niccolò Giani, *Perché siamo antisioniti* (Milan: Scuola di mistica fascista, 1939), 41, 10. The pamphlet draws on Evola’s work, cites the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” frequently, and endorses Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.
physical renewal of the race, but above all in the spiritual strengthening of the race. Under the guidance of the Duce, the race is returning to its role as the center from which a new civilization and a new social organization shine forth.\textsuperscript{17}

Similar themes appeared in missives sent to Mussolini by Fascist anti-Semites. One of them, writing in late 1938, championed “Italian spirituality” against the “degeneration caused by Jewish influence.”\textsuperscript{18} Countless articles in the Fascist press argued that biological and spiritual racism were compatible and mutually required one another.\textsuperscript{19}

The group of thinkers around Preziosi and Evola went much further than this. They argued that merely biological racism was insufficient; the spiritual component of racism was paramount, because “it is spirit that brings value to race.” The Jews, they warned, were fighting an “occult war” against all spiritual values, with “materialism” as their weapon.\textsuperscript{20} These authors frequently cited Nazi leaders like Hitler and Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) as authorities. At the same time, however, they insisted on “the necessity of an Italian racism” and objected strenuously to the suggestion that they were simply imitating their Nazi colleagues. Indeed for Evola and his associates, Nazi anti-Semitism was often too plebian and materialistic, unattuned to the all-important spiritual dimensions of the “Jewish problem.” Evola distinguished three levels of racial consciousness: body, soul, and spirit, in ascending order. The spirit took precedence over the body. This was a racism that called for both “spiritual and biological purity.”\textsuperscript{21}

There were Nazi racial theorists who shared similar views. One of the more prolific was Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss (1892-1974), whose work centered on the notion of a “racial soul.”\textsuperscript{22} Clauss saw his task as “unmasking and repelling world Jewry.” Clauss fell out of favor after 1942 due to conflicts with rival Nazi race theorists, though he continued to work with the SS.

\textsuperscript{17} ACS Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (1937-39) 14/1/8147.
\textsuperscript{18} ACS SPD / CR 480/R b. 146 f. 401.
\textsuperscript{19} For representative examples see Giuseppe Omarini, “Spirito e materiale nel razzismo,” \textit{La Nobiltà della Stirpe} (February 1939), 1-3; Pasquale Pennisi, “Appunti per la dottrina fascista della razza,” \textit{Gerarchia} (July 1942), 286-289.
\textsuperscript{20} Salvatore De Martino, \textit{Lo Spirito e la Razza} (Rome: Signorelli, 1940), 199, 88. In addition to repeated references to Evola and Preziosi, the book invokes the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” and quotes \textit{Mein Kampf} at length.
\textsuperscript{21} Stefano Cutelli, “Rivolta contro il mondo moderno,” \textit{La Nobiltà della Stirpe} (March 1934), 69-78, quote on 73.
\textsuperscript{22} Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, \textit{Rasse und Seele} (Munich: Lehmann, 1926); Clauss, \textit{Von Seele und Antlitz der Rassen und Völker} (Munich: Lehmann, 1929); Clauss, \textit{Die nordische Seele: Eine Einführung in die Rassenseelenkunde} (Munich: Lehmann, 1934). Clauss fell out of favor after 1942 due to conflicts with rival Nazi race theorists, though he continued to work with the SS.
\textsuperscript{23} Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss to Rudolf Brandt, Persönlicher \textit{Stab} Reichsführer-SS, February 18, 1944, Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereafter BA) NS19/1260, 52.
SS Office of Race and Settlement wrote to his superior explaining the crucial importance of “the search for the racial soul”:

Like Clauss, I take the view that even with the complete annihilation of the Jews in Europe, and eventually perhaps in the whole world, we will still be a long way from exterminating spiritual Jewishness, which confronts us at every turn.  

Italian proponents of spiritual racism gave their own accent to this apocalyptic vision. They cast Jews not just as racially foreign, but as “insidious, poisonous, and dangerous,” a dire threat to the “spiritual conservation of our race.” Evola and his fellows cited Clauss’s work regularly.

A variety of authors belonged to the core group of spiritual racists in Fascist Italy, many of them protégés of Preziosi or Evola. They included figures like Roberto Pavese and Piero Pellicano, who combined enthusiasm for Nazi racial measures with extravagant conspiracy theories about ominous “occult powers” and their Jewish minions. Some of them had literary and artistic pretensions, such as Ettore Martinoli (1895-1958), who published lyric poetry alongside anti-Semitic screeds, and Aniceto del Massa (1898-1975), an art critic involved in avant-garde circles in Florence. Others, like Alberto Luchini, secured pivotal positions in the Fascist racial apparatus, or published numerous articles on race in the Fascist press, like Massimo Scaligero.

