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CLAUDIO SICOLO

**UMBERTO NOBILE
AND THE AIRSHIP *ITALIA*
AT THE NORTH POLE**

**POLITICS AND HISTORY IN UNSEEN
DOCUMENTS 1928-1978**

Preface by

LUCIANO ZANI

Afterword by

GREGORY ALEGI

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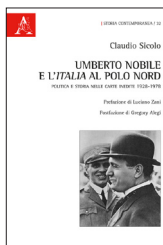
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In memory of Vittoria Schiavotto
1913-1983

«For the second time in a short time (the first had been two years earlier, after the departure of the Norge), my eyes were taking leave of that “northern widowed site” where so many events had taken place. But how different it looked from when we had arrived with the airship Italia, throwing the mooring cable on the snow-covered esplanade! With the melting of the white carpet it seemed that our dreams had also melted away. Having vanished that whiteness, that brightness where aspects of life were repurposed in a fairy-tale background, the earth that had sprung up below had unearthed its misery, made of mud, garbage, and animal excrement.»

Cesco Tomaselli, in memory of his departure from King's Bay at the end of the airship *Italia* expedition (from *Strana gente a Pitcairn*, 1948)

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PREMISES

The book *Umberto Nobile e l'Italia al Polo Nord* was published for the first time in Italian in March 2020 with the preface by Prof. Luciano Zani and the afterword by Prof. Gregory Alegi. This English language edition is as faithful as possible to the original text compared to which these *Premises* written in August 2024 were added. Furthermore, the original *Addendum* was replaced by an essay of mine on Giuseppe Gianfranceschi written in 2021 and finally the bibliographical notes and the index of names were updated.

The following text of the *Premises* presents a summary of the main results of the Italian book and a critical overview of the literature published in recent years.

Umberto Nobile and the airship *Italia* at the North Pole, a story without dogmas

Umberto Nobile was an industrial engineer, builder of airships, General of the aeronautical engineering team,

academic and explorer. After his initial socialist sympathies which had little influence on his destiny, he formed ties with Benito Mussolini and with fascism which gave him a meteoric career following the successful feat of the airship *Norge* in 1926. Once the dark times of an equally rapid decline caused by the 1928 *Italia* airship disaster were over and at the end of a fruitful experience in Moscow, after the war Nobile declared himself a victim of fascism, was fascinated by Soviet ideology and joined Palmiro Togliatti's Communist Party.

Nobile's political conformism influenced the progressive adaptations of his memoirs with the use of a posteriori reconstructions of the fascist experience, and therefore of the polar adventures, in the context of the polemics and controversies that involved him during the tormented years that brought Italy from Monarchy to the Republic⁽¹⁾.

Fifty years of the General's painful literary and journalistic campaigns in search of definitive rehabilitation had the final outcome in 1966, for Nobile bitter, of the refusal of the Ministry of Defense to proceed with a review of the investigation of the fascist state which in February 1929 had judged responsible for the airship catastrophe.

Reviewing the boundless and often redundant literature on the expedition of the airship *Italia*, the book highlights

(1) After a career established under fascism, Nobile claimed in *Perché sono a fianco dei comunisti* in 1946 that he had never opposed the regime for unspecified "sentimental reasons", while at the same time claiming his own inner moral independence from the dictatorship. In this he showed affinity with that "grey area" of intellectuals who suffered the influence and conditioning of fascism out of fear, inertia or convenience, but did not make militant anti-fascist choices. The theme was developed for Federico Chabod, Piero Calamandrei, Luigi Russo and Alberto Moravia by Simon Levis Sullam, "I fantasmi del fascismo – Le metamorfosi degli intellettuali italiani nel dopoguerra", Feltrinelli, Milan, 2021, in particular, pp. 11-24.

the substantial self-referentiality and lack of neutrality of memoirs and popular works, both Italian and foreign, all of which lack appropriate recourse to primary historical sources.

Unprecedented and systematic research paths in the archives of the Italian Navy, the Air Force, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Geographical Society, the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, as well as those of the Central State Archives, reach to an integrated perspective of the different sources.

From correspondence not intended for publication, radio telegrams, service notes, notes and diaries, the book brings out important innovations, real revelations, which radically change the traditional, often imaginative, vision of the events of the expedition: revelations that remove anecdotes, reconstructions clues, myths and stereotypes that have become classics in recurring commemorations.

