

RESEARCH NOTE

Norwegian support to the airship *Italia* polar expedition

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Abstract

Despite the bitter dispute that arose between Italy and Norway after the Amundsen–Ellsworth–Nobile transpolar flight of 1926, the Nordic country assisted with various organizational aspects of the airship *Italia* polar expedition of 1928. In particular, Adolf Hoel's contributions to the preparations for the Italian polar mission were extensive and varied. The eminent Norwegian scientist made available to the Italians unpublished cartographic material, books, information on the Svalbard archipelago and polar equipment. The maps that Hoel gave to Gianni Albertini aided Italian rescue efforts after the crash of the *Italia*. Using Italian and Norwegian archives, this paper examines a little-known page of Italian–Norwegian scientific cooperation in Arctic exploration during the interwar period.

Keywords

Arctic exploration; Svalbard; Umberto Nobile; Adolf Hoel; Roald Amundsen; airship *Norge*

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Abbreviations

ACS: Italian Central Archives, Rome
AP: Fund Political Affairs (ASMAE)
ASMAE: Historical Archives of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome
AUSMM: Archives of the Historical Office of the Italian Navy, Rome
b.: archival box
CDUN: Documentation Center “Umberto Nobile,” Vigna di Valle, Italy
CISP: Polar Expedition Inquiry Commission (ACS)
CR: confidential correspondence (ACS)
ITA: Fund “Italia” (MUN)
f.: archival folder
MUN: Museo Umberto Nobile, Lauro, Italy
NAR: Norwegian Embassy in Rome (RA)
NOR: Fund “Norge” (CDUN)
RA: National Archives of Norway, Oslo
SPD: Special Secretariat of the Duce (ACS)
UD: Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RA)

Introduction

On 1 December 1994, at the office of the Norwegian Polar Institute in Tromsø, a memorandum of understanding was signed by the Norwegian Adviser on Polar Affairs Jan Arvesen and Ambassador Antonio Badini, on behalf of the Kingdom of Norway and the Italian Republic, respectively. On that occasion, Ambassador Badini recalled the long-standing ties of collaboration between Italy and Norway in Arctic exploration and stressed that the agreement would relaunch the polar dimension of Italian research in the spirit of international cooperation (Vik 1994). The memorandum noted the “shared memory of the transpolar flight in the airship *Norge* by General Umberto Nobile and Roald Amundsen in 1926” and the intention of the two countries to “ensure its continuity in the interests of science” (MOU 1994a: 1, b, my transl.).

Even more remarkable than the collaboration in the *Stella Polare* expedition (1899–1900), during which 11 Italians and eight Norwegians operated “like a crew of one single nation” (Savoia et al. 1903: x), was the Italian–Norwegian cooperation in the Amundsen–Ellsworth–Nobile transpolar flight of the airship *Norge*. The mission, organized between 1925 and 1926 with the aim of crossing by air the Arctic region from Spitsbergen over the North Pole to Alaska (Kontract 1926), involved an international crew of six Italians, one American, one Swede and eight Norwegians (Roald Amundsen, Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, Emil Andreas Horgen, Oscar Adolf Wisting, Birger Gottwald Lund, Fridtjof Storm-Johnsen, Oskar Omdal and Fredrik Ramm). In the days leading up to the departure of the airship from the aerodrome of Ciampino (10 April 1926), Italian and Norwegian authorities expressed their hope that cooperation in the polar expedition would consolidate the already cordial political, cultural and

commercial relations between the two countries (Miscali 2021a, b). In an interview with a Norwegian journalist, Benito Mussolini declared that the transpolar flight “bode well for relations between the two great peoples” (Ramm 1926); the Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Aeronautics Alberto Bonzani wished that the flight of the *Norge* would represent “a new unforgettable bond in the friendly relations’ between the two countries”; Johannes Irgens, Minister Plenipotentiary of Norway in Italy, during a reception at the headquarters of the Italian Geographical Society in Rome, praised the many “memories of excellent friendship” between the two countries of which “the most glorious” would forever be that of the *Norge* transpolar flight (*Il Giornale d’Italia* 1926, my transl.).

As is known, the success of the transpolar flight was then manipulated and exploited for nationalistic propaganda purposes by the Fascist regime, which claimed all the credit for the feat (Duggan & Cord Meyer 2001; Aas 2002; Alfei 2022). The concomitant journalistic controversy pitted the two protagonists of the polar mission—Roald Amundsen and Umberto Nobile—against each other (Aas 2022). Nevertheless, the memory of the friendly collaboration during the preparations and the flight of the *Norge* was still vivid in the summer of 1927, when Italy organized a new polar expedition and Norway decided to support the mission. This article examines this unexplored page of international cooperation in Arctic exploration.