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24 Ettore Martinoli, Liriche e canti (Trieste: Trani, 1940); Martinoli, “Gli impulsi storici della nuova Europa e l’azione dell’ebraismo internazionale,” La Vita Italiana (April 1943), 355-364; Aniceto del Massa, “Considerazioni sull’arte e sulla razza,” Regime Fascista (March 22, 1942), 3; Del Massa, “Premesse per una concezione spiritualista del razzismo,” in Razzismo Ebraismo (Verona: Mondadori, 1944), 47-53.
What these writers shared was an abiding interest in esoteric spirituality and its ostensible racial significance. This perspective distinguished them both from common ill-defined invocations of “spiritual” race discourse, as well as from the more narrowly biological orientation of contending schools of Fascist racial theory. Such distinctions made a difference to the vagaries of Italian policy, as Mussolini’s own racial views “frequently oscillated between biologism and spiritualism.”

In the effort to define their own profile and contrast their approach to rival factions of racist thought, spiritual racists drew significantly on two lines of transnational influence: affinities with minority currents in Nazi race theory, and the longstanding tradition of esoteric appropriation of purportedly Eastern spiritual philosophies.

Much of the material published by committed spiritual racists, particularly Evola and Scaligero, borrowed heavily from the nineteenth-century worldview of Theosophy, an esoteric movement founded by Russian noblewoman Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) in New York City in 1875. Theosophy posited a grand panorama of cosmic-spiritual evolution extending over millennia and structured along racial lines, with successively “higher” racial forms advancing while “lower” races degenerated toward extinction as “a Karmic necessity.”

Claiming inspiration from South Asian sources, Blavatsky and her followers promoted an esoteric variant of the Aryan myth, postulating an ancient racial bond joining Indians and Europeans. The Aryan race, according to Theosophical doctrine, arose on the lost continent of Atlantis and represented “the apex of physical and intellectual evolution,” in stark contrast to “the lowest races of men” such as non-European indigenous peoples. Theosophical texts pointedly juxtaposed Aryan spirituality to Jewish materialism, characterizing the Jews as an “unspiritual people” who systematically degraded sacred traditions. Judaism was “a religion of hate and malice toward everyone and everything outside of itself.”

Ideas like these found a welcome reception among Italian spiritual racists, who adopted the fundamental dichotomy between “Aryan” and...
“Semitic” peoples along with mythical tales about the racial heritage of Atlantis. Evola employed Theosophical race nomenclature, and his disciple Scaligero made especially copious use of it, giving references to Atlantis a central place in his work. Scaligero, del Massa, and Martinoli combined these themes with terminology drawn from Anthroposophy, a German offshoot of Theosophy founded by Austrian-born esoteric teacher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Martinoli, a longtime Fascist militant and co-founder of the Anthroposophical Society in Italy, touted “the perfect correspondence between Steiner’s thought and the fundamental tendencies of Fascism and National Socialism,” declaring that “Rudolf Steiner was a true ideal precursor of the new Europe of Mussolini and Hitler.” Spiritual racists also cited Dutch-German occult author Herman Wirth, who traced the Nordic race to Atlantis, along with nineteenth-century racial thinkers like Arthur de Gobineau who helped popularize the Aryan myth.

 Allegedly Eastern teachings were fashionable among Fascist race theorists. They used Sanskrit terms and described ancient India as “the oldest racist society” in the world. Evola’s philosophy incorporated substantial elements from Hinduism and Buddhism. At times India assumed a status both mystical and immediately political. In a 1941 pamphlet encouraging Indian nationalists to side with the Axis, Scaligero claimed that Jewish influence over British policy threatened “the heroic principles of the authentic Aryan tradition.” A final mythic component, essential to Italian spiritual racism, was the pedigree of ancient Rome and its imperial power, which Fascism aimed to revive in a new Mediterranean empire. For advocates of spiritual racism, the primeval “race of Rome” had again come into its own under Fascist leadership.

 Even at the outset of Mussolini’s racial campaign, spiritual racists expressed impatience with the pace of developments. What they demanded was a “totalitarian racism” that would confront the “Jewish danger” in its

33 See e.g. Massimo Scaligero, “Il mistero della razza atlantica,” Regime Fascista (November 20, 1938), 3, which features references to Atlantis, Thule, the Aryan race, the Grail, the ancient Egyptians, craniometry, the “superior and original white race” as the “divine solar race,” and so forth. On the broad resonance of Theosophical and Anthroposophical ideas in Italy see the fine overview by Marco Pasi, “Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Italy during the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” Theosophical History 16, 2 (2012), 81-119.


35 Asvero Gravelli, “La più antica società razzistica e il moderno concetto di gerarchia,” Antieuropa (March 1934), 323-334; Giulio Cogni, Il Razzismo (Milan: Bocca, 1937). Cogni translated the Bhagavad Gita and texts on Buddhism into Italian, as well as works by Nietzsche, Novalis, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain.

