

# Francesco Severi and the Fascist Regime



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**Abstract** Francesco Severi was an eminent leader of the Italian school of algebraic geometry at the beginning of the twentieth century. A biographic profile of his is here traced but concerning his political and intellectual activity. Severi began his political career in Padua as a member of the Socialist Party. Then, in the middle of the 1920s, he converted to the Fascist regime. Severi remained close to Mussolini even in the following darkest years. After the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Fascism, he underwent the procedure of “purge” in the University and in the Accademia dei Lincei for his important activity in favor of the Fascist regime. But he got away essentially unscathed.

**Keywords** Biography · Severi as a member of the Socialist Party · Severi and the Fascist regime · The “purge” after WWII

## 1 Severi: The Mathematician and the Politician

This chapter will not discuss the importance of Severi’s work as a mathematician, for whom I refer to the long essay “Geometria algebrica” by Brigaglia, A. and Ciliberto, C. <sup>1</sup> and the most recent “Francesco Severi: il suo pensiero matematico e politico prima e dopo la Grande Guerra” by Ciliberto, C. and Sallent Del Colombo, E. <sup>2</sup> I will limit myself to recalling, in an extremely succinct way, that Severi

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<sup>1</sup> Brigaglia, A. and Ciliberto, C. “Geometria algebrica” in *La matematica italiana dopo l’Unità*, Di Sieno, S., Guerraggio, A., Nastasi, P., (Eds), Marcos y Marcos, Milan, 1998, pp. 185–320.

<sup>2</sup> Ciliberto, C. and Sallent Del Colombo, E., “Francesco Severi: il suo pensiero matematico e politico prima e dopo la Grande Guerra,” in *Serva di due padroni*, Cogliati, A. (Ed), EGEA, Milan, 2019.

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obtained his chair in 1904 and went then to teach at the universities of Parma, Padua, and Rome. His scientific production, especially in the years preceding the outbreak of the First World War, included particularly significant contributions in the field of projective varieties, enumerative geometry, and classification of algebraic surfaces, with specific attention to irregular ones. His research activity would be soon recognized and valued, beyond the university professorship. In the period between 1905 and 1915, Severi received the XL Medal (1906), the Prix Bordin of the Institut de France with Federigo Enriques (1907), the Guccia Medal on the occasion of the International Congress of Mathematicians (1908), and the Royal Prize for Mathematics by the Accademia dei Lincei (1913). In the first postwar period, Severi's scientific activity was mainly oriented towards systematizing the results obtained in the previous period and taking care of his students. The most original results concerned the complex analysis. In 1921, his *Lezioni di Geometria Algebrica* of 1908 were translated in German as *Vorlesungen uber Algebraische Geometrie*. In 1926, the first (and only) volume of the *Treatise on Algebraic Geometry* was published, followed—already during the Second World War—by the lectures held at the National Institute of Higher Mathematics.

Here, I will deal with Severi as a politician and an intellectual, framing his work and vicissitudes in the more general theme of relations between Italian intellectuals and politicians during the Fascist regime. In the period between the two World Wars, Severi achieved the greatest intellectual substance and renown among the Italian mathematicians, following the steps of Vito Volterra albeit with completely different political outcomes. The intellectual was conceived as someone that—despite enjoying a good, often notable, reputation in his or her professional field—chooses to place himself or herself above the sectoral interests of his or her profession, using his or her skills to speak on behalf of society as a whole. Intellectuals would deal with topics and problems that do not concern them directly and would try—with their judgments—to influence the public opinion. They would put aside their university careers to get actively involved in social life as columnists and activists. It is a category, that of the “committed” intellectual, which today appears less frequent. Starting from the 1980s and 1990s, social, political, and economic macrophenomena have indeed transformed the figure of the intellectual into that of an expert, an interpreter, and a communicator who facilitates the translation of concepts formulated within a given knowledge. We have gone from one universalistic to many particular perspectives, where the search for meaning within one's own discipline has replaced the critical attention to the general society framework.

When Severi was active—from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Cold War period—the characteristics of the typical intellectual which I have outlined fit perfectly on his person. Severi started to deal with problems that “do not concern him,” in the sense that they were extraneous to his life as a mathematician, even well before the Fascist period. In 1909, Severi became president of Mathesis, the association that brought together mathematics teachers at national level, founded about 10 years earlier by Rodolfo Bettazzi. While teaching and working on the improvement of the school system could be seen as a commitment to society shared

by all researchers, the young Severi—who had been at that time a professor for a few years only—was the first university professor to take on the role of president of *Mathesis*. His election highlighted that not only he was not avoidant of extra-university positions, but he was almost seeking for them too. His interest would later bring him to be a member of both the Board and the Superior Council of the Ministry of Education and President of the National Association of University Professors.

