

What Is in a (Street) Name? Too Much History. And Italian Americans in Chicago Make the Headlines.

Stanislao Pugliese* (July 11, 2011)



A recent petition by Chicago academics to rename Balbo Drive in Chicago has generated a counter-petition and ignited a small controversy in the Italian American community.



In the summer of 1933, Italo Balbo (1896-1940), Italian General and Minister of the Air Force, led a squadron of twenty-four seaplanes from Rome to Chicago for the Century of Progress International Exhibition (also known as the World's Fair). This was a propaganda coup for Mussolini's fascist regime. Not the fascist regime of Blackshirts rampaging in the streets of Italy administering castor oil to their opponents or murdering socialist and communists but the technocratic, modernist fascism derived from Futurism that sought to harness the vitality of the modern: speed, technology, violence and the glorification of war. This was one aspect of the contradictory nature of fascism: reactionary in looking back to ancient Rome; modernist in its understanding and manipulation of modern technology and communication.

Balbo triumphantly landed in Chicago where he was greeted by the masses and the mayor. A parade was held in his honor with the street naming to follow. President Franklin Roosevelt invited Balbo to lunch at the White House where the Italian was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. In New York's Madison Square Garden, Balbo thrilled a large audience of Italian Americans, charging them to be proud of their heritage because "Mussolini has ended the era of humiliations," evidence of what I have called elsewhere "fascism as an ideology of compensation." In short, the young, dashing and charismatic Balbo and his endeavors (he had already flown to Rio de Janeiro in 1930) were a perfect example of the "new Italy," the Italy where "the trains ran on time": modern, technologically advanced, with a political regime that seemed rigorous and energized compared to the declining and decrepit Western liberal democracies. Hence the street in Chicago named in his honor.

And the petition drafted to re-name the street:

Be it resolved that whereas Balbo Drive in Chicago was named after the most violent of the Fascist warlords, Italo Balbo, who was a founding member of the Fascist Grand Council, who was responsible for the killing of numerous Italian citizens including the parish priest Giuseppe Minzoni, and who as governor of the Italian colony in Libya supervised concentration camps in which thousands of civilians perished, the name of Balbo Drive should be changed. Be it further resolved that the former Balbo Avenue be re-named Fermi Drive, after the Italian physicist Enrico Fermi, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics, was driven out of his homeland because his Jewish wife suffered under the Manifesto of Race promulgated by Mussolini, and found refuge in Chicago, where he developed the first nuclear reactor (the Chicago Pile 1). Whereas in Italy itself, in which Italo Balbo's crimes are well known, no streets are named after him, many are named after Fermi.

This sparked an editorial in the Chicago Tribune on June 27, also calling for the renaming of Balbo Drive in honor of Enrico Fermi. The editorial generated a counter-petition addressed to Alderman Bob Fioretti, counter-editorials and letters, most in favor of retaining the Balbo name. The counter-petition, drafted by Don Fiore, William Dal Cerro and Rosario Iaconis of the Italic Institute of America, can be found [online here](#) [2].

The controversy has found its way to the H-ITAM (Italian American) list serve (www.h-net.org/~itam) where several posts in favor of Balbo Drive contain a decidedly anti-intellectual animus:

"Some Egg Head Professor's [sic] are attempting to discredit him," writes Richard Annotico while Giorgio Iraci (M.D., Ph.D., F.A.C.S.), writing from Italy, complains that the "contemptuous egg heads" of the anti-Balbo petition are not sufficiently Italian to criticize Balbo:

"Now, the academic titles of all these seven honourable ladies and gentlemen ("so are they all, all honourable...") are too lengthy and farraginous to be transcribed here, BUT - can ANYONE find an Italian-sounding surname in this medley? The closest one might be Cardoza's, and THAT one clearly is of Spanish, not Italian derivation. One of them is an 'associate professor of MUSICOLOGY'. WHAT has 'musicology' possibly got to do with the price of fish, namely something that can connect with politics and/or contemporary history??!!!"

This is, to say the least, bizarre logical reasoning: notice the sarcastic "honourable" (quoting



Shakespeare) and the explicit statement that unless one is Italian, one is not a legitimate interlocutor in this debate. Also note the requirement that one be a specialist in Italian history, implying that a musicologist could have no possible understanding of the subtle nuances involved in the debate. It is possible Dr. Iraci would be further outraged to learn that one of the signers of the anti-Balbo petition, Deidre N. McCloskey (born Donald McCloskey) is a transgendered person, surely confirming the good doctor's opinion that we in academia are all somehow politically, culturally and sexually beyond the pale.

I oppose changing the name of Italo Balbo Drive in Chicago, not for the reasons listed on the petition, but because it would be too easy a way to erase some dark aspects of our collective past. (I would also support naming a street in Chicago for Fermi and it hard to believe there isn't one already.)

