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ABSTRACT

THE MARKETING OF MUSSOLINI: AMERICAN MAGAZINES AND MUSSOLINI, 1922-1935

Author: Anthony F. Ambrogio

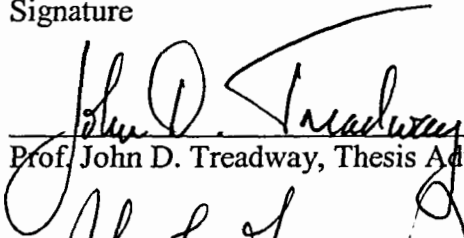
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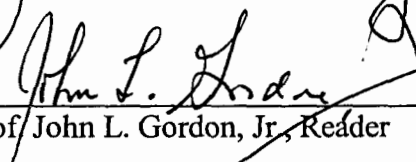
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Until the Italo-Ethiopian War, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and the American press had a symbiotic relationship. Mussolini used his charisma and journalistic skills to put himself in the limelight of the American foreign press, and whether they loved him or hated him, American periodicals relished the constant flow of news and sensationalism from Rome. This analysis examines the rise of Fascism and Mussolini in Italy and his efforts to market himself to the press, especially the American press. It then reviews American magazines from 1922 until Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and their varying attitudes toward *Il Duce*. Popular and business magazines tended to favor Mussolini, whereas high-brow journals generally did not, but these trends were not universal. Regardless, American magazines thrived off of the Mussolini phenomenon, and Mussolini used that relationship to his fullest advantage.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE MARKETING OF MUSSOLINI:

AMERICAN MAGAZINES AND MUSSOLINI, 1922-1935

by

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B. A., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1996

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A Thesis

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PREFACE

The American soldiers had begun looting the town. After months of bitter, bloody fighting to recapture the Italian peninsula, the American army had just captured the hamlet of Diecimo in northern Tuscany. The German army was continuing its slow, methodical retreat up the peninsula. The American soldiers had persevered through an agonizing and lethargic march through the Apennines, first fighting the Italian army and then the German Wehrmacht. Now, in last days of 1944, after repulsing a German attack north of Lucca, they were finally beginning to break the resolve of the Nazis.

Having suffered so much in three years of war, the soldiers of the Fifth Army had hardened themselves to their surroundings. "Italian" now equated to "Fascist," and that meant simply "the enemy." Mussolini's Italy was allied with Hitler and the Nazis, the supreme global villain. Although the war was in its waning days, American soldiers were still dying. Now was not the time to get to know the locals. They were in hostile territory, and only their fellow soldiers could be trusted.

Diecimo was not a remarkable town. Most of the residents lived in row houses clustered along the main street that branched off from a nearby highway. The most notable building was the church, a spartan stone edifice dating to the thirteenth century. What interested the warring armies was the railroad that sliced through the town and the surrounding mountains. The Germans had erected anti-aircraft batteries on rail platforms. They hid the batteries under the mountains in the railroad tunnels by day and wheeled them out long enough to fire upon passing American bombers by night. The Americans had been frustrated repeatedly by this tactic and had failed in locating and

destroying the batteries by air; it would be up to the ground forces to demolish them.

Thus, the unassuming town of Diecimo took on strategic military importance. Now the Americans had driven out the Germans and had taken control of the area. They were tired, cold, and hungry, and this town offered some of the spoils of war.

None of them expected the feisty woman that came into town a few days later. She was short and thin, with dark but graying hair and a weathered face that looked older than her thirty-two years. She had been hardened by the war and the two years that she, her husband, and her three young children had spent in the mountains hiding from the Nazis. Life during wartime had been a mission of survival. On many nights, she and her husband had gone without food so that their children could eat what little they could gather on the mountainside. But when they saw the men of the Fifth Army march by, they knew it was safe to go home. The Nazis were gone. The Americans were here.

She did not expect to find them in her home and certainly not destroying her furniture for firewood. She barged into her house, yelling in Italian and interjecting the only English she could remember: "I am American! I am American!" The soldiers were taken aback. After fumbling around, they found a fellow soldier who knew Italian and could translate. Her story was ultimately passed up the chain of command and checked out. Yes, sure enough, she was an American, born in Richmond, Virginia, the seventh child of Italian immigrants. Her mother, weakened from the birth, died within months. Her father was a saloon keeper, but after Prohibition began, he took his three youngest children, including little Teresa, back to his home in Italy, while the older children stayed

to make a life in America. Since she had been born in the United States, Teresa was an American citizen. The American soldiers were destroying the property of an American.

What Teresa did not tell them was the story of her husband. Aladino had been born in Italy and was a carpenter by trade. After Mussolini's rise to power, the Fascists controlled all of the labor unions and employment opportunities. The only way to get work was to be a Fascist, whether one agreed with Mussolini or not. It was the 1930s and the height of the global Depression, and Aladino needed work to bring food home to his new wife and growing family. The politics meant nothing to him, but the money did. Now, however, that allegiance, tenuous as it was, could mean a death sentence if the Americans discovered it. She may be an American, but he was a card-carrying member of the Fascist party. He was the enemy.

Fortunately, the soldiers were so surprised to find an American in this backwoods town that no one asked about Aladino's political affiliation. Instead, the commanding general made his headquarters in their house and diverted fresh fruits and meats to the family. A few weeks later, the Americans departed to continue the fight in the north. In a couple of months, the war was over, and Diecimo, damaged though it was, was once again a quiet, forgotten hamlet.

A decade later, the youngest child discovered that, as the son of an American citizen, he was also legally an American. At age sixteen, he boarded a boat to America with only twelve dollars to his name. Over the next few years, he saved enough money to pay for his parents and brother to join him back in Richmond.

For the first time in forty years, Teresa saw her sister.

