

Chapter Title: Designing the Ocean Liners of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany

Chapter Author(s): James J. Fortuna

Book Title: Art and the Sea

Book Editor(s): Emma Roberts

Published by: Liverpool University Press. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2hbr255.12>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Liverpool University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Art and the Sea*

Designing the Ocean Liners of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany

James J. Fortuna

“The greatest thing the regime ever built”

Near the end of Italian film director Federico Fellini’s *Amarcord* (1973), the *SS Rex* makes a surprise appearance. Off the coast of Borgo San Giuliano, a village not far from Rimini, the 51,000-ton ship emerges from the fog on an apparently chilly night to be greeted by a small flotilla of local citizens. As the cruise liner steams past the motley collection of rowing boats and fishing schooners, the expectant villagers hurl patriotic shouts in its direction: “Hurray for the *Rex*, the greatest thing the regime ever built!” “Long live Italy!”¹ Before the ship slips into the darkness some five seconds later, a representative of the *Podesta*, the local mayor’s office, nearly tosses himself overboard to formally wish the ship and its passengers a safe onward journey. Barely audible over the repeated blasts of a foghorn, this wish, aimed in the direction of a mere glimpse of the vessel that was cast as a physical manifestation of national superiority both across the peninsula and overseas, proves a futile gesture as ill-fated as the *Rex* itself. In the summer of 1944 the ship was laid up before being moved from harbour to harbour in desperate efforts to safeguard it, and it eventually came to rest off the coast of Koper (former Yugoslavia) in Capodistria Bay. After a first round of RAF rocket attacks failed to sink the vessel on the morning of 8 September 1944, two additional squadrons comprised of Bristol Beaufighters from the Royal and South African Air Forces returned to the harbour where, as the

1. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

Imperial War Museum in London puts it, “the *Rex* was finished off later that day”. With fires blazing both above and below deck, the cruise liner finally rolled on to her port side and sank in the shallow water.²

In the film, this seemingly trivial scene signals the climactic turning point of a carnivalesque narrative of virile pre-war energy. As the product of a similar fit of misdirected Fascist vigour that saw the state commit to the rapid assembly of a new, world-leading fleet of ocean liners, Fellini deftly deploys the *Rex* as a floating symbol of the hubris and ambition that would ultimately leave the regime over-extended and the country it ruled in ruin. Fonts of national pride while they existed, the SS *Rex*, its sister ship the SS *Conte di Savoia* and many others of the Italian Line, served in a capacity similar to that of their peer liners built in shipyards across the Alps in Germany. While Fascist Italy had relied on its high-profile transatlantic cruise ships to reinforce the prestige of the regime both at home and abroad, Nazi officials, too, saw value in producing massive, state-of-the-art and easily identifiable vessels that would serve as floating symbols of a revitalised nation.

This chapter considers some of the more high-profile liners that sailed under the *tricolore* of Fascist Italy and the *Hakenkreuzflagge* of Nazi Germany. Specifically, it compares the ships built for the National Socialist Kraft durch Freude (KdF) (Strength through Joy) programme to those that sailed for the Italia Flotta Riunite, commonly known simply as the Italian Line.³ Where the KdF was an early initiative of the Nazi regime, the Italian Line was the product of an eventual forced merger of three major shipping lines with pre-existing routes and interests that, until 1932, extended well beyond Mussolini’s new corporatist system. Halfway through the period of dictatorial rule known in Italy as the *ventennio*, however, the better-travelled and more globally recognisable ships that had once belonged to Turin’s Lloyd Sabaudo, Trieste’s Cosulich STN and Genoa’s Navigazione Generale Italiana lines were brought under the consolidated command of the newly amalgamated Italian Line.

The following pages will explore the ways in which both “national” lines were created, organised and ultimately deployed. Maintaining a

2. Imperial War Museums, Air Ministry Second World War Official Collection, C 4622, “Royal Air Force Operations in Malta, Gibraltar, and the Mediterranean 1940–1945”, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205023347> (accessed 19 July 2020).

3. Founded as a department of the Deutsche Arbeitsfront in November 1933, the KdF’s full name was Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaft ‘Kraft durch Freude’.

dual-pronged analytical approach, this chapter will not only weigh the differences and similarities between the KdF and Italian Line ships, but also identify some of the key points of creative, ideological or even technological transfer in the development of both fleets. This analytical frame, both comparative and transnational, will not only inform our understanding of the ways in which German and Italian travellers came to interact with these ships; it will also make clear that aside from the apparent domestic propaganda value of the programmes, these ships were critical for the ability of each regime to assert itself in global terms. In a taxonomical sense, they were a new species of fascist design that often goes misclassified and is sometimes overlooked completely. In facilitating the international exchange of tourists and professionals, these ships served actively to demystify Italy and Germany for outsiders while simultaneously legitimising each country's new political system both at home and abroad. Modern in form and function but symbolically bedecked with neoclassical trimmings, these cruise liners can, and indeed should, be considered "total works of art", reflective not only of the aesthetic mood of this particular period, but also of the movements that produced them.⁴

After a brief overview of the nature and geopolitical role of the already widely acknowledged general connection between design, international travel and statecraft, this chapter will evaluate the more specific diplomatic and, indeed, cultural value of these ships to both the Fascist and Nazi regimes. This analysis will also reveal the existence of certain links between the aesthetic features and architectonic tone of these vessels and the more prominent domestic design trends which, in the commission of buildings, redesign of interior spaces or composition of advertising material, had been championed by both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and cast as an extension of the creative disposition that the regime leaderships hoped would define their popular image. These claims will be defended in individual sections dedicated first to the Fascist ships of the Italian Line, and later, to the Nazi cruisers built as part of the expansive KdF fleet. The chapter will conclude by commenting on the fate of some of the more high-profile liners and identifying related areas that deserve future scholarly attention.