More striking was the 1913 episode of the poisonous exchange of views with Benedetto Croce on philosophical issues, in the wake of the more famous controversy that Federico Enriques had had with Croce in 1911 after the International Congress of Philosophy in Bologna. At that time, the relations between the two mathematicians could not have been better. Immediately after graduation, Severi had been an assistant to Enriques, who had oriented his interests towards the study of algebraic surfaces, starting a fruitful season of scientific collaboration. The controversy between Severi and Croce yet began when Severi—who had moved to Padua after a short stay at the University of Parma—chose “Rationalism and spiritualism” as the title and theme of his inaugural lecture for the academic year 1913–1914, going far beyond the necessary interdisciplinarity required on occasions like this. In his lecture, he wrote: “I think that the reaction against rationalism and science, based on the belief that they distance us from human principles, risks bringing us back towards harmful mental habits. The recent idealism of Croce and Gentile does not lead us to correcting errors, but to the persecution of those who err.”<sup>3</sup> Such a harsh comment could not leave Croce and Gentile silent. The sharp reply was entrusted to Croce in an already very sarcastic intervention titled “And if they talked about mathematics?": “To Professor Severi, who is an intellectual, I would like to address a prayer to avoid discussing concepts that belong to fields that are foreign to him, and for which I do not know if he has an aptitude, but certainly does not have the preparation.”<sup>4</sup>

After Croce’s reply, Severi would no longer venture into philosophical debates. To express his interests outside the realm of mathematics, he chose politics, first as a militant of the Socialist Movement and then as a powerful management figure. He was not only an intellectual then, but also a man of power. Severi would be president of the “Banca Popolare” di Arezzo, his hometown, and of the Vallecchi publishing house. He liked to study and debate, but also to take action and translate his ideas into facts. He was a mathematician, a politician, and a man of power with broad horizons, who came to achieve ambitious goals and managed to overcome with ease the difficulties he encountered.

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<sup>3</sup> *Annuario della R. Università di Padova*, 1913–4, pp. xxvi–lvii

<sup>4</sup> *La Critica*, 1914, pp. 79–80

## 2 Severi in Padua

Severi's political debut occurred in 1910 in the City Council of Padua, to which he participated as an elected member of the Socialist Party. While Severi was only the ninth elected councilor in terms of number of preferences, he had only received 100 votes less than the first of those elected. On August 6, Severi was also appointed as councilor for public education. In fact, Severi had already occupied an administrative position in Padua before, when in 1906 the progressive junta chaired at the time by Giacomo Levi-Civita (Tullio's father) had appointed him—newcomer to town—as President of the Administrative Commission supervising the water and gas distribution by municipal companies for water and gas. After 2 years, however, Severi resigned due to a workload that had proved excessive and unequally distributed among the members of the board of directors.

Severi's debut in the city council was immediately marked by very clear and controversial positions. In greeting the other councilors, Severi continued to call the members of the minority party “clerical, even though they call themselves Catholics,”<sup>5</sup> inducing angry reactions expressed through various interruptions. His experience as a city councilor was very productive. The acts of the council recorded his intense efforts to develop and rationalize the school system in Padua. His interventions often featured polemical and anticlerical tones, including at the time when the municipality decided to name an elementary school after the philosopher and pedagogue Roberto Ardigò, an illustrious representative the University of Padua, to celebrate his 80th birthday. Severi's speech explicitly referred to secular and positivist principles. He stated emphatically that it was necessary to guide the child to the observation of facts and to shape his or her education solely on what is scientifically proven, and not on precepts which are outside the objective reality and which, for that very reason, cannot be the object of affirmation or negation.

Severi's experience in the City Council was intense but short. Severi remained in office until the end of 1911, resigning after the “political incident” of September 27. That day, the socialists had proclaimed a national strike against the war in Libya and Giolitti's politics. In Padua too, there had been several demonstrations with strikes affecting the functioning of the tramway and other public services. It had been a day of strong political tensions: in the late morning, a delegation of nationalists came to the town hall demanding that the municipality display the tricolor flag to distance itself from socialist demonstrations and express its closeness to the Italian troops. The mayor, absent at that moment, had made it known that he would have not considered the display of the tricolor to be appropriate but had left the final decision to Severi. While declaring that the socialists were against the war and that for him “the flag remained the symbol of the nation and not of the nationalists,” Severi agreed to have the tricolor displayed on the facade of the town

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<sup>5</sup> This and the following quotes of this section are taken from documents kept in the General Archives of the Municipality of Padua. I wish to particularly thank Dr. Elena Ferraro for her collaboration and kindness.

hall. The decision triggered many tensions within the junta, on which the minority speculated, speaking of an evident difference of opinion between the mayor and one of his councilors. Moreover, Severi had not shared the mayor's decision not to pay the day of strike to the municipal employees, as he did not support the practice of striking in public sector provision. After this accident, Severi resigned as Member of the Council. It is yet apparent that his decision was a sign of the different positions among the progressive forces in Padua, and also within the Socialist Party, on the war in Libya. These differences were explicitly recalled in the other resignation letter, this time from the city councilor, which Severi reviewed a few weeks later, at the beginning of 1923: "Following a difference of appreciation on an important political issue which arose between me and the majority of the members of my party, and convinced as I am that whoever is invested with political or administrative representation must be able to faithfully interpret the views of the majority of their Party, I consider it my duty to resign from Councilor of the Municipality." The Socialist Party remained opposed to the intervention in Libya, but lost an important member when Leonida Bissolati was expelled because of his support to the military action in Libya. Benito Mussolini—then director of the party's newspaper *L'Avanti*—accused the dissidents of "Libyan ministerialism and warfare." Severi became instead close to Bissolati's reformist positions and increasingly cold towards his own party, now led by the revolutionary current.

