

BACK FROM THE DEAD

BENITO MUSSOLINI

To many Italians, death has become him.
But can Il Duce's Italy repeat itself?

By John Lukacs

THE SPECTER OF FASCISM IS RISING all over Europe — so some people say, and I think they are wrong. But then, I am a historian, not a prophet. History, unlike the law, involves multiple jeopardy. Its subjects will be tried over and over again. We are constantly rethinking — and revisiting — the past, which is what all human thinking is really about. And so the prospects of fascism involve, inevitably, the figure of Benito Mussolini, who not only incarnated it but was its creator.

And Mussolini is now redivivus in Italy, which should be the cause of some concern. There is, half a century after his demise, a neo-Fascist majority in Rome, and also in Naples (led by his granddaughter); and the new Italian Government includes five neo-Fascist ministers.

About them Antonio Martino, the Italian Foreign Minister, finds it necessary to say, "Our five ministers from the National Alliance have nothing to do with the past or nostalgia for the past." Is that so? Mussolini was "the greatest statesman of the century," proclaimed Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the neo-Fascist party, on April 1. April Fools Day. His party now calls itself the National Alliance — before that, the Italian Social Movement — eschewing the word "Fascist," which is forbidden by the Italian Constitution. Fini has thought it politic not to insist on the repeal of that ban. Regarding the new Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi (in whose cabinet those five neo-Fascist ministers sit), Fini

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has said: "He will have to pedal if he wants to show that he belongs to history. Like Mussolini. Two identical men are not born in a year, not even in a century."

History does not repeat itself, but certain historical conditions do. And what are these conditions? Discredited old political parties; a parliamentary system racked by corruption; public services that are chronically inefficient and in disrepair; recurrent waves of strikes: in sum, the scandalous weakness of the state. Much of that is true — in some ways — of Italy now. Against these things the Fascists and Mussolini rose, more than 70 years ago. Fascism represented a third alternative, between an outdated parliamentarism and the radicalism of the Italian Socialists and Communists. It was energetic, determined and modern, at a time when respect for law and order and for the governmental institutions of the state was breaking down. Seventy years later the neo-Fascists, too, insist on the recovery of the national authority of the centralized state, rather than extolling the benefits of "privatization" and of capitalism.

But there the parallel ends. The differences are greater than the similarities. Seventy years ago dictatorship did not have the dreadful reputation it went on to acquire even before World War II. For a determined man or minority to acquire power by force — or by the threat of force — is not acceptable today, even in the name of anti-Communism, an ideology from which Mussolini and Hitler profited.

Communism is not a danger in Italy now; the former Communist Party is a pale and shrunken version of what it once may have seemed to be. And Italy 70 years ago was a poor country. It is not now. The structure of its society is entirely different. This has something to do with the success of Berlusconi, who is a television

Right: Mussolini in 1926, hours after an attempt on his life.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVA BARRETT

magnate and a television personality, an Italian combination of Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan (and, perhaps, Ross Perot), a national popular figure because of his leadership in the sports and entertainment field.

Still, there is something to worry about when the once-execrated Mussolini is being rehabilitated in some circles. The reputation of the founder of Fascism has survived better than that of Hitler or Stalin, not because he was the greater statesman but because he was more human.

WHEN MUSSOLINI WAS still an infant, the Italian statesman Francesco Crispi wrote: "Italy has been constituted, but the national soul is wanting in energy; what is missing is the man who will inspire it and direct it to the path of audacious virtues that are proofs of the greatness of a nation. Will we see the rise of such a man? I so hope." When Mussolini was still a callow youth, Gabriele d'Annunzio wrote in a poem: "From your poor land, Italy/ will there rise a new hero/ of bitter peasant blood?"