36 Massimo Scaligero, L’India contro l’Inghilterra (Bologna: Il Resto del Carlino, 1941), 12.
full breadth and recognize the true antithesis between the Jewish and Aryan spirit. Because race was "metabiological," more than just physical methods were required to ward off the threat of Jewish contamination.

Spiritual racism called for an all-pervasive anti-Semitism that transcended materialism and went beyond mere biology. Biological racism was a necessary starting point, but inadequate on its own; it needed to be expanded and completed by spiritual racism in order to create a genuine racial aristocracy. The spiritual dimension must be at the center of "every racial doctrine and any serious racism."

Scaligero spelled out this position at length in a 1939 book on *The Race of Rome*. In order to demonstrate that Italians were of ancient Aryan stock, the book reconstructed the prehistoric itinerary of the Nordic-Atlantean race after the fall of Atlantis. The glory of the Roman Empire and its "heroic spirit" reflected a synthesis of Nordic and Mediterranean racial groups, while the Jews represented "sub-human Ahrimanic forces." The same primordial struggle between Aryan and Jew continued two thousand years later. A spiritual conception of race was essential because a "non-Roman, non-Aryan, non-Italian" soul could be disguised within an Italian body. By re-establishing authentic values that are "anti-modern, anti-egalitarian, aristocratic," Fascism had achieved "a resurrection of the spiritual values of race." But the task was not yet complete. The only way to deal with an enemy as sinister as the Jews was to "eliminate that which can do us harm."

Because of his blending of disparate ideological elements and his extraordinary productivity as an author of racist texts, Scaligero makes a fitting case study in the concrete contours of Fascist spiritual racism. Massimo Scaligero (1906-1980) worked as a journalist for the Italian Naval League in the 1930s and began writing for the Fascist press at an early age. In 1931 he hailed Fascism as the bearer of "that luminous spirituality

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41 Scaligero, *La Razza di Roma*, 259.

42 Ibid., 173.

43 Ibid., 203.
which is the principal characteristic of superior civilizations.” He envisioned a “Fascist spirituality” in a front-page article in the newspaper *Regime Fascista* in August 1938, just as the racial campaign took off. After 1945 he inspired several neo-fascist groups and became the foremost Anthroposophist in Italy. His latter-day admirers describe him as “a contemporary Italian spiritual master who has drunk deep from Western and Eastern traditions.”

During the Fascist era, Scaligero’s racial theories unequivocally rejected the notion of any African or Semitic origins for the ancient Italian peoples and their Mediterranean culture. Building on contemporary anthropology as well as esoteric myths about Atlantis, he constructed an elaborate pseudo-history tracing Etruscans, Minoans, Phoenecians, and others across long-lost civilizations, offering a cautionary tale against the dangers of racial admixture.

In a typical 1941 article entitled “Blood and Spirit,” Scaligero characterized “our racism” as a more advanced “science” than simple biology. Mere “mechanistic rationalism” was incapable of comprehending either “the mystery of blood” or the “spirit of race.” What was needed instead was a “science of the spirit” to reveal the inexorable bond between spiritual and bodily purity: “racial consciousness can only be achieved through conscious communion with the blood.” The Aryan race, he insisted, depended on “the absolute absence of Semitic contamination.” He preached a “racist ethic” as “the only force that can oppose the enormous decadence of modern civilization, presaged in ancient traditions which speak of one unique race, of the ‘masters of destiny’ who alone will survive the end of this cycle.”

Jews, for Scaligero, were the very embodiment of spiritual decadence. They never created any values of their own: “Every metaphysical and cultural expression of the Hebrews is the result of usurpation.” The only

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thing the Jews have to show for themselves is “Semitic barbarism.”51 The presence of “Jewish characteristics,” even only to a “faint degree,” threatened the “spiritual unity” of the Italian race. But with the proper methods, “the Jew can be easily recognized and eliminated.”52 Toward this end, he called for “an authentic science of racism” that would go well beyond existing measures: “eugenics alone is not sufficient for a totalitarian racist praxis.”53

As a major theorist of spiritual racism in Fascist form, Scaligero contributed a series of comprehensive treatments of the subject to Preziosi’s journal in 1941 and 1942, arguing for an integration of biological and spiritual racism. In the midst of rancorous conflict between competing racist factions, Scaligero maintained that there was no real opposition between the two viewpoints. Only the “obsolete dualism of spirit versus matter,” which was “a fundamental characteristic of the Jewish race,” could hinder the reconciliation between biological and spiritual components of Fascist racial policy into a “complete racist synthesis.”54 Rather than a piecemeal approach, Scaligero proposed an “integral racism” bringing together political, eugenic, and cosmic factors. He presented this task not simply as a biological necessity but as a noble “spiritual mission.”55 For Scaligero as for other spiritual racists, the goal of this total racism was nothing less than “the elimination of the Jewish virus.”56

