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Article

Administration of the State Railways During the Fascist Regime: The Creation of the Ministry of Communications

Abstract: *The political and social climate in Italy at the end of the First World War was fertile ground for the establishment of the Fascist Regime.*

During Fascism, even the transport sector, already strained by the war effort, was subject to organisational changes aimed at establishing greater political control.

A well-defined pattern was imposed on the organisation of the State Railway Administration, as a state rail transport body, accompanied by a strict military order.

During the fascist period, two distinct phases of change in the internal organisation of the State Railways Administration can essentially be identified. The first was marked, in 1922, by the appointment of the Extraordinary Commissioner for the State Railways, while the second, which determined the real beginning of the Fascist administration for the State Railways, was characterised by the establishment of the Ministry of Communications, which took place with Royal Legislative Decree RDL. No. 596 of 30 April 1924. The contribution, after a brief historical reconstruction of the development of the Italian railway network, focuses on the analysis of the railway transport system during the years of Fascism,

highlighting how the regime, in a highly strategic sector such as transport, actually implemented timid political-institutional transformations.

Specifically, the work analyses the establishment of the Ministry of Communications and the reorganisation of railway services.

Keywords: *fascism; ministry of communications; railway transport; transport policies*

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1. Introduction. The evolution of the Italian railway system: from pre-unification to fascism

At the time of their creation, railways were the most widely used means of transport within the different social contexts. Railways were mainly created for economic purposes by private companies with large

amounts of capital to invest. Initially, no particular weight was given to the social role that rail transport could play.

The history of the Italian railways began in the first half of the 19th century when, following the extraordinary successes achieved by other European countries, the Italian political class also began to see the railways as a driving force for economic and social development. The Italian railway network only experienced its true development from the years before the unification of the territory (Guadagno, 1996).

The development of railways in the pre-unification period of Italy was characterised by the construction of fragmented railway networks managed and financed by a few private companies (Briano, 1977).

The country's first railways, however, were not built for economic and social needs but rather to facilitate the journeys of the wealthier social classes who had to travel from their city dwellings to their holiday homes. Only later were these infrastructures used for economic and war purposes.

In Italy, the first state to tackle the construction of an internal railway system was the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies under King Ferdinand II of Bourbon.

In 1836, a request was made to carry out a feasibility study for the construction of railway lines connecting Naples to Manfredonia and Naples to Salerno (Briano, 1977). Thus, on 3 February 1838, the construction of the section of railway linking Naples to Nocera with a branch line from Torre Annunziata to Castellammare di Stabia was authorised (Guadagno, 1996). The project for the first Italian railway actually had very little Italian about it. In fact, the project and funding came from France, while the locomotives, which were to be put into operation to ensure proper circulation, were imported from Great Britain.

In 1839, therefore, the first real Italian railway came into operation: the Naples-Portici. This first railway section was initially a great success as it made it possible to get from Naples to Portici in only fifteen minutes. In the first months of operation, as many as 131,000 people used this means of transport (Forghieri, 1997).

Given the extraordinary success, King Ferdinand II of Bourbon subsequently promoted the construction of further railway links. Thus, was born the 33 km Caserta-Naples line, the 20 km line connecting Portici, Torre Annunziata and Castellammare di Stabia, and the 11 km line from Capua to Caserta.

To ensure the functioning of the nascent railway system, the *Opificio di Pietrarsa* was built in 1840, created to repair rolling stock but later intended for the construction of steam locomotives (Jannattoni, 1975).

In the rest of Italy, too, the first railway links began to emerge in those years. In 1840, the route connecting Milan to Monza was inaugurated and can be considered the second railway line in operation on Italian territory.

The Grand Duchy of Tuscany, also in those years, tired of Austrian pressure to create a railway line to connect the Adriatic side with the Tyrrhenian side, started building the railway line between Livorno, Florence and Bologna.

The connection between Livorno and Pisa (1844) was the first to be active within the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. later, other lines operated by other private companies were added, including the line from Florence to Empoli Pisa Livorno, the line from Empoli to Siena, the line from Florence to Prato, Pistoia, Lucca and Pisa, and finally the line from Pisa to Lucca.

