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The Racism of *Romanità*: Mobilizing the Idea of Rome for the Fascists' Anti-Semitic Campaign

Rhiannon Evangelista

In September 1995 Rome's mayor, Francesco Rutelli, proposed naming a street after Giuseppe Bottai, a high-ranking Fascist in Benito Mussolini's interwar dictatorship who served as mayor of the city from 1935 to 1936. Rutelli, member of the Green Party and a former communist, justified his decision to honor Bottai by saying: "Roma, in questo secolo che sta finendo, deve riconoscere che anche qualcuno che ha avuto responsabilità nel fascismo ha realizzato qualcosa di rilevante per la città. Senza assolverlo per quello che ha fatto, Roma riconosce questa parte di storia che gli appartiene" (Rome, in this century that is ending, must recognize that even someone who had responsibility in Fascism accomplished something of importance for the city. Without absolving him for what he has done, Rome recognizes this part of history to which he belonged).[1] While mayor of Rome, Bottai oversaw the reclamation of many ancient sites, which changed the physical landscape of the city to foreground its Roman past. He also began the planning for the Universal Exposition of Rome, set for 1942 (but never realized due to the Second World War), which created the EUR district of the city. The "part of history to which he belonged," however, was one of the darkest in Italy's history and Bottai was a full participant in Mussolini's rise to power and twenty-year dictatorship. Just two years after his tenure as mayor, Bottai, as Minister of National Education, began removing Jewish professors, teachers, and students from Italy's universities and schools. This was the most significant Fascist persecution of Italy's Jewish citizens to date and foreshadowed the Italian state's role in the Shoah during the Second World War. Moreover, Bottai was a committed Fascist who had taken part in Mussolini's violent seizure of power in the early 1920s and served the Fascist dictatorship at its highest levels. Which part of this past was Rutelli hoping Rome would recognize by naming a street after Bottai?

Rutelli's proposal roused opposition from both Rome's Jewish community and leftist groups, so he abandoned the plan, but the relationship between Rome, Bottai, and the persecution of Jews was closer than Rutelli, or his critics, realized. Bottai, an intellectual and lifelong resident of Rome, was committed not only to the city but to the idea of Rome as a set of civic values that embodied the best of Italian history. In 1938, Bottai used Rome—its history, past glory, imperial conquests, and present remaking under Fascism—to justify implementing anti-Semitic measures in the school system. Honoring Bottai's contribution to the city with a street in his name would have required suppressing the memory of his anti-Jewish and pro-dictatorship actions.

Using Bottai's articles in his cultural and political journal *Critica Fascista*, his diary entries from 1938, and official government documents, this article traces the development of Bottai's anti-Semitic actions and their connection to the Eternal City. It explains how Bottai, the Fascist anti-Jewish campaign, and Rome (as a symbol of civic values) connected in the late 1930s to further Mussolini's agenda and increase Bottai's influence. It shows how Bottai's 1938 defense of the "Roman" nature of Fascist anti-Semitism in the pages of *Critica Fascista* provided an ideological justification for the persecution of Italy's Jews that had the potential to garner support from sectors

[1] Alessandra Longo, "Roma avrà Largo Bottai, Rutelli nella bufera," *La Repubblica*, September 13, 1995, https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1995/09/13/roma-avra-largo-bottai-rutelli-nella-bufera.html. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

of the educated elite. And it reveals how Bottai's implementation of anti-Jewish policies furthered his own agenda as Minister of National Education. Bottai's anti-Semitism was central to his politics in the late 1930s, and therefore cannot be separated from his legacy or the way in which the city of Rome might remember him today.

Bottai, Fascist Anti-Semitism, and Rome

Giuseppe Bottai was one of the most famous Fascists in the top ranks of Mussolini's regime and has received steady scholarly attention. In 1920, he helped found the Roman branch of the Fascist movement and he engaged in anti-socialist violence during the early years of the movement.[2] He was a commander of Fascist squads during the March on Rome, taking the initiative to attack inhabitants of the San Lorenzo working-class neighborhood on October 28, 1922.[3] He was a member of Parliament for the National Fascist Party and rose to become a key figure in Mussolini's cabinet, serving first as Minister of Corporations (1929–32, a kind of labor minister) and then as Minister of National Education (1936–43). While a high-ranking Fascist, he had close connections to Italy's artistic and intellectual worlds. Bottai founded *Critica Fascista* in 1923, a Fascist periodical for political and cultural criticism, which ran until the fall of the regime in 1943, and he maintained a large clientele of young artists and intellectuals who he hoped would form the Fascist ruling class of the future.[4]

Because of his associations with the intellectual world and the small space for criticism he created with his journals, scholars in the 1960s and 1970s portrayed him as an internal critic of the regime, a revolutionary who wanted to use Fascism to bring substantive change to Italian society. Historians like Giordano Bruno Guerri and Alexander DeGrand used Bottai's example to counter the prevailing tendency to dismiss Fascism as a vacuous, reactionary movement whose top adherents were Mussolini's yes-men.[5] Bottai's reputation among historians has benefitted from the fact that *in comparison with other Fascists* (like Roberto Farinacci, Achille Starace, Ettore Muti, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, etc.), Bottai appeared to be a moderate and intellectual, a Fascist whom liberal democracy's supporters could at least tolerate, if not admire.

