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## Getting ready for the Second World War. Fascist Propaganda and Ideology in *L'Avventuroso* (1938–40)

*Se préparer à la Seconde Guerre mondiale : propagande fasciste et idéologie dans L'Avventuroso (1938-1940)*

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### Résumés

English Français

In 1938, the Italian Fascist regime enacted legislation banning foreign comics, specifically targeting the children's press. As a result, publishers like Nerbini had to radically alter their magazines' contents to align with the regime's aim of using the children's press as a tool for indoctrinating Italian youth with Fascist values. This article takes *L'Avventuroso* as a case study to investigate how Fascist policies influenced children's media between 1938 and 1940 – from the ban on foreign comics to Italy's intervention in World War II – focusing on the transition from American-inspired contents to nationalist propaganda. Through content analysis of Italian-made comics and short novels, combined with socio-historical contextualisation, the article explores the extent to which Fascist rhetoric permeated the children's press. The analysis examines recurring themes, character archetypes, and iconography to assess the role of comics as a vehicle for propaganda. The study also employs qualitative discourse analysis to trace the alignment of narrative structures with Fascist ideology. By examining nationalistic and propaganda contents in *L'Avventuroso*, the article provides a nuanced understanding of how Fascist policies at the onset of World War II influenced the publishing of comics, offering insights into the regime's use of children's media as a tool for propaganda.

En 1938, le régime fasciste italien a promulgué une loi interdisant les bandes dessinées étrangères et visant spécifiquement la presse pour enfants. En conséquence, les éditeurs de bandes dessinées comme Nerbini ont dû modifier radicalement leur contenu pour s'aligner sur l'objectif d'un régime désireux d'utiliser la presse enfantine comme outil d'endoctrinement de la jeunesse italienne aux valeurs fascistes. Cet article étudie le cas de *L'Avventuroso* afin de déterminer la façon dont les politiques fascistes ont influencé les médias pour enfants entre 1938 et 1940 – de l'interdiction des bandes dessinées étrangères à l'intervention de l'Italie dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale – en mettant l'accent sur la transition d'un contenu d'inspiration américaine à une

propagande nationaliste. Grâce à l'analyse de bandes dessinées et de romans courts produits en Italie, combinée à une mise en contexte socio-historique, l'article explore la mesure dans laquelle la rhétorique fasciste a imprégné la presse pour enfants. L'analyse porte sur les thèmes récurrents, les archétypes de personnages et l'iconographie afin d'évaluer le rôle des bandes dessinées en tant que vecteur de propagande. L'étude fait également appel à l'analyse qualitative du discours pour retracer l'alignement des structures narratives sur l'idéologie fasciste. En examinant le contenu nationaliste et propagandiste de *L'Avventuroso*, l'article apporte une compréhension nuancée de la manière dont les politiques fascistes au début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale ont influencé l'édition de bandes dessinées, offrant un aperçu de l'utilisation par le régime des médias pour enfants en tant qu'outil de propagande.

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## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** guerre, bande dessinée, Seconde Guerre mondiale, fascisme, culture populaire, presse jeunesse

**Keywords:** war, comic book, Second World War, fascism, popular culture, youth press

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## Texte intégral

# Introduction

- 1 When it was first launched in October 1934, *L'Avventuroso* – published by Nerbini – distinguished itself from the other comics magazines of the time by its innovative content. It was the first magazine that featured American comics, alongside short stories, and the first one also not to add captions or delete speech bubbles, as was customary in Italy's children's periodicals.<sup>1</sup> Although comics in Italy gradually began to include speech bubbles, thus modernizing the children's press, it was *L'Avventuroso* that established the modern form of comics as we know it today in Italy.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 *L'Avventuroso* introduced American adventure comics to the Italian young readership. They quickly gained immense popularity, so much so that other publishers began to feature American heroes, too. Leading the way was Flash Gordon, *L'Avventuroso*'s standout hero, always published in colour on the first page – the page displayed at newsstands. Other American series, such as *Mandrake the Magician*, *Radio Patrol*, *Jungle Jim*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *The Phantom*, became regular fixtures, attracting a loyal audience of adolescents and young adults – expanding its readership compared to other magazines that targeted younger children, like *Corriere dei Piccoli*, *Novellino*, *Jumbo*, and *Topolino*.<sup>3</sup> In this publishing context, *L'Avventuroso* established itself as one of the leading comics magazines of the time. The success of American comics, proved by the increasing number of magazines launched between 1932 and 1937 that featured them, soon caught the attention of the Fascist government, whose totalitarian project encompassed the education of the youth according to its ideology – and consequently included the control of the children's press.<sup>4</sup>
- 3 Mussolini's regime aimed at creating a new Italian nation and spirit, an ambitious goal reflected in the reformation of the schooling system developed by philosopher Giovanni Gentile and approved in 1923, and the creation of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (National Balilla Organization, 1926) and the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (Italian Youth of the Lictor, 1937), youth organisations that indoctrinated children into the Fascist<sup>5</sup> regime from a very young age and up to adulthood. In other words, the education of the Italian youth was a fundamental step towards building a new Fascist society, where individuals united and worked for the higher interest of the State.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, the regime also relied on comics to deliver its messages to Italian children, with new characters populating the pages of popular periodicals like *Corriere dei Piccoli*, where, after 1931, the previously recurrent American comic strips were replaced by Italian creations featuring Fascist characters.<sup>7</sup> The adventures of these new

