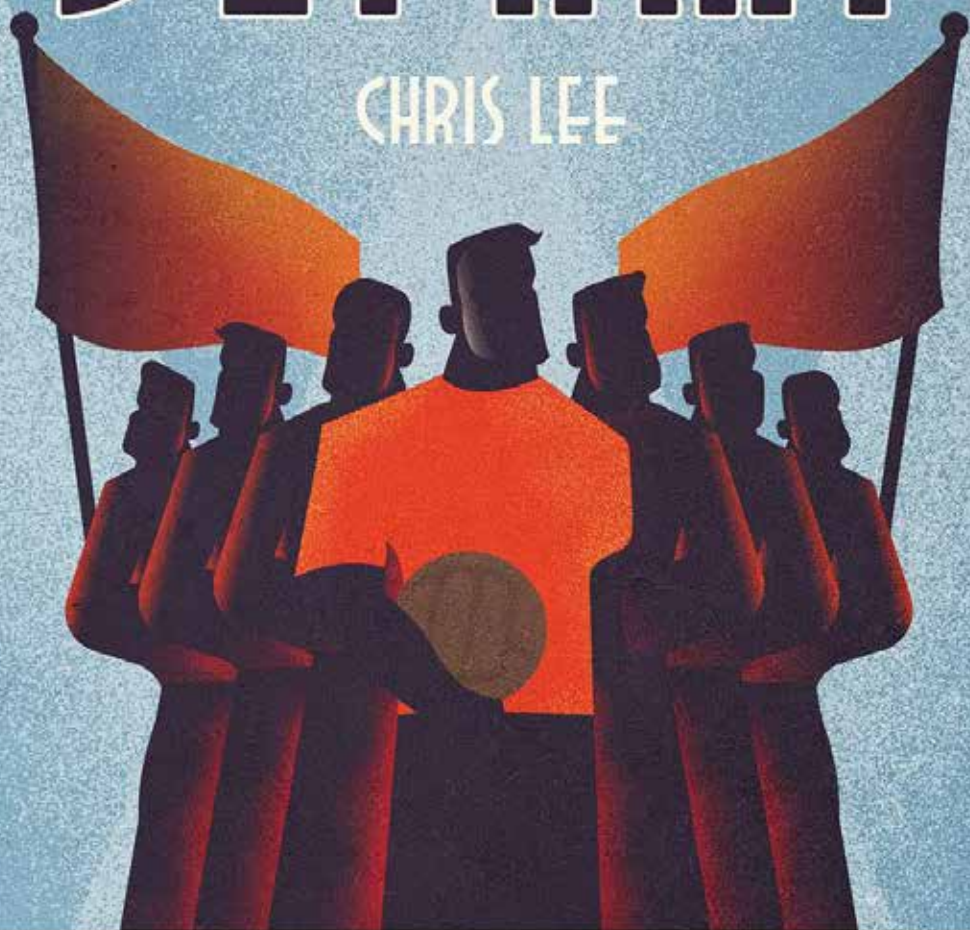


THE
DEFIANT

CHRIS LEE



**A HISTORY OF FOOTBALL
AGAINST FASCISM**

THE
DEFIANT

CHRIS LEE

A HISTORY OF FOOTBALL
AGAINST FASCISM



Contents

Introduction	7
1. Italy	17
2. Iberia	62
3. Central and Western Europe	107
4. Eastern Europe and the Balkans	166
5. Latin America	197
6. Britain	224
Conclusion	242
Acknowledgements	249
Bibliography	251

Chapter One

Italy

BENITO MUSSOLINI – *Il Duce* – was Italy’s authoritarian leader for 21 years, from his ‘March on Rome’ in October 1922 until he was ousted from power in July 1943. He established the world’s first fascist state, and sport was a core ingredient of his reign. His impact on defining football as Italy’s national sport is absolutely key to the country’s early success in the sport. Under him, a nationwide league – *Serie A* – was founded in 1929 along with the peninsula-wide expansion of the *Coppa Italia* knockout competition. The *Carta di Viareggio* (Charter of Viareggio) in 1926 set out many of the rules that the Italian game would follow, including the legalisation of professionalism and the limiting of foreign players.