My father and grandmother shared many stories with my siblings and me about life in Italy during and after World War II. (Many of them were a lesson about how we should not be complaining about our chores.) But I never heard this story until I was seventeen, years after my grandmother passed away. She rarely spoke about the war to anyone. My father was only five years old when he and his family returned to Diecimo, but my aunt was a teenager. Today, she only mentions the war to remind my father teasingly of the time she “saved his life” by rescuing him from his bedroom during an air raid. (Only one bomb actually fell in the town throughout the entire war, and it wasn’t that night.)

So it felt like an archeological discovery when my father rediscovered the house in the mountains where he took refuge during the war, and I saw a sense of wonderment in his eyes as he introduced me to the woman who helped them during those years and who still lives on that same mountainside. I listened with rapt attention as he pointed out where he saw the first American soldiers marching by. I could not believe that, after all of his stories of growing up in Italy and immigrating to the United States, I had just experienced an entirely new chapter of his life. When I asked him why he had never told me about this, his answer was simple: “We just don’t talk about those days anymore.”

Thus it is with World War II and Mussolini in modern-day Italy. Sixty years after the war, Mussolini is still a touchy subject. He was, and by many still is, revered as *Il Duce*, Italy’s savior and leader out of the darkness of the first world war. He brought a sense of national pride back to an Italy that was struggling with its identity and self-worth. He put the country back to work. And then he brought the nation back into a

devastating war. Again, Italy was ripped apart from inside and outside. Again, Italians were forced to live on nothing and still sacrifice for *la patria*. Again, Italy would face defeat. It is little wonder that Mussolini was hanged, shot, and his body put on display in the piazza in Milan to be mutilated and defiled by the public. But so many Italians did and still do believe in much that he did. How can that be reconciled with the horrors of the war? For many, the easiest solution is simply not to talk about him.

When I was young, Mussolini always went into the same category as Hitler: evil World War II villain. As I got older, however, I discovered that history is not so black and white. There are nuances and shifts in opinion and behavior. The figure that was beloved one day could be hated the next and reconciled the third. So it is with Mussolini. As much as his legacy is ensconced among the devilry of Fascism and Nazism, the truth is that he did some great things for Italy before he brought her to her knees in ruin. But he often did them with violence, Machiavellian intentions, inflammatory rhetoric, and pure machismo. For a time, he was admired, reviled, and ridiculed simultaneously around the world. That is what makes him interesting. It is also why it is difficult to discuss him today, but is it exactly why we must discuss him.

This thesis is nearly six years in the making, beginning with a simple research paper in my first graduate class. I chose Mussolini as my topic because of my family history, not realizing just how complex a character he really was. That first infatuation has ballooned into this. I had a great deal of help from many people along the way, and I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to thank them.

The first is my graduate advisor and my professor for that first class, Dr. John Treadway. He has been my mentor and guide throughout my education, starting with that first phone conversation about the graduate program at the University of Richmond. He has been an inspiration for me. I also want to thank Dr. John Gordon for his help during my thesis preparation. Next is my family: my mother for instilling in me the desire to learn always; my father for teaching me to work my hardest at everything I do; my brother, Paul, for showing me the importance of doing what I love; and everyone else for their encouragement and support. Most important, I need to thank my ever-patient wife, Laura, who has put up with countless late nights of class and piles of books and magazine articles about Mussolini scattered all over the house. Most of all, her constant love and devotion has kept me going – without it, I never could have come this far.

Finally, there is Benito Mussolini himself. Thanks to his ego, his braggadocio, his journalistic eye and ear, and his love of the limelight, I had a wealth of sources to use in this analysis. There was never a dull moment while he was alive, and there has never been a dull moment researching him. His big mouth made my job exceptionally easy, just as it got him into trouble. If nothing else, we can learn from that.

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Introduction

“He made the trains run on time.” For many Americans in the pre-World War II years, this phrase encapsulated Benito Mussolini. As the strongman of Italy, it was difficult for many to decipher if he was a new, glorious Caesar or a back-alley thug kept in power by his henchmen. Nevertheless, it was hard to argue with results. Mussolini rebuilt Italy after the destruction of World War I and turned a backward nation into a progressive economic and political power. He was a man of action who dared to dream and took bold steps for his nation. And for a while, America loved him.

It should not be hard to understand why. Mussolini embodied the American spirit of hard work, self-confidence, ingenuity, and strong leadership. As the violence that accompanied the early years of his reign died down, the Italian economic engine revved up. During the late-1920s and early-1930s, Italy seemed to be in the midst of a new Renaissance with Mussolini as a twentieth-century de Medici. This revival stood in stark contrast to the rest of Europe that was plodding along in the aftermath of World War I. England and France were reconstructing their economies and their populations and bickering over war reparations and debt burdens. Russia was transforming itself into the Soviet Union, tearing itself apart and rebuilding its society into a Communist state. It would sift through the fallout of the October Revolution for years, and even then, the constant internal struggles and political chaos would hamper its progress. Many of the small European nations, such as Belgium and the Netherlands, were trying desperately to recover from the devastation of the war. The old Austro-Hungarian Empire was no more, and the small states born out of its demise were still searching for their identities.

And then there was Germany, the monolith of central Europe, the anchor of the European balance of power, now reduced to a dysfunctional republic beset by corruption, distrust, and attempted coups from the outset. Its people carried the yoke (unfairly, in their minds) of the full blame for World War I, and the culminating treaties threw down a gauntlet of debilitating reparations that would have hamstrung any nation, but especially one with so many other problems. Before long, its economy would collapse, sending inflation to stratospheric levels and making currency worthless in a matter of hours.

In the first years after World War I, Italy seemed to be following the same path. The Liberal government that had guided it through the beginning of the century and the war was still in power, though many citizens questioned whether it had any true power or if it would even know what to do with it. Most Italians saw it more as a nuisance than anything else – a bureaucratic logjam of lazy and corrupt politicians who had little contact with the people and no understanding of the real problems and issues facing Italy. In addition, the rest of the world looked down on Italy as the “beggars of Europe” who came to the table at Versailles demanding an empire after switching sides during the war and being routed by the Central Powers’ armies at Caporetto. This made the rest of the world have about as much faith in the Italian Liberal government as its own people had.