protagonists – whose names often referred to the regime's ethos, like *Romolino e Romoletto* in honour of the Roman past, reflected the Fascist myth of *romanità* – echoed the militarist and dutiful ideals of the new Fascist man and disseminated the regime's iconography (ill. 1). At a time when children's periodicals were mirroring the change in rhetoric and moral values promoted by the dictatorship, *L'Avventuroso* entered the market with the only aim of entertaining its readers with comics and short stories, with few or no elements of Fascist propaganda.



Illustration 1: *Corriere dei Piccoli*, 13 August 1939

- 4 The unprecedented success experienced by *L'Avventuroso* was mainly due to the presence of American adventure comics, a feature that went against Mussolini's aim to create a purely national culture with no foreign "contamination".<sup>8</sup> In March 1937, Minister Dino Alfieri declared that the aim of the Ministry of Popular Culture (MCP) was to ensure all cultural productions for Italians adhered to the Fascist ethos. Consequently, new laws were enacted to tighten control over periodicals, including comics, which by then were heavily influenced by American contents. The new legislation stipulated that periodicals, including comics, had to shift their focus and "develop Italian subjects inspired by the life and events of our explorers, navigators, aviators, of the heroes of our war."<sup>9</sup> This directive was followed by an even stricter order specifically targeting comics: on 19 July 1938, Alfieri ordered that all American-imported or influenced comics be eliminated within three months. This aligned with the general tightening of control of the children's press, driven by a campaign against foreign influences, seen as harmful to the morals of Fascist youth. Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti clearly expressed this view in his introduction to the 1938 children's literature convention manifesto: he emphasised that "youth literature must break free from foreign books, harmful to the education of the younger generation."<sup>10</sup> This resulted in a policy of "decontamination" of the children's press, through the approval of legislation that required all foreign materials to be removed and the number of pages dedicated to pure illustration to be halved, in favour of texts that glorified Italian heroism and history, while rejecting corrupting themes. The new directives reflected the MCP's interest in using the press to teach Italian youth Fascist values by exalting Italian heroism, especially of the military kind, the Italian race, and the past and present history of Italy.<sup>11</sup>
- 5 Not only did the regime see foreign products as having a negative influence on Italian children, but American comics were seen as the greatest form of propaganda that was poisoning Italian children and disseminating the stereotype of the Anglo-Saxon hero against the Mediterranean villain, to the detriment of the nation's future.<sup>12</sup> Adventure comics imported from the US and the Italian versions that imitated them were, in short, seen as undermining the Italian spirit and corrupting the morals of the Italian youth. As a result, the contents of *L'Avventuroso* had to change in order to comply with the new Fascist legislation.
- 6 Autarchic cultural policies were not the only force that changed the appearance and contents of Italian comic magazines. The political context, the increasing polarisation of geopolitical alliances, and the ideological clash between democracies and totalitarianisms also had an impact on children's magazines, and specifically on *L'Avventuroso*. Before 1938, the Nerbini publishing house focused primarily on entertainment, but after the regime's approval of specific norms against foreign influences in the children's press, the contents of its magazine underwent a radical shift to comply with the new legislation. *L'Avventuroso* adopted a nationalistic tone, and its writers and artists exchanged the old American-inspired adventures for comics featuring Italian heroes. It is worth noting that Nerbini's editorial team remained the

same throughout the years. Creators like Yambo, Giove Toppi, Giorgio Scudellari, Ferdinando Vichi, Vincenzo Lemmi, Corrado Sarri, and Paolo Lorenzini – to name a few – worked for *L'Avventuroso* and adapted their styles first to the successful American example, then to the pro-nationalist and autarchic Fascist demands. The latter change followed the new legislation, to which both the publisher and the comics creators and writers had to adapt. Readers, however, did not welcome the change and the number of copies sold plummeted, marking the beginning of the end of the once beloved magazine *L'Avventuroso*.<sup>13</sup>