The contrast exploded sharply in 1914 with the outbreak of the First World War. As the socialists were searching for a difficult balance between the nationalistic sentiments of large sectors of the youth population as well as of many intellectuals and the solidarity with the European proletarians that were on the other side, the slogan "Neither adhere, nor sabotage"—which Severi did not agree with—was forged. For Severi, the war against the Prussian militarism and for the defense and consolidation of democracy was just. The unfolding of the war events—with the invasion of Belgium and the brutal violation by Germany of people's rights—led to the war with a further characterization in terms of conflict between two civilizations, and Severi had no doubts in taking sides with the attacked countries and the nationalities to which the central empires denied recognition. Severi left the party, and the article he published in March 1915 in the newspaper *L'Adriatico*, supporting democratic interventionism, represents his substantial farewell to the Socialist Party. There he wrote: "While it is true that the Socialist Party, as a political organism, could never be the promoter of a war-like intervention, it seems much better to me if the socialist opposition to the war was always limited to being a theoretical assumption (...). A less assertive attitude by our party's leadership would also be politically very important, leaving each member the freedom to evaluate the situation (...). Just as there is no Socialist who—living in this bourgeois society—does not adapt to what the environment imposes on him while still working for a better tomorrow, so I do not find any substantial contradiction between the faith of our ideals and what today's historical reasons—superior to our will—can prescribe us to do (...). Moreover, has the Socialist Party perhaps not recognized that in daily life it is better to adapt to a minimum program and not to avoid contacts with the most enlightened fractions of the bourgeoisie when it is, for example,

necessary to oppose the parties which perniciously threaten political freedoms, which constitute the prerequisite for the economic conquests of the proletariat? And why should we lock ourselves in a form of intransigent denial, when the importance of something transcends so much the everyday politics, and it is basically a vital matter of freedom?" For Severi, this is a personal choice too. He enlisted as a volunteer, earning a promotion and two war crosses for the contribution provided in responding to the technical needs of the army. As a mathematician, Severi's specific contribution concerned the artillery with the revision of the firing tables, depending on the geography of the Dolomite area where the conflict was taking and the Italian mountain phonotelemetry system to identify the enemy batteries.

### 3 Moving to Rome

In 1921, Severi moved to the University of Rome, winning over the competition of other important mathematicians, such as Leonida Tonelli and Federico Enriques, who aspired to the same position. Severi arrived in Rome with the label of "Socialist," even if he was no longer a member of the Party. His appointment in 1923 as Rector of the University of Rome by Giovanni Gentile, who would become the Minister of Education in the first Mussolini Fascist Government, was thus met with some surprise. To be expected was his decision to sign the so-called *Manifesto Croce* as a democratic intellectual in 1925.

The Fascist movement still faced, at the time, the issue of convincing the high intellectuals, still very suspicious—if not decidedly contrary—to the political course begun with the March on Rome in October 1922. The "Battle of Posters" began with the first national conference of "Fascist Cultural Institutions" promoted by Gentile in Bologna in March 1925. That was a meeting which featured no discussion but only written communications, previously presented to the organizing committee, due to fear that "any theoretical overrun would not be inconclusive but would also divert the attention away from the initiative's immediate positive purposes, for which it was believed necessary to gather in Bologna the most influential Italian thinkers." From the conference came the appeal by Gentile to solicit the intellectuals' adherence to the Fascist movement—what became immediately known as the *Manifesto Gentile* was released to the press on April 21. The response of the anti-fascist intellectuals was not long in coming, entrusted to Benedetto Croce. His counter-manifesto, published on 1 May, was widely supported, including by Severi, together with other illustrious mathematicians such as Leonida Tonelli, Vito Volterra, Guido Castelnuovo, and Tullio Levi-Civita.

For the leaders of the Fascist movement, that was too much. They had already experienced with some disappointment Gentile's choice to entrust the position of rector of the University of Rome, a highly regarded position, to a socialist. Now, the rector even gets to sign the anti-fascist manifesto! The "jar was full" for them, and it was time for Severi to pay the right price for his political past (and present), also taking advantage of the fact that he could no longer count on the presence of

Gentile (and his Undersecretary Balbino Giuliano, replaced at the beginning of 1925 by Pietro Fedele) at the Ministry of Education. A few months after Severi's public adherence to the Croce Manifesto, Severi was investigated for alleged administrative irregularities. As illustrated in his defensive memoir, Severi immediately understood the gravity of the situation, without excluding that "orders may have come from above to make the rectorial life impossible for me, because I am not politically close to the government. But even on this point, my conscience is calm, because I have always contained the manifestations of my political ideas within the limits that the importance of my role imposed on me."<sup>6</sup> He replied to all the allegations, with the belief that "my work has been assiduous, prudent, and thrifty to the point of unbelievable,"<sup>7</sup> deciding not to resign until the conclusion of the investigation. It was only when the minister grudgingly recognized the correctness of his actions that Severi resigned. In the memorial written during the purge procedure (which we will discuss later), speaking of himself in the third person, he noted: "With this act, Severi's active participation in political life was closed forever. He remained on the sidelines, frowned upon and systematically kept out of positions, competition commissions, etc."