Then, like a bolt of lightning from the dark and dreary skies of Europe came Benito Mussolini. He stormed Rome with flash and thunder and a cadre of violent but ardent followers. It was certainly style before substance, but it was also an improvement. He promised action, reform, economic stability, and ethnic pride. He promised to make Italy great again and to let the rest of the world know it. He spoke loudly and with

emotion, and he spoke directly to Italians about their problems. For the first time in years, Italians began to embrace their heritage. And for the first time since the Roman Empire, the world had to contend with a young, vibrant, energetic, and fiercely nationalistic Italian dictator. He was a new kind of leader in Europe, and he got results.

The American press took notice and seized on this modern-day revival. Although not universal in their praise, the American press on the whole made the Italian premier into a hero and a media darling. Even for those who hated him, they had to admit that Mussolini and almost everything he did was news, and the American public devoured it. Mussolini himself fostered this. The one-time newspaper editor never lost his sense of what was news and how he could put himself on the front pages of magazines and newspapers around the globe, but especially in the media-rich United States. This love affair could have lasted much longer, but when Mussolini's ambition led him to invade Ethiopia against the wishes of the United States and her allies, the American media quickly turned against him and helped put an emphatic end to a burgeoning relationship between American and the Fascist dictator.

While Mussolini was on the rise, so were magazines in the landscape of the American media. The 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of American national magazines. Unlike newspapers, which at the time were mostly dry, regional in scope, and except for an editorial page, gave little elaboration or opinion on the happenings of the world, magazines had the chance to delve deep into particular topics of interest and create a much richer and sometimes nuanced picture of the events of the world. Most of the larger magazines sent reporters around the globe to cover important people and

stories, something that only a handful of the largest American papers and the Associated Press could afford to do. This would all change as new technologies entered the mainstream and as Americans became more mobile, but for this space in time, magazines were quite literally a window on the world for the American public.

This thesis investigates the relationship between American magazines and Benito Mussolini. First, it explores the back-story of Fascism in Italy by looking at the legacies of the Reunification and the Liberal government of Italy and how they and the social tensions surrounding the Great War allowed Fascism to take root in Italy. Then, it looks at the unique and symbiotic relationship between Mussolini and the American media. The research examines Mussolini's attempts to market himself to the world and to the United States in particular, as well as the opinions and attitudes of various and different types of American magazines toward *Il Duce*. Finally, it considers the impact that these magazines had on American public opinion and how that influenced America's political, economic, and social relationships with Italy and Mussolini. American magazines varied in their responses to Mussolini, but all of them agreed that he was newsworthy, and at some point in his reign, virtually all of them saw him as Italy's savior and a possible prototype for a new kind of leader. Their readers listened, and until Mussolini turned his back on the West and invaded Ethiopia, there were few places in the world that held him in higher esteem than the United States.

Chapter I: Italy before Mussolini

To understand Mussolini's rise to power and why many Americans took such a favorable view of his arrival, one must understand how modern Italy came into being. The modern Mediterranean state began as a conglomeration of independent kingdoms under the House of Savoy's King of Piedmont in present-day northwest Italy. As the Piedmontese united northern Italy, they joined forces with Giuseppe Garibaldi, who had united the southern part of the boot. After France withdrew its troops guarding the Pope in Rome to use during the Franco-Prussian War, the Italians took control of Rome, completing Italy's unification. Unlike Germany, which had unified in much the same way under the Prussians, Italy was not seen as a threat to Europe. It did not dominate central Europe as Germany did, and the French and British navies still maintained control of the Mediterranean Sea.¹

Although unified under one government, the peoples of Italy were quite different. The north was much more industrialized; the south was largely agrarian. Italy was truly a nation of "haves" and "have-nots." The industrialists and large landowners constituted a *bourgeoisie* in Italy and were far removed from the industrial workers and the *braccianti*, the landless agricultural peasants. Many Italians, especially those in the more poverty-stricken areas of the south, emigrated to the United States, France, and to quasi-colonies

¹ Thomas Row, "Italy in the International System, 1900-1922," in *Liberal and Fascist Italy*, ed. Adrian Lyttelton. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 84. See also Janet Penrose Trevelyan, *A Short History of the Italian People*, 4th ed. (Pitman: New York, 1956), and Giuliano Procacci, *History of the Italian People*, trans. Anthony Paul (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

in Tunis, Beirut, and Tripoli in order to find jobs and a better standard of living. From its beginning, the socioeconomic conditions in Italy were ripe for confrontation.²

Italy began its life with difficult economic conditions; however, it was able to recover fairly quickly. Its first fifteen years (until 1885) were marked by slow economic progress, followed by fifteen years of depression, which included a banking crisis. Beginning at the turn of the century and leading up to World War I, Italy experienced a great deal of economic advancement and relative prosperity. Imports doubled and exports tripled between 1881 and 1913, the number of miles of railroads increased ten-fold from the 1860s to the 1910s, and the population grew by over 30 percent between 1870 and 1914. After initial budget problems due to the costs of unification, Italy began to balance its budgets. There was a noticeable trade deficit, but much of it was covered by tourism and remittances from émigrés. On the eve of the Great War, Italy's economic and industrial base still lagged behind most European nations, but it was catching up fast and was making more economic progress than any other nation in Europe.³

As a newcomer to European politics, Italy suffered from some of the same insecurities felt by Germany, whose feudal enclaves coalesced with the Prussian state in 1870. After unification, Italy was still politically isolated and had no overseas colonies, in contrast to the vast amount of African and Pacific colonies held by Britain and France

² Paul Corner, "The Road to Fascism: An Italian *Sonderweg*?" *Contemporary European History* II, no. 2 (2002): pp. 276-7; Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 166.

