Downloaded from UvA-DARE, the institutional repository of the University of Amsterdam (UvA)
http://dare.uva.nl/document/217591

File ID	217591
Filename	Summary and conclusion

SOURCE (OR PART OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCE):

Type	Dissertation
Title	Cultural promotion and imperialism: the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council contesting the Mediterranean in the 1930s
Author	T.M.C. van Kessel
Faculty	Faculty of Humanities
Year	2011
Pages	IX, 241

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHIC DETAILS:
http://dare.uva.nl/record/378573

Copyright

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other then for strictly personal, individual use.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (http://dare.uva.nl)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the lead up to the 1930s, cultural foreign policy became increasingly an indispensable instrument in international politics. This is illustrated by the history of the Deutscher Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Alliance Française and the Società Dante Alighieri, private organizations that at the end of the nineteenth century began to promote national language and culture abroad. All three organizations, regardless of the kind of government in their home country, would witness an increased activity by the state in the domain of foreign cultural promotion. This was already noticeable after the turn of the century but became particularly pronounced after the First World War.

In Great Britain, where an Empire that still covered almost a third of the world could amply feed self-confidence, society felt no need for an organization that would spread British culture. To have the British government implement a foreign cultural policy was even more out of question. Culture was regarded as a matter of private initiative and any cultural promotion by the state risked degenerating into the wartime propaganda that British public opinion had abhorred during and after the Great War. Nevertheless, in the 1930s a public servant of the Foreign Office News Department, Reginald Leeper, was able to gather enough political support for the creation of the non-governmental British Council. A combination of factors made this possible: nationalist uprisings in countries like Egypt and India that were weakening Britain's grip on its Empire; the negative effects that active German and Italian cultural promotion was having on British international trade interests; the threat to European peace and British freedom and democracy posed by Fascism, by National Socialism and, further afield, by the international aspirations of the Bolshevists.

A key area for Britain's control over its Empire was the Mediterranean Sea, which gave access to the easiest sea route to India, namely the Suez Canal. This was also the area that Italy saw as its natural sphere of influence and of territorial expansion: its *Mare Nostrum*. Its ancient orientation towards the Mediterranean became pivotal in the 1930s, when the cult of *romanità* and the revival of the Augustan Empire were made central to Mussolini's ever more totalitarian regime. Around the Mediterranean Sea and its key outlets, British interests inevitably clashed with Italian ambitions. As the activities of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in Malta, Abyssinia and Egypt showed, promoting Italian and British culture respectively in this area was a major instrument in the ongoing power struggle between the two imperial nations.

Since its creation, the Dante Alighieri Society had co-operated with Affari Esteri but it was an independent, private organization. Once Mussolini came to power, the Dante had to reposition itself. Especially in the 1930s, it had to strike a balance between maintaining its autonomy and winning sufficient approval from Mussolini. At first, it was in the regime's interest to associate itself with a venerable organization connected to the Risorgimento. In the 1930s, however, when several government institutions for Fascist propaganda functioned alongside organizations for cultural promotion, the threat of being absorbed by the state increased. As demonstrated by the cases of Malta and Egypt, the British Council worked under the aegis of the Foreign Office and was never as independent as the Dante had been in origin and remained for a long time. In the Mediterranean, the Council's policy was aligned to the Foreign Office's priorities. The Dante also attuned its activities abroad to the policy of Affari Esteri but, as the example of Abyssinia shows, it had to make sure it maintained its own relevance within the changeable political landscape that developed under the Duce's 'divide and rule' dictatorship.

In part to comply with the requirements of the new regime and in part through a natural generational change in its membership, the Dante tried to take up the striving for modernity that Fascism had as its rallying cry. The Dante was hampered by its nineteenth-century heritage, which was in some way a guarantor of the organization's respectability but also an argument for those who claimed that the organization was now becoming obsolete. In the strategy used to promote Italian culture abroad, the Dante's central management was guided by a concept of nationalism that remained literary and abstract, and the key figures were slow to pick up the new tools of mass communication. The British Council, while presenting Britain as the beacon of European tradition, was seemingly far more aware of the need to make use of modern media and emphatically positioned itself in the changing world of global communication, which would require ever more cultural understanding between peoples. Although the Council complained that British film production was lagging behind and that more had to be produced for promotional ends, in its awareness of the need for more visual communication it was comparable with the propaganda institutions of Mussolini's regime, and more precisely with the Istituti di Cultura.