#### 4 The Oath

The reconstruction I have just mentioned, made by Severi 20 years later, is functional to his defense in the purge process. Things had actually turned out differently. Severi came back to politics, joining in 1932 the National Fascist Party (NFP) with an act that, for a former socialist, cannot be considered merely formal, particularly as he went straight back to the "high places" of power, where the academic and political world grant each other mutual favors.

After his resignation as rector, Severi actually experienced a short period of isolation, which was very heavy on him: he felt useless, away from all discussions and people that matter, unable to use the power by which he was so attracted and with which he identified. He spent a few months abroad, hosted by some Spanish universities, but yet looking forward to returning and regaining his place in the national elite to which he felt he belonged. He began to think that Fascism was a reality to live with and that any important change would only happen from within. Political ideals gave way to more pragmatic views. He focused on the pleasure of personal affirmation and the ability to manage, in any possible way, what he was able to achieve.

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<sup>6</sup> This quotation is taken from a letter from Severi to Gentile, dated July 31, 1925. The whole letter is published in Guerraggio, A., and Nastasi, P., *Gentile e i matematici italiani*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

It is from these considerations that his march towards Fascism originated. In reality, Severi was fast in changing affiliation. He continued to have a cordial relationship with Gentile, who was then politically his friend and who agreed to write the presentation for a school text such as the *Elementi di geometria*. He even started communicating personally with Mussolini. In January 1929, he addressed a memorandum directly to the Duce, which confirmed an already established personal relationship and the beginning of Severi's political parabola. The memo was about university professors. According to Severi, their initial opposition to Fascism has been greatly attenuated, both in terms of number and intensity, and which must be acknowledged with satisfaction. Continuing to remember some unorthodox political demonstrations of previous years with the consequent recurrent threat of dismissal for teachers who had not immediately joined the new regime "would be fatal to Italian culture and science, and would result in moral and material damage for the nation, with serious repercussions near and far." Severi was thinking about himself, in the hope of being able to "silently and faithfully serve the Fascist state, in my current function. To serve with pure disinterest, but to serve without technical limitations, so that our work can be efficiently carried out; to serve, not expecting prizes or distinctions or leadership positions."<sup>8</sup>

How could the Fascist regime acknowledge that the many critical positions of the first years of power had changed and trust that they could be used without danger to the benefit of the nation and of political stability? Severi had an idea, which he expressed in a letter to Gentile shortly after the memorandum to the Duce, sent on February 15 from Barcelona where he was for a series of seminars. Severi knew that the question of intellectuals was being discussed by the Grand Council of Fascism and that there, or in the Council of Ministers, a new oath of allegiance would soon be put on the table, for university professors to sign. He wrote: "It would be necessary that the oath be represented as an act of direct intransigence to obtain the much requested fascistization of the Universities; as an appeal to the loyalty of professors, who could not avoid taking the oath without incurring into far more serious measures than the dismissal of authority. But at the same time as an amnesty of political acts that had occurred long time ago, so that the State could benefit without limitation of the technical skills of professors who had signed the oath, thus eliminating the absurd current situation of so many professors not even being able to be part of judging commissions!"<sup>9</sup>

The oath, precisely with the characteristics invoked by Severi and owned by Gentile, would become a reality in 1931. Compared to the previous formulations, that of 1931 conceptualized the Fascist party away from a simple party that had won the elections but as the very backbone of the State, equated with the monarchy. People had to swear to be faithful to the regime: "I swear to be faithful to the King,

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<sup>8</sup> The entire memorandum is published in Guerraggio, A. and Nastasi, P., *Matematica in camicia nera*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> The entire letter was published in Guerraggio, A. and Nastasi, P., *Matematica in camicia nera*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan, 2005.



to his Royal successors and to the Fascist regime (. . .) with the intention of forming industrious, upright and devoted citizens to the country and the Fascist regime.” The stick and the carrot: the carrot for professors who, by swearing their loyalty to the regime, showed that they had repented and could therefore fully reenter the great family of the (Fascist) nation; the stick, in the form of immediate dismissal, for diehards who chose not to bend over. Severi, Gentile, and the Fascist regime bet that few would refuse, and they were right. The oath passed and became a success for the regime with a plebiscite adhesion. All but 12 intellectuals (1% of university professors!) did swear. Among them, the only mathematician was Vito Volterra.

