

POLITICS, MOTOR SPORT AND THE ITALIAN CAR INDUSTRY 1893-1947

di Aldo Zana

Il testo che segue, in inglese, è il contributo chiesto ad Aldo Zana per la Parte III del volume "The History and Politics of Motor Racing" dai tre curatori, professori universitari in Australia, Gran Bretagna, Nuova Zelanda. Il volume è una raccolta di 29 approfonditi contributi di taglio e contenuto accademico, dedicati al rapporto tra politica, società, cultura, industria e automobilismo sportivo. La Parte III è focalizzata sulle corse e l'industria automobilistica in Gran Bretagna e Italia. Su quest'ultimo Paese ha scritto Aldo Zana. Il testo è rivolto a un pubblico internazionale che può non conoscere i momenti essenziali vissuti in Italia dalle corse e dall'industria automobilistica.

Le 772 pagine del libro, solo testo, cartonato nell'edizione a stampa e disponibile anche in e-book e pdf, trattano temi diversificati tra i quali l'automobilismo e la politica del gender (come va di moda oggi definire la presenza femminile) e della razza (altro tema di moda). Più vicini e di maggiore attualità e interesse sono argomenti quali il rapporto tra le corse e le televisioni, i social, i declinanti media a stampa. Interessanti le pagine che gettano luce sulle oscure manovre finanziarie di Bernie Ecclestone nel trasformare la F1 in un media business globale. E diventare la persona più ricca della Gran Bretagna.

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Politics, Motor Sport and the Italian Car Industry, 1893-1947

This paper focuses principally on the years from the first appearance of a motor car in the country through to 1940, when Italy entered World War Two.

The years before the Great War were a time of slow-growing mutual understanding amongst politicians, government, and the emerging motor car industry, which exploited races for market leverage.

The two decades between the Great War and Second World War saw the apex of motor racing celebrations as the fascist regime invested it with their key concepts: tight discipline, sheer power, daring courage, quest for victory, total supremacy.

The new Italy that emerged from mid-1945 onwards set a different stage, on which motor sport was still popular yet it became more autonomous without direct connections with politics or government. The focus was on the impact of the car industry on economic and social issues.

Humble origins

The story (or, maybe, the tale) goes that the first ever petrol car running in Italy arrived by train on January 2, 1893 in Schio, a small hillside town in the Vicenza county (in the Veneto Region). The unusual destination completed the 1892 order by Mr. Gaetano Rossi, the tycoon founder of one of the premier textile factories in Italy.

The car was a French Peugeot Type-3 animated by a German-designed V2 565 cc engine, with a 2 HP output.

Such a humble entry of the country into the new world of the automobile went unnoticed by the two pioneers striving to produce the first Italian-made petrol car: Michele Lanza in Turin and Enrico Bernardi in Padua.

Once again, the story never determined who was the first Italian to manufacture and drive a roadworthy internal combustion vehicle. The Miari & Giusti company, manufacturers of

vehicles based on the Bernardi's invention, produced a handful of motor cars between 1896 and 1901. The former's company factory (rather, workshop) was located in Turin, the town shortly to become the cradle of the Italian automobile industry.

Politics, administration, and government didn't care about the nascent industry. Italy was then struggling to find the exit path from decades of widespread illiteracy, high international indebtedness, underdeveloped capital markets, lack of primary energy and raw materials (principally, coal and steel) to feed the new factories of the industrial revolution, which in Italy arrived late.

Social unrest was at its zenith in the years before the new century: in 1898 in Milan, a peaceful march of workers on strike to demand better working conditions and decent salaries was attacked by soldiers, who fired on the crowd, killing 82¹. The revenge came two years later when an anarchist from America shot and killed the king of Italy, Umberto I.

Paradoxically, a superiority complex permeated much of the country, triggered by the government of Francesco Crispi, who wanted to gain a front row place among the leading European countries in military power, colonial acquisition, technology, and innovation. This policy won over the industrialists seeking wealth through the new mechanical industries, with the automobile industry leading the way.

Milan was the leading manufacturing centre of the country and the town already numbered 21 marques producing automobiles in 1901: two among them, Bianchi and Isotta Fraschini, were destined for a long life and significant growth. Yet by 1904 it was Turin which was the standard bearer for the Italian car industry thanks to Fiat, established in 1899, Itala (1904) and another seven minor marques located in town. The count had risen to 34 by 1906.

Turin had already been the venue for the first motor car race officially recorded in Italy: on May 18, 1895 five intrepid *automobilistes* left the town aiming for Asti, another town in Piedmont, 29 miles away. It took the winner, a Mr. Federman, the whole day, from sunrise to sunset to be back in Turin. He drove a Daimler Victoria Phaeton as he was the Italian representative of the German company.

917 motor vehicles circulated in Italy in 1901, quite a low figure in comparison to France, USA, and UK, yet a threefold increase over the previous year. In the same year the overall output of domestic motor car plants amounted to 301, the balance being imports from France and Germany.