- 7 This article examines how *L'Avventuroso* incorporated Fascist rhetoric and contributed to the dissemination of the regime's morals. I focus on short novels and Italian comics published between 1938 and 1940 to show recurrent themes that contributed to Fascist propaganda in favour of the regime's allies – Spain, Germany, and Japan – and the ideological war against Western democracies. My study is built on Philip Cannistraro's idea of Fascist culture as a means of achieving mass consensus and George Mosse's idea of Fascism as a faith capable of giving the people a sense of belonging and identity.<sup>14</sup> The examination of Fascist propaganda in comics is informed by Mabel Berezin's idea of the primary importance of emotions in Italian Fascism as well as on Simonetta Falasca Zamponi's study of how Mussolini's regime used emotional resonance and inspired feelings linked to the themes of heroism, sacrifice, and duty.<sup>15</sup> To further enhance the analysis of the role of emotions to shape Fascist rhetoric and create a collective emotional engagement, I draw from Emilio Gentile's definition of Fascism as a secular religion; whose rituals contributed to create a sense of belonging among the masses.<sup>16</sup> Combined with Ruth Ben Ghat's study of Italian Fascism, which highlights its project of national regeneration and – more importantly – its response to the process of modernisation,<sup>17</sup> I approach Fascist rhetoric as the result of complex forces at play, ranging from reaction to the crisis of European society to the sacralisation of politics, and from the exaltation of actions and virility to the ideal of the creation of a new order. Finally, my approach draws on the framework provided by Chiara Ferrari in her study of the Fascist regime's rhetoric of violence and sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> I carry out a qualitative discourse analysis based on the aforementioned analyses of the relationship between culture and ideology, combined with more specific studies concerning Fascist ideology and cultural production<sup>19</sup> to examine how Fascist rhetoric permeated *L'Avventuroso*'s comics and its written contents (*i.e.*, columns and short stories).

## 1. From American Adventures to War Comics

- 8 The first change in *L'Avventuroso*'s appearance after the approval of the new legislation was the modification of its masthead. Since its launch in 1934, the magazine had featured its title in red, against a yellow background, with the drawing of a native American man, a Black man, and an Asian man on the left, and an American policeman on the right. These illustrations reflected the collective imagination of the time: the myth of the American West – made highly popular by the shows of Buffalo Bill<sup>20</sup> – blended with the exotic worlds crafted by Italian novelist Emilio Salgari, and the myth of America.<sup>21</sup> On 11 September 1938, the policeman disappeared in favour of a Fascist policeman wearing the uniform of Italian East Africa troops. This change visually reflected the new legislation requiring the move from American-centred comics to Italian-focused stories. The fact that the policeman was from Italian East Africa is revealing of how Fascist demands aimed at replacing the exotic images created by adventures in the American West with Italian conquests in Africa. This can be seen as a reflection of anti-Americanism as expressed by the regime, especially after the 1929 Wall Street Crash and, more importantly, after sanctions against Italy were approved by the League of Nations in response to Italy's invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the

Fascist war in Africa marked the beginning of autarchy – the policy of self-sufficiency pursued by the regime as a response to the economic sanctions voted by the League of Nations – therefore symbolising Italian autonomy and independence, as well as the country's military strength. The ideal of “a Place in the Sun” for the Italians<sup>23</sup> was part of the Fascist propaganda that the children's press reflected and contributed to disseminate in a more systematic way from 1938 onwards. In *L'Avventuroso*, this meant a substantial change in the comics published.

9 Mario Nerbini's epistolary exchange with the Italian agent of the American King Features Syndicate, which provided the publisher with its most successful comics such as *Flash Gordon*, *Mandrake The Magician*, and *The Phantom*, has been explored and analysed by Fabio Gadducci, Leonardo Gori, and Sergio Lama. The study shows how, after 1938, KFS's Italian agent tried to sell Nerbini new American stories, which he refused because of the strict control of the MCP: “I receive[d] today an intimidation from the Minister forcing me to give up all American series that are still being published in my newspapers, without exceptions [...] Thus I must confirm my previous order of cancellation [...] and please advise America to cease shipping all the material I am currently receiving”.<sup>24</sup> The letter, dated 17 September 1938, testifies to the profound changes that Nerbini had to make to keep publishing its magazines. In practice, this resulted in the creation of Italian comics that reflected Fascist rhetoric, while maintaining the dynamism and exotic look that Italian readers had grown to love to preserve the allure of its popular magazine.

10 In September 1938, *Flash Gordon*, which had been published on the first page since the launch of *L'Avventuroso*, was replaced by a story by Giove Toppi: *I tre di Macallè* [*The Three from Macallè*], based on an episode of the Italian war in Ethiopia back in 1896. References to Italian colonialist drive and an exaltation of the Italian past were part of the new rhetoric adopted by Nerbini. However, the most interesting stories in terms of propaganda are those that echo Fascist Italy's military alliances and ideological alignment. This is clearly shown, for example, by the comic *Agli ordini di Franco* [*Under Franco's Orders*], published from 25 September onwards and illustrated by Mario Tempesti. Its subtitle leaves no doubt as to its ideological meaning: an “Episode of the anti-Bolshevik war in Spain”. Set during the Spanish civil war, this comic is representative of the impact of Fascist propaganda on *L'Avventuroso*: it exalts Italian heroism, and it builds on the Fascist stereotypical image of Spanish Republicans as villains while praising Francoist Spain. The story features a young Italian man who would rather be unemployed than renounce his Fascist “faith”, and whose courage and high morals lead him to stop a ship smuggling weapons into “Red Spain” – while also saving a young Italian woman unjustly incarcerated by the communists. Visually, Tempesti creates characters whose features contribute to separate the heroes from the villains: the Italians are clean, close-shaven, young, and in good shape – similar to a Francoist soldier who helps the Fascists, drawn with the Caudillo's distinctive thin mustache – while the communists are ugly, dirty, bearded, and old, and their supposedly negative attitude is reflected by their less than desirable appearance. In short, in its illustrations, the comic reinterprets the Fascist iconographic representation of the Spanish Republic as uncivilised, dirty, without morals or ethics.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the plot, which does not directly feature a war scenario and instead looks into an everyday situation, in which the hero has to choose between good – Fascist faith – and evil – bolshevism –, reflects the permanent military mobilization sought by Mussolini's regime: Italians should always be ready to fight.