Much later, when Mussolini was the lawmaker and dictator of Italy, biographers tried to trace his ancestry to noble families in Bologna and Venice. In 1932 he said to the biographer Emil Ludwig: "All this does not interest me in the least. Only one of my ancestors interests me: there was a Mussolini in Venice who killed his wife, who had betrayed him; and before fleeing he put two Venetian scudi on her chest to pay for her funeral. This is how the people of Romagna are, from whom I descend."

His father was a *romagnolo*, a radical workingman and a Socialist. He named his son after the Mexican revolutionary Benito Juárez, who had the last Emperor of Mexico executed in 1867. And Benito lived up to his name and to his father's wish. He became a young radical and a Socialist, self-educated, with a quick mind, a voracious reader. His rise in the Socialist Party was amazingly swift. At 29 he was the editor of the Italian Socialist newspaper *Avanti!* Then he made a great discovery. He was an *Italian Socialist*; an Italian first, a Socialist second.

He was born in 1883, the year Karl Marx died; and Mussolini knew many things Marx did not know or refused to think about, the force and sentiment of nationalism chief among them. Marx was wrong: the struggle

of nations was more important than the struggle of classes. Mussolini recognized that international socialism was an illusion. He was proved right in 1914. International socialism could do nothing to stand in the way of the enthusiasm with which entire nations rushed into the war. And Italy — still neutral in 1914 — had to rush to war, too: it was her chance to recover those Italian lands still ruled by the old Austrian Empire. After the Socialists expelled Mussolini from their party, he told them, "In your hearts you know I am right." Italy and Mussolini went to war in 1915.

Four years later Italy was among the victors, but her national ambitions were partly unfulfilled and her social fabric was badly torn. There was disillusionment, widespread poverty and endemic violence. In 1919 Mussolini proclaimed the foundation of a "Fas-

ces" party, giving an impression of clear determination. His very voice was attractive, virile enough not to be unduly operative, though perhaps just enough to appeal to Italian ears. Only on reading his speeches do the pathos and unreality appear. "Credere! Obbedire! Combattere!" ran his signature line, which became the Fascist credo. "Believe! Obey! Fight!"

Besides his speechmaking abilities, Mussolini introduced a new element into the political arena: the militant organization and the militant image, the apparent visibility of his militant followers, storm troopers in black shirts. In October 1922 Mussolini threatened the inefficient Government of Luigi Facta, staging the March on Rome by the Black Shirts. The King and the army chose not to resist him. He became the Prime Minister of Italy.



highways (before the German Autobahnen and 15 years before the first American one). For the first time in history the marsh around Rome were drained. The rule in Sicily was rather effectively suppressed. Mussolini, the erstwhile revolutionary and atheist, brought about the Lateran Treaty, establishing the autonomy and authority of the Vatican state. Unlike most of the achievements of other dictators, many of these proved durable.

More ephemeral though by no means insubstantial was the impression that Italy, under Mussolini's rule, had become a bright, prosperous and powerful country. This impression was shared by many men and women beyond Italy, including Winston Churchill, who respected and spoke well of Mussolini. So did countless other visitors to Italy, such

A 1935 version
of Cole Porter's 'You're
the Top' went:
'You're the top! You're
the great Houdini!
You're the top!
You're Mussolini!'

Left: A rapt crowd in Florence
in 1930. Right: An adoring
fan at the Mussolini Mausoleum,
in Predappio, in 1994.

cist" party. (The word had a double meaning: one was "fasces," the Roman symbol of justice, a two-headed ax within a bundle of reeds; the other was "fasci," groupings of radical Sicilian peasants in the 1890's.)

Soon Fascism became a national force, because Mussolini made a second discovery, perhaps not less important than his first. Instead of emphasizing the revolutionary essence of fascism, he would appear as the leader of a party dedicated to law and order. He would acquire the support of the established powers of Italy, of society and of the state; and of the monarchy. He was now the head of a great nationalist movement, cutting across classes. Conditions in Italy approached anarchy because of the rabid demagoguery and agitation of the Socialists and Communists. All this worked in his favor.