Motoring entered the fast lane thanks to the astonishing success of the 1901 Milan and 1902 Turin car shows. The former sold 120,000-plus entry tickets; the latter strengthened the domestic leadership of the local marques as a follow-on of the first ever Italian motor car show in April 1900¹.

In those early years of the new century neither the government nor the army realized the promise of the automobile despite the increasing attention created by races and their media coverage.

Motor racing moves out of the cradle

The pioneer of international motor racing in Italy was a rich bourgeois from Palermo, Sicily: Vincenzo Florio (1883-1958) of the Marsala liqueur international fame. Besides the car shows in Turin and Milan as well as some minor local events recorded as racing contests, Florio was the key promoter of the September 1905 Brescia Motor Racing Week. The feature race was the Coppa Florio, 324 miles on a three-sided circuit south of the town. The winner was Giovanni Battista Raggio, a gentleman driver, driving a 100 HP (14.5 litre) Itala, the marque established the previous year in Turin. He won in 4 hours, 46 minutes and 4 seconds, at an average 65.16 mph, and without suffering any trouble with the tyres, while his fiercest competitor, Vincenzo Lancia (1881-1937) driving a Fiat, was forced to finish as a backrunner by too many tyre changes².

Florio decided to launch a new competition in his native Sicily to promote the island as a vacation site for wealthy Europeans. History goes that he conceived the race when he attended the 1905 Gordon Bennet Cup in France. A circuit without railway level crossings was found in the hills and mountains south of Palermo, with start and finish on a straight along the sea, close to the mainline railway to Messina to facilitate the attendance of large crowds. The Grande Circuito (Outer Circuit) delle Madonie was tracked: 92.6 miles a lap, highest elevation at 3,413 feet.

For most of the peasants living up the Madonie hills, the vision of a motor car was a devil-like novelty, more exciting than for the inhabitants of the richer North of the Peninsula. As customary with Vincenzo Florio, the purse was generous, richer for constructors than drivers. On May 6, 1906, at 6:00 am Vincenzo Lancia, driving a Fiat 24/40 HP, 7.4 litres, was the first of 22 competitors from Italy and France, to be released by the chief timekeeper. At the end of the grueling three laps, the winner on elapsed time was Alessandro Cagno (1883-1971), in an Itala 35/40 HP, who cashed the 25,000 Lire of the winner purse³.

The broad (of course, relative to the times) media coverage and the fascination of motor racing pushed the domestic motor car industry to grow as a significant contributor to the country's economic system. The strongest players in the industry survived the financial crisis of 1907-1908, which forced out of the market the many underfunded and poorly managed small companies producing too few and too expensive vehicles.

The government in those years, known to historians as "Belle Époque", understood, at last, the value of the motor car for the military. Many hundreds of trucks were ordered from Fiat, Itala, Isotta Fraschini and Ceirano for the war against the Ottoman Empire to conquer Libya. The ruggedness of the soil limited the range and scope of the motor trucks: they were the losers against camels and horses. Nevertheless, the connection of the motor car industry with government and politics was finally established.

Such a connection switched the focus from motor racing as the most effective way of promotion to lobbying at the top government levels, while the ever-increasing cost of racing forced the leading marques to establish departments specialized in the design and production of racing cars. The huge investment was only sustainable by the largest concerns, with Fiat virtually alone in Italian motor racing until the mid-Twenties.

Since the first decade of the century Fiat had widened the reach of their racing program to the whole of Europe and America. Vincenzo Lancia and Emanuele Cetrino (1879-1908) became popular in the US due to their achievements in major events like the Vanderbilt Cup and the Beach Races in Ormond Beach, Florida. The American ace-driver David Bruce-Brown (1887-1912) began his meteoric career as riding mechanic on the Fiats driven by Cetrino and met his death in a Fiat in practice for the 1912 American Great Prize in Milwaukee.

A turning point: the Great War

The Great War was a turning point for the Italian motor industry. The Italian government, at last, fully understood the need for motor vehicles, ordering 32,000 of them for the army. They were confined to short-range transport behind the lines because the Italian war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire was fought in the mountains and the front was constituted as closely facing trenches. A war of movement supported by motor vehicles was then a concept fully unknown to the Italian Chiefs of Staff. Nevertheless, they were in favor of exploiting the newest warfare weapon: aircraft, even though they were forced to go to French and British manufacturers for them. Nevertheless, Italian motor car companies received fat contracts to produce aero engines under French licence: a more profitable business than delivering trucks to the army. The long delays in outfitting production lines and the overall laggardness of Italian metallurgical and mechanical industries forced the government either to cancel or to pay only a fraction of the price because the products became available too late - at the end of hostilities and, often, even later.

The situation was nearly lethal for Itala, which never fully recovered from the failure to ensure the timely delivery of the 3,000 aero engines to be built under licence of Hispano-Suiza⁴. The severe social and political unrest after the Great War was terminated by the fascist government in 1922. It became a totalitarian regime in 1925, a forerunner of Nazi Germany.