The Piedmontese State, on the other hand, was much later. In fact, it was not until 1853 that the first railway link between Turin and Moncalieri was created in the territory, just 8 km of

track. However, although starting late compared to the other small pre-unification states, the Piedmontese state quickly equipped itself with an impressive railway infrastructure: as many as 688 kilometres of railways were opened for operation in this state, up to the date of 1861.

In the years of pre-unification Italy, therefore, the individual states began to equip themselves with their own railway infrastructure with profound functional and administrative differences. The factors that determined this situation were, without a doubt, the different social and economic conditions in the different parts of Italy, but also the different understanding of the potential of a good railway network.

For example, in central Italy the Papal State had a highly sceptical attitude towards the progress that rail transport could bring. It was not until 1846 with Pope Pius IX that concrete ideas about the possible development of railways in that territory began to develop (Jannattoni, 1975).

It was, however, only around 1850 that, thanks to Camillo Benso Count of Cavour, people began to talk about a real railway policy that would include the construction of the major railway lines of what would later become united Italy (Guadagno, 1996).

Cavour understood that the development of the railway network would be a decisive element in the process of territorial unification. In his political design for a united Italy, the construction of a railway network based on two axes would have been indispensable: the first was the Po Valley – Alpine (West – East), directly connected to the port of Genoa, and the second was the Apennine (North – South). In time, these two backbones imagined by Cavour would have to be connected to ensure not only the successful territorial unification of Italy but also the presence of an efficient railway system capable of connecting the entire territory.

The economic burdens of these works were, according to Cavour, to be borne solely by the central state, without the interference of outside capital as had been the case until then.

In any case, at the time of the unification of the Italian territory, the railway system was, as previously mentioned, extremely fragmented, making it immediately necessary to proceed with projects and works for the construction of connections. In 1861, the new kilometres of the nascent Italian railway network amounted to approximately 360, a figure that increased year by year until in 1866 a further 700 kilometres were put into operation.

In addition to the need for internal connections, however, the need to connect Italy with the rest of Europe and the world through railways was increasingly present. Thus, the great tunnels were created: the Frejus tunnel was opened for operation in 1871, followed in 1882 by the opening of the Gotthard tunnel, and finally in 1898 the Simplon tunnel was opened (Villari, 1970).

However, at the end of 1862, given the increasing economic difficulties that the newly unified country was facing, it was realised that the state coffers would not really be able to finance and manage the various railway projects aimed at connecting Italy.

Thus, in 1865, the reorganisation law was introduced with the reliance on the private concession system. In the Private Concession Regime, the main objective was to complete the physical unification of the numerous and fragmented railway branches, which had previously been run by numerous private companies.

In this way, the burden of building the new railway lines was placed on private concession companies. In order to incentivise the private companies, the state offered modest grants.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the train had become the most popular means of transport for fast travel.

The Italian railway system suffered from very limited economic intervention to such an extent that at the beginning of the century it was in a precarious state of preservation and operation. In 1905 only 17% of the connections were double-track, a percentage that increased dur-

ing the war years to 23%, making it one of the European countries with the lowest percentage of double-track railways.

Declining conditions were also present with regard to trains and equipment, which were very old and poorly maintained. In addition to this, railway stations were architecturally valuable but very poorly functional (Giuntini, 2007).

An analysis of the Italian railway network at the beginning of the 20th century shows that the extension of the network in 1906 was about 12,537 km, while in 1922, the network reached a total of 16,344 km thanks to further development, of which 1,057 km was only added at the end of the war thanks to the annexation of conquered territories (Guadagno, 1996).

The precarious conditions of rail transport and possible remedies were, in fact, a central theme in the public debate throughout the Giolitti era. What was most probably missing, however, was an assessment and planning of the costs and investments for the modernisation and maintenance of the facilities needed to operate this type of transport. Added to this was the high cost of fares for freight and passenger transport.

This disappointing situation was also due to the fact that the railway industry, over the years, had failed to take off despite the attempt to stimulate it through the 1885 Conventions (Merger, 1997) which, among other things, imposed the obligation on private companies to prefer to procure material from exclusively Italian companies if their prices were not 5% higher than foreign offers.

The need for the Italian state to rethink its railway policy was increasingly felt. The solution found was the nationalisation of the railways, a costly but necessary undertaking.