4. Though the origins of this concept can be traced to K.F.E. Trahndorff and the nineteenth century, I use the phrase here in the twenty-first-century sense of Marla Stone. See Trahndorff (1827, pp. 312–318); Stone (1998, p. 130).

Diplomacy, Identity and Design

Often noted for their imposing size and uniformity, the ocean liners produced by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany contributed to the ability of each regime to put forward an impressive public face, one that would simultaneously emphasise each country's self-identification as a global power abroad and expedite the development of a common national culture at home. Such prestige projects were commonplace for both regimes. Large-scale infrastructure projects, for example, were points of focus for both regimes, and motorways, bridges, railways and harbours were intended as state-planned emblems of national vitality and modernity both within and beyond Italy and Germany. As the Nazi official in charge of KdF's travel division once declared, his German ships were to serve as "ambassadors of peace" and help reinforce the well-promoted view of Deputy Führer Rudolf Heß that "proper organization of the working people's leisure time is a decisive precondition not only for social peace within the nations, but also for political peace among the nations" (Spode, 2004, p. 136).⁵ These ships were responsible for ferrying travellers who were to serve, in the words of Labour Front Head and Reichsleiter Robert Ley, as "missionaries of National Socialism" (Semmens, 2005, p. 134); accordingly, great care was put into developing design plans for these vessels of diplomacy.

From their earliest days, both regimes had committed to what can be described as an experimental approach to design. In Italy, where architectural and other modes of creative production had initially fallen under the influence of avant-garde factions such as Marinetti's Futurists, the more reserved, classically inclined designers soon found themselves having to negotiate between the sporadically reactionary, rationalist and radical impulses of the regime that had, by the mid-1920s, become a dominant patron of the arts. The result was a brand of state-sponsored design that the regime hoped would prove easily identifiable (and be regarded as uniquely Fascist-Italian) around the world. Certain cities in Germany, too, after the Nazi seizure of power of 1932, became ground zero for the type of aesthetic experimentation demanded by the new regime. Well before Albert Speer gained the fame and power he would eventually enjoy by the end of the war in 1945, the man he effectively replaced, chief Party architect Paul Ludwig Troost, had earned a reputation by designing the interior of transatlantic

5. The latter quotation is attributed to Amt für Reisen, Wandern und Urlaub (RWU) director Bodo Lafferentz.

cruise ships for the Norddeutscher Lloyd line throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the 1930s, however, it was Troost's vision for a Nazified Munich, fashioned in an austere, if also over-scaled, classical mode, that won Hitler's attention and very quickly came to lay the aesthetic foundations that Speer and others would follow until the end.

Loosely codified design principles that betrayed an obsession with reconnecting so-called "superior blood lines" to the material legacy and ethereal spirit of past generations were applied to plans not only for ships and buildings, but also automobiles, aeroplanes, roads and trains. Methods and modes of political propaganda took on familiar tones: the printed word reached the masses on signs and paper using a mostly uniform set of fonts and typefaces; nationalised labour forces produced radio sets which delivered nationalised messages irrespective of region or dialect; and the power of new aesthetic trends, such as collage and streamlining, were exploited and subordinated to a national ideal. Both regimes developed design programmes with the expectation that such displays of size, technological dominance and "modern" interpretation of ancient styles would inspire ethnic pride, popular consent and diplomatic legitimacy both at home and abroad. In this way, the domestic projects headed by designers such as Troost in Munich, and Marcello Piacentini in Rome, can be understood to have served a diplomatic function. Like state-controlled liners, urban renewal and monumental design did as much to generate acclaim from the outside as it did from within, and Hasso Spode's claim that "in the eyes of the [Nazi] regime's inner circle all domestic policy was to serve foreign policy agendas" can and should be applied to the Fascist Italian regime as well (Spode, 2004, p. 136).

But just how "global" were the two most high-profile and complex fascist regimes? The idea that diplomatic channels were reliant upon the health of the ill-fated post-war liberal democracies of Italy and Germany can be disproven rather easily, though not necessarily by pointing to the political (or even military) record of the political programmes that ultimately took root in the capital cities of those countries. Rather, a more useful point of focus would be the inter- or sometimes transnational cultural, athletic or touristic programmes so important to the "brand" of both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Occasions such as the 1936 Olympic Games, co-operative archaeological excavations across the greater Mediterranean region, and perhaps above all the world's fairs of this period, betray the willingness of the global community to make room for dictatorial states within the slowly fading image of the Wilsonian world order. British and transatlantic interest