All sport was politicised under *Il Duce*. The Italian Football Association, the *Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio* (FIGC – Italian Football Federation) was headed up by the politician Leandro Arpinati, who was a friend of Mussolini’s and would also head up Italy’s Olympic committee during his career. New football clubs were formed to strengthen competition between cities. In Florence, the Club Sportivo Firenze and Palestra Ginnastica Libertas clubs were merged in 1926 to form Associazione Calcio (AC) Fiorentina. The following summer in Rome, Associazione Sportiva (AS) Roma was established

through the merger of three clubs from the capital, Fortitudo-ProRoma, Football Club di Roma and Alba-Audace. SS Lazio refused to join the AS Roma project, a move that teed up one of world football's biggest cross-city rivalries. New stadia were also established, like Arpinati's impressive Stadio Littoriale complex in Bologna (now the Stadio Renato Dall'Ara) and the Foro Italico complex in Rome – formerly the Foro Mussolini – which holds the Stadio Olimpico. Even the language changed under Mussolini. Traces of Englishness were removed. Football would now be known as *Calcio* (kick), a nod to the violent medieval Florentine ball game of *Calcio Fiorentino*. English-founded Genoa Cricket and Football Club became Genova 1893 Circolo del Calcio in 1928; in Milan, Internazionale was renamed Società Sportiva Ambrosiana, while Milan Cricket and Football Club became Associazione Calcio Milano. Mussolini even presented Italy as the source of modern football; for him, the English had merely rediscovered the game.

During Mussolini's reign, Italy would host and win the second FIFA World Cup tournament in 1934, claim Olympic football gold in Berlin in 1936 and retain the World Cup in Paris in 1938. However, Mussolini's support for sport was not a benevolent policy; its aims were to prove the Italians' superiority and provide a sense of unity in a country divided by language, politics and economics that had only been created a few decades prior. Rival political parties were outlawed and the death penalty reintroduced. Yet, the fascists' grip on Italian football institutions was not without opponents, both at home and abroad. The Italian national side, the *Azzurri* (Blues), and other Italian clubs would become lightning rods for protests against the Mussolini regime from exiled Italians overseas. As John Foot writes in *Calcio*, his seminal history of Italian football, 'Fascism was good for Italian football, and football was good for fascism.'¹ Foot tells me that there was very little open opposition to Mussolini or

the regime during the 1930s. ‘In part, that’s because of a very effective secret police that’s crushed any kind of organised opposition, and anybody who was in organised opposition was massively underground or was abroad,’ he explains. ‘There’s no open opposition at all, either at the games or on the streets. You would get arrested and thrown in jail for five years. It just wasn’t worth it.’

Even before Italian fascists marched on Rome, football was caught up in the fast-evolving dynamic within Italy. English club Burnley was due to play a match in Bologna in June 1922 as part of its Italian tour when the city fell to the *Fascisti* along with neighbouring Modena and Ferrara. In 1928, football and fascist politics were already showing themselves abroad when an Italian student team won a tournament in Paris against French, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian teams. At the final whistle, the Italian fans antagonised local supporters with their fascist songs and cheering, which led to a fight in the stands. Police had to break up the scuffles.²

Italian rebels

Within Italy, the ‘Roman salute’ – or fascist salute of the raised right arm outstretched in front – was introduced in 1925 by Lando Ferretti, a prominent fascist and journalist who also served as president of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI – *Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano*). Players were expected to raise their arm pre-match in an act that would court controversy at home and abroad throughout the 1930s. One player who very publicly refused to perform the salute was Bruno Neri. Neri was a midfielder from Faenza, east of Bologna. In 1929, aged 19, he signed for Fiorentina, where he spent seven years of his career. During this time, Fiorentina moved into its new Stadio Giovanni Berta (now the Stadio Artemio Franchi) designed by famed stadium architect Pier Luigi Nervi. The Florentine club’s

new stadium was named after a local fascist militant killed by communists during clashes in the city a decade earlier. Berta was attacked by socialists and thrown from the Ponte Sospeso to his death. It appears he may have clung on to the bridge before the mob cut off his hand, sending the rest of his body plummeting into the River Arno.³

Italian fascists considered Berta a martyr. Neri, however, had no time for fascism. A famous photo taken on 13 September 1931 shows the Fiorentina team lining up for an inaugural match against Admira from Vienna at the Stadio Giovanni Berta. The only man in the line-up conspicuously holding his hands at his side while the rest of his team-mates raise theirs is Bruno Neri. There were 12,000 spectators in the ground, which was still unfinished, including leading local fascists.⁴ Neri would go on to die fighting fascism. Having joined partisan fighters in 1943, he died in a shootout after being ambushed by German troops on 10 July 1944 on a path in the Apennine Mountains. A plaque marks the spot where Neri and his comrade Vittorio Bellenghi were gunned down. Faenza's stadium – where Neri had returned to finish his career as player-coach – was named after him in 1946.