The reward for the Severi’s “conversion” and for his help with the political characteristics of the oath arrived immediately. What he gained was entering the *Academy of Italy*, the new cultural institution wanted by the Fascist regime to replace the Lincei, which had been too reluctant to align. When the moment came to choose new academics, and only one place was reserved for mathematicians, at last the name of Severi replaced that of Enriques. This meant that, for the regime, Severi was the leader of Italian mathematicians, adding an important layer to his image and prestige. All this occurred in March 1929, only a few weeks after the memo and the letter to Gentile previously mentioned.

## 5 1938

With his appointment as the “Italian academic” and his subsequent registration with the NFP, Francesco Severi’s long journey into Fascism began. In the 1930s, our mathematician represented a perfect expression of the intertwining of politics and the world of universities: always present in the front row in the ceremonies with which Fascism showed its attention to science, and always ready to embark on trips abroad to magnify the awakening and the bright future towards which the new Italy has set out.

This “partnership” is perhaps best exemplified by the behavior held when the racial laws of 1938 were promulgated. Italians were discovered to be of Aryan race with the publication, on July 15, of the so-called “Manifesto of racist scientists,” which sought to provide a scientific justification for an eminently political operation. Immediately after, in September, the persecution of Jews began with the expulsion of hundreds of professors and thousands of students from universities and schools, the “purification” of school manuals from Jewish contamination, the implementation of measures hindering the presence of Jews in public office as well as commercial/industrial activities and in the free professions, and a whole series of hateful acts of harassment to make life in Italy as difficult as possible for the Jews.

The anti-Semitic legislation also affected the world of mathematicians with devastating results. Among others, Federigo Enriques, Gino Fano, Guido Fubini, Beppo Levi, Tullio Levi-Civita, and Alessandro Terracini were removed from teaching. Somewhat surprisingly, the Italian Mathematical Union (UMI) did not protest, nor it asked any easing of the measures taken, which would have been

an understandable ask given the delicate situation and the repressive climate established in the country. In the document that summarized the discussion held on December 10, the Scientific Commission of UMI took note of the decisions taken at a political level, almost supporting them by observing that “the Italian mathematical school, which has acquired a wide reputation throughout the scientific world, is almost entirely the creation of Italic (Aryan) scientists.” The note only asked that “none of the chairs for mathematicians made vacant by the measures established for the integrity of the race be removed.” One of the blackest and most shameful pages in the history of the association was thus written, as UMI itself has recognized in recent years with great intellectual honesty.

At the meeting of December 10, Severi—present as a member of the Scientific Committee—did not raise any objections to the final text. Given his personality and undisputed scientific value, his silence was particularly heavy. In this regard, it is important to remember that Severi did not express any negative comment even in 1935, when the “Fascist reclamation” by Minister De Vecchi had also demanded that the appointment of the UMI President, the Vice President, and members of the Scientific Commission took place only after the approval of the Ministry of National Education, thus leading to the replacement of Giulio Vivanti and Vito Volterra who had been duly elected to the Scientific Commission. Similarly, Severi would never dissociate himself from the discriminatory measures introduced by the racial laws in universities. Actually, as soon as these were promulgated, he intervened to ensure that colleagues such as Castelnuovo, Enriques, and Levi-Civita were prohibited from entering the library of the Mathematical Institute in Rome. He was also not sorry that the geometry textbooks for secondary schools authored by Enriques became banned, widening widely the school market for his texts. Severi also took advantage of the racial laws to “Aryanize” the editorial board of the most prestigious Italian mathematical journal, the *Annali di Matematica Pura ed Applicata*, removing its Jewish components and being named the sole director. In short, Severi capitalized on his adhesion to Fascism, with significant benefits coming to him in 1939 with the foundation of the Istituto Nazionale di Alta Matematica, of which he became President and through which he prepared to counterbalance the work by the Istituto Nazionale per le Applicazioni del Calcolo by Mauro Picone, which he had always considered as too biased in favor of applications.

## 6 The End of 20 Years of Fascism

At the basis of Severi’s behavior was the same motivation that had brought him, in the second half of the 1920s, to abandon his democratic ideals to enlist directly under the Duce and Gentile: a considerable sense of self and of his abilities—which, if gone used, would have been a waste for the nation—combined with the pleasure and ambition of participating in the construction of the new Fascist state and the power games that revolved around it, as well as the opportunity to develop his career and gain ever-greater power. His path was common to that of many Italians and most

intellectuals. The historical judgment on their attitude towards Fascism is, however, unanimous by now: their initial suspicion towards the innovations introduced by the “black shirts” and their squad methods were soon replaced by a resignation for what seemed inevitable, an acceptance of the “less worst,” the sympathetic acquiescence, and the realistic wish to protect their own families. Eugenio Garin, in an interview in 1988, stated: “Our clerics have been very acquiescent. Nobody was saved from Fascism. I say that only those who died, those who ended up in jail, those who went out of Italy were saved; (. . . The others) genuflected or remained silent.”<sup>10</sup>