Another burden of the past that weighed on the Dante, closely related to the issue of diffusion via modern tools, was the definition of Italianness promoted by the organization. Italianness remained a highly abstract concept, with undefined qualities that were attributed to the Italian spirit or genius. The cult of the *romanità* possibly enabled the naming of a few values but generally, even under the Mussolini regime, the Dante did not promote a specific model of society. In contrast, the British Council, which could rely on a far older history of national and imperial unity, spread a well-defined, coherent image of Britishness that was centred on institutions. These institutions - such as the

system of justice, parliamentary democracy, education and sports - were all regarded as embodiments of fundamental British values, primarily freedom, a sense of duty, pragmatism and fair play.

The different chapters of this thesis have led to yet more conclusions. The first chapter demonstrates that looking at the histories of the Deutscher Schulverein/Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland, the Alliance Française, the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in relation to each other provides a better insight into the broader European context in which these organizations were created. By the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed (1919), it had become clear that democratization and new communication technology had made influencing public opinion an important factor in international relations. What comes to the fore in this chapter are the different ways in which private and public bodies in four major European countries approached cultural promotion abroad. In Germany and Italy, two relatively young nations, the concern about co-nationals remaining outside the established national borders added a distinctive feature to their cultural foreign policy. Initially, private bodies saw it as their task to protect the national identity of these co-nationals abroad. With the establishment of totalitarian governments in Germany and Italy, which recognized cultural propaganda as an essential instrument of expansionist foreign policy, the private bodies were gradually supressed or forced to adapt. In France, it was again a private body – the Alliance Française – that began promoting French culture abroad, and in the first two decades of the twentieth century governmental bodies were created to develop an official foreign cultural policy. But from the start the Alliance's mission had been of a more universal nature: the promotion of the Enlightenment values that were epitomized in the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*. Given the timing of its creation, the Alliance seems to have wanted to compensate for France's weakening political and military power by bolstering its cultural influence, thereby reinforcing colonial control. Yet here too, it was in the interwar period, as the significance of cultural influence for foreign policy grew, that French governmental efforts in this field increased. The history of the British Council, a late-comer on the scene, shows that its creation was a response to the British realization of the ever greater importance of cultural foreign policy. Although the Council presented itself as being a private body, it was closely linked to the Foreign Office and its policy adhered to the proprities set by British foreign policy. The Council denied being in any way involved in cultural propoganda, speaking instead of cultural promotion or of providing information for a better international understanding. Rather like the Alliance Française, it saw itself as having a universal mission to defend democracy and Western civilization.

In the second chapter, the evidence shows that the relationship between the Dante and Mussolini's dictatorial rule was problematic, but so too was the position of the Council with respect to the democratic government in Britain.

This chapter deals with two very different state structures and Mussolini's dictatorial regime did not permit the openness of Britain's political debate in Parliament. However, after closely analysing Dante's attempts to maintain independence, it becomes clear that 'fascistization' was not as straight-forward a process as is usually suggested. Negotiation needed to take place between established power bases and new ones, and between the accumulated assets of an older generation and the will to succeed of a new generation, for they depended on each other. The latter generational dynamics are less apparent in the Council than in the Dante, due also to the Council's recent creation. However, a relatively young visionary like Leeper fought his way through much resistance in Parliament to advance the idea that it was time for Britain to engage in cultural promotion, and that, due to its noble cause, this could be distinguished from the aggressive and evil propaganda of authoritarian states. Individuals matter. This can be said for both organizations: the driving force of Paolo Boselli within the Dante and that of Leeper together with Lord Lloyd for the Council, are a testimony to this basic factor in human interaction.

As illustrated in the third chapter, the Council's and the Dante's definitions of national culture were fundamentally different. The paramount components of the *italianità* promoted by the Dante were the national 'soul' and its manifestations through art, music, literature and other expressions of 'genius'. By contrast, the Council's 'Britishness' emphasized the role of institutions. Non-governmental institutions, like the voluntary organizations for mutual help and charity, were also included in this iconography. Furthermore, the Dante was at times proud to underline Italy's modernity but held on to the Dante's old-fashioned methods. In contrast, the Council frequently presented Britain as a country only willing to succumb to novelty if time had shown its practical value, yet it seemed far more aware of the need to use modern means of communication. Ironically, though the Dante hoped to reach out to the poorly educated Italian emigrants abroad as well as to the more cultivated foreigner, its leaders were less aware of the new mass culture than the Council's were. The irony lies in the fact that it was the Council's initial policy to aim at the higher, influential strata of society abroad but it appeared far better prepared to adapt to the requirements of mass communication.

