In the history of Italy, there are no two forces that have been more despised than Fascism and the Sicilian Mafia. While Fascism has largely been eradicated from the mainstream political sphere, and the Sicilian Mafia’s influence and power has waned, both are indelibly imprinted on the Italian consciousness. Yet despite being hated by the Italian people today, both Fascism and the Mafia were once sworn enemies of each other as well. From 1925 to 1929, under Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the state set out on a campaign to eradicate the Mafia from its homeland of Sicily. This suppression led to many mafiosi either going into hiding, being arrested, or fleeing to the United States. Nevertheless, Mussolini’s 1943 crackdown on the Mafia was a factor that led to his eventual downfall, when mafiosi took their revenge by helping the Americans liberate Sicily. In order to understand how this rise contributed to the “Southern Question,” an overview of the Mafia’s rise during the aftermath of the Risorgimento (Italian unification) is essential. Furthermore, an examination of the nature of the hostile and complex relationship of Fascism and the Mafia during the height of Mussolini’s 1943 crackdown will help clarify the effects of the forces in play during the period. Ultimately, we may find that, despite the successful repression of the Mafia, the lingering North-South divide prevented the Fascist effort to achieve absolute national unity.

The origins of the Fascist-Mafia conflict lie in the years following the Risorgimento, when the long-standing North-South divide was accentuated. After the unification of Italy in 1860, “the confrontation between northern Italian administrators and Sicilians... proved quite painful... [and] the imposition of rigid centralization produced much resentment.”¹ The Sicilians who had supported unification initially
were upset with the island’s lack of autonomy, while the administrators from the North were disenchanted with what they saw as “a world of semi-feudalism, based on archaic notions of honour, in which blood feuds abounded, and liberalism was scarcely understood, let alone practiced.” Additionally, conscription, higher taxation, and unemployment were other factors plaguing Sicily and leading to further hostility with the newly formed Italian state.

While the Mafia in Sicily had its roots in the early part of the nineteenth century under feudal rule and the advent of conglomerates, the Risorgimento provided an opportunity for it to solidify its presence on the island. The annexation of Sicily prompted barons to abandon their rural holdings to other agents and former tenants. These new landowners subsequently needed protection against the general lawlessness and disorder that had come about from the civil unrest that was threatening their lives and property. This provided a fertile climate, especially around Palermo in western Sicily, for the Mafia to fulfill landowners’ need for protection by maintaining order through campieri, or armed guards. As a result, the Mafia began to generate revenue by extorting the new landowners and entrenched itself within Sicilian society, and eventually extended their reach into politics and government.

In addition to the difficulty faced by the Northern-dominated Italian state in managing Sicily, as well as the expanding presence of the Mafia, economic factors furthered the divide. The Mezzogiorno region, comprised of the southern part of the peninsula, including Sicily, had a primarily agricultural economy, and as a result was poorer than the more industrialized North. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the so-called “Southern Question,” which was built upon the various differences and difficulties existing in the southern part of the country, entered Italian political discourse. The notion that Sicily belonged more to Africa than Europe was also prominent throughout the country. With the acceptance of eugenics and Social Darwinism as scientific fact, this provided additional justification for the North to assert its superiority.

“Southern Italy, and especially Sicily, was considered a social problem and threat to public order”

The “Southern Question” was a notion that persisted into the twentieth century. Southern Italy, and especially Sicily, was considered a social problem and threat to public order. This was due in large part to the success of the Mafia in capturing the public imagination. Benito Mussolini took advantage of this divide and incorporated it into Fascist ideology. Shortly after taking power during the March on Rome in October of 1922, Mussolini boasted that he had the power to solve the “Southern Question” even though “fascism was a northern product, and its implantation into the South, and its growth there, proved difficult.” This is supported by the assertion of virtually all historians that out of all of Italy’s regions, Sicily was the least Fascist. Mussolini’s solution to the “Southern Question” was to provide funding for investment and undertake public works projects. In fact, Mussolini was at first quite thoughtful about the situation, admitting that the “Southern Question” was complicated and “produced a fairly concerted effort by the government to draw the South into the framework of the nation.”
However, for provincial Sicilians, Fascism’s national unity and cohesion did not have much appeal. From the beginning, “some Sicilian writers maintained that the weakness of Fascism on the island was due to the presence of the Mafia.”