The chances for players who showed dissent or held leftist political beliefs were limited. Lucchese's Hungarian Jewish manager Ernő Egri Erbstein was only too keen to take on players whose chances had been restricted elsewhere due to their anti-fascist stances. He snapped up Neri when Fiorentina made him available, along with midfielder Bruno Scher, another committed anti-fascist who refused to Italianise his Yugoslav name. Erbstein's biographer is Dominic Bliss. He tells me that while at Lecce, Scher had been linked with both Milan giants and was likely to have been called up to the Italian national side before his personal anti-fascist viewpoints became known publicly. So, instead of a glittering international career at one of Italy's top clubs, Scher ended up in the country's third tier with

Erbstein's Lucchese. 'Erbstein was known as someone who would overlook the political norms and was courageous in his decisions in that respect,' Bliss tells me. 'He liked characters, he liked people who believed in their own way, and that were progressive.'

Another Erbstein signing was Gino Callegari, brought in from the *Genovese* club Sampierdarenese. Callegari's anarchist views were so well known that when he was introduced to Mussolini pre-match during a short spell at AS Roma in the 1933/34 season, *Il Duce* reputedly commented, 'Ah, the anarchist'.⁵ For some players, this meant striking a compromise if they were to enjoy a successful career. One such player was *Il Gatto Magico* (The Magic Cat), Aldo Olivieri, who won 24 caps and the World Cup with the *Azzurri*. Olivieri had never been a fascist and had been spoken to for failing to show the salute in domestic games. On the international stage, however, he went along with the protocol that national team coach Vittorio Pozzo was keen to instil. Indeed, Olivieri was singled out by Mussolini as a national hero for his heroics in Italy's successful retention of its World Cup in 1938.⁶ Lucchese could probably claim to be the most rebellious of Italian football clubs during the 1930s, as far as resistance was possible.

Domestic resistance to fascist sporting doctrine was not restricted to men's sport; women footballers also played on despite the regime's disapproval. In Milan in 1933, a group of friends led by Losanna Strigaro and Nini Zanetti, and including Luisa and Rosetta Boccalini, plus the Lucchese sisters, formed the *Gruppo Femminile Calcistico* (GFC – Women's Football Group). In a global context, the Football Association in England had banned women's football at FA-affiliated grounds in 1921 on apparent health grounds. In Italy, women's *calcio* also faced a struggle for acceptance. The regime had a traditional view of women's roles as good wives and mothers, but on the other hand girls started receiving physical education in schools. Physical health was a key

feature of womanhood in the eyes of Mussolini's regime, which was obsessed with Italy's declining birth rate, so women's non-contact sports – such as swimming, tennis and basketball – were promoted within Italy, particularly in the northern and more industrialised cities.

For girls who grew up under Mussolini, their experience of – and exposure to – sport differed from those of their mothers' generation. Marco Giani is a member of the *Società Italiana di Storia dello Sport* (SISS – Italian Society for Sports History). He has researched the GFC extensively and even interviewed members of their families. Giani tells me that attending football matches was a normal activity for girls in Milan, so the natural next step was to organise their own games. The GFC wrote to Leandro Arpinati, who headed up Italian sport at the time, for permission to play, and he said yes. Arpinati, an old friend of Mussolini's, had been the fascist chief of Bologna during the 1920s, yet he was very open-minded about women's sports.

After a couple of matches, the two internal GFC teams decided to play with a 13-year-old boy in goal to avoid any potential criticism of their game being overly physical and, above all, dangerous for their reproductive capacity. In the summer of 1933, the GFC played without any problems. Then, they bravely decided *not* to follow one of Arpinati's conditions – that football was played behind closed doors. The team's second public match at Campo Isotta Fraschini in Milan attracted a crowd of 1,000, including some players and staff from Ambrosiana (Inter Milan's name during this period) and Czechoslovakian side Sparta Prague, who were in town for the semi-finals of the Mitropa Cup. Stories about the *calciatrici* (women footballers) were even carried in the Italian press, including *La Gazzetta dello Sport*.⁷

Attitudes towards women's football changed when Arpinati was succeeded as head of the Italian Olympic Committee by Achille Starace. Italian sports policy was now directed exclusively

towards achieving international success and recognition. ‘Starace was really cynical, he was really against women’s football and any kind of female sports,’ Giani tells me. ‘Starace was only interested in developing female athletes in sports that would bring prestige to Italy on the international stage in the form of Olympic medals, for example.’