The language of spiritual racism grew more strident as the war went on. According to Preziosi and his companions, “Jewry wanted this war.”57 The Allied countries were “completely Judaized,” and the war was a “vendetta” by “international Jewry” against Germany and Italy, who were defending themselves against the “Jewish-Masonic-capitalist plot.”58 The eternal adversary of the “race of Rome” was the “race of Israel.” Nazi

52 Massimo Scaligero, “La decadenza spirituale del giudaismo,” Regime Fascista (September 18, 1938), 5; Scaligero, “La razza italiana e la guerra,” La Difesa della Razza (May 5, 1941), 16-19.
53 Massimo Scaligero, “Coscienza del sangue,” La Difesa della Razza (August 20, 1942), 4-6, quotes on 4.
54 Massimo Scaligero, “Razzismo spirituale e razzismo biologico,” La Vita Italiana (July 1941), 36-41, quotes on 36-37. The article cites both Evola and Steiner.
55 Massimo Scaligero, “Per un razzismo integrale,” La Vita Italiana (May 1942), 428-434, quote on 431. See also Scaligero, “Limiti alla comprensione del problema razzista,” La Vita Italiana (September 1941), 255-263.
56 Massimo Scaligero, “Verso un supernazionalismo razziale,” La Difesa della Razza (July 20, 1941), 6-9, quote on 8.
57 Giovanni Preziosi, “Il giudaismo ha voluto questa guerra,” in Gli ebrei hanno voluto la Guerra, ed. Luchini, 35-45; Scaligero and Evola also contributed chapters to the pamphlet. See also Giovanni Preziosi, Come il giudaismo ha preparato la guerra (Rome: Tumminelli, 1940).
58 Giulio de’ Rossi dell’Arno, L’ebraismo contro l’Europa (Rome: Maglione, 1940), quotes on 34, 70, 130.
Germany and Fascist Italy were waging "a war against plutocracy, a war against Jewry, a war against Bolshevism," and the only way to win this war was through "a definitive eliminatory counter-attack." As late as July 1944, spiritual racists were still acclimating Nazi and Fascist military forces, flatly rejecting "enemy propaganda" about "concentration camps." The Axis powers represented "a new race of the spirit," and their triumph was assured "under the sign of the Fasces and the Swastika." Depicting the war in apocalyptic terms, Scaligero declared that "the victory of the totalitarian principle of Fascism and National Socialism through force of arms reveals to the world something that goes beyond the meaning of immediate events." It was a matter of destiny: "The collapse of the old Europe in a crash of iron and fire" would bring "the advent of a Romano-Germanic spirituality that can truly restore to mankind the vision of the sacred and the eternal."

Spiritual racism was not mere rhetoric. The group around Preziosi and Evola established important institutional footholds from which to broadcast their doctrines, and several of these had notable influence at least for a time. For roughly a year, during the crucial period of 1941/42, esoteric spiritual racism was the predominant tendency within the Fascist camp. In May 1941 Luchini was named head of the "Race Office" in the Ministry of Popular Culture. This appointment provided a critical opening for the spiritual racist current. By mid-1941, Mussolini himself "became a convert to Julius Evola's spiritual Nordicism." The Duce had read Evola's recent tome on racial doctrine and embraced it as the proper course for Fascist policy. Sensing an opportunity, Evola pressed for a more coordinated racist campaign, while Preziosi called for a definitive "solution to the Jewish problem."

One of Luchini's responsibilities at the Race Office was overseeing the network of newly established "Centers for the Study of the Jewish

60 Aniceto del Massa, "Rinasce un esercito," L'Ora (July 30, 1944), 4-7.
62 See the 1931-1943 materials on Luchini in ACS SPD/CO b. 2411 f. 551694.
63 Gillette, Racial Theories in Fascist Italy, 146. See Julius Evola, Sintesi di dottrina della razza (Milan: Hoepli, 1941), and its German translation: Evola, Grundrisse der fachistischen Rassenlehre (Berlin: Runge, 1943), as well as Evola, Indirizzi per una educazione razziale (Naples: Conte, 1941); Evola, "La razza come problema spirituale," Regime Fascista (October 25, 1938), 5; Evola, "Andare avanti sul fronte razzista," La Difesa della Razza (February 20, 1941), 18-20; Evola, "Sul problema della 'razza dello spirito',' La Vita Italiana (February 1942), 153-159.
64 Julius Evola, "Per un 'Ufficio Razza' del Partito," La Vita Italiana (March 1942), 279-284; Giovanni Preziosi, "Per la soluzione del problema ebraico," La Vita Italiana (September 1942), 221-224.
Problem" in cities across Italy. The bulletin of the Centers, *Il problema ebraico*, was published monthly from April 1942 to June 1943. Its editor was Aniceto del Massa, who used its pages to full effect, urging Fascists to "eliminate the Jewish spirit." The "struggle against Jewry," he decreed, must aim for "the unrelenting destruction of the enemy." Ettore Martinoli assisted Luchini and del Massa as head of the Center for the Study of the Jewish Problem in the city of Trieste, where he worked closely with the German consul and the SS delegation. Martinoli, a native of Trieste, portrayed the city as a stronghold of the "international Jewish conspiracy" and its "age-old plan for global conquest and domination." His collaboration with the Nazis bore fruit in late 1943, when German forces occupied northern Italy. Trieste was one of the first cities to be declared "free of Jews."