in a fascisticised continental Europe was so strong, in fact, that it was able to support the likes of Thomas Cook and a prosperous travel industry right up until the German western advance of spring 1940. Indeed, Anglophone writers, such as the Scribners-signed novelist Thomas Wolfe and *National Geographic* correspondent John Patric, wrote glowing reviews of a paradisiacal Munich and of a “Roman Empire” which had rightly been returned to its imperial splendour (Wolfe, 1939; Patric, 1937, p. 269).⁶ Escalating tensions on the periphery of the western European psyche, and flagrant disregard for the terms of the Versailles Treaty, meanwhile, did little to disrupt the inward and outward flow of exchange students from the United States, Britain, Sweden, Hungary and the Baltic States (Bodó, 2003; Norwood, 2011; Roche, 2013). Nor was Italy’s contentious withdrawal from the League of Nations, after refusing to pay fines amassed for the use of poison gas during the invasion of another sovereign state, reason enough to see it disinvited from participating in the major international expositions of 1937 and 1939 in Paris and New York, respectively. As the travel films studied by Heather Norris Nicholson reveal, some British travellers between 1925 and 1936 appeared to take no note of the fascist presence across Italy on holiday cruises from Sicily to Stromboli and eventually to Naples (Norris Nicholson, 2003, pp. 157–160). While there was some opposition to both regimes on popular and official planes, in general there remained a common willingness to overlook the bellicose language, ideological antagonism and aggressive military intervention of both the self-styled “Third Reich” and “Third Rome”. This, at least in part, can explain the popularity of the cruise liners in question.

What Do We Already Know About the Design History of Fascist and Nazi Cruise Liners?

While surprisingly few historians have viewed the ships of either regime as products of the larger aesthetic programmes that sponsored their design, work across various fields has improved our understanding of how these liners ought to factor into our thinking about the broader sociocultural policies of each regime. While later scholars, such as Margit Berwing

6. Though *The Web and the Rock* was published later, it was written before Wolfe’s damning literary exposé of the hidden face of Nazi cruelty so cleverly depicted in his serialised “I Have a Thing to Tell You” (Nun Will Ich Ihnen “Was Sagen”) in *The New Republic*, 1937.

(1984), have indirectly questioned some of its findings, the very existence of Ernest Hamburger's 1945 Institute of World Affairs investigation of the significance of the Nazi leisure time programme suggests that the KdF fleet had indeed achieved international fame, and was understood to be an integral part of the overall totalitarian agenda of National Socialist Germany, long before the dust settled in Berlin. In the second volume of his popularly received three-part study of Nazi Germany, *The Third Reich in Power*, Richard Evans placed the cultural mission of the regime, and by extension the KdF fleet, at the heart of its new power structure and social hierarchy (2005, pp. 467–474). Evans's appreciation of the KdF ships was informed by the work of both Baranowski (2001; 2004) and Semmens (2005), which, besides contextualising the more pacific international aims and dimensions of the Third Reich's sociocultural policies, also offers valuable insight into the purpose and function of (sometimes overtly politicised) travel between the wars. John Guse's 2011 analysis of the Reich's commitment to the promotion and development of new technology, as well as the "re-education" of the producers of that technology, reveals the multifaceted role of the KdF ships.⁷

Ironically, though a greater number of Italian Line ships spent more time traversing the world's oceans and hosting a more diverse cast of travellers than their German counterparts, less is known about the ships of Fascist Italy, at least as far as their relation to the broader ambitions of the regime is concerned. While many existing studies acknowledge the debt owed by the KdF to the earlier Fascist Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (National Afterwork Organization [OND]), historians remain unwilling to compare the connection between these ships and the politically inflected leisure programmes of each regime. The Italian organisation, thoroughly researched by Victoria de Grazia (1981) and more recently by Elena Vigilante (2014), set a clear model for the upstart German organisers to follow, but the two approaches to totalitarian administration of leisure have rarely been subjected to comparative treatment. Because the Italian Line ships operated independently of the OND, whereas the Nazi ships sailed under the KdF banner, the comparison here is not all that straightforward. It is, however, necessary, as the ships served a similar function in both contexts. If social,

7. The state-promoted, exhibitionist nature of the so-called "voyages of technology" explored by Guse (2011, p. 448) has certain parallels to the floating art exhibitions *Arte Flotante* organised to rehabilitate national image and identity after the war. These floating exhibitions have recently been discussed by Laura Bohnenblust (2019).

cultural and diplomatic historians have neglected the ships of the Italian Line, their aesthetic value has not been lost on the art historians and curators who came together to produce an elaborate exhibition at the Museo dell'Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti in Genoa, the port city where the majority of these liners were built. Though the exhibition did not focus exclusively on the ships of the Italian Line, the expert commentary published in the related catalogue offers some insight into the variety of ways in which these ships were presented to the Italian public and used to leverage Italy's position on the rapidly changing global stage (Tettarmanti, 2002).

On the history of liner and cruise ship design, at least as it relates to the focus of this chapter, Philip Dawson's study (2000) remains the main point of departure. Widely hailed as the landmark analysis of the evolution of cruise ship design since the nineteenth century, it places a heavy emphasis on the foundational value of the liners produced by (and exclusively for) National Socialist Germany, but has nothing at all to say about those produced, both concurrently and slightly earlier, by Fascist Italy. While Dawson claims that the "remarkably standardised approach to all-one-class accommodation" of Nazi ships was "well ahead of its time", he overlooks the Italian liners which hosted a decidedly more heterogeneous blend of passengers and, given that there were simply more of them, sailed a greater number of routes to a more diverse range of destinations (Dawson, 2000, p. 7). Dawson is correct that the KdF cabins represent "a primal integration of domestic function with the structural form of the vessel herself" in ways never before seen "in shipbuilding history", but implicit in his omission is the charge that the Fascist Italian liners were less inventive in their design (Dawson, 2000, p. 43). In the interest of presenting a more rounded view of transatlantic cruising in the interwar period, this chapter will consider the significance of the fascist liners to the international dynamics of the period in general, and to the regimes that sponsored them more specifically.