A new scenario to exploit

Fiat emerged from the Great War as the dominant motor group in Italy and widened its reach and scope into aircraft and large diesel engines for ships. They also continued with motor racing and developed a series of innovative racing machines: these included the first racer to win in Europe with a supercharged car in 1923.

Fiat now committed themselves to an unscrupulous political exploitation of motor racing. Fiat victories were rendered as victories of the Italian genius, for its unrivalled superiority, and of course for the will to power in new fascist Italy.

Mussolini himself lowered the blue flag at the start of the Italian and European Grand Prix at Monza Autodromo on September 9, 1923. The media reserved the best of their glorification to the imposing presence of Mussolini, already elevated to the title of "Duce" ('leader', from the Latin 'dux') for his, purportedly, bringing back to life the past glories of the Roman Empire.

The *Gazzetta dello Sport*, the largest circulation Milan-based sport daily paper sold across Italy, opened the lead article about the race: "The whole of youthful Italy, the Italy of sports, the Italy always moving ahead, the dynamic Italy of the vital speed that is a multiplier of life, was lined up this morning waiting for the signal from Il Duce, indomitable master of will, his arm was outstretched in the way of the Roman Salute every time the red cars flashed past in front of him". (In truth, Mussolini left the Autodromo immediately after the start, therefore he couldn't have raised his right arm at every passing of the dominant Fiats).

Senator Giovanni Agnelli (1866-1945), Fiat's founder, president, CEO, and largest shareholder, was in the pits together with the top brass of the company and the designers of the racing department. Of course, they all paid the due respects to Mussolini when he paraded in front of the cars on the grid.

The race, 497 miles, was a long and boring affair. Sunbeam, a brand based in Wolverhampton in the British West Midlands and then the fiercest rival of Fiat, didn't appear and a faint opposition was provided by the single Miller 122 driven by the American star-driver Jimmy Murphy, the unusual and underpowered Benz RH (the first rear-engined Grand Prix car), the French Voisins and Rolland-Pilains.

The Fiats came home with Carlo Salamano (1891-1968) first and Felice Nazzaro (1881-1946) second 24 seconds behind. Only an unbearable pain in the left wrist forced Pietro Bordino (1887-1928) to stop at mid-race and deprive Fiat of a clean 1-2-3 sweep.

When the ageing Nazzaro was called by Fiat to rejoin the team, the *Gazzetta dello Sport* celebrated with the headline: "Felice Nazzaro will race the Italian G.P. for Fiat – Italy's first and foremost". And to further flatter Fiat (one of the largest buyers of advertising in the country) the article added: "We convey our profound appreciation to the men managing Fiat, first of all to the senator Agnelli. He understood that the honour of the company and, even before, the honour of Italy, required Fiat to vindicate the defeat in Tours and to triumph in Monza". The final sentence: "To Fiat, to Alfa, to all our drivers, we address the wish, the appeal, the battle-cry, the order: "Win for Italy"."

The effect of the Fiat victory found a brilliant recap in the *Gazzetta dello Sport* headline when reporting on the race: "Italy in the forefront again. The red Fiat cars triumphed". And *Corriere della Sera* (the largest circulation daily paper in the Milan and Monza area) wouldn't be outdone. The first lines of the opener on their front page flashed: "Our triumph was and is complete and gigantic. Italian drivers, Italian cars, Italian tyres – Pirelli – won against all competitors"⁵.

The media reports confirmed the complete alignment between the fascist regime and the car manufacturers when it came to proclaiming the Italian superiority in every facet of modernity, automobiles and also aircraft (yet the latter is another long and quite different tale).

Adhering with supine resignation to the orders of the regime, both media and car industry downplayed the incidents and the deaths of drivers: a normal occurrence when driving those unsafe, often unreliable racing cars. Nothing, not even a death, should have disturbed the triumphs of Italian skill and know-how. The news of the death of Ugo Sivocci (1885-1923), works driver of Alfa Romeo, on the eve of the 1923 Italian and European Grand Prix was ignored by the dailies until the day of his funeral in Milano on September 12, four days after the deadly incident.

If racing were for the glory and power of Italy, the dead were “Fallen Heroes” to be glorified and then very quickly forgotten. This was the fate of Enrico Giaccone (1890-1923), Fiat works driver, who was killed on August 28, 1923 during the early trials for the Monza race. Bordino, seated beside him in the car, suffered a fracture of the left wrist which, later in the Grand Prix, forced him out at mid-race.

The censorship by the regime of news about racing accidents found a blatant example in the case of the tragedy in the Italian Grand Prix at Monza on September 9, 1928. Emilio Materassi (1899-1928), then a front row driver, was killed together with 21 persons standing in the front of the grandstand. It would be the worst motor racing incident anywhere until Le Mans in 1955 (See Stephen Wagg’s chapter on the politics of safety in motor racing in this book). Nothing was either written or said about it in the news of the day and the whole issue was soon forgotten.