At the turn of the third millennium, a new generation of scholars reconsidered Bottai's role within the cultural world of interwar Italy. No longer needing to prove the existence of an intellectual branch of Fascism and more concerned with analyzing the relationship between politics and culture during the Mussolini years, these scholars viewed the creation of a new Fascist ruling class as the fundamental idea at the heart of Bottai's politics. Historians like Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Marla Stone, and Mirella Serri emphasized not the room for literary and artistic pursuit within the regime, but the integration of the state apparatus and the cultural world.[6] Within this

[2] Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Giuseppe Bottai, fascista* (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 19–20.

[3] For more on this episode see John Foot, *Blood and Power: The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 126.

[4] For more on Bottai's role in the cultural world see Marla Stone, *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 44–45; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 34, 98.

[5] Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Giuseppe Bottai, un fascista critico: ideologia e azione del gerarca che avrebbe voluto portare l'intelligenza nel fascismo e il fascismo alla liberalizzazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976); Alexander J. De Grand, *Bottai e la cultura fascista* (Rome: Laterza, 1978). Guerri's biography was later republished as Guerri, *Giuseppe Bottai, fascista* (Milan: Mondadori, 1996).

[6] Stone, *The Patron State*; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*; Mirella Serri, *I redenti: gli intellettuali che vissero due volte, 1938–1948* (Milan: Corbaccio, 2005).

framework, the reassessment of Bottai's career produced a more balanced interpretation. Scholars like Ben-Ghiat concluded that "the dictatorship's policies toward young intellectuals lend truth to Michel Foucault's observation that power often works not by repressing dissent but by organizing and channeling it, creating an opposition that in some way serves the interest of the hegemonic power."[7] Thus the scholars of the new millennium understood Bottai's critique as benefitting Mussolini's authority and the longevity of the regime as much as it might have challenged it.

According to Monica Galfré, another specialist of this generation, the previous tendency to emphasize Bottai's commitment to openness and to the intellectual world has serious consequences:

> porre l'accento sull'intellettuale puro, sul Bottai animatore di iniziative culturali aperte anche agli antifascisti e al frondismo giovanile, trascurando la sua personale responsabilità nella persecuzione degli ebrei, rischia di isolare le sue sorti da un regime che fu un coacervo di tendenze…contraddittorie e di cui egli condivise tutte le scelte fino al 1943.
>
> putting the emphasis on the intellectual only, on Bottai promoter of cultural initiatives open to even antifascists and youthful rebellion, obscures his personal responsibility in the persecution of the Jews, running the risk of isolating his fortunes from [those of] a regime that was an accumulation of contradictory… tendencies and with which he shared all of the choices that it made until 1943.[8]

Thus portraying Bottai as an internal critic of the regime has had the effect of minimizing his responsibility for both the direction of the regime and his role in it. No subject better reveals this fact than Bottai's participation in Fascist anti-Semitism.

Before 1938, Mussolini's Fascist regime had implemented policies that negatively affected Jews living in Italy, both citizens and foreigners, with attempts to make distinctions between Jews and non-Jews becoming more pronounced after 1936. By that point, Mussolini and other top Fascists had designated racism as the engine for renewing the Italian people, hoping it would turn them into the new Fascist men and women of the future. Anti-Jewish action became an integral part of this strategy. In 1938, Mussolini embraced a biological definition of race and used it to shape the government's official pronouncements and policies.[9] Heredity would define "Jewishness" in government measures rather than religious affiliation or adherence to cultural traditions.[10]

This biologically racist direction became clear in the summer of 1938 with the publication of the July 14 "Manifesto della razza" (Manifesto of Race), signed by ten of Italy's leading scientists

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[7] Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 98.

[8] Monica Galfré, *Giuseppe Bottai: un intellettuale fascista* (Florence: Giunti, 2000), 5.

[9] For more on Mussolini's biological understanding of race and the development of his racist ideas and actions throughout 1938, see Michele Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei: cronaca dell'elaborazione delle leggi del 1938*, rev. ed. (Turin: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 2017).

[10] For more on Fascist anti-Semitism in general and the importance of 1938 in particular see Michele Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista: vicende, identità, persecuzione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000). This text was published in English as Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). See also Giorgio Fabre, *Il Gran Consiglio contro gli ebrei. 6–7 ottobre 1938: Mussolini, Balbo e il regime* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023).

and social scientists. Reflecting Mussolini's own ideas,[11] it affirmed the Italians as "Aryans" and distinguished them from Asians, Africans, and Jews. It provided the ideological framework for a series of discriminatory laws that followed, collectively known at the time as the "Leggi razziali" (Racial Laws). In Italy's colonies, these laws institutionalized the legal inferiority of subject peoples. In the Italian homeland, the Racial Laws affected Italy's Jewish population by introducing restrictions, such as banning Jews from working in the civil service, the military, or school system as well as many private-sector professions. Instead of shaping Jewish citizens into new Fascist men and women, the government defined ideal Italians in opposition to Jews, wishing to remove the latter from the nation.