The authorities stopped the first proposed national-level match between the GFC from Milan and a team from nearby Alessandria in October 1933. The GFC kept playing in secret until the spring of 1934, despite losing its president Ugo Cardosi. During these months, the club was led by the new secretary, Giovanna Boccalini Barcellona. Giani describes the ban on women’s football as a ‘soft ban’; there were no arrests, but the obstacles became too great, and the women stopped playing. GFC co-founder Rosetta Boccalini went on to enjoy a successful career in basketball, including appearances for the Italian national side. Rosetta was one of seven children. One of her older sisters, Giovanna, was a co-founder of the first female partisan group in World War II, *Gruppi di Difesa della Donna* (Women’s Defence Group). Some other GFC players were redirected to athletics: the Lucchese sisters became two of the best Italian 800-metre runners of the 1930s, while sprinter Franca Agorni, who was one of the last girls to join the GFC before the boycott, went to the 1936 Summer Olympics as a reserve in the 4x100-metre relay team.

The story of the *Gruppo Femminile di Calcio* was largely unknown until Giani discovered it while researching the history of women’s football in Italy at the school where he was teaching in 2014. He published his first two academic articles about GFC in 2017. The story was retold as a novel in Italian by journalist Federica Seneghini in 2020, titled *Giovinette: Le Calciatrici Che Sfidarono Il Duce* (*Giovinette: The Female Footballers Who Challenged the Duce*). In 2021, the Municipality of Milan named

a street after the GFC – *Via Calciatrici del*’33. ‘On one hand, the *Gruppo Femminile di Calcio* played against prejudice and sexism by going against the accepted tradition of the role of women, but on the other hand, they were daughters of the fascist regime. It’s something of a paradox,’ Giani concludes. ‘The regime destroyed any kind of memory of them; there was no further press coverage. But also, speaking to members of the footballers’ families, it appears they didn’t fully realise the importance of what they were doing just by playing football at that time. Like many of the women partisans in the war, they didn’t seem to think their acts were significant because they were women.’

Political Football: World Cup 1934

FIFA awarded Italy the right to host the 1934 World Cup at its Stockholm summit in October 1932, getting the nod over the Swedish bid. It was the organisation’s second tournament and the first to be held in Europe. Despite being hosts, Italy was still required to qualify for its own tournament – the first and only time this has happened in World Cup history. Italy ran out 4-0 winners at home to Greece in March 1934, only for the Greeks to withdraw ahead of the return leg. Seeing the propaganda value of a World Cup win, Mussolini reminded FIGC head, Giorgio Vaccaro, that ‘Italy must win the World Cup’.⁸ Italy’s path to glory was made somewhat easier by some noticeable absentees. The football associations of England, Wales and Scotland still refused to participate in FIFA tournaments. Meanwhile, 1930 hosts and world champions Uruguay also declined the invitation to take part, apparently still sore from so few European sides making the journey to its tournament four years earlier.

To strengthen the national and domestic game while staying relatively true to the Mussolini government’s anti-foreigner policy, the regime enabled foreign-born players of Italian descent to play in Italy and, crucially, *for* Italy. Many foreign-born players,

known as *oriundi* or *rimpatriati* (returnees), originated in South America, where football was already established to the highest standard. Uruguay won the first World Cup in 1930, building on Olympic gold success in 1928 in Amsterdam and 1924 in Paris. The Uruguayans' opponents in both the 1930 and 1928 tournament finals was Argentina. Italy's 1934 squad included Luis Monti, who featured in Argentina's losing side in the 1930 World Cup Final, and Attilio Demaríá, another member of Argentina's 1930 squad. Fellow Argentines Enrique Guaita and Raimundo Orsi, a veteran of Argentina's 1928 Olympic final defeat, were joined by Brazilian-born Anfilogino Guarisi. In all, 47 South American footballers moved to Italy to become *oriundi* in the Italian leagues between the wars, a handful playing at the highest level for the national side. So significant was the exodus that the Argentine FA complained directly to the FIGC, arguing that the fascist Italian government was wanting Argentina's leading players to make Italian football the best in the world.⁹

The man charged with delivering international glory was Vittorio Pozzo. The cultured Piedmontese manager had played football in Switzerland with Grasshopper of Zurich and been a founder member of Torino FC. He had coached the Italian football team as early as the Stockholm Olympics of 1912 before serving in Italy's Alpine division during World War I. Pozzo took charge of the Italian Olympic team in Paris in 1924 while also working as a journalist for *La Stampa*. In 1929, Leandro Arpinati approached Pozzo to take over the reins as Italy's national coach permanently, a post he held for 19 years. During this period, Pozzo brought his *Metodo* (Method) system of play, which increased the focus on defence in a 2-3-2-3 formation.

