

Maria Malatesta

The reconversion of the Italian nobility. Aristocracy and the fascist regime

During the so-called 'liberal' period extending from the Italian unification (1860) to the advent of the fascism (1922), the Italian nobility remained on the margins of the national ruling class. If the diplomatic corps is excluded, the nobility no longer occupied important posts in the civil service. The nobiliary presence diminished in the army, in the local administrations, and at national political level. In Parliament, whilst nobles had represented 30% of members in 1861, they had decreased to 26% by 1896. Their presence in governments, which in the two decades following unification had oscillated around 43%, fell to 20% on the eve of the First World War. These are percentages such to make Italy, which was a monarchy, more similar to the French Third Republic than to Germany or Great Britain. This anomaly was the result of several factors. The first was the long-standing weakness of the Italian nobility, which had for some time lost – when it had possessed – privileges and seigniorial rights, and which since the Napoleonic period had become wholly similar to the land-owning gentry. The second factor was the fragmentariness and heterogeneity of the nobilities scattered among the various pre-unification states, which were devoid of ties with the Piedmontese Savoy monarchy that subsequently became the national monarchy after 1860. The third factor was the hostility manifested by some noble groups, such as the Roman and southern Bourbon aristocracies, against the process of national unification.

These factors made it impossible for the Italian process of nation building to proceed along the monarchical-nobiliary lines followed by Germany, and for the unitary state to draw on the social capital offered by a solid *ancien régime* nobility. The new Italian state adopted a constitutional regime which was instead similar to the French one, which recognized the nobility but did not contemplate the existence of a court nobility endowed with privileges. The result was in some respects paradoxical. In a monarchical state, the nobility as a body did not participate in the formation of the national élites. Indicative of how unimportant noble title was considered for entry into the national élites is the small number of ennoblements granted by the post-unitary governments. Between 1861 and 1922 only 278 new nobles were created out of a nobiliary corps constituted by 16,304 individuals between 1895 and 1909.

Fascism represented, at least apparently, a break with the liberal period. During its twenty years in power, the Fascist regime devised a neo-nobiliary policy which served two purposes: 1) fascisticise and bureaucratise the nobility, at the same time attributing it the political-administrative role which it had lacked during the liberal period; 2) create a new nobility of regime. To achieve the first objective, Mussolini put in 1923 the heraldic council created in 1869 with the task of monitoring and certifying the nobility under the aegis of the prime minister's office. In 1926 succession was eliminated on the distaff side because it had excessively expanded the ranks of the nobility, especially in the South. Between 1924 and 1930, following the Concordat with the Vatican, the fascist state recognized the noble titles conferred by the Pope to form the so-called 'black aristocracy'. Finally, in 1929 the new code regulating the Italian nobility was enacted, on the basis of which the noble order was constitutionalized and increasingly integrated into the Fascist hierarchy. The significance of this reform was emphasised by Mussolini, but it did not bring any real changes in practice. The nobility remained excluded from the protocol of the Kingdom and was not granted positions at public functions, nor in precedences at the court of Savoy.

Ennoblements were the second component of the Fascist neo-aristocratic policy. Some 286 new nobles were created between 1922 and 1946, which was more than those created between 1860 and 1922. Fascism's intention was not to create a new noble group to replace the old one, as Napoleon had done, only to integrate the new patricians with those of ancient lineage. Whilst in the liberal period, high-ranking army officers close to the Court had formed the category rewarded most with ennoblement, during Fascism their place was taken by industrialists, followed by the group consisting of those distinguished by fascist merit; finally, also scientists and academics were ennobled by the regime.

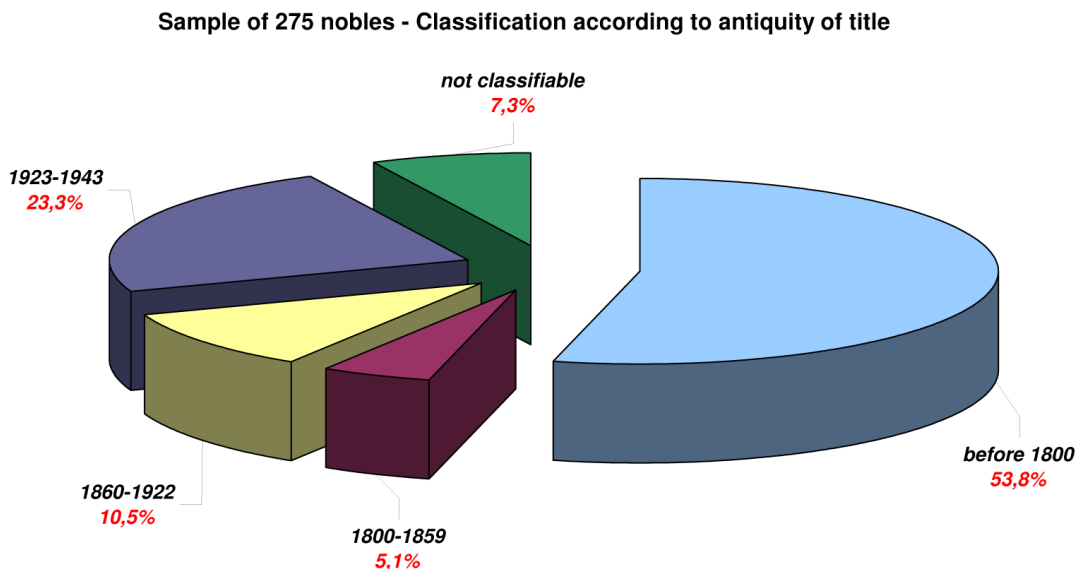
The few historians who have studied the Italian nobility in the twentieth century have done so from a mainly institutional standpoint, privileging the point of view of the state rather than that of the nobility. As regards the Fascist period, they agree that the nobiliary revival was an ephemeral phenomenon. The aim of Fascist pro-aristocratic policy was not to valorise the nobility, and even less to give it a strategic political role, but rather to utilize the system of social hierarchies and symbols that it expressed to reinforce the Fascist ideology. The noble revival served not so much to gain the consensus of the old élites as to legitimate the Fascist state by creating a new imperial aristocracy. This paper instead adopts an analytical perspective centred on the nobility and addresses the following questions:

1. Who were the nobles that participated in the management of power in the fascist state?
2. What were the sectors which the nobility its strategies of reconversion?
3. What was the level of adherence by the nobility to Fascism?