Like most Italians, intellectuals understood very late the gravity of the situation and the consequences of the attitude held over 20 years. War was the detonator of a new awareness: for some (very few), it was the war in Ethiopia with a conflict still very distant and the seduction of the Empire; for many, it was the outbreak of the Second World War, and all the dramatic events that occurred in the weeks from 25 July to 8 September 1943. Only then the intellectuals started moving away from the regime, with many joining the Resistance. Gustavo Colonnetti, Francesco Tricomi, Giuseppe Zwirner, Ugo Morin, Enrico Magenes, Lucio Lombardo Radice, and the young Mario Fiorentini (who would participate in the organization of the attack in via Rasella) are some of the mathematicians whose life choices anticipated the maturation of a general anti-fascist awareness that then spread through the academic world.

Severi, however, remained close to the Duce, to Gentile, and to Fascism even in the darkest months. In March 1944, in the middle of the civil war, with Italy split in two also geographically, as the allied troops were forcing the German army to retreat and a few months later they would liberate Rome, Severi participated in Florence at the commemoration by the Accademia d'Italia of Gian Battista Vico on the second centenary of his death. The initial speech of Gentile, who had forcefully reentered the political scene with the so-called *Discorso agli Italiani* (“Speech to the Italians”) held in the Campidoglio on 24 June 1943 and who had become President of the Academy, opened with an all-political preamble in which he highlighted “how, as a result of the betrayal, Italy was reduced to a flock without a leader, a displaced multitude without a soul, humiliated and scarred by the stranger, as if the dishonor of a gesture wanted by a few unconscious had canceled 25 centuries of history sparkling with genius, virtue, work and daring. But the voice of Mussolini, who people wanted to believe had disappeared forever with that great Italy that he had created, still echoed through all the districts of Italy and the world, bringing together the dispersed multitude. With the resurrection of Mussolini, a young, loyal, generous, daring Italy was reborn, confident in its own strength, anxious for justice for all.” Not many academics participated in this extreme tribute to the regime in Florence but, among them, there was Severi, who did not miss to acknowledge those who continued to raise the banner of Fascism, to praise Hitler as the leader of great Germany, and to invite young people to enlist and to follow Mussolini in his last attempt at resistance. Carlo Alberto Biggini, former rector of the University of Pisa

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<sup>10</sup> Ajello, N., Interview to Eugenio Garin, *La Repubblica*, June 16, 1992.

and Minister of National Education in the Republic of Salò, in a moving portrait of Gentile (killed 1 month after the speech, on April 15) recalled how many of those present in Florence could not hold back their tears when the philosopher once again reaffirmed his love for the Fascist homeland for which “if necessary, we want to die, because without it, we would not know what to do with the wreckage of the miserable shipwreck.”<sup>11</sup>

## 7 The Purge

The showdown was near. For Severi, it came with “the purge,” the usual procedure with which—in a sudden and often violent transition from one political system to another—the holders of the new power condemn or remove from top positions the elements that have colluded with the previous regime to make sure that they can no longer harm, that they do not have a chance to regroup, and that they somehow pay for their choices. In Italy, the purge following the fall of the Fascist regime was a complex phenomenon for a whole series of legal, administrative, and political reasons. It actually began immediately with the arrival of the allied troops and continued on 25 July 1943 with the defenestration of Mussolini through the vote of the Grand Council of Fascism to end with Togliatti’s amnesty in June 1946. It was not an easy operation to reconstruct because, in previous months, Italy had actually witnessed three different purges: one by the Anglo-American army that went up the peninsula from Sicily; one by the Italian Government which progressively extended its power over the peninsula and the liberated territories; and the third one operated in Northern Italy by the partisan forces. The purge was also a complex phenomenon from a legal point of view because the new state wanted to adopt rigorous measures that would definitively leave behind seasons of revenge and arbitrariness. It was thus difficult to define what conduct was liable to punishment. At the end, three levels of judgment were defined: the first instance procedure, the appeal before a central commission, and the last appeal to the Council of State. No wonder then if this time was featured by a flood of decrees and laws that tried to clarify the terms of the purge, also in function of a political situation that was very rapidly changing. The so-called Magna Carta of the purge of 27 July 1944 represented the most organic answer to the legal problems, but it too had to deal with the country still struggling with a civil war and a battle against the German army that affected numerous regions.

For Severi, the purge procedure began very early, in the summer of 1943 with the reorganization commission of the university in Rome preparing the initial report that examined the behavior of the mathematician. The report included a two-faced judgement: while Severi’s colleagues had no doubts about his participation in the

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<sup>11</sup> The quotations from Gentile’s speech in Firenze are taken from Guerraggio, A., *Matematici da epurare*, EGEA, Milan, 2018.

regime's politics, they felt almost embarrassed to accuse a scientist of his level and declared that "the task of judging his political-moral activity was particularly serious and painful." After that, however, the evaluation was clear: Severi had "also expressed, in contrast with his inner attitudes, an open action of propaganda for the Fascist regime; and, after the advent of the Italian Social Republic, he personally attended the first meeting in Florence (March 20, 1944) of the Academy of Italy."