Suspicious and truth in the adventure of shortwave radio at the North Pole

The discussed radiotelegraph links between the *shortwave* field radio known as *ondina 33* fortunately installed at the famous *Tenda Rossa* and the support ship *Città di Milano* are reconstructed on the basis of more in-depth research already published in 2017 by the author⁽²⁾, in the context of the futuristic communications system developed by the Italian Royal Navy to connect the Rome San Paolo station, the airship and the ship. The system envisaged a targeted

(2) C. SICOLO, *Le onde smarrite della tenda rossa – Storie, leggende e verità della radio nella spedizione del dirigibile Italia al Polo Nord*, Sandit, Albino, 2017.

and limited use of *short waves*, well known at the time not only for their miraculous performances, but also for their intrinsic vulnerabilities which made them an unreliable medium. *Short waves*, in fact, suffered from the already known weaknesses due to the presence of the phenomena of vast neighboring zones of silence (*Skip zone*), while they enjoyed sporadic contacts at large and unpredictable distances due to the effect of atmospheric reflection (*Skip distance*). The picture that emerges highlights the risks associated with having replaced the airship's safest radio emergency system, an internal combustion engine electric generator, with a shortwave only battery-powered field radio. In Nobile's intentions, that radio should have accompanied the scientific research of a group of men who landed from the airship on the polar ice. Despite the difficulties of an unlikely connection, difficulties due among other things to the "zone of silence", the radio operators of the Navy ship, under the command of the frigate Captain Giuseppe Romagna Manoja and the head of radiotelegraph services Captain Ugo Baccarani, managed to intercept for the first time ever the coordinates of the position of the castaways insistently transmitted from the *Tenda* by the Navy radio operator Giuseppe Biagi. The reconstruction of the facts proposed in the book denies the conjecture, full of suspicion, of the *long inertia imposed on the ship's radio operators* (as was written) due to disinterest and alleged political pressure received from the ship's Commanders, an inertia that was only fortuitously interrupted by the news of an uncertain interception by the Russian radio amateur Nikolai Schmidt.

The myth of Guglielmo Marconi

In all this, contrary to what is told in the anecdotal accounts, Guglielmo Marconi had no direct role. The field radio was not Marconi's and he did not suggest boarding it on the airship. The paternity of that radio belongs to the Navy which built it in the Naval Arsenal of La Spezia together with other prototypes of field radios. Furthermore, the author of the book had already questioned, in a previous publication, whether Marconi had listened to the *SOS* of the *Tenda Rossa* on board his yacht *Elettra* at anchor in the Mediterranean. This circumstance was reported by Nobile in an attempt to refute the presence of the "zone of silence", but was denied by the *Elettra* radio operator Adelmo Landini.

The journalistic monopoly of the Corriere della Sera

The investigations into the connections between the expedition and the journalism of the time are interesting. A document discovered by the author reveals the agreement between the *Corriere della Sera* and the *Royal Italian Geographical Society* to create that newspaper's monopoly on journalistic communications through the use of the Navy's radio service. Made exclusively for reasons of economic exploitation of the news, that agreement had serious consequences for the carrying out of the rescue operations because it took away useful time from the radio operators, especially during the initial dramatic period of radio silence on the airship. During the rescue phase, the Navy denied ever having agreed to that plan.

The myth of Soviet generosity

The book reconstructs the rescue expedition of the Soviet icebreaker *Krassin* which brought the last survivors of the catastrophe to safety. It does so in an unprecedented way, through the documentation of radiotelegraphic traffic between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Italian Embassy in Moscow and the Italian diplomatic delegation in Oslo. The investigation reveals the details of the negotiations with which the Italians, at the specific request and demand of the Soviets, provided *Krassin* with all the necessary maintenance in the ports touched during navigation, all the supplies of coal and food and a substantial, but indispensable, dollar loan from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These facts led one to suppose, already at the time, that the Soviets were acting on commission and not out of a pure spirit of solidarity, contrary to what was always written and propagated.

The non-existent plot organized by Italo Balbo to abandon the search for the six men missing with the casing of the airship Italia – The adverse fate of the airships

Regarding another hot point in the most widespread literature, the radiotelegraphic documentation highlights how there was no Italian will to abandon the aerial searches of the airship's casing and the six men on board (never found again) and even less so was there an Italo Balbo order in this sense. The flights were suspended from Rome by Admiral Giuseppe Sirianni, head of the rescue operation, following a technical report from Italian seaplane pilots Umberto Maddalena and Pierluigi Penzo. Having received refusal of collaboration from the much more adequate Swedish air