As the organisers had promised in their bidding process, no expense was spared. Foreign visitors were enticed with offers, overseas fans enjoyed subsidies of up to 70 per cent and the cost of travel between games within Italy itself was also reduced.¹⁰

Mussolini ordered the creation of an alternative trophy, the *Coppa del Duce* (The Duce Trophy). It was six times the size of FIFA's Jules Rimet trophy and would also be presented to the eventual winner. Football writer Aidan Williams has studied Mussolini-era football extensively and asserts that while hosting a successful tournament was essential for how Italy was perceived abroad, it would not have been quite as beneficial for the regime had the *Azzurri* not won the trophy. 'While Mussolini wasn't massively into football himself, he recognised the political value that a successful national side could provide,' Williams tells me. 'Pozzo also claimed that he was only able to select party members for the 1934 squad.'

After sweeping aside the USA 7-1 in its opening game, Italy scored controversial victories over Spain and Austria's *Wunderteam* to reach the final. Various question marks remain over the quality and impartiality of the officiating in those fixtures. In the final, held at the Stadio Nazionale PNF – the fascist party stadium in Rome – the Italians would face Czechoslovakia. 'Much to the chagrin of Mussolini, on the day of the final itself, the Czechoslovakian government decided that this was the day to announce that it was to ally with the Soviet Union,' Williams explains. 'This communist pact was very much seen as an anti-fascist move, and to announce it on the day of the final was seen by Mussolini – and probably correctly – as a hugely symbolic gesture.' Italian communists had suffered greatly in the 12 years that Mussolini had been in power, and Williams believes that many communists viewed the final as a mirror of the clash of ideologies between communism and fascism. Williams adds that just four days after Italy's 2-1 extra-time victory over the Czechs, Mussolini and Hitler met for the first time in Venice. The future fascist Axis was founded that would ultimately lead to conflict in Europe.

In 1934, there had been no real opposition to Italy hosting the World Cup. Perhaps the world had not yet been woken up

to the expansionist designs of fascism to consider it a threat. The first real test for the League of Nations, a forerunner to the United Nations, came in October 1935 when Mussolini flexed his muscles abroad and invaded Abyssinia, modern-day Ethiopia. Italian forces advanced from Somaliland, using air support and even poison gas against the vastly technically inferior Abyssinian defenders. Italy succeeded where it had failed in the 1890s in its first attempt to invade Abyssinia and conquered the country within six months. Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie fled into exile. Vittorio Pozzo had previously said of the foreign-born *oriundi* that ‘if they can die for Italy, they can play for Italy’¹¹ as they were eligible for national service, yet Enrique Guaita along with Argentine compatriots, AS Roma players Alejandro Scopelli and Andrés Stagnaro, were discovered sneaking over the Swiss border rather than face a military call-up.¹²

The lack of international response to the Italian invasion emboldened Mussolini, and straight after the successful takeover of Abyssinia in the summer of 1936, he was happy to support General Francisco Franco’s fascist *coup d’état* against the democratically elected Second Republic in Spain. Under this cloud of international tension in both Africa and Europe, Italy sent its amateur footballers drawn from various universities to the Berlin Olympics held during August. Rome itself had been a potential host before withdrawing from the selection process in 1931. Notably, the student team representing fascist Italy wore all black – not the traditional *Azzurro* (blue) – on its way to the gold medal, a look that would return to feature controversially for the national side just two years later in France. Another of Erbstein’s Lucchese players, Libero Marchini, had been called up to the Olympic squad. The 21-year-old midfielder played in all of Italy’s games in the run to the gold medal and came from an anti-fascist family. After the Olympic final victory against Austria, while his team-mates performed the obligatory Roman salute, Marchini is

photographed scratching his left thigh, therefore avoiding having to make the gesture. But while the Italians enjoyed a sympathetic crowd in Nazi Germany, tensions were rising in Europe, and ideological divisions were about to enter the field of play.