<sup>12</sup> The report closed with the proposed removal of Severi from the university but also with the underlining of the "damage that this provision could cause to Italian science, from a purely doctrinal point of view." The report was dated 25 July. On July 31, the Minister of Education removed Severi from teaching as a precaution.

On November 3, the First Instance Commission decided to challenge Severi with two specific charges: "having made repeated manifestations of apology for Fascist politics in numerous conferences" and "with his participation in the solemn political demonstrations called by the Fascist republican pseudo-government for the start of the work of the Accademia d'Italia in Florence, having substantially collaborated the government itself." Severi had to defend himself and he did so with a memorial of about 20 pages that he sent to the first-degree purge commission on November 18, and in which he reconstructed the stages of his scientific and political career.

Apologia of Fascism in conferences held outside the more strictly scientific sphere? But when? It is a false accusation, according to Severi, who explains it to his judges with didactic patience. First of all, "those conferences were all cultural and scientific, never political." Although they contained expressions of support for the regime and appreciation of the Duce's talents, they were "the usual expressions of praxis, which anyone who spoke in solemn public events had to adopt, especially in relation to their own functions, and which must therefore be evaluated in that context." "We all behaved in the same way," Severi insinuated, including many of those who perhaps were then judging him and had only recently changed faction. These were seen, in any case, as venial sins, in which nothing was considered to have a judicial interest, and for which what was happening to him was deemed completely out of place and beyond any reasonable measure. This rhetoric highlighted "characteristics and results of Fascism that, even now, could not be dismissed" and never, even remotely, included "the apologetic extremes of Fascism and, more specifically, the aspects of Fascism that are to be condemned and constitute the worst and most sectarian aspects, i.e. its arrogance and denial of elementary freedoms." "Was it a crime to talk about the ongoing war and hope that it would end with the victory of Italy? This was certainly not an apologia of Fascism: it was only respect for the sacrifice of the people, the fighters, and the dead, a basic duty towards Italy."

More problematic was his presence in Florence at the commemoration of Vico, organized by the Academy of Italy chaired by Gentile. As his appointment had occurred after 25 July 1943, when Mussolini was no longer the Head of

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<sup>12</sup> All the quotations of this section are taken from Guerraggio, A., *Matematici da epurare*, EGEA, Milan, 2018.

Government, and it was then attributable to the Republic of Salò, Severi could thus be accused of collaborating with the Germans, like all the officials who followed Mussolini in his last attempts. Also in this case, as for the accusation of apologia, Severi's defense focused entirely on the cultural value of the event in Florence, declaring that he could not refuse the invite he had received given the personal relationship with Gentile who lived in his same building in Rome and who had sent a car to pick him up in Arezzo: "the political connotation that Gentile would have given to the commemoration was not foreseeable and was completely unknown to him."

In general, Severi judged his behavior as irreproachable. His support to the regime was justified on the basis that, at the beginning of the 1930s, the opposition to Fascism was only for those few who saw "the dangers that the regime, in an overwhelming nationalistic exaltation, could reserve for Italy in the future" and that "the many who did not have, in full good faith, the same vision cannot be blamed." The message was clear: if there were so few anti-fascists, in all probability it meant that those who now stood as his judges had been part of the Fascist majority and shared its orientations. If there was a crime, they were accomplices. In any case, Severi (who in the Memorial continues to talk about himself in the third person) broke off all relations with Fascism after 25 July, when the Italian Social Republic was created. Neither in Rome nor in Arezzo, he maintained any contact with the republicans and the German occupation forces.

The verdict closing the First Instance proceedings was reached just before Christmas, on 23 December 1944. For the first accusation—that of apologia of Fascism—the Commission believed that the evidence collected was sufficient to configure an execrable behavior and that the laudable relief action to help civilians in Arezzo could not be considered a sufficiently mitigating factor. The conclusion was clear: removal from the university, dismissal, or dispensation from service. As for the accusation of collaboration with the enemy through the Republic of Salò, some doubts remained, as the justifications put forward by Severi appeared plausible, although it was still disconcerting to think that a personality of his experience was really surprised by the meeting's evident political character. In conclusion, "the Commission declares Professor Francesco Severi guilty of the charge of repeated manifestations of apologia of Fascism and therefore proposes that he be dispensed from the service. It acquits Professor Severi from the other accusation of collaboration with the self-styled republican government."