The research methodology used consists in identification of a group of 275 nobles, who occupied political, institutional and economic positions in the Fascist period, The sample of nobles who collaborated with Fascism represented 0.7% of the entire nobility censused in 1933, equal to 7,750 families and 41,853 individuals. It does not include noble deputies, podestà (i.e. mayors, no longer elected but appointed by the government) of municipalities which were not provincial capitals. Also the number of nobles employed in the colonial administration is underestimated. Nevertheless, the sample does not differ excessively from the reality. The 275 nobles have been classified according to antiquity of title :

1. Old nobility (titles granted before 1800) = 53.8% of the sample;
2. Napoleonic nobility and of the Restoration (1800-1859) = 5.1%;
3. Nobility of the unified state (1860 -1922) = 10.5%;
4. Fascist nobility (1923-1943) = 23.3%.

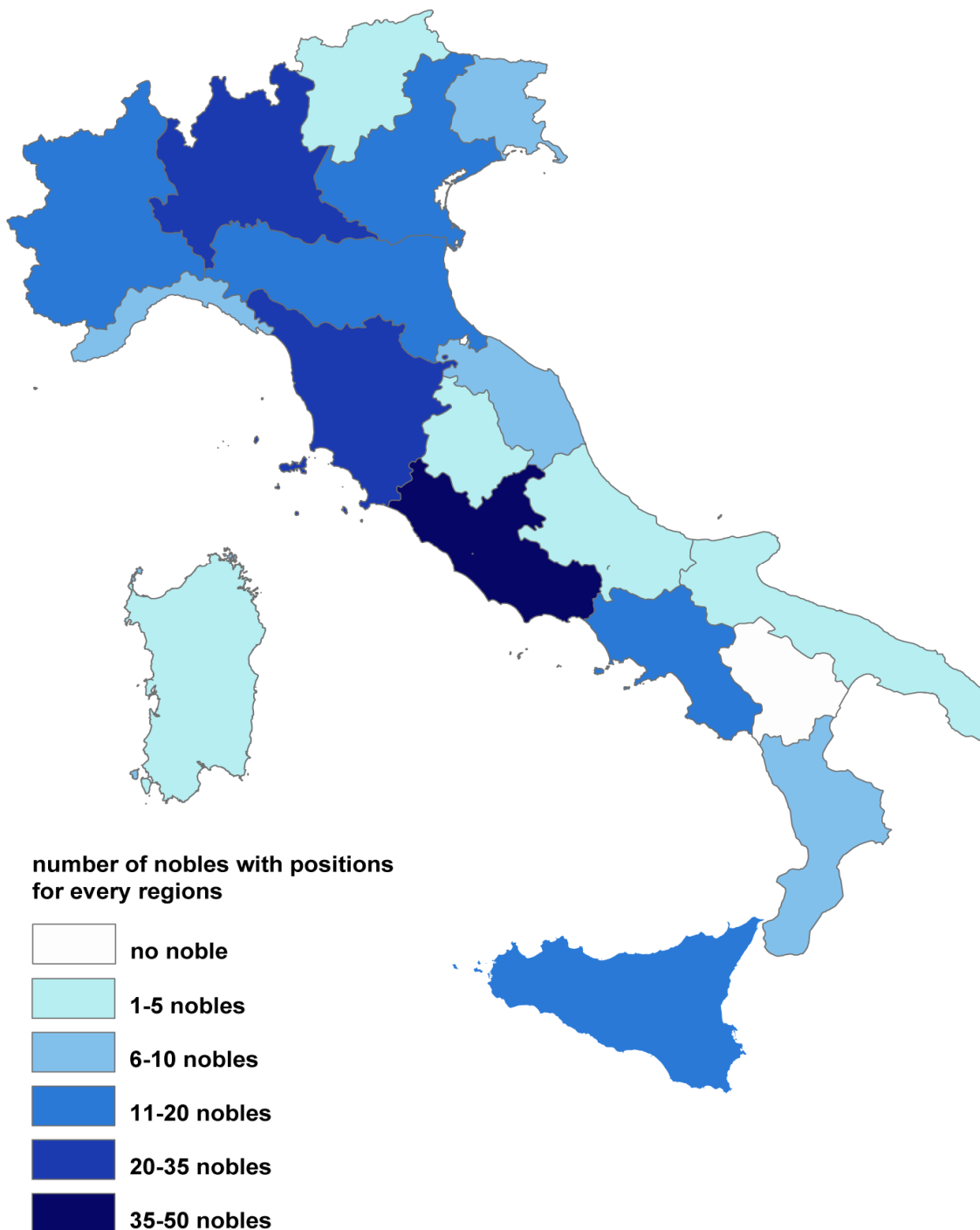
[Figure 1]



Their geographical origin was primarily Rome, followed by the regions of Lombardy, Tuscany, Campania, Piedmont and Emilia Romagna.