11 Another story published shortly afterwards, on 30 October 1938, contributes to educate Italian youth according to the geopolitical alliances made by Mussolini's regime by referring for the first time to the heroism of Japanese people. Entitled *Jutso, piccolo eroe giapponese* [*Jutso, a Little Japanese Hero*], the comic centres on a young Japanese boy who selflessly and courageously helps a group of Japanese fighters to win their fight against Chinese soldiers. These stories, written and illustrated according to the example set by American adventure comics, clearly reflected the predominant rhetoric of the time and contributed to the dissemination of Fascist ideology, by

adapting it to the previously established tropes of the young hero as created, for example, by Lyman Young in his *Tim Tyler's Luck* – whose adventures had hooked young Italian readers from their first appearance in *Topolino* in 1933. This type of ideological propaganda, however, is even more striking in the written contents of *L'Avventuroso*, as will be described later on. What is important to note here is how, between 1938 and 1939, the contents of the magazine's comics remained consistent, shifting their focus from depictions of America to Italian stories reproducing exotic settings reminiscent of those found in the popular novels by Emilio Salgari. Comics like *La stella di Bangalur* [*The Star of Bangalore*, from 26 March 1939], or *Kali, Dea della distruzione* [*Kali, Goddess of Destruction*, from 02 April 1939], were set in Asia, mirroring the Salgarian adventures that had until then predominantly shaped a widely recognized vision of exoticism, as seen in the *Sandokan* series.<sup>26</sup> Such a reference to the Italian literary past – that of Salgari – and general contents focused on Italian history, show the strictness of Fascist control over the children's press, since not even the many letters complaining about the disappearance of American comics could convince Nerbini to reintroduce them, as it would have caused the requisition of the magazine for non-compliance with the directives of the MCP.<sup>27</sup> However, in 1939, in spite of the strict control of the press, Nerbini reintroduced some American comics in *L'Avventuroso* to appease the readership and maintain its sales. Although the popular American comics featured in the magazine were purely adventure stories with no ideological content and, therefore, involved no portrayal of enemies in relation to Fascist ideology, they were published under Italianised names to avoid censorship. Such is the case of *The Phantom*, which reappears under the title *Giustiziere mascherato* [*The masked avenger*] and was created and signed by Emilio Fancelli and Roberto Lemmi. In this version, the hero's iconic red suit and black mask which featured in its first Italian publication were replaced with a green suit and red mask, to further differentiate him from the original American character. Further change in the magazine's format was implemented in 1940: comics again occupied most of the space and *L'Avventuroso* recovered its traditional appearance, with less text and more comics. The magazine even reintroduced some popular American heroes like Mandrake the Magician, the original [The] Phantom, and an Italianised version of Superman [*Ciclone*] – all heroes with extraordinary abilities battling a range of villains motivated by greed, power, or domination, in an urban or fantastic setting.<sup>28</sup> The overall rhetoric of the magazine and the purely Italian comics, however, remained heavily aligned to the Fascist militaristic and ideological view of Europe. On 18 February 1940, for example, a new Italian comic entitled *The Besieged Fort* set out the current Italian alliances in a subtle yet very effective way. Set in Ethiopia, the story features the usual pattern of a Fascist hero vs. anti-Fascist villains – in this case, Abyssinians fighting Fascist rule, guided by a “European renegade” whose nationality is revealed in a speech balloon: his words “Allez, allez” give away the fact that he is French. This anti-French hint came at a time where Mussolini had finally abandoned any thought of possible cooperation with Great Britain and France, and had instead chosen to side with Germany, a decision made that same month.<sup>29</sup>

12 In June, the American comic *Jungle Jim* reappeared without its original title: instead, only the titles of the separate episodes featured – e.g., “*Sul lago dei caimani*” [“On the Lake of the Caimans”], “*Karnak il maniaco*” [“Karnak the Maniac”] – and the comic appeared as written by “Alex” and “adapted by” Coghei. In this way, the American content was hidden behind an Italian production, evading Fascist censorship. The timing of these publications suggests a decreased attention to the children's press by the MCP, whose internal propaganda effort was now focused on Italian involvement in the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> After the declaration of war against France in June 1940, no major change was reflected in *L'Avventuroso*. If anything, its pro-Germany propaganda became more explicit, leaving no doubt as to where Italy stood (see ill. 2).