Tensions abroad

In March 1937, the *Azzurri* were in Vienna to take on Austria's *Wunderteam*. The match had a political edge from the off. The Austrians were conscious of Nazi Germany's ambitions of *Anschluss* – a unification of the German-speaking peoples of Germany and Austria – which would eventually happen the following year. On seeing the Italian side perform the fascist salute at the start of the match, the 50,000-strong Viennese crowd turned on the visitors, booing them vehemently. Some Austrians grabbed hold of Italian flags and tore them up. With echoes of Highbury three years earlier, when Italy lost a bruising encounter with England, the game appears to have descended into violence. Three Italians and two Austrian players were forced to retire, and an Austrian player was sent off. When the Italians refused to allow a free kick to be taken, the referee abandoned the match after 74 minutes, with Austria 2-0 up. The Italians needed a motorised police escort to leave the ground.¹³ According to a British United Press report, the match had 'turned into one of the biggest anti-Italian demonstrations seen in the Austrian capital', and the news reached Mussolini himself.¹⁴

The abandoned Vienna match would have repercussions in Paris just a month later. Tensions between France and Italy had been ratcheting up since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War the previous summer. A Spanish military *coup d'état* led by General Francisco Franco was launched in July 1936 against the progressive Republican government. The resulting civil war would rage for three years, and Franco's fascist uprising received support from Mussolini. The war displaced thousands of Spaniards,

many of whom fled across the Pyrenees to neighbouring France. Like Britain, France remained neutral in the face of nationalist uprisings in Europe, favouring appeasement over confrontation. A friendly match between France and Italy, scheduled at the Parc des Princes for 11 April 1937, was cancelled by Mussolini after news reached Rome that French communists and Italian anti-fascists exiled in Paris were planning to protest against the Italian side. The Italian football authorities sought assurances that 'ample protection would be afforded to Italian players in case of possible political demonstrations'.¹⁵ French authorities were mindful of crowd trouble following the recent Vienna abandonment and are reported to have informed the Italians that neither the Italian anthem nor the fascist salute would be allowed.¹⁶ The match cancellation followed accusations from Italy that France had been providing military assistance to Spain in contravention of non-intervention agreements. France denied the allegations. Later that month, Italian aircraft were involved in the bombing of the Basque market town of Guernica, which inflamed international outrage at Mussolini's regime.

Tensions against Italian teams continued throughout the summer. Once more, Vienna was the scene of controversy as a 'free fight' broke out between home side Admira and Genoa (Genova) in a Mitropa Cup match on 4 July. 'From the start, the Austrian antipathy to the Italians showed itself in an unfriendly attitude on the part of the 45,000 spectators towards the visitors,' the *Belfast Telegraph* reported.¹⁷ While the game was relatively calm, things changed when an Austrian player converted a penalty near the end and apparently celebrated by 'making a long nose'¹⁸ at the Italians. The nearest Genoa player punched the offending Austrian, and all hell broke loose. One Italian lost several teeth after being kicked in the mouth, and the police were required to keep the two sides apart. Four Italians were injured. In response, when Admira travelled to Italy for the return leg

the following week, Mussolini called the game off and gave the Austrians 24 hours to leave the country.¹⁹ Both Admira and Genoa were expelled from the tournament.

The fascists controlled the media, so the only way an Italian could read, hear or see news around *calcio* was through the filter of the regime. Understanding the role of the media early on, in 1933 Italian exiles in Belgium managed to grab hold of radio commentator Nicolò Carosio's microphone at a match and speak to the population at home.²⁰ Italian exiles would go on to badger the regime abroad wherever possible, most notably in France during the World Cup of 1938. When Italy returned to France to defend its title, it stepped into hostile territory. Many political opponents of Mussolini had fled across the border to France to escape his regime, including Professor Carlo Rosselli, an influential scholar and anti-fascist activist. Rosselli had been interned on the island of Lipari in 1929, but escaped and made his way to France, where he edited the anti-Mussolini paper, *Giustizia E Libertà* (*Justice and Liberty*). He also helped organise Italians fighting for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. In June 1937, Rosselli and his brother Sabatino – an esteemed historian also known as 'Nello' – were found stabbed to death in the grounds of a chateau in rural Normandy. An estimated 200,000 people lined the streets of Paris for the brothers' funerals.