He spoke in short, declarative sen-

Four years later he was much more than Prime Minister; he was the dictator of Italy, the leader, Il Duce. The great majority of Italians were behind him. He was the embodiment of a new alternative: neither that of a revolutionary upheaval, nor of the class struggle, nor of a corrupt and inefficient parliamentary rule or nonrule. This was achieved at the cost of certain political freedoms. Freedom of the press and parliamentary government ceased to exist. There were also a few anti-Fascist exiles, and political prisoners; but their numbers were small and there were no concentration camps and no executions. This cost seemed to Italians and others to be worth paying because his achievements were impressive.

It was not only that Mussolini made the trains run on time. He built the first automobile super-

different people as Will Rogers, the American humorist, and Stefan Zweig, the Austrian-Jewish writer.

There were American members of Congress who declared during the Depression that what America needed was a Mussolini. A succession of American ambassadors to Italy admired him, one co-writing his "autobiography" for *The Saturday Evening Post*. Franklin Roosevelt maintained respect for Mussolini, at least during the first years of his Presidency. The majority of Italian-Americans, and their newspapers owned by the Generoso Pope family, were sympathetic to Mussolini and Fascism. Americans who visited sunny Italy in the 30's were, almost without exception, in favor of Mussolini. A 1935 version of Cole Porter's "You're the Top!" had as one of its stanzas: "You're the top! You're the great Houdini! You're

the top! You're Mussolini!" — two lines eliminated from the major Cole Porter songbooks, including "The Complete Cole Porter" and "The Unpublished Cole Porter."

IN 1935 MUSSOLINI WAS THE most respected statesman in Europe. That year he provoked a war with Abyssinia, conquering it in eight months — unopposed by any of the great European powers. For four more years he stood at the zenith of his power. Then his descent began — because of Hitler.

Hitler admired and even imitated Mussolini for more than a decade. But by 1938 their relationship had been reversed. Now Mussolini felt constrained to emulate Hitler. There was, however, a difference between the two dictatorships. This has been obscured by the sloppy and illegiti-

later Hitler made a triumphal tour of Italy. He was deeply disappointed, contemptuous of the continued existence of the monarchy and of the "reactionary" society of Rome. "Fascism is only a half-job," he said.

Mussolini advised Hitler not to start a war in 1939. Time was not working for the Western democracies, he said. But Hitler did not listen to him. When France was falling, in June 1940, Mussolini chose to enter the war on Hitler's side. He earned nothing but the contempt of the world because the Italian people had no enthusiasm for the war and did not fight well. Now wholly dependent on Hitler, Mussolini was aging in body and spirit, more and more isolated from his advisers, close only to his mistress, Clara Petacci, and their sycophants.

In July 1943, two weeks after the

than that. There was a duality to his character. There was a rational and human side to it; yet he was not immune to the temptations of violent action and of glory. He believed in and propagated the virtues of family life; at the same time he was a determined womanizer. He had some of the insights of a realistic statesman; but he became attracted to military display and employed the grandiloquent rhetoric of war.

These dualities were reflected in his behavior and in the very image he elected to cultivate. In the early years of his power people were impressed by his simplicity, by his often ill-fitting clothes. Later he thought it propitious to appear in boots, uniforms, martial berets — especially after 1936, when he felt more and more overshadowed by Hitler. His characteristic postures now included those appearances of his on the balcony of Palazzo Venezia, with his jaw stuck out, hand on his left hip. His big brown peasant eyes narrowed; his mouth turned almost froglike.

Something about these transformations was ludicrous, as was his 1938 order that the Italian Army adopt the parade march of the German goose step. Worse, that same year he declared an Italian racial policy restricting the freedom of and imposing humiliating restrictions on the small number of Italian Jews.

Italians — and some other people, too — thought Mussolini would restrain Hitler. Wrongly so; long before his demise, his influence on Hitler had become nil. He was no longer an important statesman, or even an undisputed national leader: he had become an Italian Faust, someone who had sold his soul to the Devil — and who, near the end, depended on rescue by his friend the Devil.