It is not necessary to be a sophisticated lawyer to appreciate the sentence as weak, leaving—one way or another—many openings for recourse or a change of judgement. By acquitting Severi of the most serious accusation of collaboration with the enemy, the First Instance Commission also reduced the weight of the other accusation (that for apologia), whose gravity was clear in the path that had led to intelligence collaboration with both last fascists and Germans. Severi presented his appeal immediately, on December 30, a week after the First Instance sentence, without many new details added beyond stressing the consequences to which his removal and that of other teachers in the same conditions would lead: "But do you, men of the new Italy, really wish to exclude your best talents from managing a

State that must be rebuilt from the rubble, and rather keep those mediocre who have stayed in shadows? Do you think that it would perhaps be advantageous for the future State, which needs to be rebuilt with so much energy, to expel its morally and technically best elements, and instead keep the timid, the mediocre, the immoral, who in the intellectual milieu of today boast of having betrayed fascism, without having had no need to do it, (...) and who always rushed overhead without ever making a gesture of personal independence?" The second-degree sentence, by the Central Commission, arrived on 9 May 1945. Only 4 months had passed since the appeal—a very short period considering the general slowness of the Italian judiciary. In 1945, however, time ran quickly and the passage from winter to spring also signaled a different political climate. The new orientation of the judges was a clear signal that the wind was changing, at least in Rome and at least in the institutions, and that the more radical positions were giving way to a more understanding attitude towards the behavior of many Italians: "A careful examination, then, of the various apologetic ideas, in said speeches contained, leads to the conclusion that the ideas themselves were dictated not by a specific animus to spread the Fascist propaganda, but by a generic patriotic aim to highlight Italy's contribution in the field of science, culture and work (...); he (Severi), yet had allowed his distinguished name, his moral integrity, his high scientific merits and his past as an anti-fascist intellectual, to serve—beyond the good of Italy—the political purposes of the regime. Responsibility all the more serious, since said adhesion, for a personality like that of Severi, actually constituted, for the regime, a notable strengthening; and this cannot remain without sanction (...). But only a minor penalty (...). This sanction, considering all the circumstances, can only be the minimum; and that is the censorship."

## 8 The Purge at the Lincei

The acquittal obtained at the end of the purge process allowed the accused greater legitimacy: they had been investigated, their behavior during the 20 years of Fascism was subject to a detailed examination, and in the end they had been acquitted. Therefore, they were right to defend themselves and reject the accusations! At least this was the attitude taken by Severi in his other purge process, which started after the (almost) acquittal sentence of the Central Commission, i.e., by the *Accademia dei Lincei* which, after it risked being closed and replaced by *Accademia d'Italia* during the Fascist period, wanted to settle all the disputes with the academics that had given up to political power, behaving in an abject and shameful way.

The Academy's purge commission, which saw the participation of Guido Castelnuovo and Benedetto Croce among others, first established that belonging to the Academy of Italy did not in itself constitute a sufficient reason to be expelled from the Lincei. However, it also decided that "having participated in the session held in Florence by the former Academy of Italy, under the presidency of Giovanni

Gentile, constitutes in itself a reason for expulsion, having to be interpreted as a form of adhesion and collaboration with the enemy.”<sup>13</sup>

This particularly concerned Severi who had gone to Florence and who, on the immediate eve of the meeting of the Commission that would deal with his case, on 1 June 1945, addressed directly Castelnuovo: “I learned a little while ago that my case should be decided today at the Lincei (...). I have no reason to correct any page of the book of my life and I will certainly not be afraid that my frankness may have aroused any aversion against me that in this place, with people like you, I do not think can find any resonance.” Shameful—how to define it otherwise?—is the postscript that closes the letter: “I thought I did something nice for you by not mentioning among the significant examples of my behavior in front of the racial law the interest I showed in 1940 for your book on the origins del Calcolo not to be taken out of circulation, something you nudged me to with a friendly note.” Severi sent all the members of the Commission a memorandum with an almost triumphant incipit: “Francesco Severi, acquitted by the Central Purge Commission, is about to resume his office as a university professor!” The memo did not spare jibes and insinuations against the more radical elements of the Commission and those accusing it of anti-Semitism: “Severi’s favorite pupil was a Jew, Beniamino Segre, currently a professor at the University of Manchester. Severi helped Segre even while he was in England making sure that Segre was paid his pension wherever he was and that he was allowed to transfer a certain sum to England.”

Castelnuovo, however, remained firm in supporting his expulsion, in line with the general position adopted by the Academy, and 2 days later he wrote to his colleague: “Dear Severi, I received your Memorial, but it did not matter. From the very first session, the Commission to which the Government entrusted the unfortunate task of purifying the Academy of Lincei, paying particular attention to the members who had belonged to the Academy of Italy, unanimously decided to exclude all academics who had taken part in the session in Florence in March 1944 (...). However, I hope that in the future, when the partisan issues—painful but inevitable after the catastrophe to which the fascist regime has brought the country—will be over, the Academy will be able to embrace again, with new elections, those among the now excluded members who will be considered more deserving thanks to their scientific work.” Castelnuovo’s wish will soon come true. The Lincei yearbook reports next to Severi’s name “Expelled through D.L. on January 4, 1946. Re-elected as National Member from July 15, 1948.” Severi had thus to wait a little more than 2 years to finish paying the price for his relationship with Fascism.

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<sup>13</sup> The quotes of this section too are taken from Guerraggio, A., *Matematici da epurare*, EGEA, Milan, 2018.