Mare Nostrum: The Ocean Liners of Fascist Italy

While often presented as trophies in their own right, the true significance of the Italian liners lay in their ability to connect a flamboyant, self-interested new regime to the outside world. Typically commissioned in pairs, Fascist cruisers covered the highly competitive transatlantic routes two hemispheres at a time. After the sister ships SS *Roma* and MS *Augustus* were launched in 1926 and 1927, for example, the former was assigned to the South

American route while the latter routinely crossed the North Atlantic between Genoa and New York. Twelve other ships, though, were also completed for the Italian Line throughout the *ventennio*. Of those, three were built by shipyards in Scotland and one at a shipyard in England, though these four were each completed before 1927 and therefore likely to have been ordered in advance of any traceable degree of Fascist influence. The remaining ten ships were built in shipyards across Italy and were more in tune with the regime's autarchic expectations. Besides these new commissions, the Italian Line also absorbed two smaller, older ships, the SS *Colombo* and the SS *Tel Aviv*.⁸

Insofar as it would be possible to ascribe a certain character to the ships of the Italian Line, they might be said to mirror the Fascist sense of self as well as any other element of cultural, architectural or industrial production unveiled between 1922 and 1943. In their scope, size and speed, the new ships exemplified the dynamism so often described by regime officials in speeches and in print. Where assertions of Italian superiority in areas of high culture (such as drama and music), civic development (such as urban planning and architecture) and academia (such as archaeological excavations and the publication of new scholarly journals – *Roma*, for example) were necessarily localised, each individual liner was a triumphant feat of Italian ingenuity not only capable of being seen and experienced abroad, but *designed* to be seen and appreciated beyond the limits of Mussolini's new self-styled "empire". In this sense, the ships were instruments of international competition, and it was no secret that the development of the Italian Line fleet was a bid for dominance that knew no regional boundaries. Within two years of their launch, both the *Rex* and its sister ship, the *Conte di Savoia*, competed for the Blue Riband – the prestigious, if entirely unofficial, honour bestowed upon the passenger liner that made the fastest transatlantic crossing in either direction. After the Italians had watched the German ships *Bremen* and *Europa* break their own westbound records on three separate occasions between 1929 and 1933 on a Norddeutscher Lloyd route from Cherbourg to New York, the newly built *Rex* slid in as challenger. When it shattered the *Bremen*'s July 1933 record by nearly three full hours just one month later, the *Rex* became an immediate national icon and catapulted Italy and Italian ship design into the global conversation. The *Rex* had maintained an incredible (for the period) speed of 28.92 knots

8. While the SS *Colombo* was refurbished by Cantieri Baia Napoli and promptly returned to service in 1932, the SS *Tel Aviv* was scrapped in 1934 before there was a chance for her to be renamed.

on her trip from Gibraltar to New York and held on to the record for nearly two years before losing ground to the SS *Normandie* of the French Compagnie Générale Transatlantique when she made the crossing from the British Isles of Scilly to Ambrose Light in Lower New York Bay. To date, the *Rex* remains the first and only Italian ship ever to win a Blue Riband.

Speed, though, was not the only metric of interest to the shipbuilders of Fascist Italy. Size and heft were also taken seriously, and if there exists any doubt as to whether or not the regime adopted the ships as symbols of state, one need only look to the roster of dignitaries charged with naming some of the more famous ships to understand the ways in which the ruling class capitalised on the fanfare generated by each launch. It was Edda Mussolini, daughter of the Duce, who named the 32,650 gross ton MS *Augustus* before she made her inaugural crossing of the equator *en route* to Rio de Janeiro at the end of 1926, while the regally named SS *Conte di Savoia* was named by Marie-José of Belgium, Italy's last queen, in advance of her official launch in November 1932. Over the span of five years, the standard size of Italian Line ships continued to swell. By the time the *Conte di Savoia* was completed at the Cantieri Riuniti dell'Adriatico shipyards near Trieste, she weighed 48,502 gross tons, 32 per cent heavier than the *Augustus*. As the line's heaviest ship, however, the honour of naming the *Rex* was left to the Duce himself. The highly publicised August 1931 unveiling of the 51,062 gross ton *Rex* was a celebration intended not only to draw attention to Italy's new largest ship, but to the broader power and might of the regime. Before an audience that included King Vittorio Emanuele III, Mussolini welcomed in the *Rex* while ushering out NGI, one of the three companies that the regime would see amalgamated within four months.

The Italian Line and Italy

After unearthing ruins of the ancient Roman port of Ostia, Mussolini's regime sought to complete its self-image by establishing a powerful, globally respected maritime presence. Accordingly, Fascist Italy's competitive approach to shipbuilding was not confined to the European coasts of the Atlantic. Although Italy hosted the Continental Advertising Association Conference in 1933, Italian thinkers had already been looking to more distant shores for inspiration. Since at least the end of the First World War, some Italian theorists had linked the advertising and consumerist culture so prevalent in the United States to that country's perceived geopolitical

might. Advertising was regarded by some as “America’s sword” (*La spada d’America*) and underpinned much American economic and diplomatic success (Cavalli, 1919). Not long after Egisto Roggero argued that advertising could be a “powerful tool in the fight among the nations” (Roggero, 1920, p. 151, quoted in Arvidsson, 2001, p. 163), the Fascist regime found itself in a position to create goods, experiences and sentiments that would promote its cause and worldview.