The airship *Italia* polar expedition

In the wake of the success of the Amundsen–Ellsworth–Nobile transpolar flight, on 12 July 1927, Nobile outlined plans for a new polar expedition, to be conducted with the airship *Italia* (Lanza di Scalea 1927a). The mission was not intended to be a mere “replica of the flight made in 1926” (Giusti 2023: 283, my transl.), but rather “to immediately use the experience gained for a geographical reconnaissance of the polar area not seen from the *Norge*, as extensive as possible, accompanied by a collection of scientific elements, for the physical study of the region and its atmosphere” (Lanza di Scalea 1927b: 1, my transl.). Although the polar expedition was not officially organized by the Fascist regime, the initiative—promoted by the Italian Geographical Society—had the authorization of Mussolini and counted on the collaboration of the Italian Armed Forces (Balbo 1928; Tomaselli 1929): the expedition needed “personnel and means” from the Italian Navy, Air Force and Army (Trojani 1978: 17, my transl.). A meaningful testimony was provided months later by Italo Balbo, then Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Aeronautics: “We have placed the aircraft construction plant at General Nobile’s disposal and for

several months it worked exclusively for him. We have placed the meteorological office at his disposal, and we did everything humanly possible. Every week we met in my office with Admiral [Giuseppe] Sirianni, the Chief of Staff of the Italian Army [Armando] Armani, [Giovanni] Roncagli, [Umberto] Nobile, [Mario] Moris and a few other officers” (Balbo 1928: 12, my transl.).

Similarly to what happened between 1925 and 1926 with the *Norge* transpolar flight, preparations for the polar expedition of the airship *Italia* were carried out in the spirit of transnational scientific cooperation (Alfei 2024). Although the quarrel between Amundsen and Nobile was still being played out in the media, the general’s correspondence reveals that the Italians still needed the help of the Norwegians to organize the new polar expedition. This need was first and foremost in the meteorological field: as early as November 1927 Nobile emphasized the importance of Norwegian meteorological support (Nobile 1927a) and noted the urgency of sending, as soon as possible, a group of Italian radio operators from the Navy “to Oslo and Bergen to study the necessary procedure to receive weather bulletins compiled according to the codes in use” (Nobile 1927b: 2, my transl.). With the mediation of Naval Attaché Franco Quentin and Minister Plenipotentiary Carlo Senni, the Norwegian authorities guaranteed maximum support not only with meteorology but also with logistics, in mainland Norway as well as in Svalbard (Senni 1927a). Through the Norwegian Aero Klubb, the crew of the airship *Italia* was granted the use of the two mooring masts—on the mainland in Vadsø and in Svalbard in Kongsfjorden—as well as the hangar in Ny-Ålesund (Thommesen 1926). The support of the Norwegian Ministry of Defense was also remarkable: Minister Ingolf Elster Christensen authorized, in fact, “all possible assistance” not only to the airship but also to the Italian Navy ship, the *Città di Milano*, which would be sent to Svalbard (Christensen 1927, my transl.). In particular, the ship was allowed to call and refuel at any port in Norway and to stay in Kongsfjorden as long as necessary (Christensen 1927; Senni 1927b). Finally, the assistance of several Norwegians—particularly Adolf Hoel—to the polar expedition was extremely significant.

Adolf Hoel’s assistance

Hoel was at the time one of Norway’s most renowned experts on polar issues and, especially, on Svalbard. He had led or co-led 17 scientific missions to the archipelago during the first three decades of the 20th century (Hoel 1919, 1922, 1929c). These expeditions yielded considerable scientific information and resulted in an extensive revision of Svalbard’s place names (Irgens 1927; Hoel 1942;

Sörlin 2002). More generally, Hoel's "topographic, hydrographic, oceanographic, geological and botanical" research in the archipelago (Hoel 1924: 37) should also be read as an expression of Norway's Arctic expansionist policy (Drivenes 1995; Berg 2013, 2017; Myklebost & Jølle 2021; Wråkberg 2023). During the first quarter of the 20th century, Norway pursued what has been variously interpreted as "small-scale Arctic imperialism" (Berg 2013: 170) or "aggressive Arctic imperialism" (Murphy 2002: 197), centred mainly on Svalbard (Greve 1983). A milestone was the Treaty of Svalbard (February 1920), which put the islands—formerly terra nullius—under the sovereignty of Norway (Borgia 2012; Berg 2017). Hoel was among those who "acted strategically to ensure that Spitsbergen was a territory worth acquiring, in national and commercial terms" (Jones 2012: 277–278) and played "a crucial role in establishing Norway as a 'natural' source of political order in Spitsbergen and, concomitantly, in establishing that the archipelago was a space that belonged to Norway" (Robert & Paglia 2016: 898). Hoel was also responsible for the foundation, in early 1928 of Norway's Svalbard and Arctic Ocean Survey, the forerunner of today's Norwegian Polar Institute (Hoel 1937, 1966, 1977; Barr 2003; Skarstein 2008).