13 As *L'Avventuroso* suffered this transition from the American-inspired magazine to the autarchic publication the Fascist regime wanted it to be, its sales dramatically and consistently dropped after the disappearance of American adventure comics in 1938.

Even though the comics published remained focused on exotic adventures and heroic achievements, and sometimes still featured the readers' beloved American heroes, the restrictions of censorship were palpable and particularly visible in the written informative columns and serialised novels.



Illustration 2: "La bambola portafortuna", *L'Avventuroso*, 8 September 1940.

## 2. Fascist Rhetoric and War Propaganda: Novels

14 One of the most visible changes made by *L'Avventuroso* after the approval of the new legislation on periodical press was, as mandated by law, the reduced space dedicated to comics. Starting on 18 December, *L'Avventuroso*, which had previously captivated young readers with *Flash Gordon* prominently featured on its cover, began to promote "interesting, entertaining, and informative columns".<sup>31</sup> In contrast to the rhetoric used in the comics and novels, which disseminated highly ideological contents, these columns were more informative in nature, designed to glorify Italian history and present Fascism as a natural continuation of Italy's grand legacy. Many of the columns celebrated historical Italian figures who embodied Fascist ideals, focusing on military victories, imperial conquests, and demonstrations of Italian excellence in various fields.<sup>32</sup>

15 The process of "fascistisation" of *L'Avventuroso* had already started in October 1938, with the featuring of short stories and serialised short novels focused on Fascist heroes and steeped in Fascist rhetoric. The first text to explicitly incorporate the regime's ideology appeared on 23 October 1938 – a short story entitled *His Father's Shadow* –

*an Episode of Fascist Redemption*. Written by Emilio Fancelli, one of the most prolific signatures in *L'Avventuroso*, the story follows an Italian family whose head fell in the Great War. The protagonist is the fallen soldier's son, Mario, who suffers from the death of his father and from the Italian government's ineptitude in handling the post-war period ("and victory was sabotaged [...] and veterans were insulted; and the dead in war despised"). Mario finds new lifeblood in joining the *Fasci di Combattimento*, thanks to which he is able to follow his father's heroic steps and avenge his death. The rhetoric of the story mainly highlights Italian heroism and bravery ("*ardimento*", one of the code words of Fascism), and dwells on the idea of "faith", in particular faith in the new Fascist organization. These were recurrent themes in the new pro-Fascist *Avventuroso*, disseminated also through the newly introduced informative columns that framed comics and generally took up most of the space on the page. This shift balanced the contents in favour of the written word, in compliance with legal requirements. The column entitled "Fascist Ethics", subtitled "For the new Italian", for example, appeared in January 1939 and clearly aimed at educating young readers according to Fascist ideology and against communism:

Two currents, two doctrines still keep the peoples divided while flashes of fire [...] still flicker in tormented Spain [...] One rises from Rome and radiates all the wisdom of a bi-millennial civilization. The other is made of brutal violence and masks the basest feelings that can ever nourish the human soul [...] [and] destroys what is most sacred and noblest in man: God, Fatherland, Family.<sup>33</sup>

The reference to Spain serves the purpose of moulding the conscience of readers in favour of Fascist intervention in the country in support of the Francoist cause. Furthermore, Spain appears to be the subject of many comics and columns, serving as an iconic example of the relevance of Fascist Italy in the international scenario and of Italian bravery.

- 16 Some examples from each sampled year clearly show this. On 20 November 1938, a short story by Fancelli, *A Story for today*, featured an Italian legionary fighting in Spain and giving his life for the higher ideal of Fascism. Caught by surprise by a group of enemies – Spaniards led by Ivan Kameneff, establishing an instant link between the Republicans and the Soviet Union – the Italian gives his life to protect Francoist troops. The fallen soldier is immediately recognised as a hero, while the civil war is identified as a war of *liberation*, in which the Italians are sacrificing themselves for the greater good – Fascism – against the evil of the world – communism. The story ends with an expression that is the epitome of Fascist rhetoric, imparting the notion that Fascist faith surpasses all else, and that sacrificing one's life for a higher (Fascist) ideal is the most noble and fulfilling goal for any courageous individual: "The 'Italianito', mortally wounded, [...] struck by the daggers of the Reds, smothering the flame with his generous blood, that of a humble, valiant, fighter, a shining example of the courageous faith that animates those who live in a fascist climate and know how to joyfully give their lives for a sublime ideal."<sup>34</sup>

- 17 Again, on 23 April 1939, the Spanish war was the subject of a short story. *Winning flags will return* by Adriana Cumano Ricci,<sup>35</sup> the author of many stories with highly ideological contents, follows the resistance of three Spanish nationalist soldiers who bravely resisted the attack of the "Reds". The story shows the same self-sacrifice that the Francoist soldiers were willing to make in order to defend their nation from communism and praises the strength and integrity of Franco's army. According to an announcement placed at the end, the story won the prize of the leisure time Fascist organisation (*Dopo lavoro*), hinting at the involvement of common readers in the production of *L'Avventuroso*. Pro-Franco propaganda also comes through the iconography used: the symbol of the Spanish *falange* is placed at the end of the story (see ill. 3).



