

Italian politics

Italy's Meloni government sparks outrage with stamp of fascist figure

AS Roma club founder Italo Foschi was a loyal supporter of dictator Benito Mussolini



AS Roma supporters wave a flag, bearing the portrait of team founder Italo Foschi, ahead of the Uefa Europa League final between Sevilla and AS Roma in Budapest in May 2023 © Odd Andersen/AFP/Getty Images

Amy Kazmin in Rome JUNE 7 2024

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's right-wing government has ignited fresh controversy over its views of Italy's fascist past by issuing a postal stamp bearing a picture of a prominent supporter of dictator Benito Mussolini.

Italo Foschi, who founded the AS Roma football club in 1927, was commemorated in a stamp unveiled on Thursday during a ceremony at the industry ministry attended by former and current players and some of Foschi's descendants. The stamp was celebrated by the club as a "source of pride".

But the leftwing opposition and some historians promptly accused Meloni's government of glorifying a fascist whose loyalty to Mussolini — and his vision — lasted until the dictator's death. Michele Fina, a senator from the centre-left Democratic party, said the decision was "shameful".

Carlo Giovanardi — a member of the philatelic council that reviews and approves all ceremonial stamps — said he did not recall the council taking a decision on Foschi, and added that honouring him was "in total contradiction to the principles of our constitution".

"I discovered his past as a militant, as an antisemite, as a collaborator — all the

characteristics not to be celebrated on a stamp,” Giovanardi told the Financial Times.

Industry minister Adolfo Urso, a member of Meloni's Brothers of Italy party which was spun out of a neo-fascist movement, was not present at the ceremony.

Urso's spokesperson said on Friday that the minister knew about the release of a stamp honouring the founder of AS Roma — but was unaware of Foschi's fascist background.

“It was a mistake by the technical officers,” Urso's spokesman said. “They focused only on the sports side, but not on the political side.” He noted that the government had only printed 5,000 Foschi stamps — compared with several hundred thousand for regular stamps.

But many are sceptical of claims that honouring a Mussolini loyalist was simply an accidental oversight. Historians say Foschi, who helped run a newspaper called Fascist Rome, was involved in violent attacks on opposition newspapers.

Foschi was an official with Mussolini's puppet republic propped up by Nazi Germany after the Allies landed in Sicily in 1943, though a court acquitted him of wrongdoing in a trial just after the war.

“This is both a nod to the far-right base, a deliberate provocation designed to provoke left-wing reaction, and a way of spreading an indulgent, unreflective view of Italian history among a wider public,” said David Broder, author of the book *Mussolini's Grandchildren*, about the contemporary Italian far-right.

The ruling Brothers of Italy party is the successor of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement founded by Mussolini loyalists after the second world war. As a teenage activist with the group in the 1990s, Meloni described Mussolini as a good politician, asserting that “everything he did, he did for Italy”.

Before her 2022 election, Meloni issued a video in which she said that the Italian right “had consigned fascism to history”, while condemning the suppression of democracy and the “ignominious anti-Jewish laws”.

But analysts say the government is now promoting a more ambiguous view of Italy's past in which those who played key roles in the fascist regime are honoured for alleged positive contributions to the country.

“Ever since Meloni took power, we've seen a subtle, creeping rehabilitation of fascism,” said Tobias Jones, author of the book *Ultra: The Underworld of Italian*

Football. The goal, he said, was to create a “cultural terrain in which the far-right is recognised, and even lauded, for its role in history”.

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