The involvement of Hoel in the preparations for the *Italia* expedition was due to the mediation of Irgens with the Italian Geographical Society. Four days before Nobile presented his project for a new polar mission (Lanza di Scalea 1927a), Hoel had requested (through Irgens) to borrow from the library of the Italian Geographical Society three volumes considered necessary for his work on revising place names in Svalbard. The desired publications comprised the eighth volume of the *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* (1872), an issue of the *Rivista Marittima* (August 1873) and the fourth volume of *Cosmos* (1877; Irgens 1927). Thus, the opportunity arose by chance to involve one of the leading experts on Svalbard in the preparations for a new Italian polar mission.

A key episode of Adolf Hoel's contribution to the organization of the *Italia* polar expedition was his meeting with the Naval Attaché Franco Quentin on 6 December 1927 (Lojacono 1927). During this meeting, Hoel provided a series of operational guidelines for air and sea navigation in Svalbard, emphasizing the importance of the data provided by the meteorological stations on the island of Bjørnøya and in Grønfjorden, Spitsbergen (Hoel 1927). In addition, at Quentin's request, Hoel shared with the Italians a new "unpublished" general map of Svalbard as well as other "still unpublished" regional maps of the archipelago (Quentin 1927: 6, my transl.). These were particularly valuable resources for the Italians since, as Hoel pointed out in December 1927, "most of the [Norwegian] topographical material exist[ed] only as

hand-drawn maps" (Hoel 1927: 3, my transl.). The Norwegian geologist also offered to draw up for the Italians a hydrographic research project to be conducted in the archipelago. This project was later discussed with Commander Giuseppe Romagna Manoja (Hoel 1953, 1954) and realized with the ship *Città di Milano* (Hoel 1927; Romagna Manoja 1929). Finally, during the meeting of 6 December 1927, Hoel proposed to the Italians that "his office" could become a centre for "directing all the practices relating to the expedition" (Senni 1927b: 1, my transl.).

A second key episode in Hoel's assistance occurred in February 1928, when Nobile came to Norway to define some aspects of its support to the polar mission with the *Italia*. After arriving at Oslo's train station on 5 February 1928, Nobile attended a banquet organized at the Italian Legation in Inkognitogata (Incognito Street). Among the guests were Norwegian political, military and scientific authorities, including Hoel and Lieutenant Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen (Skarstein 2008). The participation of Riiser-Larsen, former second-in-command of the airship *Norge*, gave the event a strong symbolic meaning. Italian newspapers saw in this a gesture of reconciliation in the context of the ongoing Italo-Norwegian (Nobile vs. Amundsen) dispute and "a new guarantee for the ever-increasing rapprochement between Italy and the Norwegian people" (*Il Giornale d'Italia* 1928, my transl.). During the banquet, as Minister Senni pointed out to Mussolini, "the most cordial offers of assistance and collaboration came from [Norwegian] government circles and local scientific institutions" (Senni 1928a: 1, my transl.).

Following the preparatory work conducted by Quentin in December 1927 and the friendly atmosphere of cooperation during the banquet of 5 February 1928, during the following days, Nobile had several meetings with Hoel in his office in Oslo (*Morgenbladet* 1928: 1; *Rauma Tidende* 1928: 3). On those occasions, Hoel provided information about the topographic and hydrographic maps of Svalbard as well as the relevant literature pertaining to the island group and the broader Arctic (Hoel 1929b).

As the accounts of Nobile and Hoel show, the maps of Svalbard made available by the Norwegian scientist, including an unpublished map of Spitsbergen at a scale of 1: 750 000 (1927), proved to be crucial to the preparations for the polar mission (Hoel 1928; Nobile 1930). Unfortunately, further details about the publications that Hoel made available to Nobile have not turned up in the archives. These publications likely included several works from the Norwegian geologist's vast scientific bibliography (Holmsen & Richter 1966). In addition to sharing information, data, books and unpublished maps during several meetings in his office, Hoel—"with the consent of the Norwegian authorities"

(Hoel 1954: 31, my transl.)—also handled the purchase of “[polar] clothing, skis, sleds” (Hoel 1929b: 1–2, my transl.), as well as “sleeping bags and other things” that the Italian crew would need (Hoel 1954: 31, my transl.).