Italian spiritual racists sought cooperation with their German counterparts all along. This was not an easy task in light of skeptical Nazi attitudes toward Fascist racism. Moreover, prominent Nazi racial thinkers like Alfred Rosenberg and Hans Günther "harbored pronounced antipathies against the Italians." This animosity led to the failure of several projected ventures, such as a planned German translation of Preziosi's book *How Jewry arranged the War* in 1940, abandoned due to opposition...
from Rosenberg. They were published in German, and he gave speaking tours in Nazi Germany, often enjoying a warm reception. Luchini took part in anti-Semitic congresses in Germany in 1937 and 1938, while Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss embarked on an Italian tour in spring 1941, speaking on race in Rome, Florence, and Turin. Preziosi and Evola found a promising ally in Nazi ideologue Johann von Leers (1902-1965), a fervent anti-Semite with spiritual inclinations. Leers served as an “apologist for the Holocaust.” He promoted Preziosi's works in Germany, lauding the Fascist writer in September 1943 as the most reliable Italian proponent of a “radical anti-Jewish standpoint.”

From the perspective of Fascist-Nazi partnership, spiritual racism offered several advantages. One of its important functions was to conjoin “Aryan” and “Roman” racial discourses; this was the thrust of much of Scaligero’s work, for example. It combined an “Aryan race” and an “Italian race” or a “Roman race” into one suitable concept. This also allowed spiritual racists to get around the irksome problem that the biological makeup of the Italian population was obviously mixed. By attending to the presumed characteristics of its soul and spirit, a coherent profile of the Italian race could be established. In del Massa’s words, this made it possible to “form a precise racial typology, one that is unmistakably Italian, with an Aryan-Roman character.” Nazi racial thinkers were not always convinced by such claims.

Due in part to tensions like these, Evola’s central initiative for larger scale co-operation between Italian and German racial theorists did not come to fruition. In September 1941 Mussolini authorized Evola to establish a bilingual German-Italian journal to be titled Blood and Spirit. The plans were ambitious. They hoped to publish monthly at 40 pages an issue, with financial support from the Fascist party, while German sponsoring organizations were supposed to purchase 7,000 copies of each issue. The School of Mystical Fascism would host regular joint meetings of the Italian and German staff. Evola was to edit the Italian segment, and he pro-

72 Andrea Hoffend, Zwischen Kultur-Achse und Kulturrampf: Die Beziehungen zwischen “Drittem Reich” und faschistischem Italien in den Bereichen Medien, Kunst, Wissenschaft und Rassenfragen (Frankfurt: Lang, 1998), 379-380; the translation was to appear in the official Schriftenreihe der NSDAP.
73 Hoffend, Zwischen Kultur-Achse und Kulturrampf, 398-399, 382.
74 Marco Sennholz, Johann von Leers: Ein Propagandist des Nationalsozialismus (Berlin: Be.bra, 2013), 265.
75 Sennholz, Johann von Leers, 272. See also Bartikowski, Der italienische Antisemitismus im Urteil des Nationalsozialismus, 146-149.
76 Del Massa, “Premesse per una concezione spiritualista del razzismo,” 53.
posed Leers as his German co-editor. Leers did not have the support of several of the Nazi agencies involved in the project, who could not agree on an editor. Ideological differences played a role as well. Alfred Baumeier, a high official on Rosenberg’s staff, expressed fundamental reservations about Evola’s theories. But the head of the Nazi party’s Office for Racial Policy endorsed the planned journal despite these concerns.

