

Mussolini and the Eclipse of Italian Fascism: From Dictatorship to Populism

By R. J. B. Bosworth. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. Pp. xiv + 338. Cloth \$32.50. ISBN: 978-0300232721.

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Over the course of a career spanning five decades, Richard Bosworth has been one of the most productive and influential historians of modern Italy writing in English. His 1979 work, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers*, remains mandatory reading on Italian foreign policy, and his 2002 biography of Mussolini is unsurpassed. Bosworth's scholarship is marked by a uniquely acerbic style and a delight in teasing out the continuities and contradictions within Italian history and Fascism. Now, with *Mussolini and the Eclipse of Italian Fascism*, Bosworth claims to have written his last book on the Italian dictator. If true, this title represents a worthy capstone.

The book focuses on the Fascist state and its foreign and domestic policies during the 1930s. Dealing especially with the "typical Richard Bosworth question" (3) of continuity, the book's main themes and conclusions will be familiar to Bosworth's readers. Revisiting his earlier work in light of recent scholarship on Italian colonialism, Fascist mythmaking, and transnational fascism, Bosworth largely reiterates his long-held interpretation of Mussolini's dictatorship as a typically Italian one. Critiquing some of the newer literature in the field, Bosworth remains skeptical of the regime's (and historians') claims that it was guided by a revolutionary ideological program to fashion a Fascist "new man" through myth, ritual, and war. But it is precisely the ordinariness of Italian Fascism, he argues, that makes Mussolini's regime suitable for comparison to the populist movements and authoritarian leaders of today. Criticizing the prevalence of Hitler analogies in contemporary discourse, Bosworth counters "that the *Duce* is a better instructor about the nature certainly of dictatorship, and perhaps other forms of modern politics than is the *Führer*" (9).

The book begins with a fascinating essay on the popular memory of Mussolini in the English-speaking world, and on the use and (more frequent, in Bosworth's view) misuse of the fascist label by present-day pundits, before reminding readers that "throughout the 1920s, the ultimate meaning of Italian Fascism remained contested" (31). Chapters 2 through 4 flesh out the background of the regime's first decade, highlighting the peculiarities and contradictions within the Italian state and society on the eve of the *Decennale* (celebrating ten years since the March on Rome) in 1932-1933, which augured a shift in direction for Mussolini's regime. Chapters 5 through 8, the true meat of the book, trace how this shift played out within Italy and abroad. Proceeding mainly chronologically while alternating between coverage of domestic and foreign policies, Bosworth argues that the radicalization of Italian Fascism in this second decade was not driven by a coherent revolutionary ideology but was primarily a response to the dictatorship's stagnation at home, accentuated by the rise of a more dynamic and successful model of authoritarianism in Nazi Germany. Eclipsed and beset by these challenges, Mussolini opted for "a crass populism" that disguised "Fascism's actual hollowness" (135).

This is a story of a failing regime, well before the Second World War brought about its ultimate demise. In his interpretation of Italian Fascism, Bosworth has always privileged reality and results over the rhetoric and intent of the regime. In the 1930s, he argues, the gap between words and deeds reached its greatest proportions. Domestically, Mussolini's "interview method of administration" (147) was more suited to hasty improvisation than to revolutionary policymaking. The efforts of the regime (and party secretary Achille Starace) to Fascistize society amounted to little more than "Fascist populism" as the "ambition to control

overmastered an aim to convert” (149). Bureaucrats learned to “speak Fascism” (160) without changing their worldviews. Peasant life went on as if “Fascism might never have existed” (167). Meanwhile, living standards for ordinary Italians steadily declined with the failure of the regime’s corporatist and autarchic schemes, and with its constant and costly wars.

Mussolini’s wars in Africa and Spain were brutal, but Bosworth discerns little revolutionary intent here. While uncomfortable with their tendency to whitewash Italian colonial violence, Bosworth largely sides with Italian revisionist historians in rehabilitating a De Felicean interpretation of Mussolini as a traditional “realist” (63) statesman whose foreign policy was guided more by opportunism than by ideology. Mussolini’s foreign ambitions were “old-fashioned” (236), and his planning for aggressive war always was “more verbal than real, more populist than actual” (235). The alliance with Hitler was not due to a sense of common destiny or ideological affinity but the result of “frightened realism” (238) following the *Anschluss*. Bosworth downplays the existence of knowledge transfers between the two regimes and suggests that the influence of the Italian model on other fascist movements (including Hitler’s) has been overstated in recent scholarship. The relationship between Italian Fascism and German Nazism was based more on competition and jealousy. By September 1939, Mussolini’s brand of fascism was “in full eclipse” (246).

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the book trace the transformation of foreign impressions of Mussolini’s dictatorship during the 1930s. Drawing on newspapers, journals, diaries, and memoirs (mainly but not exclusively representing the English-speaking world), Bosworth shows how until the middle of the decade establishment politicians, bureaucrats, financiers, and media lauded Mussolini as a “good dictator” whose style of rule was well-suited to the Italian people. It was Mussolini’s “populist war” (187) of aggression against Ethiopia, along with press reports on Fascist atrocities and use of poison gas, that permanently transformed him into “the worst of the dictators” (202) in the world’s eyes.

There is something here for all readers. The book provides generalists and Europeanists with an argumentative yet accessible narrative of the Italian state during the 1930s, filled with amusing anecdotes and biographical sketches of some of the regime’s major and minor characters. Those interested in fascism and totalitarianism as generic historical and political concepts with applicability to the present-day rise of right-wing populist movements will be challenged by Bosworth’s observations. Italianists too will find plenty that is new here. While this work is unlikely to change minds in the interminable debate over how seriously we ought to take Fascist words, rituals, and intentions, Bosworth’s cautionary notes demand consideration and engagement, as always.

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Jewish Childhood in Kraków: A Microhistory of the Holocaust

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“Early in the German occupation, Kraków Jews understood they had to present themselves as economically advantageous to the Germans. They removed children from the Germans’ sight