Cruises, once commodified, became a vehicle for state-influenced consumerism and, as such, a medium of governmentality that would enable the regime to reach beyond its borders and exert influence in new ways. There is no denying that sea travel was indeed a commercial enterprise in Fascist Italy. The interior of the *Conte di Savoia*, for example, was appointed by none other than northern designer Melchiorre Bega, an architect known at the time for his sleek treatment of stores, cafés and hotels, and the ship was promoted to consumers as the fleet’s lone seasick-proof liner thanks to its new “anti-rolling gyroscopes”. In such ways, the liners celebrated, and indeed sold, a bigger, newer, more powerful Italian identity, not just to ethnic Italians, but to the world over, and were, effectively, agents of the same powerful sense of national regeneration that the regime sought to promote across all facets of daily life in every corner of the globe. Transforming Italy into a twentieth-century sea power was central to the Fascist strategy of identity reclamation, but the commitment of the regime to this Latinate concept of maritime domination was not limited to the expansion of a war-ready naval fleet. Under Fascism, Italians could activate their cultural heritage by simply booking leisure or transit cruises.

Strength Through Sea Travel: The Ocean Liners of National Socialist Germany

If the ships of the Italian Line were designed to dominate the foreign competition, the ships of the KdF line were built to revolutionise domestic attitudes towards the international cruise experience. As the pre-eminent pair of a planned thirty ships, both the *Robert Ley* and *Wilhelm Gustloff* (originally named *Adolf Hitler*) were engineered to provide their passengers with a more egalitarian, if not completely democratised experience. By 1937 nearly one-fifth of the German population older than 15 had booked at least one KdF trip, and under the direction of Reichsleiter Horst Dressler-Andress, the regime appeared successfully on track to deploy the cruise

ship programme as a tool dedicated to overcoming what was perceived as an ongoing class struggle (Spode, 2004, pp. 131–132). Though the ships were engineered with card-carrying Party members in mind, unlike other ships around the world, the KdF ships did not differentiate between tiered service classes. Were they realised, plans for the full KdF fleet would have seen these Nazi liners, the first cruise ships dedicated exclusively to leisure cruising and not to travelling, host upwards of two million passengers per year (Dawson, 2000, p. 40). These specifications, besides netting the regime considerable global attention, proved consequential in several different ways.

For one, where the Italian liners were designed to break speed records, the German liners were deliberately slow vessels, averaging a mere 15.5 knots. Longer, slower journeys allowed cruise directors more time with their captive audience and placed an emphasis on transit *between* two destinations rather than travel *to* a destination. The slower speed also gave cultural officials onboard time to execute what can be described as propaganda itineraries and to exaggerate, or at least reinforce, the distance between the homeland and “other places” to the throngs of typically blue-collar passengers onboard. As evidenced by the decision of ship designers to exclude the standard storage spaces from their final plans, KdF cruises prioritised volume and capacity over meeting international norms or standards. By working to host as many members of the German working class as possible, KdF ship designers also made the bold decision to eliminate all interior cabins so as to ensure a constant supply of sunlight, and provided ample public spaces, such as sun decks, swimming pools and sporting facilities, to facilitate considerable pan-German interaction among cruisers and crew alike (Dawson, 2000, pp. 39–40). In this sense, the design of the ships helped the regime to promote its vision for a common national culture. While travelling, the “ethnic Germans” on these cruises had no choice but to *share* a perspective of the outside world. Wherever a cruise may have headed, the people onboard shared in the approach and experience of that place, thus contributing directly to the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community) principle supported so vocally by the regime. The Nazi-sympathising Swiss novelist Jakob Schaffner used his 1936 travelogue *Volk zu Schiff. Zwei Seefahrten mit der KdF-Hochseeflotte* to celebrate the fact that in creating “a nation at sea”, the regime had managed to use these ships to set a new standard in popular mobility.⁹

9. While the literal translation of the German noun *Volk* is “people”, the word was typically used by the regime to convey a sense of nationhood or ethnic belonging, as Schaffner does here.

Through KdF cruises, views of the outside world were affirmed *en masse*, and a sampling of the more popular destinations betrays the fact that organisers had, at least for a time, been somewhat hesitant to venture beyond the established sphere of German influence. Trips to countries or colonies ruled by dictatorial allies in Mussolini's Italy, Salazar's Portugal and Metaxis's Greece, for example, were made early and often, even before the KdF had been able to supplement its inherited fleet with the two flagship liners. Contemporaneous press clippings indicate that the trips to Italy and its colonies were intended serve a particular purpose and to "pave the way to a great friendship between the folk forces of two young nations" that had united themselves in opposition to "the old, rotten, liberal, democratic Europe" (Hamburger, 1945, p. 234).¹⁰ The plan to add a new Japanese route to the KdF's list of offerings, for example, was eventually abandoned at the outbreak of the war, but there are clear connections between the geopolitical disposition of the regime and the routes sailed by its, ostensibly civilian-oriented, ships (Spode, 2004, p. 149). Another example can be found in the Iberian Peninsula, where, in a move that would prefigure the liners' eventual roles as troop and hospital ships during the Second World War, KdF cruises were cancelled in May 1939 to ferry the notorious Condor Legion back to Germany from Spain, where it had been deployed to subdue Republican resistance to Francisco Franco's violent military coup.¹¹