Another explanation for Fascism’s early weakness in Sicily was that it was “considered a political phenomenon peculiar to the North... [and] the dominant capitalist-industrial-agrarian class felt no particular need to have its interests defended by the Fascists while the peasant masses of the population remained politically inert.” This general anti-Fascist sentiment led to the Soldino movement formed by Messina deputy Ettore Lombardo Pellegrino in 1923, which managed to create minor disturbances in most major cities in Sicily. Fearing an open revolt, Mussolini swiftly cracked down on the Soldino movement and arrested Pellegrino and thousands of others in the ensuing sweep.

In the early stages of their relationship, “the Mafia sought to support Fascism, ally with it, infiltrate it, and, if possible, to corrupt it.” This tenuous “mutual tolerance” was due to Fascism’s emphasis on maintaining law and order, which could be accomplished by the mafiosi. The Mafia initially saw an alliance with Fascism as “the best guarantee of preserving their property, advantages, and prestige, but it also provided a timely opportunity for the acquisition of social and political respectability.” In fact, before 1926, Fascist leaders in western Sicily were either lawyers for the Mafia or mafiosi themselves. Perhaps the most famous of these leaders was Alfredo Cucco. While he maintained the outward appearance of being opposed to the Mafia, he became a “federale of the province of Palermo before his Mafia connections proved too embarrassing and provoked his expulsion from the Fascist party.”

In 1924, two casus belli events occurred, allowing Mussolini to move against the Mafia and bring the inevitable conflict to fruition. First, Mussolini allied with the Liberals in the elections that year and, with the aid of mafiosi, eliminated the socialists and Sicilian leftists in what proved to be a crushing electoral victory. The following year, Mussolini turned around and betrayed the Liberals, thus winning another victory at the polls. With the political opposition destroyed, Mussolini had a free hand in Sicily and promised a new deal to the Sicilian people, one that would ‘no longer [tolerate] that a few hundred criminals should oppress a magnificent population’"
one that would “no longer [tolerate] that a few hundred criminals should oppress a magnificent population.” While this remark was seen as mere rhetoric at the time, it would soon be affirmed with action. When the Don of Piana dei Greci, Ciccio Cuccia, remarked to Mussolini that there was no need for a police presence in Sicily since Il Duce was under the boss’s protection, Mussolini was offended that he “could not safely travel in a Sicilian town without depending on the Mafia for protection.” Two months later, Cuccia was arrested on Mussolini’s orders and later died in prison. Over the next three years Mussolini pursued a highly effective crackdown on the Mafia, an operation conducted by police chief Cesare Mori. Mori’s ruthless methods proved highly effective, “and that was all Mussolini wanted.”

The most significant moment in the crackdown was the Siege of Gangi in 1926. Gangi had a history of being a hotbed for criminals and the Mafia, and Mori “needed a dramatic victory to establish his authority and that of the government.” During the operation, which began on New Year’s Day, the police devastated the mafiosi, slaughtering their cattle, seizing their women and children as hostages, and sleeping in their beds. This led to a mediation with the Gangi manutengoli led by Baron Sgadari, and the eventual surrender of the last bandit, Salvatore Farrarello, on January 11. Over 430 people were arrested, most of whom were family and friends of the actual criminals. Gangi was wrested from Mafia control. Mori became a national hero for his role in the Siege, which not only achieved its tactical objectives and provided a prime example for future operations, but also created “a climate of opinion most conducive to the state’s victory.”