Mussolini, the number one testimonial

Such was the aura around motor racing that Mussolini committed himself to mime the role of a racing driver when demonstrating his penchant for Alfa Romeo. He used to drive at such a crazy and unsafe speed that even Enzo Ferrari, then the works racing driver, was scared to death when he had to assist Mussolini in a test run of a new Alfa Romeo RL/SS sports car he had personally delivered in 1924 as a present from the company.

Mussolini also believed in his ability as an aircraft pilot, preferring bombers as background to his photo-ops for which he was clad in flying overalls, goggles, and cap. And right arm stretched in the roman salute.

On August 25, 1925 he signed a message to be forwarded to the motor car people, from the bosses to the factory apprentices, from the racing drivers to the (rich, very rich) owners of touring cars. It proclaimed “The car is the machine of our time, the typical machine of our period. It is an instrument which multiplies our living opportunities through space. It is a delicate and powerful machine hosting titanic rhythms in its gentle heart. I dream of cars able to easily move through earth, sky, and sea and come back. We will have them, and then we’ll adhere to the Corporation of the Integral Speed”⁶.

Today, it’s a too easy a job to mock such an essay of lunatic poetry and foolish foresight. It was then a well-thought move to push the Italian motor manufacturers to adhere to the directives of the fascist government, that is, to focus on the domestic market and avoid costly innovations aiming at keeping up with international competition.

Mussolini’s clear and proven affection for motor cars is often generalised to the whole fascist regime as an evolution of “Futurism”, the art movement created in Italy in the early years of the century. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the magniloquent guru of Futurism, wrote in 1916: “The magnificence of the [all] Creation became richer through the beauty of speed. A racing car sporting a long bonnet adorned with big tubes resembling steel snakes spitting explosive breath is a violent god made of a new steel race”⁷.

The theory is an untenable one. When the fascist party was founded by Mussolini in 1919, the battle cry was for violence in order to establish a totalitarian regime in which the State

dominated every side and facet of the entire society. Nobody in the party was so educated and acculturated as to be interested in an art movement which promoted war, speed, recklessness as the artistic credo. By sheer chance, those were some of the keywords of the fascists and it became a too easy follow-on to define, many years later, Futurism as the forerunner of Italian fascism.

Protectionism and victories on the circuits

The government agreed to Fiat's request to protect the domestic market from foreign competitors seeking to open assembly plants in Italy to avoid the excessive import duties: Ford, for instance, had a plant in Trieste and Citroen had one in Milan. The advances of General Motors to establish a joint venture with Isotta Fraschini in Milan were promptly rejected following governmental pressure triggered by senator Agnelli. We cannot forget that the Twenties and the Thirties were decades of strong protectionism across the whole of Europe.

The output of motor vehicles in Italy remained low, despite the propaganda generated by every car industry player: in 1923 total production (including trucks and buses) amounted to 37,450 units and this was raised to 63,800 in 1926. Export was the main market: from 12,773 units (56% of total production) in 1923 to 34,191 (54%) in 1926. Fiat alone accounted for 81% of overall 1926 vehicle domestic production. In 1925, 117,500 motor vehicles circulated in Italy, which translated into 1 motor vehicle for every 271 inhabitants. In the same year, the ratio was one to 7 in the US, one to 52 in UK and one to 53 in France⁸.

There was still a long way to go to motorize the country, furthermore because by 1930 exports still amounted to 44% of production. Despite the heavy taxation on imports from other European countries, the foreign market was once again the most profitable for the Italian car manufacturers, due to the focus on medium-high range vehicles preferred by the more affluent foreign customers.

Through the Twenties the victories of Fiat and Alfa Romeo in international races helped to promote the everyday use of the automobile in Italy while supporting the foreign market penetration. By the end of 1926, three prominent and rich gentlemen of Brescia had launched a powerful program for the effective promotion of the motor car. They were Aymo Maggi (1903-1961), a nobleman fond of Bugatti and other hi-performance cars; Renzo Castagneto (1891-1971), a road racing motor cyclist and Franco Mazzotti, count Biancinelli Faglia (1904-1942), whose family was among the largest shareholder of Isotta Fraschini. They were joined by the authoritative journalist Giovanni Canestrini (1893-1975) of the *Gazzetta dello Sport* daily and won the approval of the Brescia fascist chief, Augusto Turati (1888-1965). On March 27, 1927 the "Coppa delle Mille Miglia" was born of the idea of showcasing everyday automobiles all across the country while racing on the open roads that the government had begun to improve. Yet, neither the most emphatic propaganda nor a people-oriented race could conceal the reality of a modest motor industry, light-years behind the structure, methodology, volumes, commercial and after-sale service organizations of Ford and the other leading US marques. Italian manufacturers offered cars at too a high price because the cost of production was excessive due to the small volumes and the as yet unfinished application of the principles of Fordism and Taylorism.