[Figure 2]

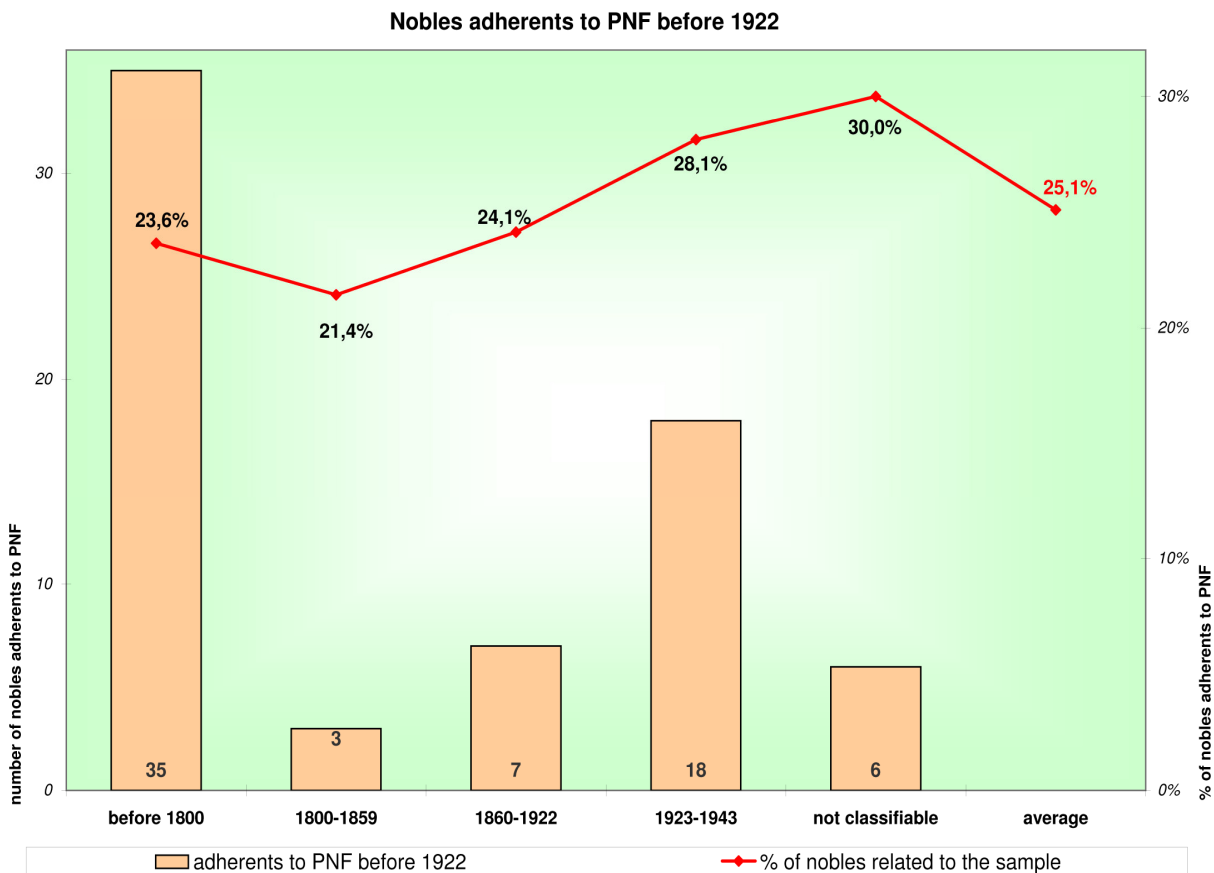
Geographical origins



The fact that the old nobility forms more than half of the sample is explained by the limited creation of new nobles during the nineteenth century. However, the most significant finding concerns those who were ennobled by the Fascist regime. These constitute 23% of the sample and represent 22% of all the 'imperial nobility'. It is the latter, and not the old

nobility, that is over-represented in the sample, and it constituted around one-quarter of the nobles who exercised power during the Fascist regime. The names of representatives of great noble houses in the sample (Roman like Borghese, Colonna, Torlonia; Milanese like the Visconti di Modrone, Cornaggia Medici, Borromeo; Florentine like Della Gherardesca and Ridolfi) suggest that there arose a pattern of noble behaviour during Fascism which was replicated in Nazi Germany, in that the old titled families were those which expressed greatest consensus towards the regime. To verify this hypothesis, militancy in Fascism prior to its seizure of power has been selected as an indicator of a spontaneous consensus not induced by the dictates of the totalitarian state. The members of the old nobility who adhered to Fascism from the outset make up 23% of the sample, while the regimes represent 28%.

[Figure 3]