Aboard the Nazi Flagship Vessels

Though the *Robert Ley* was only slightly larger, her single additional deck allowed her to accommodate 1,766 passengers compared to the *Wilhelm Gustloff's* 1,465. Unencumbered by the technical rigging equipment commonly seen aboard other deep-sea ships that were not solely dedicated to cruising, both ships were defined by their broad, open deck spaces. As Dawson has noted, with the lone cargo hatch placed all the way

10. Hamburger is quoting *Arbeitertum*, 1 November 1937, pp. 6–9; 15 April 1938, pp. 11–14; 1 August 1939, p. 7.

11. Once again, the ships enjoyed international notoriety and were celebrated in the transatlantic popular press. See, for example, the early summer *LIFE Magazine* article entitled "German Condor Legion, Home from Spain, Gets Heroes' Welcome", 26 June 1939, pp. 24–25.

forward, the deck spaces were uniformly free of the “usual obstructions of multiple hatchways, along with the kingposts, derricks, and winches on deck necessary to work them” (Dawson, 2000, p. 40).¹² The broad layout was replicated below deck throughout the internal spaces, and both ships were appointed according to the tastes of Reichskultursenator Professor Woldenar Brinkmann, who supervised their architectural design from start to finish. As models to be followed by later ships, both vessels were mostly uniform in design inside and out.¹³ Like the cabins, the walls of the public rooms were panelled in various polished woods and veneers while the ceilings oscillated between various shades of cream or bright white (Dawson, 2000, p. 42). While the ships were not saddled with the overt emulation of the classical mode on display across various other regime-built structures throughout Germany at this time, the hypermodern function of these vessels did not manage completely to overshadow some of the more superficial classical accents embedded in their design and layout. Whether in the reliefs and etchings found in the dining room, or in the portico-like partially enclosed promenade above deck, both ships channelled a certain reverence for the classical mode favoured by Party leaders. The swimming pools of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, for example, were decorated with mosaics depicting a proud Neptune reigning over the waves and waterways (Chapoutot, 2016, p. 269). Given the decidedly philhellenic predilections of the regime, the decision to depict Neptune instead of his Grecian counterpart, Poseidon, is rather curious.

For an indication of the privileged status afforded these ships, one need only consider that the first cruises began as early as 1934, less than two years after the seizure of power and one full year before the first stretch of the highly touted *Autobahn* opened to traffic in the spring of 1935 (Hildebrand, 1999; Schwarz, 1993). The rapid development of highways throughout Germany was yet another way to validate the Nazi claim to technological prowess and superiority, and became the focus of countless travel advertisements geared towards the global public. Unlike the motorway

12. The exceptions include a series of deluxe cabins on the port side of each ship, the slightly more luxurious captain's quarters, and on the *Robert Ley*, an elaborate “state suite” designed for the personal use of Adolf Hitler. See Dawson (2000, p. 42).

13. Historians have noted that Brinkmann's original, slightly more elaborate visions for the *Robert Ley* suggest that it enjoyed a privileged status in the Nazi imagination. How Brinkmann et al. reached the decision to complete the ship without the originally intended additional decorative features remains unknown. See Keine (1939, p. 216).

and rail systems, however, the cruise ships reached far beyond the borders of Germany in an attempt to normalise the regime in a much broader, indeed global, sense. That the two crown jewels of the KdF fleet were not rolled out until 1938 and 1939 evidences the sustained success of, and commitment to, the “Strength through Joy” cruising programme.

Though the majority of KdF-related documents were destroyed in the Allied bombing raids on Berlin, it is clear that the regime-controlled ocean liners were a critical propaganda arm of the overall Nazi programme and were more than mere status symbols. Indeed they did, at various points, serve to facilitate the spread of German influence in less abstract terms. Beyond their occasional use as military transports, there is also evidence to suggest that ships were sent to South America by the foreign branch of the NSDAP Auslands-Organisation in 1938 to collect votes in “offshore polling places” (Special Cable to the *New York Times*, 1938, p. 11). The votes collected aboard these ships served to register the collective will of a globally dispersed population of Germans and validate the *Anschluss*, or annexation of Austria, further evidencing the regime’s belief in the ocean liner as a unifying force.

Conclusion

As “floating cities”, these cruise liners were small-scale opportunities to experiment and to experience a scaled-down version of the social order promised and promoted by each regime. Given that the ships of the Italian Line catered to an international public, this social order in the Italian context was more diverse than that of the KdF liners, which were essentially closed-circuit universes constructed “by Germans, for Germans”, to the extent that foreign currency was rejected in favour of the Reichsmark and ports of call were sometimes only viewed from onboard the ship (Prager, 1977, pp. 166–167).

Yet, to be sure, these ships were designed to impress foreigners and were perfectly *functional* elements of nationalised cultural production. They were, effectively, shrines to the fascist reconciliation of the twentieth-century tension between modern engineering and design and an artistic deference to all things classical. Each ship was an ostentatious marker of national standing and achievement and internally decorated so as to remind the German and Italian workers onboard of their place on the timeline of so-called “Western civilisation”. Throughout their voyage, passengers were exposed to a composite of Party iconography

and design in a higher concentration than could typically be found on dry land. The interiors and deck accessories of these custom-built vessels, for example, were designed by many of the same Party architects (most notably Brinkmann in the German case) involved in other diplomatic or propagandistic architectural projects. By enshrining the products of Fascist and National Socialist creativity and high design, the ships served to remind Germans and Italians not only of their collective potential, but also of their great and distinguished past.