While many in Fascist Italy's intellectual world embraced biological understandings of race as important for forming a unified Fascist nation, others did not. Some viewed race primarily as a cultural or spiritual category, influenced by the environment.[12] Still others understood belonging to the national community outside of the concept of race altogether. The Racial Laws' emphasis on biological concepts of race and the pseudo-scientific traditions that went with it seemed more German than Italian to many nationalists, particularly given the anti-Semitic actions of the Nazi regime in the mid-1930s. Not everyone in Italy's intellectual community held that biology determined the essence of "Italianness."

A popular alternative for conceptualizing Italy's national community was the idea of *romanità*, that is "romanness,"conceived as a set of spiritual and civic values that had been passed down from the first Rome, that of the Roman Empire, the Second Rome, the Rome of the popes and the Catholic Church, and the Third Rome, the Rome of a unified modern Italy. Starting in the nineteenth century, voices of Italian conservatism expressed ideas about the "romanness" of modern Italian civilization and the state, particularly to justify Italian imperial pursuits around the Mediterranean. The Fascist regime took up this tradition of *romanità*, hoping to garner support from the intellectual class. In his famous speech "Past and Future" from April 1922 (six months before the March on Rome) Mussolini proclaimed "Roma è il nostro punto di partenza e di riferimento; è il nostro simbolo, o se si vuole, il nostro Mito. Noi sogniamo l'Italia romana, cioè saggia e forte, disciplinata e imperiale. Molto di quel che fu lo spirito immortale di Roma risorge nel Fascismo: romano è il Littorio, romana è la nostra organizzazione di combattimento, romano è il nostro orgoglio e il nostro coraggio: «Civis romanus sum»" (Rome is our point of departure and reference; it is our symbol or, if you wish, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, that is wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of what was the immortal spirit of Rome is renewed in Fascism: Roman is the Lictor, Roman is our combat organization, Roman is our pride and courage: *Civis romanus sum*).[13] The Fascists aimed to create a Roman future for Italy by re-establishing the Roman Empire, instilling values like "order, discipline, harmony, hierarchy," and by (re)constructing monumental architecture (new and ancient) in the capital.[14] The regime's representatives worked closely with scholars from the Istituto di Studi Romani (the Institute of

[11] Sarfatti, *Mussolini contro gli ebrei*, 30–31.

[12] Patrick Bernhard, "The Great Divide? Notions of Racism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: New Answers to an Old Problem," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 2019): 104. For more on the science of race, populations, and immigrants in Italy during the 1930s, see Francesco Cassata, "In the Shadow of Franz Boas: The Italian Committee for the Study of Population Problems and the Physical Assimilation of Immigrants (1938–1955)," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 2019): 79–96.

[13] Quoted in Jan Nelis, "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of 'Romanità,'" *The Classical World* 100, no. 4 (July 2007): 403. Nelis's translation.

[14] Quote from Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 35.

Roman Studies), the main exponents of *romanità*, to implement their Roman urban planning projects and their reclamation of ancient imperial sites.[15]

The advent of the Racial Laws, and the closer alliance with Nazi Germany that accompanied them, signaled to many intellectuals that the idea of *romanità* was being superseded.[16] This troubled Bottai. He was the Fascist politician most associated with Rome, the concept of *romanità*, and the Institute of Roman Studies. He wrote for the Institute's journal, *Roma*, and regularly emphasized the links between Fascist policies and supposedly Roman characteristics.[17] Bottai and others feared race was eclipsing the history, traditions, and values of Rome as the conceptual framework for Fascist policy. Moreover, Bottai objected to Mussolini's embrace of a biological definition of race, believing it signified the ascendance of a rival Fascist faction that favored a close alliance with Nazi Germany and emphasized conformity, obedience, and an aggressive foreign policy.

When the PNF launched the regime's race campaign in the summer of 1938, Bottai's diary entries reveal his skepticism about Mussolini's new biologically racist direction. For example, Bottai related a conversation over lunch with Mussolini and others (including Minister of Popular Culture Dino Alfieri) at which Mussolini said "Sono stufo…di sentire ripetere che una razza, la quale à dato al mondo Dante, Machiavelli, Raffaello, Michelangelo, è di origine affricana" (I am tired…of hearing it repeated that a race, the likes of which gave Dante, Machiavelli, Raphael, Michelangelo to the world, is of African origin).[18] Bottai's commentary on this statement was entirely negative: "Argomento debole, da giornale o comizio: una razza che ha dato Dante, ecc., può anche infischiarsene di venire dall'Affrica" (Weak argument, the stuff of journalism or political rallies: a race that gave Dante, etc. could also not care about coming from Africa).[19] Bottai's skepticism of Fascist racism is also evident in his reaction to Mussolini's policies against the Jews. Bottai wrote that Mussolini promoted "soluzioni graduali, tendenti a escluderli dall'esercito, dalla magistratura, dalla scuola. A Alfieri, che ricordava questa o quella critica straniera, opponeva essere la critica degli stranieri la conferma della bontà nei nostri provvedimenti. Sempre" (gradual solutions, tending to exclude them from the army, the judiciary, the schools. Mussolini opposed Alfieri, who mentioned this or that foreign criticism, saying that the criticism of foreigners was confirmation of the excellence of our measures. As always).[20] Here Bottai portrayed himself as critical of biological concepts of race and of the first implementation of anti-Jewish policies.