It was felt that the task of reorganising the railway system should be entrusted to a person within the sector and with a clear plan in mind of how to remedy the disastrous situation. The choice therefore fell on Riccardo Bianchini, former general manager of the Sicilian railway company, who managed to direct the railways with a firm hand, reorganising the company on a private basis.

The early years of the 20th century were, therefore, years of evolution and change for the Italian railway system. During the First World War, moreover, the railway machine was able to play a crucial role by efficiently transporting not only passengers and soldiers, but also goods and supplies.

2. Fascism and railway policy

At the end of the First World War, Italy found itself living in a political and social climate characterised by great unrest. The discontent within the population allowed the Fascist regime to take power in October 1922, which brought about major changes within society.

Even the railways, exhausted by the war effort, underwent changes and transformations typical of the new political regime (Perinetti, 1974).

After the Great War, the railway administration had to cope with a heavily indebted budget and an ever-increasing number of employees.

To remedy this difficult condition was Mussolini who, in his first years of government, devoted particular attention to public services and, in particular, to the functioning of the railway sector whose efficiency and regularity were the symbol of restored order (Maggi, 2003).

During the period of the Fascist dictatorship, a very strict military-style order was applied to the organisation of the State Railways Administration, with a regime aimed at cutting expenses.

Fascism immediately wanted to make profound changes to the internal organisation of the Italian railway company with the primary objective of restoring its balance sheet.

Having ascertained the serious financial situation in which the state railways found themselves, drastic measures were implemented, the first of which was to increase rail transport tariffs (Giuntini, 1994).

First of all, on 31 December 1922, the Fascist regime decided to dissolve the Board of Directors of the State Railways with Royal Decree No. 1681 and to suspend engineer Luigi Alzona from his post as general director.

According to Mussolini, the blame for the state the railways were in lay in the company's mismanagement, which is why the Duce decided to appoint an Extraordinary Commissioner in Alzona's place, to be entrusted with the task of putting the administration of the State Railways back on track¹.

Mussolini not only wanted to strengthen the system and operation of the Italian railways, but also wanted to give a clear signal that with the new political regime Italy was becoming an increasingly efficient country.

The Fascist regime also introduced strict management of personnel and trade unions. One of the first measures involved mass dismissals of State Railways personnel hostile to the regime, and demonstrations against the new policies were suppressed by force (Coletti, 1985).

Torre was appointed as Extraordinary Commissioner and implemented his extensive reform programme, which, among other things, included the reduction of internal offices, the consequent decentralisation of bureaucratic and administrative functions, and the reduction in the number of railway personnel.

The measures taken by the Extraordinary Commissioner could only become effective, however, after approval by the Minister of Public Works, who had to control the entire administrative activity of the State Railway Administration.

Torre, however, as Extraordinary Commissioner did not succeed in achieving the objectives he had set himself to restore the budget and the state of the Italian railways. His mandate, in fact, despite the fact that according to the law it should have lasted two years, ended after only sixteen months.

Fascism, as in all economic and social sectors of the country's life, had a very strong political interference also in the management of the railways. In May 1923, in fact, so-called Compartmental Political Secretaries were created who were entrusted with extensive decision-making and almost dictatorial functions within the various railway departments with the aim of supervising all decisions concerning railway administration (Briano, 1977).

Fascism's interference increased when in 1923 the *Milizia Ferroviaria* (Railway Militia) was established, a military corps that was supposed to help create a climate of rigour within the State Railways and ensure that employees did not have, or manifest, ideas that differed from those of the regime (Monti, 1939).

A further innovation introduced by the fascist regime was the sale of part of the State Railways to private entities.

As we have already mentioned, when Mussolini came to power, the state budget urgently needed to be restored. Therefore, one of Mussolini's first political projects was to restore the state coffers by ceding a large part of the management of the State Railways to private individuals.

At first Mussolini wanted to entrust, or rather re-trust, private companies only with the management of the secondary lines, leaving the administration of the main lines to the state. Many were supporters of this initiative as in this way the state would have retained ownership

of the infrastructure by issuing private companies with a licence to operate and manage the railway network for a fee consisting of a simple deposit. Moreover, the management of the secondary lines was to be entrusted only to solid companies with the financial capacity to guarantee income for the state coffers (Giuntini, 1994).