You can't have it both ways: if we accept the naming of the street in Chicago for Balbo's heroic trans-Atlantic flight, his opposition to anti-Semitism and his counsel against an alliance with Nazi Germany (all admirable things), you must also accept the historical facts that:

- 1) Balbo was the ras of Ferrara in the 1920s when, at the bidding of the wealthy industrialists and large landowners, he lead "punitive" (read murderous) expeditions against peasant agrarian leagues, workers' unions, socialist cooperatives and communist groups, in the process killing dozens of people;
- 2) Balbo was implicated in the murder of the anti-fascist priest Don Giuseppe Minzoni;
- 3) Balbo, as one of the Quadrumvirs (fantasies of ancient Rome!) of October 1922, actively participated in a technically bloodless but still illegal coup d'état against the Liberal monarchy of Italy. In another country, Balbo, Mussolini and the others would have been shot for treason.
- 4) Balbo's administration of Libya was anything but humane; true, he was not a brutal murderer like Rodolfo Graziani, but he acquiesced in the colonial enterprise and therefore must bear some responsibility for Italian colonial policies.
- 5) Balbo was considered a worthy successor to Mussolini, telling us something about his moral character.

Can we get past this easy philo-Italianism and examine our history with a more critical eye?

The pro-Balbo petition mentions that Balbo was against the anti-Semitic Laws of 1938 and implies that since many Italian Jews survived, Balbo deserves some credit. I can't speak for Susan Zuccotti, a highly respected historian, but I am pretty sure she would be horrified to see her work on the Holocaust in Italy put on par with the absurd and Orwellian logic (Jews survived Italy, hence Mussolini and fascism were good) of Jonah Goldberg book's Liberal Fascism.

I have often written and spoken to local groups, schools, and synagogues about the Holocaust in Italy, and I always mention that Jews in Italy had the second highest survival rate in Europe. But I also mention that because there was Hitler and the Holocaust, Mussolini and Italian fascism "get off the hook" so to speak. Let's go beyond the myth of "italiani brava gente." Yes, many Italians saved many Jews. Should we mention here that Mussolini had a long-term affair with a Jewish mistress, Margherita Sarfatti? Does it matter? How can we know? Italians - and some were Italian fascists - saved Jews; but there were plenty of Italian fascists who were fanatical anti-Semites (Telesio Interlandi, Roberto Farinacci). And how are we to consider Celeste Di Porto, notorious for betraying countless Jews and Jewish herself? As I tell my students, history - real history, not Hollywood history, not History Channel History, not self-serving history - is far more complex than what we might prefer.

Yes, Balbo was no genocidal colonizer, but he was a colonizer. And yes, I have often heard it said: the Italians built roads in Libya, Ethiopia, Somalia, etc. etc. This is the same logic as "Mussolini wasn't so bad. His only mistake was the alliance with Hitler." Italians built roads in Africa: true. Italians used aerial bombardment and gas to kill civilians in Africa: true. Where the roads worth the moral crimes?



The arguments in favor of keeping Balbo Drive are rather weak. The fact that various British officers and American politicians sang his praises is an argument from authority and the inverse of ad hominem attack. "Balbo was never an enemy of the United States." Well, yes, because he had the good fortune to die before Dec 7, 1941. Most American politicians (including President Roosevelt), businessmen (J. P. Morgan gave a loan of \$100 million) and most Italian American prominenti (foremost among them Generoso Pope), sang Mussolini's praises. Doesn't mean they were right.

The excerpt below is from Balbo's *Diario*, 1922.

"I [then] announced to [the chief of police] that I would burn down and destroy the houses of all Socialists in Ravenna if he did not give me within half an hour the means required for transporting the Fascists elsewhere. It was a dramatic moment. I demanded a whole fleet of trucks. The police officers completely lost their heads; but after half an hour they told me where I could find trucks already filled with gasoline. Some of them actually belonged to the office of the chief of police. My ostensible reason was that I wanted to get the exasperated Fascists out of the town; in reality, I was organizing a 'column of fire' . . . to extend our reprisals throughout the province. . . . We went through . . . all the towns and centers in the provinces of Forlì and Ravenna and destroyed and burned all the Red buildings. . . . It was a terrible night. Our passage was marked by huge columns of fire and smoke."

I would like to point out one particular sentence in the pro-Balbo petition:

"In light of these undeniable facts it is obvious that opponents of maintaining Balbo Drive seek to distort history for their own socio-political beliefs."

This is a disingenuous statement, clearly demonstrating that those who have drafted the petition subscribe to an outmoded (and, I would argue, even dangerous) conception of history: "we have the truth, it is absolute and eternal, and anyone who disagrees with our truth must be acting according to suspicious, dishonest and perhaps even evil motives."

Can't the signers of the petition see that they, too, seek to write history according to their own "socio-political beliefs"?

What I am asking for — what I am pleading for — is a more nuanced understanding of history. Rather than use history to console ourselves, to inflate our esteem, or to whitewash the past, let's read, write and discuss history with an eye to understanding the incredible complexity of what it means to be human. Balbo's life (and afterlife) is a perfect occasion to do so.

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For more information and further reflection:

Claudio Segre, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley, 1987) a rather positive bio.

Mimmo Franzinelli, *Squadristi: Protagonisti e tecniche della violenza fascista, 1919-1922* (Mondadori, 2003).

Ruth Ben Ghat, ed. *Italian Colonialism* (Palgrave 2008)

Ali Ahmida, *The Making of Modern Libya* (NYU, 1994).

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[1] <http://test.iitaly.org/files/balbo-poster1310437179jpg>

[2] <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/balbodrive/>

[3] https://red001.mail.microsoftonline.com/owa/redir.aspx?C=8e19aa9ba21c460caf30c3c94b0585f6&URL=http%3a%2f%2fpeople.hofstra.edu%2fstanislao_pugliese%2f