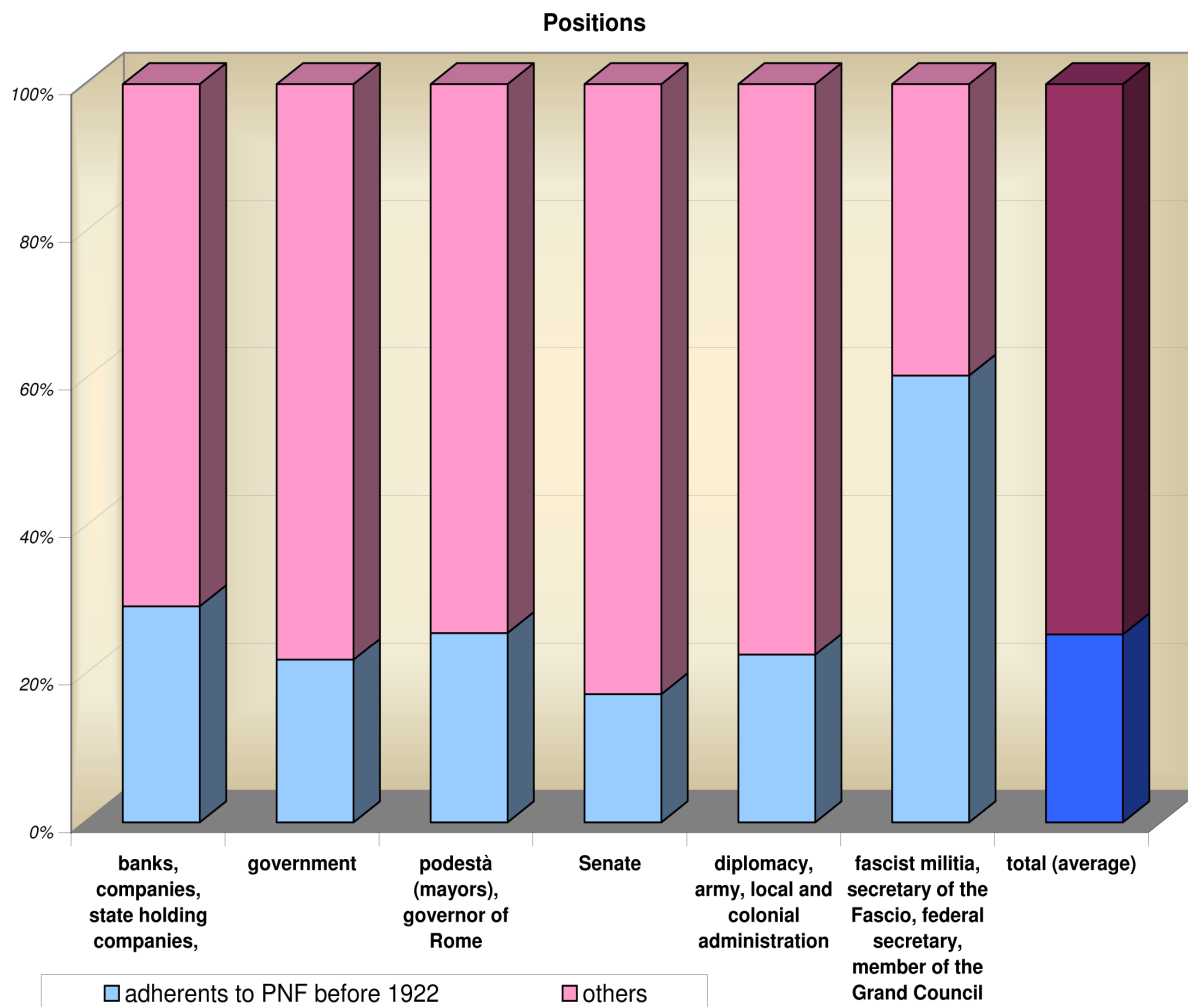


Some 50% of latter had previously been *squadristi* (i.e. activists who resorted to violent means) and in 1922 had taken part in the March on Rome, whilst the *squadristi* of the old nobility who participated in the March amounted to 34%. These were provincial nobles with landholdings in areas affected by the agrarian strikes and aristocrats who had been activists

in the nationalist party. There was consequently a minimal difference between the two groups of nobles active in the Fascist party before 1922.

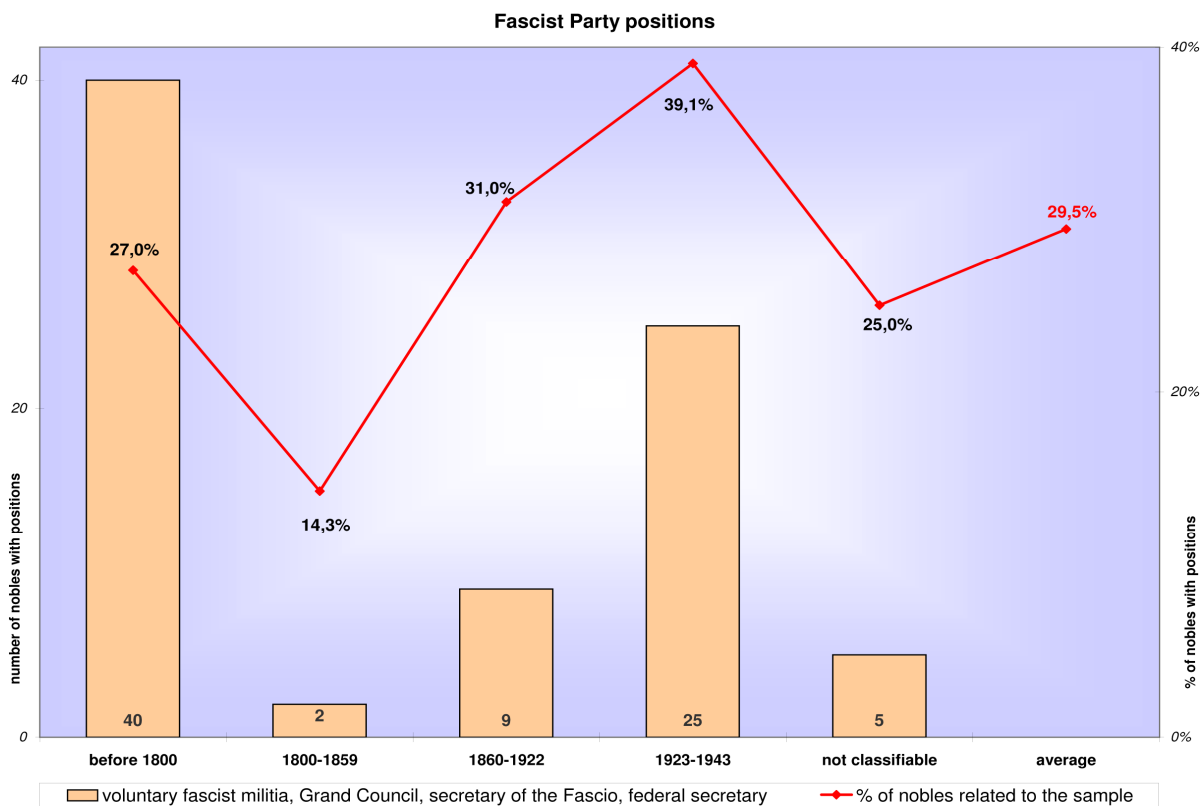
It emerges from the sample that the weight exerted by adherence to early Fascism followed by repositioning within the totalitarian state and society was relative. The nobles that used the 'capital' furnished by militancy in early Fascism of the origins were 25% on average. However, there were notable differences according to the sector. 'Capital from militancy' gave privileged access to posts in the PNF (the voluntary Fascist militia, secretary of the *fascio*, federal secretary, member of the Grand Council).