The vessels in question flew under Italian and German flags, but as agents of empire and influence they spent a considerable amount of time abroad. Though they more frequently sailed in the western hemisphere, they were seen regularly in ports around the world, and it is clear that the KdF was intent on following the example set by the Italian Line in making what were known as “around-the-world” cruises a consistent offering (fig. 7.1). While many so-called transatlantic studies continue to focus only on connections or transfers between Europe and North America, it is worth at least acknowledging here that both lines coordinated numerous routes across the southern hemisphere. The people, places and natural resources of South America were the focus of considerable competition between Axis and Allied countries, both before and during the Second World War, and the sailing routes that linked the Old World with the New indicate a concern for the South American continent that extended well beyond commercial interests generated by tourism. The focus on South America was part of a much larger and concerted effort to exert influence and maintain a presence on a continent that both the Axis and Allied powers would eventually come to value for strategic purposes.

While both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany enjoyed fairly consistent representation throughout the New World thanks to their corporate interests and embrace of the international exposition as a vehicle of propaganda, in terms of cruising there was at least one sizeable obstacle to the desire of the regimes to dock their liners in the United States. After more than a hundred passengers died when the SS *Morro Castle* caught fire off the coast of New Jersey on her return from Havana in the summer of 1934, US maritime authorities introduced some of the world’s strictest fire regulations and began actively to discourage outdated, foreign-flagged vessels from venturing into American waters (Quartermaine and Peters, 2006, p. 18). Given the interest of both regimes in establishing a global foothold, there is little question that this new barrier to entry factored into

SHIPS THAT SERVE THE WORLD . . .

Speeding from ocean to ocean, from continent to continent—great Lido liners visit the far-flung harbors of the globe! 223 world ports look to the Italian Marine for swift, efficient, regular service . . . delightful, open-air Lido life at sea.

Are you going from New York to Capetown? Choose an Italian vessel for a 19 day voyage with every modern shipboard luxury! Going

to Bombay? You can make the voyage in 16 days . . . just as you can travel to Egypt in 9 days, and reach Beirut or Haifa in as little as 12 days—aboard a Lido ship.

And you'll enjoy the same supreme standards of seamanship, cuisine, service . . . under Italy's flag . . . on every connecting vessel of her lines . . . Italia, Lloyd Triestino, Adriatica or Tirrenia!

Apply to your Local Travel Agent or

ITALIAN LINE

624 Fifth Avenue, New York. Offices in principal cities.

Figure 7.1 “Ships that Serve the World”, advertisement for the Italian Line, *Town & Country Magazine*, March 1938



Figure 7.2 “Napoli: La Nuova Stazione Marittima” (1938), postcard issued by Edizione Vincenzo Carcavallo, Naples

the desire to complement the inherited ships of both fleets with a variety of state-of-the-art liners. So, *new* ships eventually left Hamburg and Ostia for much further ports of call such as New York and Rio, temporarily exporting German or Italian culture and lifestyles. These ships were to serve as a sort of micro-society which mirrored that of the reconfigured homeland and advertised the merits of Fascist or Nazi social policy abroad. In this way, the ships were vehicles through which ideology could be exported, even temporarily, under the guise of friendly international relationship building. As Kristin Semmens has noted, “their very presence in foreign ports demonstrated the achievements and successes of the new regime[s], which had made once inaccessible leisure practices available to working-class Germans” (Semmens, 2005, p. 132). In other words, these ships served as the direct link between the fascist and non-fascist worlds. They were designed to ferry people back and forth across the seas and facilitate the normalisation of globalised fascism. The goal was both to expose the subjects of each regime to the outside world of so-called tired liberal democracy and to showcase the superlative state of the reinvigorated, or “sanitised”, to use one of Mussolini’s favourite words, Germany

and Italy. In this way, such transatlantic (or trans-Mediterranean) cruises, and the extravagant vessels which made up the fleet of each country, were further tools of legitimisation, deployed by each regime to impress domestic and international populations alike.

While the majority of KdF and Italian Line ships were lost by the end of the Second World War, the Italian Line itself managed to survive the conflict. After several rebranding campaigns, and some degree of administrative reorganisation which saw the company turn its focus from cruises to freight, the Italian Line remained state-owned until 1998 and later existed as a private business, until it was eventually acquired by a North American shipping company in 2002. Though both the *Robert Ley* and the *Wilhelm Gustloff* were also lost by 1945 (the sinking of the latter by Soviet torpedoes in January 1945 remains the deadliest civilian sea disaster to date), a brief look at some of the East German and Soviet ships built after the Second World War suggests that both KdF liners set forth a lasting model.¹⁴

Perhaps the most lasting testament to the legacy of these ships, however, can be found not under the sea, but on land. Passenger cruise terminals built to accommodate the new flow of travellers, such as Cesare Bazzani's 1936 Stazione Marittima di Napoli (fig. 7.2), remain scattered across Italy. For the many Italian emigrants who relocated to North and South America aboard an Italian Line ship, these structures marked the final view of their native country as they steamed away from the Italian coast and towards the New World. Further north, the unfinished KdF leisure resort known as the "Colossus of Prora" still stands on the edge of the North Sea on the German island of Rügen. As the Second World War raged on, plans to dock ocean liners off the island were eventually abandoned and the designs for the island, fêted by the international public at the 1937 Paris International Exposition, were never realised. While the role and design of Nazi and Fascist buildings continues to generate intense debate and scholarly discussion, these ships, no less powerful in their capacity as agents of power and influence both at home and abroad, demand an equal level of scholarly focus and attention.