When in 1938, still at the peak of his power and prestige, Mussolini allowed Hitler to occupy Austria, with the German Reich establishing itself at the crest of the Italian Alps, Hitler wrote to him: "Mussolini, I shall never forget this." Five years later he sent his special paratroopers to rescue the fallen Mussolini, who was interned in a mountain hotel on the top of the Apennines. Thereafter Mussolini became the figurehead of a neo-Fascist statelet in the north, named the Italian Social Republic.

Again we may detect a duality of his inclinations. On one side the radicalism of his youth came to the fore again. He blamed the King and

the generals and the upper classes for what he saw as their treachery; on one occasion he said to a confidant that if worse came to worst, he would prefer that Italy become a Soviet republic rather than "an English colony." At the same time he sent a priest secretly to the Vatican to affirm that he was a believing Catholic. Through other agents he sent secret messages to the Americans to warn them against Communism.

In the end, even his German masters abandoned him; the S.S. general commanding northern Italy made a deal with Allen Dulles of the Office of Strategic Services. Two days before Hitler killed himself in Berlin, a small convoy that included Mussolini disguised in civvies was halted by an armed group of partisans along the shore road of Lake Como. There, at the gate of the house where he had spent his last night, he was shot along with Petacci, his mistress. Then their bodies were taken to Milan, where they were hoisted upside down on the girders of a gas station.

That was the end of Benito Mussolini, nearly 50 years ago. It was not the end of the quarrel about his fame, about the proportion of his virtues to his vices, that divides Italians to this day. But we ought to take some comfort from the fact that history does not repeat itself. A return to Fascist rule in Italy — as indeed to Nazi rule in Germany — is impossible, and not only because of the overwhelming pressure of public opinion. At the end of the 20th century, skinheads and bully boys and Nazi sympathizers exist in many countries of the world. But their appeal does not amount to more than the inclinations of barbarism among gangs of youths — results of boredom rather than of passion, of savagery rather than of political convictions.

At the same time, the decision of the neo-Fascists to call their party the National Alliance amounts to more than a tactical choice of words. Nationalism, in one form or another, is still the most powerful political force in the world, a surrogate religion, different from old-fashioned patriotism, appealing to millions of people. It remains a potentially dangerous radical force, especially when the corruptions and weaknesses of parliamentary government become sadly apparent. But the era of dictatorships, especially in Europe, is past. Nostalgia is often an element in politics, but never its governing force. ■



mate (and Marxist-inspired) employment of the term "fascism," applied to all dictatorships or mass movements of the non-Communist variety. Fascism was a particularly Italian phenomenon, whereas National Socialism was not only German but also Austrian and Central and Eastern European. And Mussolini and Fascism were not racist or anti-Semitic, surely not before 1938.

For a moment, in 1934, Mussolini's Italy even opposed an aborted Nazi uprising in Austria. But that opposition did not last. Less than two years later, Mussolini convinced himself that the Western democracies, including Britain, were rotten and weak, and that his natural ally was Germany, along a "Rome-Berlin Axis, around which the destinies of Europe will revolve." When Hitler marched into Austria in March 1938, Mussolini stood by. Two months

Anglo-American invasion of Sicily, he gave up power without a fight — a strange and rare episode in the history of dictators. The King, the court, the generals and the Vatican were involved in what may be properly called patriotic intrigues, trying to extricate Italy from the catastrophes of the war and the disastrous alliance with Hitler. Mussolini knew about these things; yet he did nothing. During a long hot night he presided over a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council, whose majority voted to force him out of office. Late that night, on July 24, Mussolini dismissed them with a tired sentence: "You have provoked the crisis of the regime." A few hours later he went to the King to hand in his abdication; he was arrested on his way out of the palace.

American journalists called him a "sawdust Caesar," but he was more