Bottai's public reaction to Mussolini's 1938 racist measures was, however, extraordinary. Instead of denouncing them, he inserted Fascist anti-Semitism into the cult of *romanità* and used both to further his own personal political aims. Bottai hoped that by doing so, he could steer Mussolini away from the Germanophiles within the Fascist ranks and disassociate the racist actions

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[15] For more on Fascist *romanità*, particularly in reference to excavations of imperial ruins, urban planning projects, and the connection to the Institute of Roman Studies, see Joshua Arthurs, *Excavating Modernity*.

[16] Ibid., 126, 135–42.

[17] Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (January 1992): 13. Emilio Gentile uses an article written by Bottai in *Roma*—from 1937, the bimillennium of Augustus—to clarify the Fascist appropriation of *romanità*. According to Bottai, the Fascists were not looking to resurrect the old, glorious Roman past. Instead, he insisted, "the return to Rome brought about by the Black-shirt Revolution is…not a restoration but a renewal, a revolution in the very idea of Rome." Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 77.

[18] Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario: 1935-1944*, ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri (Milan: BUR, 2001), 125.

[19] Ibid., 125–26.

[20] Ibid., 126.

of his own ministry from biological racism. He also used anti-Jewish measures to increase his own power at universities. To justify these racist policies, he published articles about anti-Semitism and *romanità* in *Critica Fascista*.

Ultimately, Bottai's reinterpretation of the Racial Laws in the pages of *Critica Fascista* did more to benefit Mussolini's agenda than to redirect it. Bottai likely convinced many in the intellectual world, at least those who had taken offense at the biologically racist direction of the regime, to accept or support the Racial Laws since Bottai reconciled them with nationalist notions of Italy's civilizing mission in the Mediterranean.[21] Moreover, he benefitted from anti-Semitic educational policies because he appointed members of his clientele to positions left vacant through the removal of Jewish professors and teachers. Despite his private skepticism, Bottai's implementation and defense of Fascism's discriminatory policies furthered the racist direction of the regime at the expense of Italy's Jewish citizens.

Bottai's Defense of anti-Semitism through *Romanità*

From the time of its publication, Bottai attempted to reinterpret the Manifesto of Race in terms he preferred. That which concerned Bottai the most was Mussolini's adoption of a "Germanic" concept of biological racism, which Bottai placed in opposition to a more "Latin" concept of civilization. On July 16, 1938, two days after the Manifesto's release, he wrote in his diary "Nel colloquio…Mussolini si sarebbe dichiarato un 'nordico'…Gli stessi concetti di 'latinità' e di 'mediterraneità' sarebbero rispinti per l''arianità'. La 'romanità', con riserve, si salva" (In a meeting…Mussolini declared himself a 'nordic'…The very concepts of "*latinità*" and "*mediterraneità*" are repulsed by that of "Aryan." "*Romanità*" with reservations, can be saved).[22] To do so, Bottai called together some of the scholars who had signed the Manifesto of Race. On July 29, 1938 he wrote, "Si cerca di rimettere in sesto le idee; sopratutto, di combinare l'idea 'razza' con l'idea 'Roma'" (We're trying to put our ideas in order, above all to combine the idea of "race" with the idea of "Rome").[23] He published the results of these consultations with the signers of the manifesto in his cultural and political journal.

In his 1938 *Critica Fascista* editorials, Bottai reinterpreted Fascist racism as less biological and more spiritual than the Manifesto of Race stated, inserting it into the pre-existing tradition of *romanità*. Fascism, he wrote, "fin dal suo sorgere, si pose come restauratore delle forze positive, permanenti e universali di tutto il nostro passato più che bimillenario…è alla luce di tutta la nostra tradizione ideale, dalla Romanità al Rinascimento al Risorgimento, che…la dichiarazione [il Manifesto della razza] va letta e meditata" (right from the beginning, presented itself as the restorer of the positive, permanent, and universal forces of all of our more than bimillenary past…It is in light of all our ideal tradition, from *Romanità* to the Renaissance to the *Risorgimento*, that…the declaration [the Manifesto of Race]…should be read and considered).[24] He argued that the manifesto was an integral part of the nation's history and not a departure from it. He insisted that Italians should not be put off by its scientific language because the manifesto was "in armonia ai motivi essenziali della romanità cesarea e Cristiana…I fondamenti, infatti, del razzismo italiano

[21] Romke Visser discusses the centrality of *romanità* to Italian justifications of colonialism, even in the pre-Fascist period. Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanità," 7.
[22] Bottai, *Diario: 1935-1944*, 125.
[23] Ibid., 128.
[24] Critica Fascista, "Politica fascista della razza," *Critica Fascista* 16, no. 19 (August 1, 1938): 290. Although the article is signed "Critica Fascista," the author is undoubtedly Bottai. He often signed his editorials in this manner.

sono e devono essere eminentemente spirituali, anche se esso parte, opportunamente da 'dati' puramente biologici" (in harmony with the essentials of the *romanità* of both the Caesars and Christianity…In fact,the fundamentals of Italian racism are and have to be especially spiritual, even if it comes from…purely biological "data").[25] Thus Bottai was urging his readers to ignore the plain language of the Manifesto and interpret it as more Roman than its authors intended.