³ Gaetano Salvemini, *The Origins of Fascism in Italy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 3-8. Emigration was still a big issue: in *A History of Italian Fascism*, Federico Chabod notes that, on average, 650,000 Italians emigrated each year. Most of these went to the U.S. and sent money home to their families, thus helping to bridge the trade deficit.

and the enormous land area of Russia. As its economy recovered, Italy began looking for new markets, more resources, and imperial glory. Most of the world was now closed for colonization, but parts of Africa were still open. In 1889 and 1890, Italy formed the colonies of Eritrea and Italian Somililand on the African horn. It then looked to expand into neighboring Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia), but was defeated in a brief, humiliating war with Emperor Menelik in 1896. (Mussolini would seek revenge in 1935.) In 1911, it captured Tripolitania (modern Libya) from the Ottomans, but not without difficulty.⁴

To end its isolation and to lay the groundwork for future territorial expansion, Italy entered into the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1882. Italy had its eye on the Trentino, southern Tyrol, and Trieste, three areas of Austria-Hungary that bordered northern Italy and held a sizeable Italian population. Italian leaders knew that they were too weak to provoke a possible war with the dual monarchy, but they also knew that Austria-Hungary had designs on Serbia and the Balkans. For Italy, the Triple Alliance was a defensive treaty, but it also provided for equal compensation for Italy if Austria-Hungary gained territory in the Balkans. Italy hoped this provision would eventually allow it to take the coveted lands away from its despised neighbor.⁵

Pre-War Politics

Pre-war Italy had almost no organized political parties, but most people in government classified themselves as “Liberal.” The Liberals had their origins in the

⁴ Overy and Wheatcroft, pp. 166-7; Procacci, p. 302. See also Timothy W. Childs, *Italo-Turkish Diplomacy and the War over Libya, 1911-1912* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990); and Paolo Maltese, *La terra promessa: La guerra italo-turca e la conquista della Libia, 1911-1912* (Milan: Sugar, 1968).

⁵ Salvemini, pp. 92-3.

formation of Italy: they fought against the privileges of the Catholic Church, especially as the Vatican was still feuding with Italy over the latter's capture of the Papal lands in 1870. By the turn of the century, however, they had moved away from this inflammatory platform and were seeking to reduce friction among all factions in Italy. The Liberals and the entire Italian pre-war government were dominated by Giovanni Giolitti. Among other posts, he served as Italy's prime minister in 1892-94 and again in 1904-14. He hoped to bring all of the different factions in Italy slowly together under one government; in particular, he hoped to form a coalition with reformist socialists, who made up one of the few true political parties in Italy, in an effort to shut out revolutionary socialists.⁶

Giolitti was a masterful parliamentarian and a Machiavellian one. He routinely "managed" elections to obtain the preferred outcome. The political system in Italy allowed him to do this easily. The central government appointed the prefects of Italy's provinces, and these prefects had the power to summarily remove local mayors and councils. Giolitti would pressure the prefects to rig the votes, and they in turn would do the same to the mayors. Anyone who played along would be guaranteed to keep his job, be it by appointment or by election. Anyone who resisted would not. Giolitti tried to use this "influence" sparingly – he only manipulated votes in a few key areas (usually in the south, where the electorate was less educated) and only enough to make a difference. After suffrage was extended in 1913 to all males over age thirty or who had served in the army, the voting poll grew substantially, and Giolitti's machinations became much more

⁶ Ibid., p. 77. See also Filippo Burzio, *Politica Demiurgica* (Bari: Laterza, 1923); Benedetto Croce, *A History of Italy 1871-1915* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1929); Salvatore Saladino, *Italy from Unification to 1919* (New York: Crowell, 1970); A. William Salomone, *Italy in the Giolittian Era*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1960); Cecil J. S. Sprigge, *The Development of Modern Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

obvious. Although citizens protested, Giolitti and the Liberal government were completely out of touch with the people as they wrapped themselves into their parliamentary cocoon. This was the beginning of the growing dissatisfaction among Italians for the Liberal government and their search for an effective alternative.⁷

The anger went beyond political corruption. Catholics were still annoyed at the continuing feud between the state and the Church. To protest Italy's seizure of Papal lands, Pope Leo XIII had forbidden all Italian Catholics to vote in elections or to hold political office. His successor, Pius X, began to make exceptions; by 1919, a Catholic-Populist political party had been formed, the *Partito Popolare*, as an opposition to the Liberals' style of government. In a nation dominated by the Catholic Church, this new party was quickly viewed as a potential adversary for the Liberals.⁸

There persists a myth that the Italian people were politically "backwards" -- that they had little knowledge of politics or the issues and were largely apathetic. The truth is that Italian voters were, by and large, no different than the electorates of other industrialized nations. One key difference had to do with how voters were registered: instead of being registered in their current hometown, Italian voters were registered in the town of their birth. In addition, there were no provisions for absentee voting, thus disenfranchising Italians living abroad and those serving in the military. Nevertheless, in most elections after suffrage was extended, between 55 and 60 percent of eligible voters went to the polls. These numbers are very similar to the voter turnouts in the 1932 and

⁷ Ibid., pp. 77-81; H. Stuart Hughes, *The United States and Italy*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 47-55.

⁸ Salvemini, pp. 145-8; Hughes, p. 49.