During Nobile’s trip to Oslo in February 1928, Hoel was not the only Norwegian to offer help to the Italian general. Birger Lund Gottwaldt, radio operator on the *Norge*’s transpolar flight, gave Nobile several suggestions, including advising him “to make arrangements with the Norwegian telegraphic administration for the use of the large Stavanger-Radio for the transmission of all weather reports from the Weather Bureau in Oslo” (Gottwaldt 1928: 6). Furthermore, Gottwaldt mediated contacts between the Italian general and Theodor Hesselberg, Ole Andreas Krogness and Niels Nickelsen, directors, respectively, of the Meteorological Institute in Oslo, the Geophysical Institute in Tromsø and the Telegraph Authority (Gottwaldt 1928: 7).

Norwegian support for the preparations of the *Italia* expedition, guaranteed by the government (Minister of Defence), by private associations such as the Norsk Aero Klubb and by private individuals (primarily Hoel), could also be seen as an outcome of the good relations between Italy and Norway at the time. Extremely significant in this regard was a meeting that took place in Oslo on 24 February 1928 between Senni and Johan Ludwig Mowinckel, who had just been re-elected Prime Minister of Norway and had formed “a liberal–radical left” cabinet (Senni 1928a: 2, my transl.). Mowinckel, recalling a meeting he had with Mussolini, expressed to Senni “his deep admiration for the vast programme of national recovery implemented [by the *Duce*] in just a few years” (Senni 1928b: 1, my transl.).

Norwegian involvement in the search

On 25 May 1928, at 10:33 GMT, the airship *Italia* crashed “onto the Arctic pack ice north of Nordaustlandet” (Bendrick & Alessandrini 2019:3). Norway was one of the countries that participated in the international rescue operations (Tandberg 1977; Aas 2002; Sicolo 2020; Piesing 2022; Alfei 2023). In addition to Amundsen’s well-known participation in the Franco-Norwegian flight of the Latham 47 seaplane (Simon-Ekeland 2020; Ytreberg 2021), Norway, among other things, contributed to the search for the Italian castaways with four aircraft and nine ships: two Sopwith Babys and two Hansa-Brandenburgs and the sealers *Hobby*, *Braganza*, *Heimland*, *Veslekari* and *Viking*, the fishery inspection ship *Michael Sars*, the motorboat of the governor of Svalbard, the mining director’s motorboat *Bergmester-skøiten* and the Norwegian Navy artillery ship *Tordenskjold* (Proposte 1928).

Hoel made a significant contribution to international rescue operations as well. A chart provided by Hoel was used in the search for castaways along the northern coast of Nordaustlandet—the island in the north-east part of Svalbard—from Kapp Lovén to 10 km west of Kapp Leigh Smith (Comm. d’Indagini 1930). Gianni Albertini, a member of the University Subsection of the Italian Alpine Club involved in the Italian rescue operation, later recalled how “all the maps of the region and many publications relating to the climate, hunting and territory of Svalbard” shared with him by Hoel turned out to be “invaluable material” for research that Albertini carried out during the search effort in 1928 and then again in 1929 (Albertini 1929: 20, my transl.).

Conclusion

Hoel helped in the preparations for the polar expedition of the airship *Italia* and in the rescue expeditions by making available to them a variety of invaluable materials and ensuring that they had the proper polar gear. This exemplifies the renewed support that the Norwegians gave the Italians, despite the echoes of the discord surrounding the *Norge* expedition. Hoel later declared himself “in favour of Nobile and his conduct after the catastrophe” (Hoel 1953:17, my transl.) during the interrogations of the Commission of Inquiry (appointed by the Fascist regime to shed light on the *Italia* disaster), and he maintained an entirely favourable position towards the Italian general until the 1960s (Hoel 1929a, b, 1935, 1953, 1954, 1958; Aas 2010; Sicolo 2020).

Hoel’s scientific support went beyond the events of 1928 and should be further investigated—especially through Norwegian archives—in the context of his subsequent Nazi leanings (Drivenes 2007). Between 1937 and 1938, for example, Hoel mediated Italy’s potential involvement in the International Exhibition of Polar Exploration, which would have taken place in Bergen in 1940 had it not been cancelled on the account of the war (Ferrarini 2023). As the centenaries of the polar flights of the airships *Norge* (2026) and *Italia* (2028) approach, new questions and research perspectives may shed light on the history of scientific cooperation in the Arctic between Italy and Norway.

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