Other significant undertakings by Mori included the takedown of the Corleone Mafia and the local government sympathetic to it at the end of 1926, and the high-profile Madonie trial in 1927, whose verdict “sounded the death-knell of the mafia.” From the time of the Madonie trial to Mori’s departure from Palermo in the summer of 1929, fifteen additional Mafia-related trials were held. However, just like
Mori’s previous anti-Mafia campaigns, countless people who were only guilty by association and unconnected to the actual mafiosi were rounded up. With the imprisonment of so many suspected criminals, “the Mafia was kept underground and the incidences of its most common criminal activities... sharply declined.”

However, despite their successes against the Mafia on paper, what Mori, Mussolini, and Fascism itself failed to address was the root cause of the problem. With the age-old North-South divide and “Southern Question” ever present in Italian political discourse, Fascism was doomed to fail despite Mussolini’s early assurances to the contrary. The fact that “fear of poverty arguably lay at the root of much mafia behavior” was one that Mori did not even recognize until after his retirement in 1929. He eventually came to believe that mere “armed repression of the Mafia was not enough to uproot Mafioso criminality from Sicilian society,” and that “a national policy of reparation and equipment [must] be put in its place.”

While Mussolini had originally intended to take such a course of action, the “Southern Question” was a more complicated problem than had been originally thought. Mussolini may have had the best interests of Sicily at heart, but he was blinded by the fact that his “most influential support came from Italy’s northern conservative elite, and this curtailed his freedom of manoeuvre.” Consequently, the “Southern Question” was never resolved; instead, it was ignored, declared solved, and further discussion...

Figure 1: Operation Husky - the Allied liberation of Sicily
was altogether forbidden. Ultimately, Mussolini failed to introduce true economic and social reform in the region, choosing to merely suppress the Mafia instead.

“Northern prejudice and neglect hampered any effort to bring economic and social reform to Sicily”

As a result of the repression, many mafiosi, including Carlo Gambino and Joe Bonnano, fled to New York City, eventually starting their own Mafia families in America. During World War II, the American government used the Mafia’s hatred of Mussolini to their advantage. New York Mafia Don Lucky Luciano was coerced into providing the military with the names of mafiosi who were still in hiding and able to ease the American liberation of Sicily, codenamed “Operation Husky”, in the summer of 1943. This, in combination with Mussolini’s neglect of the island led to “the swift disappearance of Fascism from Sicily... with so little resistance and with so few immediate traces left behind.” Allied sympathy for the Sicilian plight led the new Italian government to grant Sicily much-desired autonomy in 1945. However, for Sicily, the aftermath of the war was not all constructive. The Allies were grateful for the help of the mafiosi in liberating Sicily and lent them encouragement and financial assistance to serve as a bulwark against the Communists, thus restoring the Mafia to what it was before Mussolini.

In conclusion, Italy’s North-South divide and the “Southern Question” shaped political debate over the country’s unification from its beginning. While such social and political differences were in fact real and legitimate, and the problem itself seemed at least concretely articulated, Northern prejudice and neglect hampered any effort to bring economic and social reform to Sicily. This fueled Sicilian resentment against a central government and justified its call for self-rule. The Mafia was a product of the adverse economic and social conditions that characterized the island, providing the order and stability that was not provided by the state. However, the Mafia itself contributed to the “Southern Question” gaining more credibility in the North. Despite Mussolini’s attempt to eradicate the Mafia, organized crime in Sicily survived the Second World War, while the root issues behind the North-South divide remained neglected.

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Mussolini’s War on the Mafia  
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2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 23
5. Ibid., 94
6. Duggan, 21
7. Ibid., 95
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23. Ibid., 136
24. Ibid., 138
25. Ibid., 139
26. Ibid., 147
27. Duggan, 226
28. Reece, 269
29. Ibid., 270
30. Duggan, 96
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Reece, 271
35. Reece, 271
36. Dickie, 197
37. Reece, 271

Image 1: Giuseppe Finocchiaro
Image 2: www.puglialife.com
Image 3: www.soundpolitics.com
Figure 1: Wikimedia Commons