1936 United States presidential elections (57 and 62 percent, respectively). After factoring out absentee citizens who could not vote, the participation rates are over seventy percent, comparable to those enjoyed in Great Britain.⁹

Economic conditions also sparked resentment and some political movements. As in many European nations, the northern industrial workers had begun to form Socialist trade unions, and a Socialist party entered the government. Giolitti helped bring the Socialists into existence by removing some of the legal barriers against them at the turn of the century. This was part of his plan for greater integration of all classes into the state. Workers attained some concessions from their employers, but recessions in the early 1900s made industrialists reluctant to make further wage increases. From 1912 to 1914, there were numerous strikes and lockouts, and the bitterness grew until it exploded in the violent protests of "Red Week" in 1914, during which the state was forced to use the army to gain control of some areas of Italy. The Socialists would quiet down somewhat during World War I, but their anger would resurface later. Giolitti was never able to form a true coalition with the Socialists: his core supporters (which included many industrialists) would have been alienated, and there was not enough support within the Socialist party to accept a truce with a government that appeared allied against them.¹⁰

⁹ Salvemini, pp. 61-3. In the March 1929 polling, at the height of Mussolini's power and prestige, 90 percent of the electorate voted. See Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini: A Study in Power* (New York: Hawthorn, 1964), p. 274.

¹⁰ Corner, "The Road to Fascism," pp. 278-9, 283-4. See also Giampiero Carocci, *Giolitti e l'età giolittiana* (Turin: Einaugi, 1962) and A. Aquarone, *L'Italia giolittiana (1896-1915): le premesse politiche ed economiche* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1981); Douglas Forsyth, *The Crisis of Liberal Italy: Monetary and Financial Policy, 1914-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

On the agricultural side, anger against the state was more acute. The large landowners had exploited the *braccianti* for centuries. In Italy, there was no progressive tax; everyone paid the same rate, giving the impression that the poor were taxed more heavily. There were attempts to introduce a progressive tax and redistribute some of the wealth, but Giolitti could not risk alienating his wealthier *bourgeois* constituency. Instead, the *braccianti* were left on their own. The violence that had already existed between them and their oppressors became worse, and their animosity toward a state that ignored them grew, making them some of Fascism's first disciples.¹¹

Drifting into War

With this seething cauldron of discontent in the background, Italy found itself facing the prospect of war. After hostilities began, Germany and Austria-Hungary called on their partner to join their fight. In response, Italy hedged, insisting that the Triple Alliance was merely a defensive alliance. Since Germany and Austria-Hungary were the aggressors in August 1914, Italy claimed that it was under no obligation to join, especially since it had pledged to France in 1902 that it would not participate in any war of aggression against France. Instead, Italy declared itself to be neutral in the war.¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-3. See also Anthony Cardoza, *Agrarian Elites and Italian Fascism: The Province of Bologna 1901-1926* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952).

¹² Salvemini, pp. 92-3. Although absolving itself from war, Italy insisted that it receive compensation for any gains made by Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. This selective application of the treaty strained relations with the Central Powers even before Italy sided with the Entente. See also R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Antonio Salandra succeeded Giolitti as prime minister for much of the wartime period and guided Italy's course in the war. Most Italians favored neutrality; regardless of their feelings for either side, they did not want to enter a war. Socialists were especially against it. However, this pacifist feeling was not universal. Many saw the war as a chance for Italy to be involved more aggressively in European affairs. There had been a recent and growing trend of nationalism, and the war made the nationalists a louder force in Italy, which led to deeper divisions. Salandra saw another benefit to the war: he saw it as a chance to restore social discipline to an unruly and schismatic populace. Wartime Italy would become more autocratic, but more ordered.¹³

Italy finally signed the secret and very generous Treaty of London on 26 April 1915. If the Allies were victorious, Italy would capture its coveted Trentino and South Tyrol, as well as the cities of Gorizia and Trieste. Italy would also receive Istria and the hinterlands around Trieste, Dalmatia and most of the Dalmatian Islands (but not the city of Fiume), a free hand in Albania and the Dodecanese Islands, and unspecified additional territory proportionate to what Britain and France would gain. A month later, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary. (Realizing Italy's weakness, Salandra would not declare war on Germany for another year.¹⁴)

Although Salandra was ready for war, the rest of the Liberal government was still torn. The Socialists, though against the war, saw it as a chance for revolution. The Nationalists increased their patriotic hysteria against the "internal enemy" (i.e., anyone

¹³ Paul Corner, "State and Society, 1901-1922," in *Liberal and Fascist Italy*, ed. Adrian Lyttelton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 30-1. See also Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, 1870-1925* (London: Methuen, 1967).

¹⁴ Salvemini, pp. 21-2.

against the war). The government did not have broad support from the public because it never asked for it. Salandra and Foreign Minister Sydney Sonnino acted alone. Like most leaders in Europe, they thought the war would be a short one. Rather than create a propaganda machine to convince the public of the need for war, Salandra resorted to harsh repression of public dissent. He gave broad powers to the military in "war zones" to crush opposition through summary courts-martial and even execution. At the outset, the "war zone" included only the area around the front; by the end of the war, it included the entire nation. The army took over factories and confiscated peasants' property. A workers' strike was considered the equivalent of desertion and dealt with similarly. Salandra assumed that, after a quick, glorious victory, the people would forget these repressive policies, but as the war dragged on, the public's ire grew exponentially.¹⁵

The army was a microcosm of the nation. Southern peasants made up the bulk of the infantry. The more educated northerners and the professional soldiers were predominantly assigned to artillery or engineering units, and most commanders and staff generals came from these groups, thus perpetuating the already existing divisions within the country. Overall, the army was not prepared. When Italy declared war, most of its best troops were still stationed in Libya. The geography of the Italian Front was the harshest in the theatre, running along the highest mountain range in Europe, and Italy lacked the mountain troops and heavy artillery for large-scale operations along this front. The unpopularity of the war meant that the soldiers' morale was always low and

¹⁵ Paul Corner and Giovanna Procacci, "The Italian Experience of 'Total' Mobilization 1915-1920," in *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe During the First World War*, ed. John Home (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 224-230, 233.

desertions were always high. Perhaps the army's greatest liability was its new chief of staff, General Luigi Cadorna. He was one of the most brutal commanders in the war for any army. He had no respect for his soldiers or lieutenants, who consequently had no respect for him. He was overly aggressive, repeatedly ordering new offensives and hopeless attacks. Cadorna wielded his constitutional authority as supreme commander with a heavy hand, ordering summary executions of stragglers and deserters.¹⁶ With such poor leadership, the Italian army was never destined for greatness in the Great War.