As Evola presented it, “protection of biological purity” was a basic premise for the project, combined with the recognition that an exclusively biological approach was too limited. Even those with “Aryan” physical traits might be Jewish on the inside. This must be averted at all costs: “The influence of Jewry on every other race is always corrosive and polluting.” That is what mandated the essential importance of both blood and spirit. Designated collaborators on the proposed journal included Preziosi, Luchini, Pavese, del Massa, and Scaligero, leading spokesmen for spiritual racism. By May 1942, however, the project had been abandoned. German diplomatic sources reported that a tactical alliance between Catholic conservatives and strictly biological racists blocked the journal’s appearance. Fascists who disapproved of spiritual racism and its esoteric orientation complained to Mussolini that “occultists” were discrediting the racial cause. Thus the joint German-Italian undertaking remained unfulfilled, and Blood and Spirit was never published. The setback, though significant, was temporary.

In July 1943 Mussolini was deposed, and six weeks later the interim regime which replaced him signed an armistice with the Allies. German troops then occupied the northern half of Italy and established a new hardline Fascist state with Mussolini as its nominal head. This diminished regime was called the Italian Social Republic or RSI, also known as the Republic of Salò. While others switched sides, the spiritual racists continued their allegiance to Fascism in its reduced and radicalized form.

80 “Italienische Stellungnahme zur Rassenfrage für die deutsch-italienische Zeitschrift ‘Blut und Geist,’” PA R99164, 71-80.
81 “Richtlinien für die italienischen Mitarbeiter der zu gründenden deutsch-italienischen Zeitschrift ‘Blut und Geist,’” PA R99164, 70.
porting the RSI until its final destruction in 1945. This period has sometimes proven difficult to comprehend for scholars and the public alike. Much of the previous literature on the subject “hardly left room for the existence of any Italian who wholeheartedly co-operated with the Nazi occupiers in the persecution of Jews.” Among those who cooperated most eagerly were the spiritual racists. In March 1944 the RSI created a “General Inspectorate for Race,” with Preziosi appointed to lead it. Martinoli was named Chief of the Division of Press and Propaganda.

Under the leadership of Preziosi and Martinoli, the “Centers for the Study of the Jewish Problem” were re-named the “Centers for Race,” with a mandate to save Italy by “preserving the race from contamination.” It seemed as if Evola and his circle had finally achieved their aim of “providing a truly Aryan and Roman direction for racism.” In Martinoli’s formulation: “The defense of the race aims to immunize the people against biological pollution of their blood” through “cross-breeding with Jews.” This required “separation of people of Aryan race from non-Aryan racial elements.” Preziosi expressed their mission in starker terms, demanding nothing less than “the total elimination of the Jews.”

This uncompromising stance met with approval from their German partners. Martinoli’s Nazi liaison praised him as a “zealous anti-Semite” who had contributed substantially to the “struggle against Jewry.” The German consul in Trieste extolled Martinoli’s efforts in pushing Fascist authorities to impose “harsher controls over the Jews.”

85 “Elenco dei funzionari e del personale dell’Ispettorato Generale per la Razzà,” August 13, 1944, ACS RSI PCM b. 4 f. 3096. For an incisive analysis see La Repubblica sociale italiana a Desenzano: Giovanni Preziosi e l’Ispettorato generale per la razzà, ed. Michele Sarfatti (Florence: Giuntina, 2008). Other spiritual racists, such as Roberto Pavese, also worked for the General Inspectorate for Race.
86 Ispettorato Generale per la Razzà, Centri Italiani per la Razzà: Ordinamento delle attività (Bergamo: Cattaneo, 1944), 4. Martinoli was the principal author of this text, a handbook for the “Centers for Race.”
88 Centri Italiani per la Razzà, 7, 10. This separation would allow Fascism to “rebuild the values of the Italian race, values which are not just biological but above all spiritual.”
Fascist regime’s sanctions against the Jews.” 92 For the German foreign ministry, the rise in influence of Evola and Preziosi, “the Italian pioneers of racial thinking and of the anti-Jewish movement,” represented an opportunity to urge their Fascist ally toward “a more active policy against Jews.” 93

Both before and after the onset of the German occupation, what spiritual racists highlighted above all was the threat of covert Jewish machinations, of a “Jewish spirit” masked by a familiar Italian exterior. This threat came in several forms. One was the prevalence of mixed marriages and their “mixed race” offspring, a particular preoccupation for the Centers for Study of the Jewish Problem. Another was the constant possibility that individuals who were physically “Aryan” could nonetheless be pawns of the Jews. By “acting as instruments of Jewry,” in Scaligero’s words, they were “spiritual enemies of the Aryan ideal.” 94 Then there was the ever-present danger of subversion from within, through Jewish-Masonic operatives lurking in Fascist ranks. Martinoli submitted alarmed reports alerting the Fascist leadership to the “group of Jews, plutocrats, and spies” inside the party apparatus, part of the “internal front” of Jewish influence within the Fascist camp itself. 95

According to Martinoli and Preziosi, the highest levels of the Fascist party had been infiltrated by “agents carrying out Judeo-Masonic orders.” 96 During the German occupation, Martinoli warned that even those closest to Mussolini were secretly in league with the Jewish conspiracy. Despite the race laws, Jews were still able to “maintain their dominance in finance, industry, and politics.” 97 The obsession with internal threats, either through racial mixture or imagined Jewish plots within the organs of the Fascist regime, was a signature theme of Italian spiritual racism.