Bottai addressed the contradiction at the heart of his argument to embrace modern racism along with Roman traditions by urging his readers to trust Mussolini, the originator of the racist project, whom Bottai portrayed as the paragon of *romanità*. He wrote

> al di sopra di ogni provisione più o meno logica, di ogni aspirazione più o meno giusta, di ogni contributo più o meno importante di scienziati e di scrittori politici, bisogna…aver soprattutto fede nel Capo, nel suo equilibrio tutto romano, nel suo supremo amore per questa nostra Italia, che per volontà e opera di lui s'è temprata, in sedici anni, ad una esemplare unità spirituale ed ha visto riapparire, dopo quindici secoli, la luce dell'Impero sui "colli fatali di Roma."
>
> above every more or less logical provision, every more or less just aspiration, every more or less important contribution from scientists and political writers, one must…have faith in the Leader, in his Roman common sense, in his supreme love for this our Italy, which (because of his will and work) has been tempered, in sixteen years, into an example of spiritual unity and which has seen, after fifteen centuries, the light of Empire on the "fateful hills of Rome" reappear.[26]

The Fascist known for his "intellectual independence" here urged blind obedience to the dictator because of the latter's supposedly "Roman" vision and actions.

In his subsequent anti-Semitic editorials in *Critica Fascista*, Bottai continued to emphasize the link between spiritual and biological racism in Fascist policy. In his September 15 contribution he wrote, "è evidente che non ci potrebbe interessare la forma del naso o del cranio se essa non fosse connessa indissolubilmente a una mentalità, a un mondo psicologico e spirituale. Noi non possiamo…prendere piú sul serio certo antropologismo e deterministico fisiologico di positivistica memoria" (it is evident that we could not be interested in the form of the nose or of the cranium if it is not indissolubly connected to a mentality, to a psychological and spiritual world. We can no longer…take seriously certain anthropologisms or deterministic physiologisms of positivistic memory).[27] Bottai insisted he trusted only those scientists who linked the physical to the spiritual, though he gave no indication of how many scientists in Italy did so. A month later, Bottai inverted the two approaches to the racial question by insisting that Fascist racism was essentially spiritual but took into account the scientific study of race. He explained it had an "impostazione spirituale che non nega e non ignora l'importanza . . . dei dati scientifici, ma tali dati assume e trasvaluta in una visione integrale del problema ch'è problema fondamentale umano: di quella piena essenziale *umanità* ch'è ragione e linfa di ventisette secoli di storia nostra" (spiritual foundation that does not negate or ignore the importance…of scientific data, but it elevates these data…to an integral vision of the problem that is fundamentally human: of that full and basic *humaneness* that was the reason

[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Critica Fascista, "Primo: la scuola," *Critica Fascista* 16, no. 22 (September 15, 1938): 338.

and nourishment of twenty-seven centuries of our history."[28] Thus, ironically, Fascist racism was meant to defend the *humanity* inherent in the traditions of Roman/Italian civilization, according to Bottai.

In Bottai's conception, those who the Racial Laws persecuted were either objects of the special "civilizing mission" of *romanità* or were, by nature, in opposition to Roman values. To explain why Jewish citizens, who had lived in Italy for millennia, could no longer hold important positions within Italian life, he referred to the spiritual values that defined Italian civilization. He wrote: "la personalità spirituale degli ebrei è troppo diverso alla nostra, anzi, per esser precisi, è proprio l'opposto della personalità italiana, cioè romana e cattolica, quindi non possiamo lasciare che essi abbiano funzioni direttive o educative in casa nostra" (the spiritual personality of the Jews is too different from ours, in fact, to be precise, it is the exact opposite of the Italian personality which is Roman and Catholic. Therefore, we cannot let them have managerial or educative functions in *casa nostra*).[29] Reiterating old stereotypes, Bottai continued by insisting that the Jewish mentality was focused on materialism and wealth in contrast to the spiritual and humanistic outlook of Italians.[30] Therefore, Bottai placed Jewish citizens in opposition to the values of *romanità* despite their long participation in Roman and Italian life.

If Bottai's editorials were part of a plan to drive Mussolini away from a biological definition of race through a recasting of Italian anti-Semitism, they were ineffectual. As early as August 27, 1938 he wrote in his diary: "Mussolini à elogiato…l'atteggiamento di C.[ritica] F.[ascista] sulla questione della razza. Dal mio gabinetto, intanto, mi annunciano il suo proposito di escludere gli insegnanti…ebrei dalle scuole fin da quest'anno. Le parole sono saggie, temporeggiatrici; i fatti folli e precipitosi" (Mussolini praised…the position of C.[ritica] F.[ascista] on the race question. My departmental staff, meanwhile, announce his plan to exclude Jewish…teachers from the schools beginning this year. His words are wise and temporizing, his actions foolish and hasty).[31] Mussolini continued to push for government acts of discrimination based on heredity and to have them implemented directly, while Bottai favored a more gradual approach to Jewish exclusion. Bottai's interventions in *Critica Fascista*, however, were unable to halt Mussolini's process.