Illustration 3: *L'Avventuroso*, 23 April 1939.

- 18 In 1940, Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany became more present in the written sections of *L'Avventuroso*. Another clear example of this type of propaganda can be found in a serialised novel by Fancelli, *The Novel of a brave man*, published from 24 March 1940 to 21 July 1940.<sup>36</sup> Once again, the story is steeped in anti-communist, and pro-Nazi and pro-Francoist propaganda; what makes this story particularly revealing of Fascist Italy's positioning of the time is the added element of antisemitism. One of the characters in the story is a Jew, Isaia[h], who deceived the Italians and presents stereotypical anti-semitic traits: "his [the Jew's] soul full of hatred for humanity, his desire to ascend upon blood [...] to dominate the world, to have, he [the] Jew with his co-religionists [...] the remainder of mankind under his feet in heavy bondage...".<sup>37</sup> This is one of the first and few stories that openly feature anti-Semitic content, emphasising once more the nation's alliance with Nazi Germany and the racist shift of Mussolini's regime.

## Conclusion

- 19 The superheroes who once fought to save their beloved women or protect the innocent were replaced with valiant soldiers whose life-mission was to ensure the global dominance of the (allegedly) superior values of Fascism.
- 20 In just a few months, *L'Avventuroso* shifted from being a magazine steeped in American comics (and culture) and characterised by minimal text to becoming one dominated by Fascist ideology with a predominance of dense narratives designed to educate and indoctrinate young readers. *L'Avventuroso*, which previously captivated its audience with the excitement and adventure of American heroes, or with Italian imitations that featured the same dynamism and exotic settings, became a magazine filled with stories and articles that aligned with the regime's political and cultural agenda, becoming a tool for shaping young minds. This transition reflected the regime's efforts to control and co-opt cultural production, turning entertainment into an instrument of ideological dissemination. In other words, with the legislation approved at the end of 1938, *L'Avventuroso* was repurposed as a tool for Fascist propaganda, prioritising ideological content over the entertainment value that had initially made it

so popular. Another consequence of the autarchic legislation introduced by the Fascist regime, specifically shaped to change and control the children's press, was the predominance of Italian-made content in the form of comics, short stories, and educational columns – all infused with Fascist rhetoric. As shown by the examples presented here, themes such as self-sacrifice, militarism, honour, and a general sense of ideological superiority became central, with the magazine promoting these values at the expense of the entertainment that had initially conquered its loyal readership. Although the readers of *L'Avventuroso* were children raised within Mussolini's system of power, hence exposed to its rhetoric from an early age, this change diminished their interest in the magazine, resulting in declining sales and showing the limits of Fascist ideology and its project of moulding the minds of Italian youth to create “new men” (and women). This is evident in the trajectory of the magazine – rising to popularity due to American comics and subsequently declining just as those heroes vanished.

21 The case of *L'Avventuroso* illustrates how the Fascist regime successfully imposed its ideology on the children's press through legislation and censorship. The introduction of restrictive regulations, with penalties for non-compliance, such as the confiscation of magazines from newsstands, compelled publishers to adhere to Mussolini's nationalist and autarchic directives. While the brief reintroduction of American heroes in 1940 might be interpreted as a form of subtle resistance to Fascist censorship, the reality points to a more pragmatic motivation – business. Nerbini's editorial decisions appear to be primarily motivated by the need to maintain profitability. The reappearance of American comics, albeit disguised under Italian names and heavily obscured by the word-dominated format required by law, was likely meant to be a strategic move to re-engage readers and boost sales. Similarly, Nerbini's compliance with Fascist legislation should not be interpreted necessarily as an endorsement of the regime but as a survival strategy in a tightly controlled publishing environment.

22 The decline in sales following the autarchic shift in *L'Avventuroso* reflects the readers' dissatisfaction, just as the partial return of American heroes highlights Nerbini's attempt to win its audience back. When examining the trajectory of *L'Avventuroso*, it becomes clear that Nerbini's choices were largely driven by reader feedback rather than political allegiance. This is further supported by the magazine's target audience – older children and adolescents – whose political awareness and engagement during their consumption of the magazine were likely to be limited. While it is difficult to gauge the true impact of its ideological content on readers, the adoption by fighters in the Italian Resistance of battle names inspired by American comics featured in *L'Avventuroso* highlights the shift in imagination these comics introduced.<sup>38</sup>