In analyzing the state of Italy at the onset of war, it is hard to understand how an Italian army stayed unified at all. Considering the amount of public opposition to the war, the division among the government elite, the lack of preparation of the army, and the repressive tactics used against civilians and industry, Italy in 1915 appeared to be very similar to Russia one year earlier. Italy's entry was also poorly timed. Had it entered earlier, it may have defeated an Austro-Hungarian army that was being routed by the Russians. By May 1915, however, it was the Russians who were being routed, and Austria-Hungary, and later Germany, could afford to move troops to counter the Italian threat. None of the eleven Italian offensives mounted through 1917 resulted in the breakthrough that Cadorna had predicted. The geography was a natural defense for the Austro-Hungarian army. In fall 1917, a combination force, led by German generals, used new infiltration tactics to focus on smaller areas and drive through the line to high ground in the Italian rear, bypassing strong points and isolating entire Italian divisions.

¹⁶ John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), pp. 226-228, 344-345; Hughes, p. 57. For more about the war in Italy and the Italian army, see James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations, Italy* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1949); John Whittam, *The Politics of the Italian Army* (London: Croom Helm, 1977); John Gooch, "Morale and Discipline in the Italian Army 1915-18," in *Facing Armageddon*, ed. Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (London: Cooper, 1996).

The result was the battle, or more precisely, the debacle of Caporetto. By 3 November, the Italians had retreated eighty miles to the River Piave. The attackers had to stop – they had outrun their own supply lines – and the Italian line stabilized. Although only 10,000 Italians were killed, about 275,000 had been taken prisoner. Cadorna was replaced, and Italy would not resume the offensive again until the next year, when they received reinforcements from the British. Only in the closing days of the war would the Italian army reclaim its lost land in a victory over the demoralized Austro-Hungarian army at the battle of Vittorio Veneto.¹⁷

Other nations suffered major setbacks in the war, but Caporetto became an ignominious defeat. The reason lies less in the tactical outcome and more so in how the Italian military and government leadership dealt with the defeat. While generals from other nations played down their defeats and chose not to discuss them, Cadorna publicly and loudly blamed his soldiers of cowardice and executed scores of deserters. The same was true in the political arena: while other governments launched quiet investigations of the Battle of the Frontiers or Passchendaele, the Italians declared a full-scale inquisition and produced a voluminous public report, good for newspaper headlines for months. With such publicity, people could not forget the battle, even if they wanted to do so. Ultimately, the controversy turned to blame. Socialists, Liberals, and Catholics who were against the war were upbraided for ruining the soldiers' morale and priming them for defeat. The growing nationalist Fascist party, which had always been pro-war and anti-socialist, was a particularly vocal accuser. Italy's allies did little to help the situation.

¹⁷ Keegan, pp. 229, 346-50, 416. See also Cyril Falls, *Caporetto 1917* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966); Mario Morselli, *Caporetto, 1917: Victory or Defeat?* (London: F. Cass, 2001).

Britain, France, and later the United States, were never happy with Italy's designs on Dalmatia and Africa. They also believed that the Italian Front was a parallel war that did nothing to lessen the burdens that they faced on the Western Front. Until Caporetto, Italy had maintained minimal relations with her allies, and yet Italian politicians were always demanding their piece of the postwar pie.¹⁸ Britain and France could not help but feel a little pleasure in the fact that upstart Italy had been put in her place at Caporetto.

But the greatest effects were felt at home. Caporetto galvanized disparate groups among Italians either for or against the war. Those who had been interventionists and nationalists before the war were unified under a patriotic and anti-socialist/anti-communist banner. To them, and to the political and military leaders who were still fighting the war, socialists became pariahs, which only reinforced the socialists' hatred of the state. Interestingly, nearly everyone blamed the state for the defeat, not merely the generals. The government saw this as treason and clamped down harder on the public, rather than address their concerns.¹⁹

The "Mutilated Victory"

After the war, Italy joined Great Britain, France, and the United States as one of the "Big Four" at the Paris peace conference. President Woodrow Wilson's ideals of open covenants and self-determination of peoples were at odds with most of the postwar aims of the other Allies, but especially those of Italy. The Italians received some of its

¹⁸ Salvemini, pp. 13-7; Row, p. 96. After Caporetto, the Allies developed a central strategic and command center.

¹⁹ Corer, "State and Society," pp. 34-5.

demands easily, including Trentino, South Tyrol, Trieste, Gorizia, and western Istria. However, they lost their bids for additional land along the eastern Adriatic (which went to the newly-created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later known as Yugoslavia), African and Middle Eastern colonies, and spheres of influence in the Balkans. Then-Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando introduced the city of Fiumè as an additional demand. Wilson and the other representatives had a very low opinion of the Italians; Britain's Sir Charles Hardinge labeled them "the beggars of Europe" for their greed in Paris. Wilson had grudgingly agreed to the other territorial concessions, but he was adamantly against giving Fiumè to Italy, earning him the wrath of many Italians.²⁰

Back at home, Italians reopened the old wounds and divisions among them. Socialists and Liberals who had been against the war in 1915 voiced a vehement "I told you so!" Nationalists and Fascists screamed about a "mutilated victory." Ex-soldiers wondered why they had fought for three years. The mindset left over from the days of the Roman Empire made Italians want the impossible, and when they did not get it, they turned a victory into a pessimistic defeat. Some were not willing to accept the peace settlement at all. Italian poet and war veteran Gabriele D'Annunzio led about one thousand Italian shock troops in an unsanctioned occupation of the city of Fiumè. Although patently against the orders and wishes of Rome, D'Annunzio became an idol for Italian nationalists and ex-soldiers, even drawing comparisons with Garibaldi, and heightened nationalist fervor throughout Italy.²¹

²⁰ Row, p. 99; Salvemini, pp. 22-3.