[Figure 4]



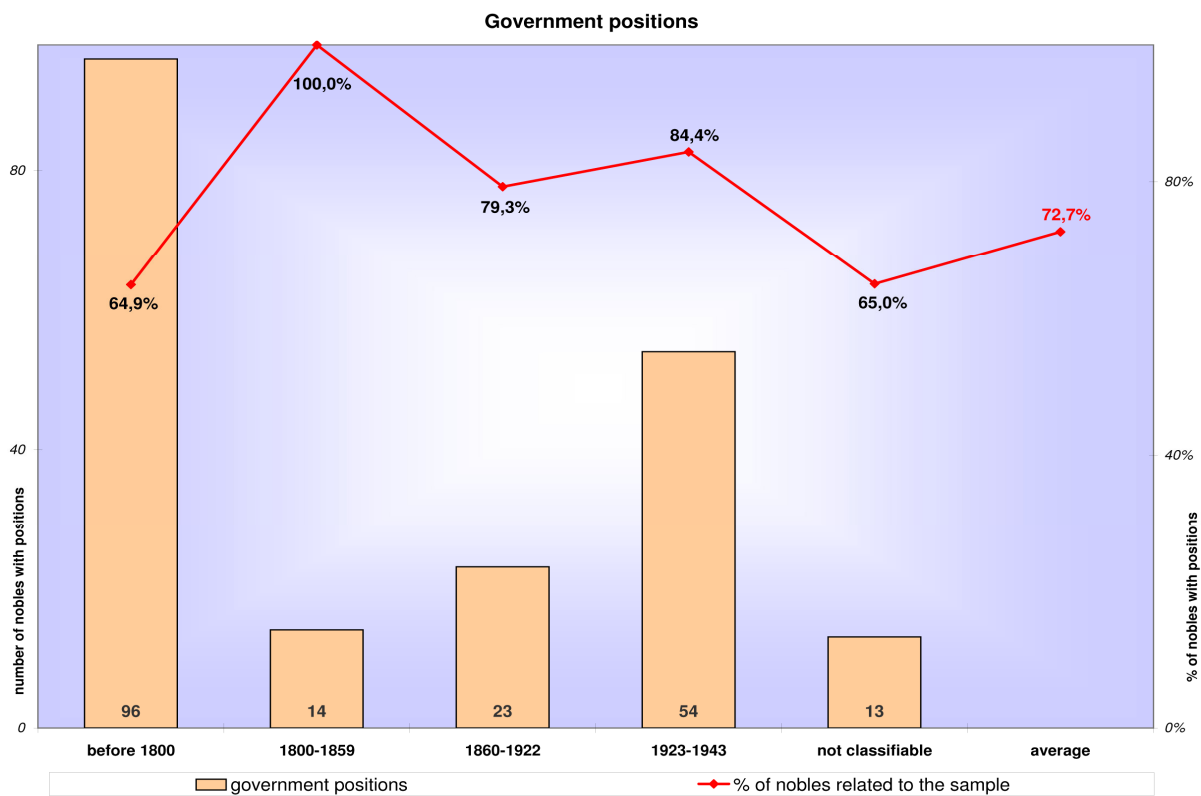
The incumbents of these strictly political appointments were mainly the new (1860-1922) and newest (1922-1943) nobility.

[Figure 5]



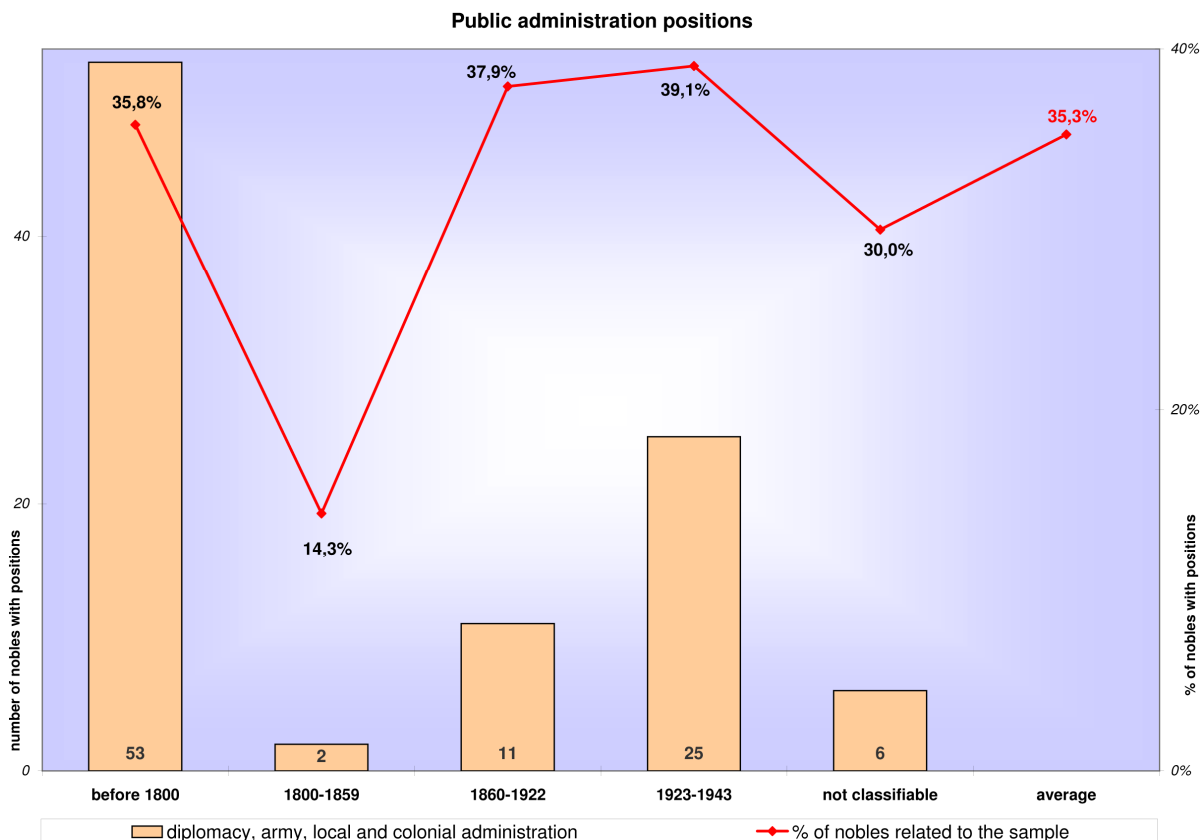
And the most recent nobility also occupied most positions in government.