23 Ultimately, the transformation of *L'Avventuroso* between 1938 and 1940 demonstrates how the Fascist regime successfully infiltrated the popular press, using comics as a vehicle to disseminate its ideology. Yet, it also highlights the enduring influence of American comics on Italian youth. Despite the regime's efforts to impose its values, the appeal of American adventure heroes remained powerful, revealing the limitations of Fascist propaganda in capturing the hearts and minds of its intended audience. This case also highlights how publishers and content creators navigated Mussolini's push for a self-sufficient national culture, free from foreign influence. In response to the regime's autarchic policies, Italian writers and creators of comics working for Nerbini were forced to adapt both their style and rhetoric to meet the expectations of Fascist ideology. The shift in contents from dynamic, American-inspired adventure comics to stories infused with nationalist and militaristic themes reflected the State's broader cultural campaign to promote Italy's ideological and political isolation from external influences.

24 These adaptations were not merely cosmetic changes; they represented a profound repositioning of popular media to align with the regime's vision of a “new Italian” identity. Writers and illustrators had to abandon the American tropes that had captivated Italian youth and replace them with narratives that glorified Fascist values like loyalty to the state above anything else. By examining this evolution in Italian comics, we gain insight into how cultural products were reshaped to serve political

ends, and how publishers like Nerbini balanced their commercial interests with the demands of state censorship.

25 At the same time, the persistence of American influences, even when disguised or suppressed, shows that cultural exchanges are difficult to fully eradicate. The continuing appeal of American heroes, despite their removal or transformation, suggests a complex interaction between imposed ideology and consumer preferences. Therefore, the development of Italian comics during this period offers a rich field for studying the interplay of external cultural forces and Fascist efforts over cultural control. It provides a valuable lens through which we can examine the broader cultural impact of both American and Fascist values on Italian society, revealing not only how culture can be shaped by politics but also how audiences and creators negotiate and resist such influences.

## Notes

1 See Leonardo Becciu, *Il fumetto in Italia*, Florence, Sansoni, 1971; Federico Zanettin (ed.), *Comics in Translations*, Routledge, 2014 and Caterina Sinibaldi, “Between Censorship and Innovation: The Translation of American Comics during Italian Fascism”, *New Readings*, vol. 16, 2016, p. 1–21, DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18573/newreadings.24>.

2 See Manuela Di Franco, “From Funnies to Adventures: Translation, Censorship, and Adaptation of American Comics in Fascist Italy”, *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, vol. 7, n° 2, 2023, p. 107–128.

3 See L. Becciu, *Il fumetto in Italia*, op. cit.; and Fabio Gadducci, Leonardo Gori, and Sergio Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, Battipaglia, NPE, 2011.

4 See Claudio Carabba, *Il fascismo a fumetti*, Florence, Guaraldi, 1973; and Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla grande guerra a Salò*, Milan, Einaudi, 2005.

5 In this article, the words “Fascism” and “Fascist” are capitalized when referring to Italian Fascism.

6 See Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015.

7 On *Il Corriere dei Piccoli* see Andrea Carta, *Il Corriere dei Piccoli. Una supernova tra le riviste d'autore*, Battipaglia, NPE, 2023; Fabio Gadducci and Matteo Stefanelli (eds.), *Antonio Rubino, Gli anni del Corriere dei piccoli*, Bologna, Black Velvet, 2009; and Giovanna Ginex (ed.), *Corriere dei piccoli: storie, fumetto e illustrazione per ragazzi*, Milan, Skira, 2009.

8 On Fascist culture and its aim at self-sufficiency, see Oreste Del Buono (ed.), *Eia, eia, eia, Alalà! La stampa italiana sotto il fascismo, 1919–1943*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1971; Roger Griffin and Matthew Feldman (eds.), *Fascism. Critical Concepts in Political Science*, vol. 3: *Fascism and Culture*, London, Routledge, 2004; Alessandra Tarquini, *Storia della cultura fascista*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011; and Francesca Billiani, *National Cultures and Foreign Narratives in Italy, 1903–1943*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

9 *Relazione di Dino Alfieri al Senato del 1937*, in Archivio Centrale di Stato, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, b. 113, f. 2. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

10 Quoted in Pino Boero, Carmine De Luca, *La letteratura per l'infanzia*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1995, p. 171.

11 Decree of the Ministry of Popular Culture on children's periodical press, quoted in *La Stampa*, 18 November 1938.

12 Giorgio Vecchietti, “La rivincita di Pinocchio”, *La Stampa*, 28 December 1938.

13 See F. Gadducci, L. Gori, S. Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, op. cit., p. 228–229 and p. 232; see also chapter six, “Il ritorno degli eroi”, p. 226–259 for the exchange between Nerbini and KFS and original archive material.

14 Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media*, Bari, Laterza, 1975; George L. Mosse, *The Culture of Western Europe. The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Chicago, McNally, 1961.

15 Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self. The Political Culture of Interwar Italy*, London-Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997; Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

16 Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1993.

17 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *La cultura fascista*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000.