²¹ Salvemini, pp. 24-6, 39-43; Overy and Wheatcroft, p. 169. In fact, if Italy had achieved all of its goals, the cost of managing such a large addition of territory may have ruined any chance for postwar

Most Italians could agree that the Liberal government was not working. Giolitti and his Liberal successors had never been able form their majority coalition, and many non-socialists were alienated by the government's overtures toward the workers, whose strikes and violence loomed as a threat to the middle and upper classes. Nationalists were disappointed with Italy's lack of international recognition and the weakness of "*i signori*" ("the gentlemen") in Rome. Middle-class intellectuals hoped for something better than the Liberal mediocrity that they had seen.²² With no common cause in World War I, no long-standing political traditions or parties (aside from the loose conglomerations of socialists and Catholics), and no faith in the political and military leadership, the war left many Italians expecting a radical change in government.

The economic situation in 1919 was also uncertain. During the war, Rome had turned over many responsibilities for war production and mobilization to groups headed or influenced by private industrialists, who became very rich in this military-industrial complex at the expense of the workers and small farm owners. This intertwining of Italian big business and the government would become the genesis of Mussolini's "Corporate State" that he would pursue in the late-1920s. In 1919, a wave of workers' strikes hit northern Italy. Most were merely obstructionist; few involved large-scale sabotage or violence. The workers received some concessions, including an eight-hour workday, but the main issue was wages. Italy was not unique: most European nations saw an increase in strikes immediately after the war, as soldiers returning to their homes

economic recovery. Eventually, Rome persuaded D'Annunzio to leave Fiume, which became a free international city through the Treaty of Rapallo (1920); however, Italian troops occupied it in 1921 after incidents of violence against Italians living there.

²² Corner, "The Road to Fascism," pp. 285-6.

sought jobs with decent pay and hours. Nor were the strikes noticeably worse in Italy than in other nations, and never did a strike completely paralyze the Italian economy. However, it was the beginning of two years of socialist activity – the *biennio rosso*. It climaxed in August 1920 with the takeover of northern factories by 500,000 industrial workers, who then tried to establish local soviets. The world, still reeling from Lenin’s communist takeover in Russia, began to think that Italy had “gone red.” The workers, however, never pursued a Leninist revolution and ultimately agreed to adopt syndical control of the factories. The poor leadership and organization of the workers proved that Russian-style Bolshevism had no future in Italy, opening the door a little wider for a takeover by the anti-socialist nationalists who were congealing into the Fascist party.²³

One of the claims that Mussolini made repeatedly after taking power was that he had inherited an Italy in financial crisis. To some extent, he was correct, but his claims were mostly hyperbole. The war had been very expensive for Italy. The “invisible exports” of tourism and emigrants’ remittances had dried up during the war. Italy had to borrow billions of dollars in war loans to balance its payments. Between July 1918 and July 1922, \$4 billion of loans matured. Railroad and towns had to be rebuilt in the north; coal, which Italy had always had to import, was even more scarce as Great Britain, Italy’s biggest coal vendor, needed it for its own rebuilding; agricultural land had been overused during the war; and cattle had been slaughtered by the thousands to feed soldiers.²⁴

²³ Corner, “State and Society,” p. 36; Row, p. 98; George Seldes, *Sawdust Caesar* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), pp. 86-90. See also Salvemini, p. 33, and J. Hampden Jackson, *The Post-War World: A Short Political History 1918-1934* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1935), p. 56.

²⁴ Salvemini, pp. 19-20.

Despite all of these obstacles, the Liberal postwar government did a remarkably fine job. After an inflationary period in 1919, inflation slowed and then reversed in 1920 and 1921. Italy restored its balance of payments, helped by the return of tourism and remittances. Although wages were still low, fueling the *biennio rosso*, unemployment was also low. Foreign businesses, especially American ones, began investing in Italy. By the time of Mussolini's 1922 coup, most of the frontier towns damaged by the war had been rebuilt, and agriculture and livestock were rebounding nicely. The war had been a boon to industrialists, and the postwar period saw greater expansion, especially in the power, automobile, aviation, and shipping industries. War loans had primed the economy and kept Italy solvent, and the government was making great strides in repaying the loans. By 1922, Italy carried only \$1 billion more in public debt than it had in 1914 (\$4 billion versus \$3 billion). Mussolini claimed to have inherited this debt, which translated to about 15 billion lire, and to have reduced it to 3 billion lire in one year. The truth was that the Liberal government had been responsible for the fiscal policies and budgets that reduced the debt. They had already budgeted the payments that reduced the debt to 3 billion lire, and Mussolini simply followed their plan. Thus, Mussolini's claim that the Fascists were rescuing Italy from economic chaos was overstated; there was no chaos, but rather the groundwork for one of the better economic recoveries in postwar Europe.²⁵

Although the framework for a democratic government was in place, Italy was quite different from other European democracies. It was a young nation-state in an old

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 28-36, 44-45.

Europe, but it clung to the memory of the Roman Empire. Its experience in the war was demoralizing. These factors have been cited as causes of Mussolini's coup, but by themselves, they do not fully explain why Italian democracy failed. The rise of Fascism in Italy was due in large part to the weak leadership and misguided policies of the Liberal Italian government both before and during World War I, and the war itself acted as a catalyst for a revolution already brewing in Italy's populace. The government's actions (and inaction), coupled with Italy's position in Europe and the war, opened the door for the Fascists to take the helm of a rudderless Italy.