[Figure 6]



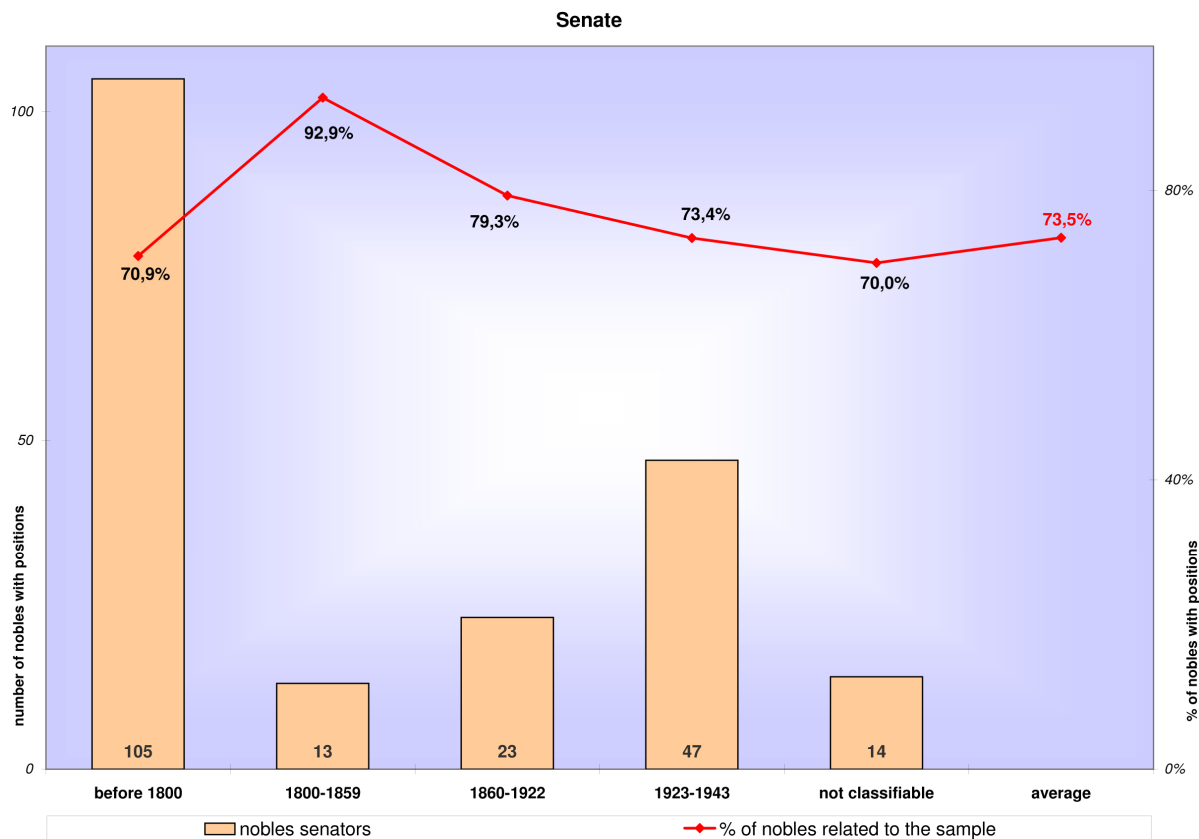
There are insignificant differences among the various noble groups in regard to senior positions in the Italian colonial administration and the diplomatic corps.

[Figure 7]