In the fourth chapter the cultural conflict in Malta between British colonial rule and Italy-oriented Maltese nationalists is examined, and this is where the role of the Dante and the Council in international relations is particularly evident. In this context, the Council's projection of Britain as the defender of freedom and democracy is revealed as being particularly hypocritical. In trying to strengthen British cultural influence in Malta, the Council was in effect working to protect Britain's strategic, military interests in the Mediterranean. What made the British position more difficult, given the history of the island as home of the Knights of St John, was the risk of being

perceived as a Protestant threat to the Catholic tradition that most Maltese cherished.

A similar interconnectedness between cultural and religious threat is noticeable in the fifth chapter, where British concern about the 'Latinisation' of Egypt went hand in hand with the suspicions about Roman Catholic religious orders. The establishment of the Council was in great part a response to the British realization of its weakening control over Egypt. Contrary to what has so far been suggested in the history of the Council, it was not the waning of trade interests in South America that shaped the Council. A more significant factor was the British experience in the Southern Mediterranean that forced the Foreign Office to recognize cultural influence as having become an essential part of foreign policy. It is no coincidence that the first British Council Representative to be appointed was based in Cairo. Both the Council and the Dante were applying cultural propaganda to the consolidation of imperial power, with the difference that the British Empire was a declining one and the Italian Empire resurgent. However, while full of optimism, the Dante proved to be poorly equipped to meet the needs of the new imperial project.

Further research into the connection with religion would add an important dimension to the emergence of cultural politics so far sketched. The Dante Alighieri, despite being fundamentally a secular organization, could not avoid co-operation with and eventual support for the Roman Catholic Church, even if only to benefit from the worldwide network that the Catholic religious orders maintained. In its rhetoric too, the Dante could not entirely distance itself from the Catholic mind-set most of its members had still grown up with. Britain's church history made the British Council's relationship with religion also problematic but in a different way. In Italy, until 1929 the dominant Church refused to recognize the nation-state, wereas in Britain, the British monarch was the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. This union between Church and State ensured that the monarchy remained Anglican, protecting the core of the British nation from the influence of its Roman Catholic communities, mainly in Ireland and Scotland, as well as the Methodist, Baptist or Pentecostal minorities. Hence the British Council had to be careful about which missionary orders it cooperated with abroad. How did these religious backgrounds affect the definition of national culture promoted abroad? And to what extent were old religious hostilities interwoven in cultural rivalries?

Needless to say, new questions could be raised if instead of analysing the **intentions** of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council the attention were to shift to the **reception** of their cultural promotion. Focussing on this aspect would require extensive interdisciplinary research into the use of foreign culture in the self-definition of local elites. How did foreign cultural promotion influence the choices of the receiving social groups regarding the use of a 'distinguished' language, the education of their children, trade partners

and international sympathies? The use of foreign languages by the upper class of society would in this context be a crucial area of study.

Harold Goad, who was director of the British Institute in Florence from 1922 to 1937, in his later years reflected on the part played in history by the great languages of western civilization. Goad's words show that, after several years of experience with British cultural promotion abroad, he was convinced that a typical relation between a country and its own national language could be identified for different European countries:

> For a Frenchman, his language is the palladium of French and European civilization; for the Teuton, High German is the citadel of his Kultur; for the Italian the Tuscan tongue is the chief bond by which many cities and provinces are held together and the symbol of his *italianità* all the world over; but for the easy-going Englishman his tongue is no more than a practical means of making himself understood by other people.[1]

The history of the Dante Alighieri Society and the British Council in the Mediterranean area during the 1930s demonstrates that it is illusory to consider language as no more than a practical tool. The disinterestedness that Goad attributes to the British in the use of the English language is far from the truth. By the 1930s, the British too were obliged to recognize that promoting their national language and culture abroad, and thereby winning the hearts and minds of foreign peoples, was an essential tool in the maintenance or expansion of international political power. The British Council was more successful than the Dante Alighieri Society in projecting a model of modern society and framing specific values, while cultivating the semblance of 'not wishing to impose'. Altogether, it seems advisable to consider foreign cultural promotion in first instance a wolf in sheep's clothes.

[1] Harold Goad, *Language in History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958) 228.