These principles key managers, technicians, and designers of the Fiat concern had observed in their study tours to Detroit and factored into the construction of the new huge plant of the Lingotto, Turin, in 1922. This plant was an industrial complex never seen before across Europe: 1.6 million square feet of covered surface, due to be doubled in a few years, buildings five floors high with a continuous front 1.4 mile long. Raw materials and components entered the ground floor, production moved up through the floors till the finished car (more precisely, the fully finished chassis) was ready to the test run on the track on top of the building, 0.60 mile long with two steeply banked turns⁹.

The interconnection of the motor industry with the government found the institutional go-between in the association of the manufacturers, which became increasingly permeated by the governmental fascist representatives, which reduced, slowly and steadily, its influence as a negotiation platform.

For the manufacturers, motor racing was the most effective way to throw sand in the eyes of the regime and the whole Italian people. The media built up the tale of Tazio Nuvolari (1892-1953) against Achille Varzi (1904-1948), the two greatest Italian racing drivers in the years between the two wars. Their personal behaviour and the driving style were at the opposite: Tazio, vehement, always close to the limit (and, often, even beyond); Achille, cool, rational, straight to the objective. And they always raced one against the other: if Achille drove Alfa Romeo, Tazio chose Maserati, if Achille was due to join Maserati, Tazio joined the German Auto Union. The perfect recipe to win people's passion even in the difficult times of the Thirties.

And difficult they were. The aftermath of the 1929 Wall Street crash hurt the European racing environment and Italian car manufacturers deeply. Alfa Romeo was saved by the State and diverted to a focus on the production of aero engines under licence of the British Bristol company; Itala went bankrupt, Lancia was too small to feel the troubles, Fiat survived thanks to their size and redirecting production towards entry-level, lower-cost cars.

To maintain positive relations with the fascists was of paramount importance to Fiat: in 1932 their products constituted 74.4% of the total Italian motor vehicle output. In the same year they named "Balilla" the new entry-level sedan, 'Balilla' being the nickname of a member of the fascist youth organization. To tell the truth, the car wasn't priced low at 10,800 Lire. i.e. three years of the per-capita Italian GDP. Nevertheless, it sold well: in two years 41,000 units entered the market. In the same 1932 the number of cars owned by Italian families was 188,331¹⁰.

Fiat terminated their racing presence in 1927 when senator Agnelli ordered the destruction of all the racers still in the department together with drawings, designs and technical documents Alfa Romeo had provided the continuation of the winning record of Fiat since 1925. If the GPR-1, the first racer of the marque in 1923, was a failure triggered by its withdrawal from the Italian and European Grand Prix in Monza as a sign of respect for the death of Sivocci, the 1925 Type-P2 was an enduring success. The many similarities with the Grand Prix Fiats came mainly from the design of Vittorio Jano (1891-1965), who was "stolen" by Enzo Ferrari from the Turin racing department and became the chief race car designer at Alfa Romeo.

Alfa Romeo, despite producing a small volume of hi-performance and very expensive cars, applied in their racing department the concept, the quality, the organization of a large factory. Furthermore, they could count on a workforce proud to be "Alfisti" with the mission to strive for victories in the name of Italy's glory. Another building block of the marque excellence was the subterranean rivalry with the Turin company, even though the direct one on the tracks lasted less than two years.

On top of this there was the Mussolini's personal penchant for the marque. He was always welcomed by the Alfa Romeo workers while, on the contrary, he understood the hostile feelings of the Fiat workforce and management when in 1932 he paid a visit to the Lingotto plant to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the fascist revolution. The outcome was a permanently negative feeling on the part of Mussolini against senator Agnelli (named a senator in 1923) while he had to accept that the company was anyway essential to the objectives of the imperial will of power of fascism.

By contrast, Mussolini praised the Alfa Romeos as being: "Fast like my thought"¹¹. And fast they were, establishing a leadership in Grand Prix racing thanks to their first "Monoposto" Type P3 driven by aces of the like of Varzi, Nuvolari, Louis Chiron (1899-1979), Rudy Caracciola (1901-1959) and René Dreyfus (1905-1993). The surprise victory of Tazio Nuvolari in a P3 Alfa Romeo, in the 1935 German Grand Prix is still inscribed in the myths of motor sport.

The 1934 750 Kg Grand Prix formula opened the years of German dominance by Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union. The Italian competition, Alfa Romeo, was annihilated. Politics and propaganda weren't any longer enough to hide the endless string of defeats, made more difficult to accept by the "betrayal" of Varzi in signing for Auto Union to solve the teething troubles of the rear-engined P-Wagen.

The State support to Alfa Romeo got some payback from the October 12, 1936 victory of Nuvolari, driving an Alfa Romeo 12C-36, in the George Vanderbilt Cup on the winding Roosevelt Raceway built in Long Island, a few miles east of New York City. Without the German teams, Nuvolari and the Scuderia Ferrari teammates Antonio Brivio (1905-1995) and Nino Farina (1906-1966) had an easy task. Behind Nuvolari, in second came the Frenchman Jean-Pierre Wimille (1908-1949) in a Bugatti T59/50B. Brivio finished third, 1 min 4 sec behind Wimille due to an unscheduled pit-stop in the closing stage of the race. Farina was DNF (Did Not Finish).