The more likely result of Bottai's *Critica Fascista* racist campaign was to convince his readers to accept, if not embrace, the Racial Laws. Considering the long tradition of *romanità* in Italian intellectual circles, the popularity of the regime's imperialist campaign in Ethiopia, and Bottai's reputation as a cultural moderate, his interpretation of Fascist racist policies likely appealed to educated Italians. Thus he helped to remove the offense of a biological understanding of race for many in the intellectual class.

Although Bottai consistently wrote about anti-Semitism only for a few months,[32] both *Critica Fascista* and his 1940s cultural and artistic journal *Primato* played an important role in amalgamating the worlds of high culture and Fascist racism.[33] For example, the future head of the Garzanti publishing house, Mario Rivoire, wrote explicitly anti-Semitic and racist articles in both *Critica Fascista* and *Primato*, arguing in one article that Mussolini had expressed racist ideas in 1911, long before the Nazi movement had begun.[34] Bottai's co-editor on *Primato*, and future

[28] Critica Fascista, "La difesa della razza nel quadro dello Stato," *Critica Fascista* 16, no. 24 (October 15, 1938): 370.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Critica Fascista, "Corporativismo senza ebrei," *Critica Fascista* 17, no. 4 (December 15, 1938): 50.
[31] Bottai, *Diario: 1935–1944*, 131.
[32] De Grand, *Bottai e la cultura fascista*, 196.
[33] Serri, *I redenti*, 83.
[34] Ibid., 75–77.

national television journalist, Giorgio Vecchietti, also used his pen to support Fascist racism.[35] Even some who later became anti-Fascists contributed to this cultural support for the racial campaign. Alfonso Gatto, a famous Communist poet of the Resistance, wrote a racist article about North Africans in a 1942 edition of *Primato*.[36] Bottai himself wrote in the periodical that racism needed to permeate every aspect of life, arguing that the concept of race needed to combine with "l'ambiente, la cultura, la tecnica, la lingua" (the environment, culture, technology, language).[37] Bottai continued to be committed to the Fascist racist project, even if he did not explicitly write about anti-Semitism after 1938.

Implementing Discrimination: Bottai and anti-Semitic Policies in the School System

As he was uniting *romanità* with Fascist racism in print, Bottai faithfully implemented anti-Semitic directives from the Division of Demographics and Race in the Ministry of the Interior, beginning in 1938. There is no record of Bottai protesting any of the measures. Instead, he regularly reported his faithful application of the division's directives to Italian schools and universities.[38] Bottai also justified the Racial Laws in public and in a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council on October 6, 1938. While other Fascist hierarchs, like Italo Balbo and Emilio De Bono, spoke in favor of mitigating the regime's anti-Semitic policies, Bottai maintained the importance of following through with the current government actions.[39] Fellow Fascist minister and son-in-law of Mussolini, Galeazzo Ciano, commented on Bottai's Fascist Grand Council speech in his diary, noting "Bottai mi sorprende per la sua intransigenza" (Bottai's intransigence surprises me).[40]

Bottai did not support these racist measures without reservations, however. His diary indicates that he objected to the Racial Laws in private, at least initially. It was not the persecution of the Jews, however, that primarily bothered him but instead the fact that the Racial Laws did not align with what he saw as the totalitarian project of the Fascist regime. Before he applied the anti-Semitic measures to the school system, Bottai recorded that Mussolini "si accenna alla possibilità di creare scuole per ebrei. Domando: è utile dar loro il modo di crearsi un'educazione a parte, originale, non soggetta allo Stato?" (mentions the possibility of creating schools for Jews. I ask: is it useful to give them the ability to create their own, separate education not subject to the State?).[41] Less than a month later, Bottai presented the Ministry of National Education's plans for the exclusion of Jewish teachers and students from the public school system. In a rare show of pity for those Jewish citizens affected by his policies, Bottai related that he presented these plans "con una tal quale commozione, non so se più per la 'cacciata' dei docenti attuali o per la permanente interdizione della Scuola di Stato agli ebrei, anche alunni" (with such a strong emotion, I do not know if it was more for the expulsion of current teachers or for the permanent ban of Jews, even school children, from the State school system). But this sentiment was at least partially motivated by concern for the Fascist totalitarian project: "Provvede bene ai suoi interessi materiali e spirituali uno Stato, che rinunzia al tentativo, se non si vuol dire: la missione, di educare gli 'allogeni' o gli stranieri, nati sul suo suolo…? Solo col tempo si potrà rispondere alla domanda. Intanto il Capo

[35] Ibid., 86.
[36] Ibid., 91.
[37] Quoted in Ibid., 83–84.
[38] See Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale demografia e razza, affari diversi (1938–1945), B. 11, f. 26, sf. C.
[39] Bottai, *Diario: 1935–1944*, 136–37.
[40] Quoted in Ibid., 500 n. 44.
[41] Entry of August 11, 1938, Ibid., 130.