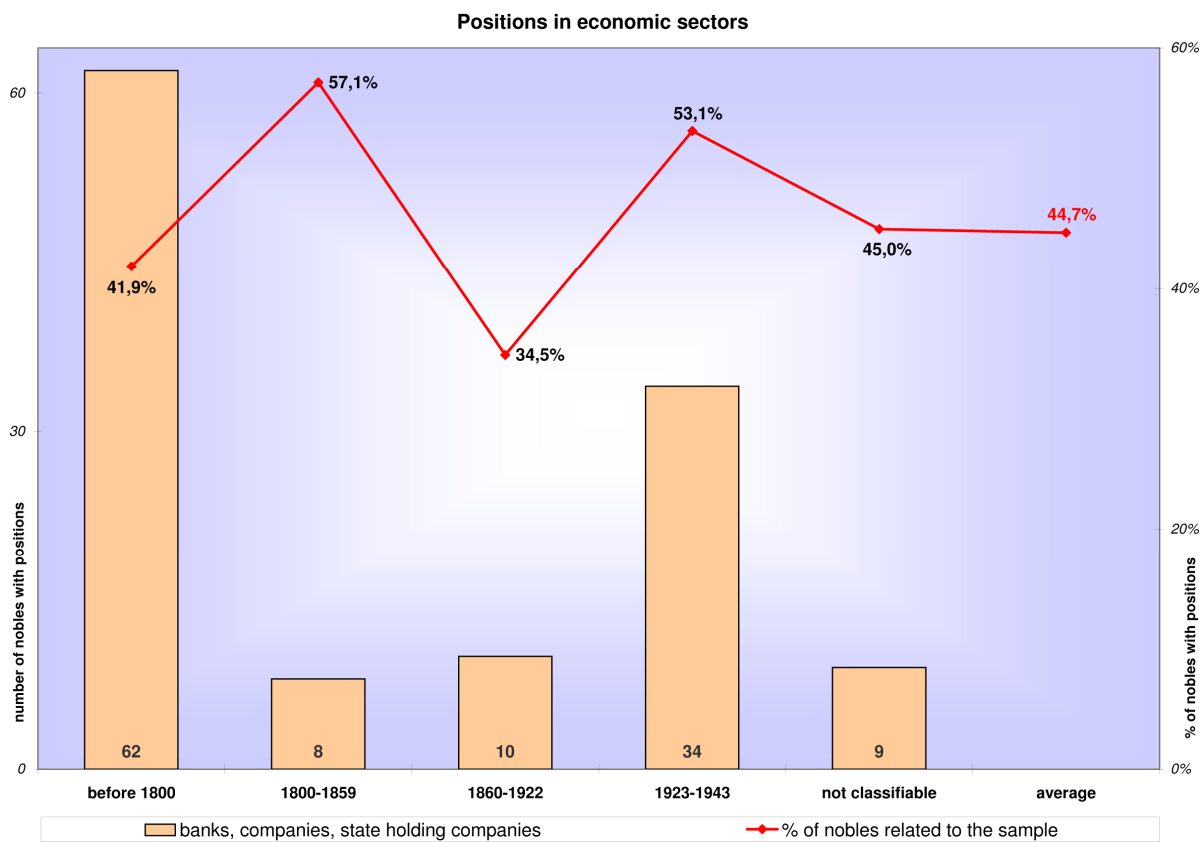


The same applies to the office of senator, whilst posts in the companies, banks, state holding companies were shared between old nobility and regime nobility, to the detriment of the nobility created by the liberal state.

[Figure 8]

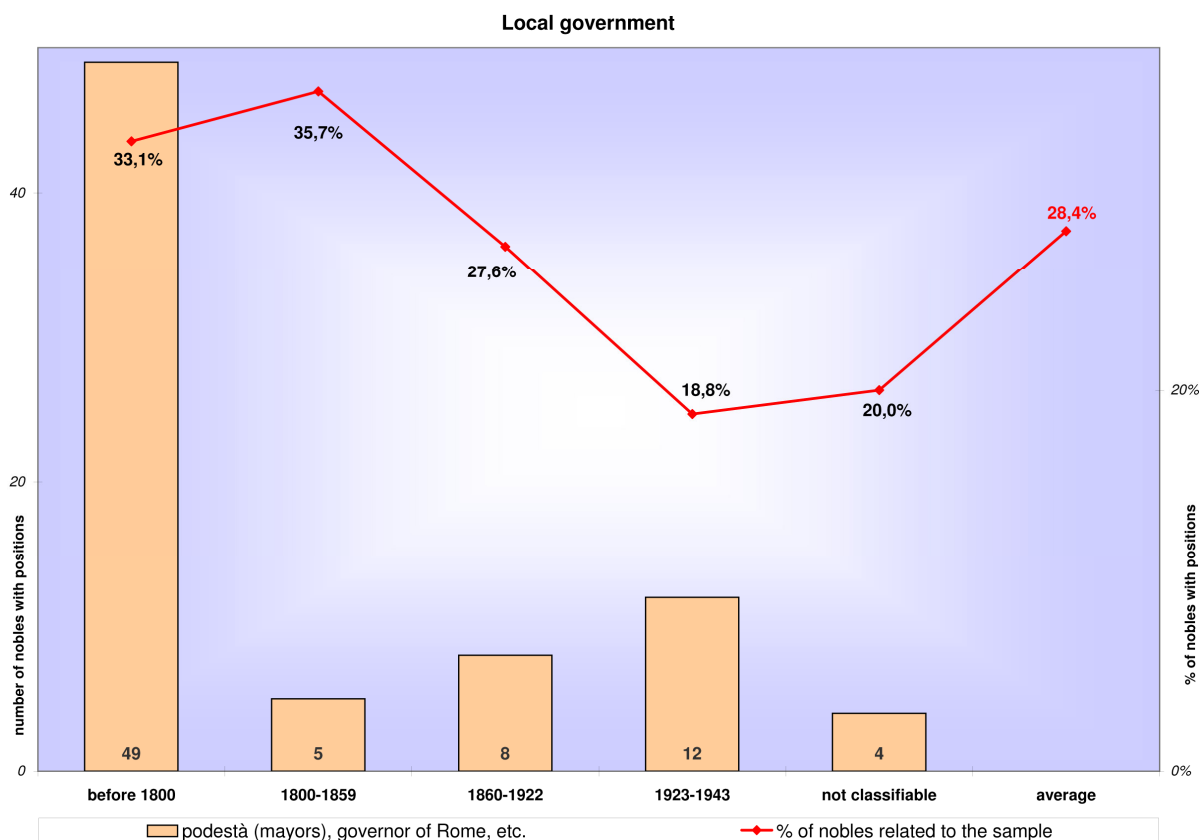


[Figure 9]



This substantially uniform distribution in percentage terms among the various components of the patriciate changes in the case of local administrative positions (governor of Rome, *podestà*, provincial councillors), for which the old nobility and that of the early 1800s were preferred.