It was an event to celebrate well beyond media decency: an Italian victory in US on Columbus Day. The *Gazzetta dello Sport* opened with the headline: "Tazio Nuvolari takes a bullying win on the American continent routing all opponents from the Old and New Worlds and proving once again the supremacy of the Italian auto industry". The side article on the front page carried the headline: "Italian triumph on the anniversary of the everlasting glory of Christopher Columbus".

Italian daily newspapers were too eager to glorify the country's motor racing supremacy as the result of the wise and effective politics of the regime to take notice of what Fiorello La Guardia, the mayor of New York City, said at the prizegiving ceremony: "We are all proud of Nuvolari. This is a great day in the history of Italian motor sport. From now on it will be difficult to beat the Italians. The country is on the move and, as long as men like Nuvolari set the pace, Italians will soon be the dominant player in the sport".

La Guardia's statement reflected the now-established custom of presenting motor races as a fight fought by national heroes aiming for the further glory of Italy and fascism. The mid-Thirties recorded the climax of the regime, and the largest percentage of Italians felt proud to live in fascist Italy. Enzo Ferrari, the owner and general manager of the Scuderia entering the Alfa Romeos winners in United States, wrote his commentary on the race: "This year in which the Nation wonderfully achieved the supreme mission that history and politics committed to the fascist revolution, the Empire has been at last re-established thanks solely to the power of the rejuvenated Italy."¹²

In 1936 Italy proclaimed the conquest of the Empire of Ethiopia, the independent East African country in the mainland next to Eritrea and Somalia, which were already Italian colonies. It was a war of cold-blooded aggression, tragically late on the colonial conquests of the nineteenth century, which resulted in the death of thousands of civilians by poison gas and mass aerial bombings.

The aggression was condemned by the League of Nations (the pre-war precursor of the United Nations), which imposed embargoes on Italian exports and imports. This embargo lasted roughly a year and was rather easy to circumvent. For instance, the Italian army managed to buy some 3,000 Ford medium trucks directly from the company plants in Detroit and Dagenham, UK. Italian-made trucks had proved to be too heavy, large and unreliable to negotiate the tracks on the Ethiopian highlands, the terrain being more suitable for camels, mules, and horses.

The Vanderbilt Cup victory was therefore a unique event to revive the links of Italian motor racing with its government. Mussolini went to visit the Milano Alfa Romeo plant on October 27, 1936 to celebrate the American victory and urge everyone to work harder for the glory of Italy.

Once again, it was left to Enzo Ferrari to write the compulsory closing lines of the article reporting on the visit: "The last words of the Duce oration are welcomed with a supreme ovation, never ending"¹³.

Sliding towards a new war

The years 1936 and 1937 saw a new word become widespread across the country: "Autarchy". Italian companies and the populace at large were ordered to buy and use products - food, clothes, motor vehicles and energy - all made 100% in Italy. The order stemmed from the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations and was exploited by the regime to mitigate the growing international isolation of the country, whose currency was too weak to support imports and whose politics was moving towards the fateful and tragic embrace with Nazi Germany.

The 1937 count of motor vehicles produced by the domestic factories amounted to 26,631 units, pushed +25% up by the success of the new Fiat smallest car, the 500 "Topolino" (Mickey Mouse). Priced at Lire 8,900 when the pro-capita GNP amounted to Lire 3,200¹³, it didn't comply with the directive of providing every family a car, yet it was affordable enough to stimulate artisans to produce special lightweight bodies and provide the right platform for many racing, "Sports", versions. The engine was usually tuned and bored to 626 cc for a 25 HP output at 4,600 rpm (figures of the Siata racing version). The body was shaped as an aluminum light open racer.

Racing Topolinos soon became the entry-level into motor racing, adhering to the loose rules imposed by the Automobile Club d'Italia. They became so popular that a new Class was established for the domestic races. In 1938, 28 Sports Topolinos started in the Mille Miglia and they also became the backbone of the many local events on dangerous circuits laid across towns and sided by rows of houses. Safety was a forgotten word. The worst accident happened during the Mille Miglia: on April 3, 1938, while racing through Bologna, the driver of a Lancia Aprilia lost control and smashed into a group of bystanders, killing ten, seven children among them, and wounding 24.

In the late Thirties, the motor car industry deeply modified its relationship with politics, i.e. the fascists: one-way only. Companies scaled down on the government's orders and silently suffered through the restrictions on the availability of imported fuels, the backwardness of the Italian metallurgical industry, the lowered production volumes due to the stagnant and too small domestic market and the shutting down of the export channels.

If Mussolini and the regime had dreamed of a motorized country based on modern roads (the first Italian motorway opened in 1924 and ran from Milan to the North) and state-of-the-art factories producing reliable, elegant, and correctly priced cars, they had tragically failed. The objective of 700,000 units yearly output planned by the fascist government for 1938 was actually not reached until 1961 (759,140) in what was then a completely different world, with regard to GNP and democratic government.