18 Chiara Ferrari, *The Rhetoric of Violence and Sacrifice in Fascist Italy*. Mussolini, Gadda, Vittorini, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2013.

19 See, for example, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007; and Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996.

20 Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna. The Americanization of the World, 1869–1922*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005.

21 Emilio Salgari (1868–1911) is considered the father of the Italian adventure novel. He captivated readers with exotic tales of distant lands and heroic protagonists. Through his prolific works, he pioneered a genre that combined action, suspense, and exploration, inspiring Italian popular literature and fuelling a national fascination with adventure. He is best known for his series *Sandokan The Tigers of Mompracem*, and *The Black Corsair*. On Emilio Salgari, see Alessandro Portelli, “Emilio Salgari’s *The Two Tigers*: Exoticism, Anti-imperialism and Ambivalence”, in: Shaswati Mazumdar (ed.), *Insurgent Sepoys. Europe views the Revolt of 1857*, New Delhi, Routledge, 2011, p. 211–220; and Armando Bisanti, “Il capitano Guido Altieri, ovvero Emilio Salgari e il fascino esotico della contemporaneità”, *Critica letteraria*, n° 151, 2011, p. 289–302. On the myth of America in Fascist Italy see Dominique Fernandez, *Il mito dell’America negli intellettuali italiani*, Caltanissetta, Sciascia, 1969; Piero Garofalo, “Myths and Counter Myths: the Making of America in Fascist Italy”, *Italian Culture*, vol. 15, n° 1, 1997, p. 91–110.

22 On Fascist Italy’s anti-Americanism see Emilio Cecchi, *America amara*, Florence, Sansoni, 1938; Michel Beynet, *L’image de l’Amérique dans la culture italienne de l’entre-deux-guerres*, Aix-en-Provence, Université de Provence, 1990; and Romano Vulpitta, *L’antiamericanismo in Italia. Un problema di identità nazionale*, Rome, Settimo Sigillo, 2012.

23 William E. Lingelbach, “Italy Demands a Place in the Sun”, *Current History* (1916–1940), vol. 36, n° 4, 1932, p. 495–498; Christopher Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy*, London, Vintage Publishing, 2013.

24 Quoted in F. Gadducci, L. Gori, S. Lama, *Eccetto Topolino*, op. cit., p. 170–171, emphasis in original.

25 Javier Rodrigo, *Fascist Italy in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939*, London, Routledge, 2021, especially p. 133–168.

26 See Viviana Castelli, “Salgari, Puccini e L’Oriente. Cultura popolare e formazione di un ‘immaginario esotico’ collettivo”, in: Virgilio Ilari (ed.), *Italy on the Rimland. Storia militare di una Penisola eurasiatica*, vol. 2, Roma, Società Italiana di Storia Militare-Nadir Media Edizioni, 2019, p. 329–338.

27 In October 1938, American comics progressively ceased to be published in *L’Avventuroso*. On 18 December 1938, Nerbini replied publicly “to the many letters, not always... courteous, that we have been receiving for some time”, reminding readers of the new directives emanated by the MPC.

28 Although the plots of these comics could be interpreted as a form of resistance to the Fascist regime – depicting battles against villains who seek power through any means, potentially alluding to the Fascist expansionist agenda and military support for other Fascist regimes – they ultimately hinge on a notion of justice that could easily be co-opted to serve Mussolini’s interests. This aligns with the Fascist rhetoric portraying the regime as the protector against the communist threat.

29 Cedric J. Lowe, and Frank Mazari, *Italian Foreign Policy 1870–1940*, New York, Routledge, 2002 [1975], p. 363.

30 See Nicola Tranfaglia, *Ministri e Giornalisti: la guerra e il MinCulPop (1939–1943)*, Turin, Einaudi, 2005.

31 *L’Avventuroso*, 18 December 1938.

32 Some examples of these columns include: “Discoveries and Inventions”, informing children about the discoveries made by “Italian genius”; and “Heroes of Imperial Italy”, featuring profiles of historical figures from ancient Rome. Sometimes instead of a column, some articles on general knowledge were featured, always with an educational scope.

33 *L’Avventuroso*, 8 January 1939.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Notably, the title appears in Spanish – *Volveran [sic] banderas victoriosas* – which powerfully reinforces the connection between Italy and the Spanish Civil War, deepening the sense of shared purpose and alliance between the two regimes.




36 The Italian title uses the term “ardito”, underlining the inherently Fascist value of courage.

37 Emilio Fancelli, “Romanzo di un ardito”, *L’Avventuroso*, 14 July 1940

38 See Franco Castelli, “Antropologia linguistica della Resistenza. I nomi di battaglia partigiani”, *Rivista italiana di dialettologia*, vol. X, 1986, p. 161–218; and Giovanni Pietro Vitali,

“L’onomastica antieroica della città di Alba”, *Il nome nel testo. Rivista internazionale di onomastica letteraria*, vol. XIV, 2012, p. 359–372.

Table des illustrations

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