[Figure 10]

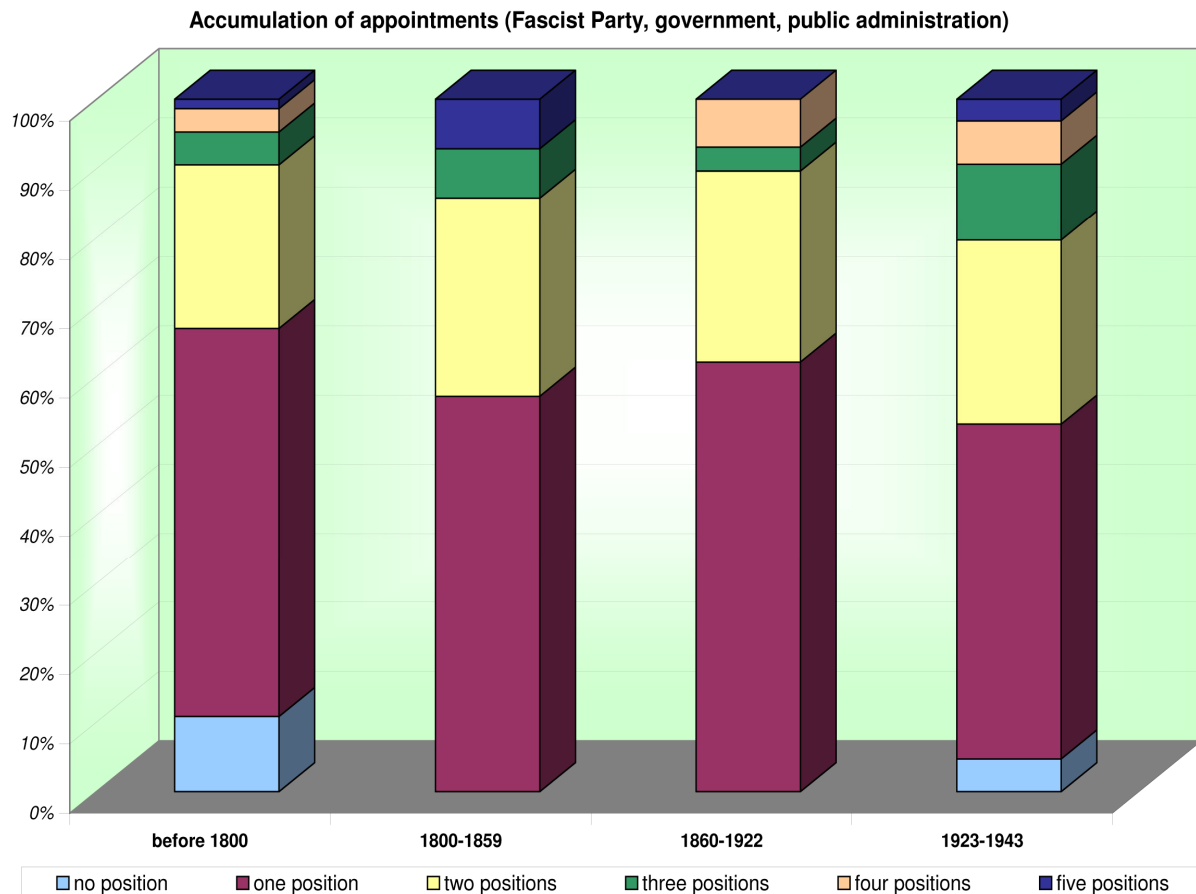


The choice of a titled *podestà* was a resumption of the model of the aristocrat mayor predominant during the liberal period and which between 1914 and 1920 had been undermined in many municipalities of the centre-north by the choice of socialist mayors. Fascism thus wanted to restore the oligarchic management of local power by relying on the prestige of the ancient families. In some cases *podestà* with illustrious surnames were selected in order to resolve conflicts within the local Fascist ruling class, as happened in Milan during the 1920s and 1930s.

The distribution of political-administrative power followed the trends which had already emerged. There are no significant differences among the various noble groups in the sample. The regime nobility accumulated the largest number of appointments; the old nobility

settled to a large extent for a single position; in both groups there are individuals with up to five posts.

[Figure 11]



The nobility's repositioning strategies in the Fascist state generally reproduce a traditional nobiliar model of participation in the political sphere. It is centred on presence in the Senate (73.5% of the sample) [figure 8], in the national government (72.7%) [figure 6], local government (29%) [figure 10], and in the public administration (35.3%) [figure 7]. Strategies of economic reconversion consisted of shareholding in banks and companies. The novelty brought by Fascism was the creation of the state holding companies, many of them agricultural, which the nobility entered thanks to its prestige and long-standing ties with local communities (45%) [figure 9].

Some figures on the presence of the nobility as a whole in national political and economic life show its general retrenchment compared with the pre-war period. The proportion of nobles in the Senate decreased from 33% to 27% in 1930; in the army from 15% to 8% in 1934; on company boards of directors from 10% to 4% in 1934. The only sector in which

the noble presence remained constant was diplomacy (30% in the early 1930s). If these figures are compared with those obtained from analysis of the sample, there emerges the picture of a social group which – except for a small group of political activists many of whom were rewarded by the regime with noble title – did not alter its traditional behaviour and approach to public life; nor did it jump on the winner's bandwagon. From this point of view, therefore, one may confirm that the Fascist noble revival was only a facade and that the group of the old and less old nobility was subsequently rather marginalized. Still to be determined is whether this was an imposition or a choice.

For a small group of nobles, Fascism provided an opportunity for gratification, but for many others it generated instability and restlessness which created extreme polarizations. There were patricians who translated dynastic pride into the racialist culture burgeoning in the country and in 1932 founded the magazine *La nobiltà della stirpe*. Other nobles remained hostile to the regime and in 1943 joined the resistance against Nazi-Fascism.