The 1938 output (the final whole year before the war) peaked at less than 54,000.

Anyhow, Italy as a whole had to flatter Mussolini. Senator Agnelli signed a telegram of slavish obedience to Il Duce when the road tax on cars was lowered for 1939 in a last-minute move to improve the circulating fleet: "Fiat technicians and workers join me in acclaiming you, Duce, who opened a new era for empowering the development of the motor car industry and for promoting additional labour. As ever, our products and our personal feelings follow your orders on the autarchy. Yours faithfully"¹⁴.

Gone were the times when the red racers flashed round the European tracks at a winning speed. Alfa Romeo exploited State money to carry the flag against the all-conquering Germans. And they secured positive outcomes only when the German marques Mercedes and Auto Union didn't show up, like in the 1936 George Vanderbilt Cup. Maserati was building a visible presence in the Voiturettes (little cars)

ⁱ races despite being a very small company committed to racing cars only and lacking any significant support from the State, the regime or the media. Nevertheless, racing continued to enjoy the support of the top representatives of the regime, more interested in media publicity when appearing on the circuits than hoping to witness victories like in the past.

Mercedes-Benz made a fool of the Italians at the 1939 Tripoli Grand Prix, the opening event of the season held on the fast Mellaha circuit close to Tripoli in the Italian colony of Libya. It was one of the most modern and better structured racing sites in the world, usually hosting either Formule Libre or Grand Prix races. Knowing that the Germans would have once more been the winners if they had entered their Grand Prix cars, Italians changed the formula only six months in advance: they selected the Voiturette Class setting the stage for a triumphal show by the 1.5 litre Maseratis and the new and promising Alfa Romeo 158.

What a surprise when on May 7, 1939 in Tripoli Mercedes-Benz entered two brand new W165 supercharged V8 1.5 litre single-seaters, designed, built, and race-readied in six months. They won hands-down.

Italians, including Marshal Italo Balbo (1896-1940), a top-brass of the fascist regime and governor of Libya, had to swallow from the poison cup once again. It was another blow against additional moves to promote the national motor industry and it terminated the overemphasized government support to racing showcased in the past decades.

Furthermore, World War Two was approaching.

The rise of a new scenario after World War Two

In the final day of April 1945 when the war ended in Northern Italy, which had been occupied by the Wehrmacht and run by a puppet fascist government, 80% of Italian road and rail infrastructure was either destroyed or badly damaged; the hydroelectric plants were still working by 90%; the industrial framework was damaged by bombing yet it was preserved from the complete destruction planned by the retreating German troops thanks to the insurrection driven by the Resistenza (Maquis) fighters and supported by the workforces who protected factories and machinery.¹⁵

The main Fiat and Alfa Romeo plants in Turin and Milan had been partially destroyed by Allied bombing; yet, the smaller automotive factories and workshops in the countryside were able to start again as soon as raw materials, fuel and tyres became available either on the black or regular markets.

Alfa Romeo saved their precious racing cars, dispersing them in hideouts around Milan. Many racing cars, mostly of the small pre-war classes, had been carefully preserved by a minority of rich privateers and artisans. They all were eager to resume racing.

The first post-war race was held on December 16, 1945 in Naples: it was a short in-town hillclimb won by a Pietro Fiordelisi driving a home-built Alfa Romeo Special. Many local around-houses races followed in 1946, regardless of the difficult situation in which the national governing bodies of motor sport had found themselves during the fall-out from the fascist past in the aftermath of the war.

The key event was the Turin Grand Prix on September 1, 1946 along the tree-lined alleys of the Valentino Park. It was open to the future F1 single-seaters, i.e. 1,5 litres supercharged and 4.5 litres atmospheric. 34 entrants came from Switzerland, France, UK, and Italy driving Maseratis, Delahayes, ERAs, and the winners-to-be Alfa Romeo 158's. The winner was Achille Varzi on a 158 in front of teammate Jean-Pierre Wimille, who followed him across the finish line eight tenths of a second in the prearranged order¹⁷.

ⁱ This was the official designation of a class of racing cars with engine max. capacity 1.5 litres, less costly and not as fast as the GP racers.

Motor racing had restarted despite the Monza Autodromo, the only purpose-built motor racing venue in the country, being still cluttered by thousands of wrecked vehicles scrapped there by the Allied Armies.

The Mille Miglia resumed on June 21-22, 1947 with 153 competitors at the start while the entrants nearly doubled to take advantage of the availability of a set of new tyres (then almost impossible to find on the regular market) and a full tank of fuel. Despite the awful road conditions, 54 made it back to Brescia. The winner was Clemente Biondetti (1898-1955) driving a pre-war 8C 2900B Berlinetta Alfa Romeo owned by Emilio Romano who was seated with him in the car.

The government now ignored motor sport. The priorities were the relaunch of production in the largest plants of the likes of Fiat and Alfa Romeo as well as the improvement of living conditions of the workforce and the whole country.