According to this plan, private companies would then, by law, be entitled to 7% of the revenue from the operation of the railway network. Above this threshold, the state was to share the revenues with the private companies. There were, in fact, many private groups that applied for the management of the railways.

In 1923, however, the Council of Ministers approved a draft plan that provided for this division of the Italian railways. According to the draft, the assignment of the lines could be for a maximum of 15 years.

The entrusting of the secondary lines to private companies, however, involved a very hasty administrative procedure, which caused great discontent and hostility within the National Fascist Party. To avoid internal rifts the fascist regime thus shelved the idea of this project with the intention of re-discussing it in later years (Giuntini, 1994). The fascist government, aiming at the reorganisation of the railway administration, therefore decided to retain ownership of the infrastructure. Again, as with the experience of the Torre administration, the good intentions of the fascist regime led to a dead end.

For Fascism, the railway system had the potential to decisively influence the development of society, so the railway was conceived as a collective public service for the lower and middle classes of the population capable of uniting people and territories far apart (Berengo Gardin, 1988).

Numerous infrastructural works were in fact completed by the regime during its years in power, and the Fascist railway policy was also concerned with technical improvements to meet the needs of travellers, especially on medium- and long-distance routes. Interventions aimed at modernising the railway infrastructure system were put in place to affirm how Italy had managed to achieve a high degree of efficiency during the regime.

One of the innovative interventions was the opening of the “Direttissime Ferroviarie”, the centrepiece of the Fascist political programme. These were lines capable of connecting, as the name suggests, large commercial centres via a route that was as linear as possible. In this way, journey times were cut down. The most important direttissima was the one able to connect Bologna – Florence – Rome – Naples, work on which began in 1905, during the management period of Bianchini’s FS administration. The first section of this line was only opened for operation in 1927 and connected Rome – Formia – Naples. It was a double-track railway that reduced the previous route by approximately 34 kilometres.

3. Conclusion. The establishment of the Ministry of Communications

One of the most important innovations introduced by the fascist government with regard to rail transport was undoubtedly the establishment of the Ministry of Communications.

The introduction of an extraordinary Commissioner to manage the railway system soon proved to be a failed idea. A further attempt to revive the increasingly weakened Italian railway system was the issuing of Royal Decree No. 596 of 30 April 1924, which established the Ministry of Communications headed by Galeazzo Costanzo Ciano, Mussolini’s trusted man.

The new Ministry, created to replace the figure of the Extraordinary Commissioner, was to deal mainly with four major directorates-general: the State Railways; the Concessionary Railways; the Merchant Navy; the Post Office and Telegraphs.

The new configuration of the communications sector provided for a reorganisation with regard to the railways, according to which the new ministry was to be responsible for the General Management as well as management and supervision. The Ministry of Public Works continued to be responsible for the construction of infrastructure works.

The management of the new Ministry was therefore left with broad powers, both administrative and management-related. Still on the subject of the organisational reorganisation of the State Railways Administration, in 1934 with Royal Decree no. 868 the Board of Directors was reconstructed and the position of Director General was re-established (Coletti, 1985), which was held by engineer Cesare Oddone, who remained in office until May 1931 and was succeeded by Luigi Velani, who remained in office until 1943 when the Rome Directorate General was divided into two distinct Directorates: the Verona and Salerno Directorates (Giuntini, 1994).

The Ministry of Communications could be assisted in the fulfilment of its tasks by the railway company's top management and the Director General. With the establishment of this new administrative institution, the end of corporate autonomy was definitively sanctioned, emphasising the close link between politics and administration and the organisation of the Italian railway system.

The organisational transformations therefore effectively placed the Ministry of Communications at the head of the railway administration thanks to the broad, deliberative and externally uncontrolled powers that the government granted it (Giuntini, 1994).

Endnote

1. It should be noted that RDL No. 304 of 31 March 1920 abolished the Ministry of Maritime and Railway Transport, which had been created solely to cope with the First World War; therefore, after that date, the administration of the FS again fell under the care of the Ministry of Public Works. With the same RDL No. 304, the Board of Directors was also re-established, with the rules previously in force.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author

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