si mette sempre più sulla via delle distizioni" (Does a State enhance its material and spiritual interests by renouncing the attempt, or better, the mission of educating the 'ethnic minorities' or the foreigners born on its soil…? Only with time can one answer this question. Meanwhile, the Leader moves more and more toward making distinctions [between Italians and Jews]).[42] Thus Bottai, who was committed to the project of creating the new Fascist man and woman through universal Italian education, felt that these Racial Laws had the potential to adversely affect this goal. While Mussolini had famously proclaimed that there should be "niente al di fuori dello Stato" (nothing outside the State),[43] Bottai indicated that excluding some citizens from public education was doing just that. Bottai was personally against excluding Jews from the Italian nation while he was implementing policies that did so.

Despite his personal views, the Racial Laws functioned in Bottai's favor. They contributed to the Minister of National Education's larger project of placing people within his network of artists and intellectuals in positions at universities, art academies, and music conservatories. According to an anonymous report in Mussolini's private secretariat, during his tenure as minister, Bottai had created over 100 university chairs and had appointed, without fair competition, 200 people to posts in higher education.[44] Removing Jewish professors from institutes of higher education contributed to the number of positions available for Bottai's clientele. Additionally, in 1938 Bottai urged university rectors to create new chairs relating to race.[45] Thus applying the Racial Laws to the school system helped Bottai in his quest to create the new Fascist intellectual class, tying writers, scholars, and artists to the regime through these appointments and other forms of sponsorship.

Conclusion: Bottai's Legacy and Rome

Ultimately, Bottai's 1938 interventions in *Critica Fascista* only partially achieved his aims. His union of Fascist racism and *romanità* did not steer Mussolini away from biological racism or from the Germanophile faction within the Fascist regime. In fact, the ties between Italy and Germany grew increasingly close after 1938, leading to the collapse of the Fascist regime and military invasion during the Second World War. The Fascist ruling class that Bottai had worked to create, therefore, never materialized. Many of those young intellectuals and artists whom Bottai had appointed to positions in higher education and who had written for his journals turned to anti-Fascism after 1943, "redeeming" themselves from their Fascist pasts through participation in the Resistance.[46] Serri asserts that Bottai, in fact, inadvertently created the anti-Fascist ruling class through his interventions in the cultural world in the 1930s and 1940s. In the postwar period, these intellectuals and artists tended to downplay their contributions to the regime and the racist actions that often went with it.[47]

For Italy's Jews, Bottai's actions had lasting consequences. His education policies disrupted their careers and educations and represented the first major move toward the Shoah in Italy. Through his writings, Bottai contributed to the ideological justification for anti-Jewish action, which grew more severe in Italy and its occupied territories during the Second World War, leading

[42] Ibid., 133.
[43] Benito Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, ed. Edoardo Susmel and Duilio Susmel, vol. 21 (Florence: La Fenice, 1967), 425.
[44] Serri, *I redenti*, 93.
[45] Ibid., 128.
[46] In her book, Serri refers to these Fascists turned anti-Fascists as "i redenti" (the redeemed). Ibid., 11.
[47] Ibid., 24–25.

to the deaths of thousands. These moves permanently altered the landscape of postwar Jewish life and culture in Italy.

After the Second World War, Giuseppe Bottai never mentioned the subject of Fascist anti-Semitism or his role in it. He survived the war years, doing so through help from connections in the worlds of education and the Vatican. In 1949, he published a memoir of his Fascist-era experiences that included an edited version of his diary.[48] From it he removed every reference to race, anti-Semitism, or his role as Minister of National Education. Bottai attempted to erase this complex history from the public account of his life story. Anti-Semitism could too easily associate him with Mussolini and the Germans, the two sources he blamed in the memoir for all that went wrong in Italy. More than anything else about his Fascist career, Bottai wanted Italians to forget the Racial Laws and his work for them.

The 1995 proposal to name a street after Bottai suggests that Bottai achieved success in the manipulation of his past, yet Rome's Jewish population, many anti-Fascists, and most historians have not forgotten his anti-Semitic actions. Past works on Bottai and the Racial Laws have given differing interpretations of his motives, focusing on the question of whether Bottai was a committed anti-Semite or was opportunistic in his actions against the Jews. Ben-Ghiat argued, for example, that he was a rabid anti-Semite who revealed himself in 1938 after many years of inaction against Jewish citizens.[49] Guerri and Michael Ledeen insisted, instead, that he implemented Mussolini's directives to counteract rumors of his own subversion of the Fascist government.[50] While it is difficult to parse the motivations of historical actors, the case of Bottai, anti-Jewish policies, and *romanità* reveals the importance of using his actions as well as both his public and private writings in assessing his relationship to anti-Semitism.