When the World Cup came around, protests began as soon as the *Azzurri* arrived in Marseille to take on the Norwegians at Le Stade Velodrome. Six of Norway's starting XI had faced Italy in the Olympic semi-finals two years earlier, which Italy had won 2-1 *en route* to gold. Crowds of 3,000 or more French and Italian anti-fascists had to be contained by mounted police, according to Ambrosiana (Inter Milan) player Ugo Locatelli.²¹ In the stadium itself, the fascist salute was greeted with boos, whistles and jeers. The outcry angered Italy coach Vittorio Pozzo so much that he ordered his team to perform the salute twice even

after the crowd had quietened down to show them that his side was not intimidated. Despite the world champions getting off to a flying start with a second-minute goal from Pietro Ferraris of Ambrosiana, the Norwegians equalised seven minutes from time, having already hit the woodwork three times. Norway then had a goal ruled out for off side. Olivieri also tipped a goal-bound shot over to keep Italy in the tournament, before Lazio's Silvio Piola bagged the winner in extra time to send the *Azzurri* through.

The Italians progressed to the quarter-final in Paris to take on the hosts at the Stade Olympique de Colombes. As both sides' first-choice shirt was blue, a draw was made to decide colours. France won, and Italy donned an all-black kit with the fascist *Fascio Littorio* crest for the first and only time in a full international.²² The order to wear black was rumoured to have come from Mussolini himself and, combined with the performing of the fascist salute, sent a message to the home crowd and the wider world. The Parisian crowd was three times the size of that in Marseille, nearing 59,000. The game was so hotly anticipated that gate receipts hit a record 876,000 francs.²³ Yet the playing of the fascist anthem *La Giovinezza* was not received with anywhere near the same hostility as in Marseille. 'Marseille is not Paris,' an Italian journalist said of the difference in reception between the crowds in the two cities.²⁴ Piola was on target twice to seal a surprisingly easy 3-1 win for the team in black as Italy eliminated the hosts from their own World Cup.

Italy returned to Marseille for the semi-final against an overly confident Brazil side, with the anti-Mussolini Italian and Spanish diasporas in the stands firmly in favour of the South Americans. Anticipating a straightforward victory, Brazil made eight changes, including resting star striker Leônidas. It proved costly as Italy won 2-1 to return to Paris for the final against Hungary, where two goals apiece from Gino Colaussi and Piola (again) secured a 4-2 win for Pozzo's side. Unlike 1934, there

was no question mark against Italy's 1938 World Cup triumph. 'Regardless of how those two World Cup triumphs came about, they were won under the fascist flag, they were won in the name of the fascist state and, frankly, they would not have happened without the fascist state in various ways influencing them,' Aidan Williams concludes.

What had changed between 1934 and 1938? John Foot describes 1935, when Italy invaded Abyssinia, as the 'peak of consent' for the Italian public, and by 1938 observers across Europe realised that Mussolini's government was a dangerous, imperialist regime. In 1934, Mussolini was not all that interested in football; he had not even attended the victory after-party and cycling – Italy's most popular sport – pushed the World Cup win off some front pages. Yet by 1938, Mussolini was much more associated with football, Foot says. Taking place in France, Italy's neighbour with a large anti-fascist Italian community in exile, the World Cup became a hotbed for hostility. 'When the 1938 World Cup comes along, that becomes a lightning rod for a series of open anti-fascist demonstrations. This is the first time that Mussolini's regime is openly contested in a public sphere, in that kind of forum, which is a really interesting moment,' Foot tells me. 'But then what Italian propaganda does is turn that on its head to make it into a trial, blaming it on the French mainly, so that despite the hostile atmosphere of the French, we stood firm, we kept our salutes in the air. That kind of propaganda was very clever, turning it on its head and making themselves into victims, like they did with the Highbury game [against England in 1934].'

The team Italy wanted to beat was England, who had still refused to take part in World Cup tournaments in the 1930s. A friendly was arranged for May 1939 in Milan – the first time the two sides had faced each other since the infamous 'Battle of Highbury' five years earlier. Vittorio Pozzo took the fixture against England so seriously that he had his team prepared one

month ahead. The match itself drew 60,000 fans to the San Siro, a record for an Italian international fixture at that time. England continued an appeasement mission that almost exactly a year earlier had seen the team issue a fascist salute before a match against Germany in Berlin, sparking a heated debate at home. Again, the England team performed a fascist salute at the San Siro, which this time went largely unnoticed by the press back home. The England team held their arms aloft even though Benito Mussolini himself was not present, although his children were. Similarly, Adolf Hitler had also not been at the Berlin match a year earlier.