Interactions between motor sport and politics were gone for good despite the still strong popular interest theoretically exploitable as an effective source of attraction for political propaganda.

Italian democratic governments stayed alert to the economic and social impact of the car industry. The policies of modernization of the country found a strong platform in motorization, thanks to a network of new state-of-the-art motorways, the improvement of the roads and the availability of affordable cars. Fiat managed only in the mid-Fifties to market family cars at a price lower than the yearly average salary of an employee.

The improved social and economic scenario provided the platform for new and existing marques in the car industry. Maserati, no longer under the ownership of the Maserati brothers, continued with the small, yet painstakingly produced, batches of racing and hi-performance cars; Cisitalia (derived from Compagnia Industriale Sportiva Italia) was born and had a short yet glorious life in Turin; Abarth, founded in Bologna in 1949, but soon moved to Turin, where their reputation grew, began selling low-cost tuning components which would later evolve into manufacturing winning race cars; Osca (Officine Specializzate Costruzione Automobili—Fratelli Maserati), also begun in Bologna, revamped the skill and the winning tradition of the Maserati brothers; Stanguellini grew out of its pre-war humble origins in Modena in 1900; the many artisans of the “Etcterini” (small jewel-like racing cars) began a long-lasting winning strike; Enzo Ferrari entered the first car manufactured under his own name in the Circuit of Piacenza on May 11, 1947.

Billions of words have been written and told since then about Ferrari and it is beyond the scope of this paper to recap the key steps of the rise of Ferrari among the most praised car marques and to win a prominent worldwide position within the top brands.

Every facet of other Italian post-war marques and cars has been and continues to be scrutinized and added to the knowledge of scholars and enthusiasts.

In post-war democratic Italy governments showed interest in the motor car industry only when it related to social issues. Racing was no longer a priority symbol of national pride and power.

The State abandoned Alfa Romeo ownership when the firm was already sunk in a black hole of losses. It didn't move a finger when Fiat swallowed every other Italian motor car manufacturer of some significance: Alfa Romeo, Lancia, Maserati and Ferrari. It continued to support Fiat every time their market position or financial performance showed signs of weakness.

In the twenty first century Fiat merged with US-based Chrysler company and established the FCA (Fiat Chrysler Automotive) Group in 2014, which was due to become second fiddler in the French PSA Group in 2020.

Ferrari still carries along the mission of representing Italian motor racing at the top, i.e. F 1. And they don't seek neither interactions with politics nor State support.

NOTES

- ¹ Based on Bossi, Giovanni; Zana, Aldo: "I Saloni dell'Auto a Milano 1901-1947" (Milan 1901-1947 Car Shows). AISA (Italian Association of Motor Historians), Milano 2021.
- ² Published in: "L'Illustrazione Bresciana - Issue 5/1905". Brescia 1905.
- ³ Published in: Canestrini, Giovanni: "La favolosa Targa Florio". LEA Editrice, Roma 1966.
- ⁴ Published in Biffignandi Donatella: "Itala, splendore e declino di una marca prestigiosa"(Itala, splendor and decline of a prestigious marque). AISA Paper No. 64, Milano 2005.
- ⁵ Published in Zana, Aldo: "Monzapolis - The Monza 500 Miles and the endless America-Europe challenge". Società Editrice Il Cammello, Turin 2017.
- ⁶ Translated from the original manuscript signed by Benito Mussolini on Ministero degli Esteri (Foreign Affairs Ministry) letterhead, supplied by the Giovanni Bossi Automobile Archive.
- ⁷ Published in Castronovo, Valerio: "Fiat 1899-1999 - Un secolo di storia Italiana" (Fiat 1899-1999 - A century of Italian history). Rizzoli, Milano 1999.
- ⁸ Data published in Bossi, Giovanni; Zana, Aldo op. cit.
- ⁹ Data published in Castronovo, Valerio op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Data published in Boscarelli, Lorenzo: "Progressi della motorizzazione e società italiana" (Motoring development and Italian society). AISA Paper No. 58. Milano 2003.
- ¹¹ Published in Bigazzi, Duccio: "Il Portello – Operai, tecnici e imprenditori all'Alfa Romeo 1906-1926" (The Portello – Workers, technicians and managers at Alfa Romeo 1906-1926). Franco Angeli, Milano 1988.
- ¹² The lines about the 1936 George Vanderbilt Cup are taken from Zana, Aldo op. cit.
- ¹³ Published in the house organ : "Scuderia Ferrari – Issue 14". Modena, November 5, 1936.
- ¹⁴ Published in Boscarelli, Lorenzo op. cit.
- ¹⁵ Published in Bossi, Giovanni; Zana, Aldo op. cit.
- ¹⁶ Published in Greppi, Carlo: "25 aprile 1945". Corriere della Sera Publisher, Milano 2019.
- ¹⁷ Published in Silva, Alessandro: "Back on Track – Grand Prix and Formule Libre racing 1946-1950". Fondazione Negri, Brescia 2019.