The evidence indicates Bottai was an anti-Semite, even if he had some reservations about the discriminatory policies themselves. Bottai threw himself wholeheartedly into the racist direction of the regime in 1938. His private diaries reveal a skepticism toward racist and anti-Semitic policies, but there is no record of his speaking against them, only for them. He defended measures against the Jews in the pages of his journal and at a Fascist Grand Council meeting. He took pains to remove the Racial Laws from their positivistic and biological context and placed them within the nationalist tradition of *romanità*. At the same time, he wrote privately that anti-Semitic policies in the school system were unwise considering the totalitarian goals of the regime. Except for one reference to a strong emotion in his diary, there is little evidence that he was moved by the plight of Jewish citizens who had lost their jobs or access to education through his ministry's actions. The initially gradual nature of the racist policies appeared to satisfy Bottai. After the end of gradual measures, however, when more sweeping policies took effect in late 1938, he continued to support the racist direction of the regime by publishing racist articles in his journals, sometimes commenting on race himself.

In addition, Bottai stated that the persecution of Jews was not sufficient moral reason to oppose the regime's anti-Semitic direction. Other high-ranking Fascists made different choices. In a September 8, 1938 diary entry, he recounted a conversation with Vittorio Cini, an industrialist and Fascist senator: "L'altr'ieri a colazione, Cini mi dava ragguagli sulla mia 'impopolarità,' pei provvedimenti contro gli ebrei nella scuola; e mi riferiva il giudizio scandalizzato di [Italo] Balbo, che avrebbe desiderato da me non so quale eroica opposizione" (The day before yesterday at

[48] Giuseppe Bottai, *Vent'anni e un giorno (24 luglio 1943)* (Milan: Garzanti, 1949). It was republished in 2008 as Giuseppe Bottai, *Vent'anni e un giorno: 24 luglio 1943* (Milan: BUR, 2008).
[49] Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 150.
[50] Guerri quoting Ledeen in Guerri, *Giuseppe Bottai, fascista*, 148.

breakfast Cini was briefing me on my "unpopularity" [with other top Fascists] due to the measures against the Jews in the school system. He was telling me about the scandalized opinion of [Italo] Balbo, who would have wanted who knows what heroic opposition from me). Bottai's response to Cini reveals the degree of moral importance he gave to Fascist anti-Semitism: "Risposi, che in un regime com'il nostro le direttive del Capo si accettano o non si accettano; che per non accettarle occorrono motivi di irresistibile resistenza morale; che a tanto non arrivano le riserve secondo me possibili sul 'metodo' della lotta antisemita" (I replied that, in a regime like ours, you either accept or do not accept the Leader's directives, and not to accept them requires motives of irresistible moral opposition. The reservations that I think are possible about the "method" of the anti-Semitic struggle do not reach this level). Bottai did not question the "anti-Semitic struggle " as such but rather whether the mode of implementation demanded a strong moral stance. While other top Fascists felt that anti-Semitic measures were reason enough to voice their direct opposition, Bottai did not. As a government minister, he had more to lose with direct opposition than some other Fascist hierarchs. But indirect opposition or keeping quiet were options he had but did not take. "Aggiunsi e conclusi, che se un giorno dovessi trovare il motivo dell'opposizione irrimediabile, non esiterei ad affrontare rischi e sacrifici" (I added, in conclusion, that if one day I should find the motive for opposition to be irremediable, I would not hesitate to face risks and sacrifices). [51] Instead, Italy's Jewish community paid the price for Bottai's obedience and loyalty.

Through his defense of the Racial Laws using *romanità*, Bottai tied Fascist anti-Semitic policies to the legacy of Rome. Rome was, therefore, central to Bottai's own anti-Jewish actions, providing justification for his compliance with the regime's directives. Any attempt to publicly remember this former mayor of the city must consider the way he used Rome in the late 1930s to maintain his influential role in the cultural world, place men who were tied to him in important positions in higher education, and keep his position as minister of education, all at the expense of Italy's Jews.

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Author's Note

After this article went to press, I happened upon Nicola D'Elia's essay in the online journal *Patterns of Prejudice* (December 2021) entitled "Giuseppe Bottai, the Racial Laws of 1938 and Italian-German Relations," which provides valuable insight into Bottai's motivations for implementing and publicly defending the Racial Laws.[52] Both D'Elia and I agree that Bottai's involvement in Fascist anti-Semitism was an outgrowth of his politics, although we diverge on which aspect of his politics: for D'Elia, Bottai's racism aligned with his commitment to Fascism's antibourgeois campaign; I instead argue that it came from his work to create the next Fascist ruling class and to uphold the principles of *romanità*. We have analyzed some of the same source material (Bottai's diaries and a few *Critica Fascista* articles) but D'Elia's most significant contribution to this discussion is his analysis of Bottai's involvement in Italian-German relations, which reveal Bottai's sustained commitment to racism as he interacted with German authorities. I, on the other hand, foreground the centrality of Rome to Bottai's racist politics and demonstrate

[51] Entry of September 8, 1938. Bottai, *Diario: 1935-1944*, 133.
[52] Nicola D'Elia, "Giuseppe Bottai, the Racial Laws of 1938 and Italian-German Relations," *Patterns of Prejudice* 55, no. 5 (December 2021): 437–55.

how his implementation of anti-Jewish policies increased his own influence in Italian public education.