The decision for the England team to show the salute during the playing of *La Giovinezza* appears to have been agreed by Football Association secretary Stanley Rous after talking to the new British Ambassador in Rome, Sir Percy Loraine.²⁵ Some of the British public were upset by the gesture. A *Falkirk Herald* columnist was keen to alert ‘hyper-sensitive’ people to the ‘unwritten laws of courtesy’ of guests towards their hosts.²⁶ In the end, match witnesses recorded that neither the English nor the Italian team appeared quite sure of the protocol. ‘It seems that we shall never get this saluting business right,’ Clifford Webb lamented in his match report for the *Daily Herald* as he observed ‘comic handwaving’.²⁷ The game itself finished 2-2 with Silvio Piola bagging Italy’s controversial second, awarded by the German referee despite English appeals for handball, before a late England equaliser from Willie Hall of Spurs.

England moved on to Belgrade, where the FA side lost 2-1 to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia’s next opponents ten days later, on 29 May, were the *Azzurri*. The young country of Yugoslavia, two decades in the making after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was in something of a tight spot. Due to the merger of Austria and Germany in the *Anschluss* of 1938, the country now shared borders with both

fascist Italy to the west and Nazi Germany in the north. Since Italy's Milan encounter with England, Mussolini had signed a 'Pact of Steel' with Adolf Hitler on 22 May, reinforcing previous accords and aligning the two fascist states militarily, politically and economically in case of war. To make matters worse for Yugoslavia, in April 1939 Italy had invaded Albania to the south, securing naval control of the Adriatic Sea and forcing Albania's King Zog into exile. Yugoslavia's vital sea corridor was now at the mercy of the Italians, and it was in this tense environment that Italy's team arrived in Belgrade. As in France the year before, Italy's footballers were jeered when they presented the fascist salute. Some Yugoslav supporters even threw stones at the Italians.²⁸ Italy ran out 2-1 winners.

Football resistance in Italy during World War II

Mussolini watched events unfold after Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, which brought about Europe-wide conflict. It was only in June 1940, with France facing capitulation, that Mussolini finally committed Italy militarily to Germany's war effort. In October, Italian forces attacked Greece from their Albanian bases, which turned into a disaster. The Greek campaign and the many Greek footballers that helped force Mussolini and Hitler's forces back are covered in depth in Chapter Four. As men of fighting age, many footballers were called up to serve in the Italian military. Many would later defect to become partisans to fight against the Nazis. Italian activity during World War II was disastrous; with failure on the Greek offensive, defeat in North Africa and Ethiopia, and a huge loss of Italian life supporting the Germans on the Eastern Front. The war created food shortages at home, and opposition movements began collaborating to overthrow Mussolini.

On 10 July 1943, Allied forces led by British Field Marshal Montgomery and American General Patton landed on Sicily. It

was the beginning of the end of Mussolini. Two weeks later, on 25 July, the Fascist Grand Council demanded Mussolini resign and *Il Duce's* reign was over. He was arrested later that day. On hearing of his arrest, anti-fascists in Bologna entered the Stadio Littoriale and attempted to tear down the bronze statue of Mussolini on horseback that stood under the Maratona tower. They succeeded in taking down *Il Duce*, but his legs and the horse remained in place for another four years.²⁹ On 8 September, the new Italian government struck a truce without the occupying Germans' knowledge, and Italy had, in effect, switched sides. The Allies began pushing northwards up the country. Mussolini was broken out of his prison in a German commando raid and made leader of a puppet state in the Nazi-occupied north of the country called 'the Italian Social Republic', also known as the Republic of Salò.

With the Nazis desperately trying to stem the Allied advance through Italy, fighting became bogged down and morale was low among the troops. Like other parts of occupied Europe, football became a distraction. As in Kyiv earlier in the conflict, a legendary match took place between the occupying Nazis and local men. The small town of Sarnano sits on the eastern shadow of the Monti Sibillini National Park in the region of Marche. The mountain range was crawling with Italian partisans keen to subvert the German occupation. One such partisan, Decio Filipponi, had been executed by the Nazis. His body was left to hang in the town square for a week to send a message to the locals. Here in Sarnano, in the spring of 1944, Nazi officers knocked on the door of a local resident, Mario Maurelli – a former referee in *Serie A*. They asked him if he could raise a team of men aged between 17 and 22 for a match against the younger German soldiers.³⁰ The Nazi officers promised Maurelli, whose brother Mimmo was among the partisans, that no harm would come to the players.