14. See especially those built in the DDR by Mathias-Thesen-Werft, as well as the Alexander Pushkin class liners built by the same Wismar yard. For more, see Dawson (2000, pp. 43–44).

Bibliography

- Arvidsson, Adam (2001), "Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy", *Social Science History*, 25, pp. 151–186.
- Baranowski, Shelley (2001), "Strength through Joy: Tourism and National Integration in the Third Reich", in Shelley Baranowski and Ellen Furlough (eds), *Being Elsewhere: Tourism, Consumer Culture, and Identity in Modern Europe and North America*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, pp. 213–238.
- Baranowski, Shelley (2004), *Strength Through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Berwing, Margit (1984), "Kraft Durch Freude: Reisen im Dritten Reich", in Konrad Köstlin (ed.), *Reise-Fieber: Begleitheft zur Ausstellung des Lehrstuhls für Volkskunde der Universität Regensburg, Oberpfälzer Volkskundemuseum Burglengenfeld, Stadtmuseum Cham (Kordonhaus), Stadtmuseum Deggendorf*, University Lehrstuhl für Volkskunde, Regensburg, pp. 115–126.
- Bodó, Béla (2003), "Foreign Students in Nazi Germany", *East European Quarterly*, 37, pp. 19–50.
- Bohnenblust, Laura (2019), "Tracing the Routes of Floating Exhibitions: A Fluid Cartography of Postwar Modernism around 1956", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 8, pp. 44–57.
- Cavalli, Pio (1919), *La Spada d'America*, Fratelli Traves Editori, Milan.
- Chapoutot, Johann (2016), *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Dawson, Philip (2000), *Cruise Ships: An Evolution in Design*, Conway Maritime, London.
- Evans, Richard (2005), *The Third Reich in Power*, Penguin, London.
- de Grazia, Victoria (1981), *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Guse, John (2011), "Volksgemeinschaft Engineers, The Nazi 'Voyages of Technology'", *Central European History*, 44, pp. 447–477.
- Hamburger, Ernest (1945), "Significance of the Nazi Leisure Time Program", *Social Research*, 12, pp. 227–249.
- Hildebrand, Klaus (1999), "Die Deutsche Reichsbahn im nationalsozialistischen Diktatur 1933–1945", in Lothar Gall and Manfred Pohl (eds), *Die Eisenbahn in Deutschland: Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, C.H. Beck, Munich, pp. 165–221.
- Keine, R. (1939), *Schiffbau, Schifffahrt und Hafenbau*, vol. 40, Carl Marfels, Berlin.
- Norris Nicholson, Heather (2003), "British Holiday Films of the Mediterranean: At Home and Abroad with Home Movies, ca.1925–1936", *Film History*, 15, pp. 102–116.

- Norwood, Stephen (2011), *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower: Complicity and Conflict on American Campuses*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Patric, John (1937), "Imperial Rome Reborn", *National Geographic*, March, pp. 269–325.
- Prager, Hans Georg (1977), *Blohm & Voss. Schiffe und Maschinen für die Welt*, Herford Koehler, Hamburg.
- Quartermaine, Peter, and Bruce Peters (2006), *Cruise: Identity, Design, and Culture*, Rizzoli, New York.
- Roche, Helen (2013), *Sparta's German Children: The Ideal of Ancient Sparta in the Royal Prussian Cadet-Corps, 1818–1920 and in National Socialist Elite Schools, 1933–1945*, The Classical Press of Wales, Swansea.
- Roggero, Egisto (1920), *Come si riesce con la pubblicità*, Hoepli, Milan.
- Schaffner, Jakob (1936), *Volk zu Schiff. Zwei Seefahrten mit der KdF-Hochseeflotte*, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, Hamburg.
- Schwarz, Angela (1993), *Die Reise ins Dritten Reich: Britische Augenzeugen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–39*, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Semmens, Kristin (2005), *Seeing Hitler's Germany: Tourism in the Third Reich*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Special Cable to the *New York Times* (1938), "German Vote Irks American Nations: Republics See an Affront to Sovereignty as Ships Prepare for Anschluss Plebiscite – Ballots Cast off Brazil", *New York Times*, 8 April, p. 11.
- Spode, Hasso (2004), "Fordism, Mass Tourism and the Third Reich: The 'Strength through Joy' Seaside Resort as an Index Fossil", *Journal of Social History*, 38, pp. 127–155.
- Stone, Marla (1998), *The Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Syrjämä, Taina (1997), *Visitez l'Italie: Italian State Tourist Propaganda Abroad 1919–1943*, Turub Yliopisto, Turku.
- Tettarmanti, Stefano (2002), *Six Wonderful Days: Un Invito al Viaggio aulle Grandi Navi Italiane*, Tormena, Genoa.
- Trahndorff, K.F.E. (1827), *Aesthetik, Oder, Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst*, Maurer, Berlin.
- Unattributed (1939), "German Condor Legion, Home from Spain, Gets Heroes' Welcome", *LIFE Magazine*, 26 June, pp. 24–25.
- Vigilante, Elena (2014), *L'Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro: Tempo Libero dei Lavoratori, Assistenza e Regime Fascista, 1925–1943*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Walton, John K. (1997), "Taking the History of Tourism Seriously", *European History Quarterly*, 27, pp. 563–571.
- Wolfe, Thomas (1939), *The Web and the Rock*, Harper, New York.