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94 Massimo Scaligero, “Fronte unico ario,” La Difesa della Razza (February 20, 1941), 21-24, quote on 23.
95 “Propaganda nemica – ebraismo – fronte interno,” November 1942 report from the Trieste Center for the Study of the Jewish Problem, ACS RSI SPD/CR b. 24 f. 166, 268-81. At times the apprehensions about supposed Jewish spies and about individuals of “mixed race” converged; see e.g. the six-page December 1942 document from the Trieste Center titled “Possibilità di spionaggio per l’ebraismo in Italia” (forwarded by the German Consul under the heading “Der verhängnisvolle Einfluss jüdischer Mischlinge”), PA Rom-Quirinal Geheimakten, vol. 124: E257766, which begins: “Esiste in Italia con ramificazioni all’estero una vastissima e fittissima rete di collegamenti ebraici estesa a tutti i rami dell’attività nazionale.” The document denounces “metici” or those of “mixed race” as “la testa di ponte dell’ebraismo” in Italy.
96 “Posizione odierna dell’elemento ebraico a Trieste” PA Rom-Quirinal Geheimakten, vol. 124: E257704.
These menacing forces represented, at bottom, a threat to the purity of the lofty Fascist mission to revitalize civilization and instill true spiritual ideals.

Fanatical anti-Semitism was central to the worldview of spiritual racism. But it was merely the core of a much more grandiose aspiration. The true objective was to defeat “decadence and mediocrity” and bring a halt to “the degradation of Western civilization.” It was the task of Fascism to combat “every form of decadence in the modern world.” Indeed modernity itself must finally be overturned. In a striking passage published in Preziosi’s journal just as the war began, Scaligero wrote:

In all of this, anti-Semitism represents only a single chapter. Once it has been liquidated through the elimination of the Judaic virus and the biological re-integration of Aryan ethnic values, the campaign will assume much broader proportions in which even greater forces will be at stake. Then we will have achieved the conditions for engaging in a decisive battle against the profane, egalitarian, leveling, and anti-spiritual powers, against the promiscuity of values, against satanic materialism, against the abuses of bourgeois modernity, against the hedonistic and orgiastic modern world.

The elimination of the Jews, from this point of view, was a necessary step toward liberating the world from the clutches of modern life and its deformation of spiritual ideals.

The neglected history of spiritual racism in Fascist Italy reveals several significant transnational dimensions and underscores the global reach of anti-Semitic thought in the first half of the twentieth century. The most obvious instance is the cooperation between Italian and German racial theorists, which sometimes took a decidedly practical form. Evola’s collaboration with the SS is the best-known example, but his admiration for Nazi elitism was shared by other spiritual racists enamored of the swastika as an ancient solar symbol. In some cases Nazi officials particularly appreciated Italian spiritual racism as a contribution to Aryan

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98 Giulio Evola, “Sulle origini remote della crisi italiana ed europea,” Dottrina Fascista (January 1941), 9-17, quote on 11. Evola identifies “the Semitic component” as the primary carrier of this decadence and degradation. See also Evola, “Sulla genesi dell’ebraismo come forza distruttrice,” La Vita Italiana (July 1941), 25-35.


100 Massimo Scaligero, “Compito eroico dello spirito nell’azione razzista,” La Vita Italiana (September 1939), 327-333, quote on 327. According to Scaligero, this demonstrates “the universal validity of the racist idea.” For a full-fledged version of the anti-modern argument see Julius Evola, Rivolta contro il mondo moderno (Milan: Hoepli, 1934), and Evola, Erhebung wider die moderne Welt (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1935).

principles. Orientalist Walther Wüst, president of the SS Ahnenerbe, gave his approval: "Evola's more spiritual and less biological racism came across to Wüst as useful in supporting his endeavor of anchoring the doctrines of the SS in the history of the Aryan tradition." There was even an esoteric current within the Italian legion of the Waffen-SS, represented by figures such as Pio Filippani Ronconi and Carlo Federico degli Oddi, with an emphasis on Anthroposophical precepts. As a mixture of Christian, pagan, and esoteric motifs, spiritual racism offered considerable common ground for cross-border alliances.

Perhaps more telling than the moments of German-Italian cooperation were the recurrent references to Eastern teachings. This facet of Fascist spiritual racism, derived in part from its Theosophical predecessors, involved a high degree of imagined continuity based on distorted perceptions of supposedly ancient Eastern creeds. It reflected a powerful tendency in Western esoteric thought toward casual appropriation of Indian themes detached from their contexts. This process frequently depended not on scrupulous study of Asian sources but on a "romanticizing of the exotic other." Whether appealing to India, Egypt, Persia, or some other locale in these enduring Western images of the mystical East, Italian spiritual racists unwittingly continued "the nineteenth-century confluence of Orientalism and occultism" by cultivating cherished notions of a perennial wisdom "hidden in the imagined landscapes of the Orient." Such


103 For a problematic but informative treatment of this evidence see Nicola Guerra, "Il volontari italiani nelle Waffen-SS: Il pensiero politico, la formazione culturale e le motivazioni al volontariato" (Doctoral thesis, University of Turku, 2012), 86-90, 150-161; for an unabashedly nostalgic autobiographical account see Pio Filippani Ronconi, "La 29a Divisione Granatieri SS, Volontari" (October 2005), 44-53. For context cf. Ricciotti Lazzeri, Le SS italiane (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982). Preziosi authored the lead article in the inaugural issue of Avanguardia, the publication of the Italian SS legion: G. Preziosi, "Perché?" Avanguardia (March 18, 1944), 1-2.


constructs played a constitutive part in Italian versions of the Aryan myth, as well as in influential forms of Nazi racial theory.  

In this and other respects, Italian intellectuals promoting spiritual racism were not unique, as arcane as their ideas may seem. Denunciations of “Jewish-Masonic plutocracy” also featured occasionally in Catholic discourse during the Fascist era, and many others beyond Italy traded on fears of a “Jewish spirit.” Nor were their disquisitions confined to the pages of seldom read periodicals, removed from the vox populi. Recent research drawing on police reports and private letters from 1940 to 1942 reveals a range of myths among ordinary Italians about a “plutocratic Judeo-Masonic conspiracy against the Axis countries.” As late as the summer of 1944, with the war closing in, the spiritual racism promoted by Preziosi and Evola had a noticeable impact on cadets at the RSI police academy. In essays written for a required course on race, these young Fascists in training pondered Masonic-Jewish plots and the “occult forces” behind the baleful Jewish peril. Findings like these are a sobering reminder not to underestimate the role of intellectuals in shaping public opinion and policy, an especially acute consideration in the history of anti-Semitism. They also indicate why it is important to understand spiritual racism not merely as an abstruse ideology but as a dynamic force in catalyzing increasingly severe measures against the wholly illusory Jewish threat.

For all their esoteric eccentricity, the principles espoused by the group around Evola and Preziosi carried deadly implications. To be sure, the claims of the spiritual racist were often sheer fantasy; aside from farfetched anxieties about a Masonic conspiracy, the notion of a grave danger emanating from Italy’s Jews – a community of 40,000 in a country of 40


million — betrays the paranoid basis of anti-Semitic beliefs. It is nonetheless imperative to look at these beliefs closely, examine their ideas thoroughly, and read their texts carefully. Though it is tempting to dismiss them as too crude to merit intensive scrutiny, too obscure to reward close reading, merely the inconsequential fulminations of third-rate thinkers, this response fundamentally misunderstands the historical significance of spiritual racism. Its ideological profusions were undoubtedly figments of the fertile anti-Semitic imagination, but they were not therefore negligible. Influential previous interpretations have badly underestimated the phenomenon, downplaying or denying its intransient and violent character. Taking spiritual racism seriously means confronting its core tenets, no matter how absurd or repellant they may be. The impact of these ideas was profound. Preziosi, Evola, Scaligero, Martinoli, del Massa and Luchini set the stage for the annihilation of thousands of Italian Jews. Like other Fascists, they “helped to create the conditions in which the Holocaust became possible.”

Near the end of his life, Primo Levi (1919-1987) reflected that the enormity of the Holocaust was made possible by the convergence of multiple causes, “each of them indispensable but insufficient if taken singly.” The spiritual form of anti-Semitism that arose in Fascist Italy was just one component in this complex and painful history. Since international scholarship has yet to catch up with innovative Italian research and re-interpretation, obsolete frameworks continue to operate when the Holocaust in Italy is discussed in non-Italian contexts. Just as important is the relevance of Fascist spiritual racism for the study of anti-Semitism in transnational contexts. This “totalitarian racism,” predicated on the absolute eradication of Jewishness, can be seen as the culmination of tendencies built into European anti-Semitism since the nineteenth century, even as it borrowed freely from Asian traditions and proudly

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displayed its Eastern inspiration. Spiritual racism was an emblematic instance of cross-over between East and West, between spirituality and science, between the sacred and the profane, between the elevated realm of ideas and their tragic implementation. Its bitter history is testimony to the role of intellectuals in cultivating anti-Semitic convictions and their fatal consequences.