The Rise of Fascism

Fascism, as a political and social philosophy, grew out of a response to the excesses of liberalism in the late 1800s and early 1900s. By the turn of the century, many Europeans were already decrying the growing corruption and decadence of the *bourgeoisie* and industrial capitalists in liberal European societies. Liberalism had evoked an economic and political individualism that allowed particular interests to take precedence over the whole of society. The result was a great disparity between a small, wealthy elite and a large group of peasants and working-class citizens. Many within the latter category began agitating for change and a voice in their society. Industrial workers often turned to the collectivist views of socialism, but many non-industrial workers and peasants saw socialism as a threat to their way of life and the order of society.²⁶

²⁶ Eugen Weber, *Varieties of Fascism: Doctrines of Revolution in the Twentieth Century* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing, 1964), pp. 8, 13, 16-7. See also Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966); A. James Gregor, *The Ideology of Fascism* (New York: Free Press, 1969); Alexander J.

At the same time, a growing sense of nationalism took root in many European nations. This ideology professed a new awareness and shared identity among the citizens of a nation, as well as a belief in man's ability to build a rational society. In the fading light of the declining power of European monarchies and the erosion of the influence of the Church (Catholic and Protestant varieties), nationalism became a unifying force, a source of collective pride, and a religion by proxy for many in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was especially true in Italy following unification. After centuries of fragmented feudal, papal, and foreign rule, the creation of a unified Italian state conjured ghosts of the Roman Empire in the minds of would-be Italian leaders.²⁷

At the intersection of nationalism and the displeasure with Liberalism, Fascism was born. Under Fascism, the state is the highest priority and the end to which all economic and political means are directed. Individual interests are not eliminated, but rather they are subjugated by the interests of the national state; personal liberty is conceded by the state if the individual acts in the interests of the state. Accomplishing this requires forceful and undivided leadership, a great contrast to the Italian Parliament before and immediately after World War I. Politicians with their self-serving agendas and promises to constituents have no place in a Fascist regime. The goals of Fascism lend themselves best to totalitarian rule, especially that of a dynamic, energetic leader.

It is useful to examine the types of people in Italy that were drawn to Fascism.

Ex-soldiers returning from the war were attracted to the nationalism embodied in Fascist

De Grand, *Fascism: Its Origins and Development* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); and Philip Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1919-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-8, 20-1. See also Angelo Rossi (Angelo Tasca), *The Rise of Italian Fascism, 1918-1922*, trans. Peter and Dorothy Wait (London: Methuen, 1938).

doctrine. Some of the educated *bourgeoisie* and lesser *bourgeoisie* were attracted to Fascism as well. They maintained a sense of pride in the nation and were worried about the general disorder incited by the socialists and their strikes. But the backbone of the Fascist movement was the agrarian workers, including the *braccianti*. Looking at these dissimilar groups, it is obvious that Fascism, unlike socialism, was not born as a class struggle; rather, the common thread among these groups was disgust with the state.²⁸

The more pious adherents to Fascism, particularly the ex-soldiers and some students, formed *fasci di combattimento*, translated as “bundles of fight.” These pseudo-military organizations roamed the countryside and fell into violent clashes with other groups, especially socialists. The northern agrarian peasants had been fighting for countless years against oppressive employers and the socialist unions who threatened to take their menial jobs. Rarely did anyone step in to stop the *fasci*. Commercial farmers, especially those in the Po River Valley, were happy to see them drive out the unions; in return, they offered jobs to peasants who were not socialist. The local police also were not inclined to defend the socialists, who had been condemning the police as pawns of the state. The *fasci* were a response to the weakness and ineptness of the government, but they were also a product of it. Their organization, tactics, and objectives were similar to modern terrorist groups. They attacked with impunity because they knew the state was impotent and, harkening back to the “failure” of the *biennio rosso*, that the socialists were not a powerful rival. Fascism did not represent the majority of Italian citizens – far from it. Many Italians, including some Fascist sympathizers and even Mussolini, were put off

²⁸ Corner, “State and Society,” pp. 39-40. See also Federico Chabod, *A History of Italian Fascism*, trans. Muriel Grindrod (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975), pp. 52-3.

by the violence at times. Nor was the rise of Fascism inevitable. The socialists had opportunities to rise up as an effective force, and the military high command was ready to crush the Fascists as treasonous rebels, if given the order. What the Fascists did have was a zealous group of followers, a dynamic, energetic leader in Benito Mussolini, and the knowledge that in the absence of any other kind of true leadership, the people would ultimately flock to them.²⁹

Benito Mussolini did not plan on creating a new movement in Italy. He was born in 1883 in the Emilia-Romagna region to a peasant family with a father whose political views were as radical as his were to be. Mussolini was a hellion as a child (and bragged about it in his autobiography). After failing as a teacher and then doing odd jobs in Switzerland (perhaps to avoid compulsory military service in Italy), he returned to Italy and served his tour of duty. He became a member of the Socialist party and editor of one of its largest newspapers, *Avanti!* He was a rising star among socialists, and he initially toed the party line and spoke out against World War I through his paper. Soon, however, he found himself publicly supporting the war effort, and for that he was expelled from the Socialist party. He started a new newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, with a decidedly pro-war tenor. He became a patriot and condemned his old party for its pacifist stance.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., Richard Collier, *Duce!* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 18. Days before the "March on Rome" by the approaching *fasci*, Chief of Staff General Pietro Badoglio told a fretting King Vittorio Emanuele III, "five minutes of fire will scatter that rabble." The king never gave the order.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 12-8, 34-40; Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), pp. 4-6. See also Collier, pp. 47-8.

Mussolini's autobiography, while obviously biased, provides a glimpse into his psyche and motivation for creating the Fascist movement. His father and his childhood in the poor agricultural district of Romagna gave an early impetus to his future career:

I began with young eyes to see that the tiny world about me was feeling uneasiness under the pinch of necessity. A deep and secret grudge was darkening the hearts of the common people. A country gentry of mediocrity in economic usefulness and of limited intellectual contribution were hanging upon the multitudes a weight of unjustified privileges.

In 1915, after Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, Mussolini entered the army and went to the front at Isonzo. He sent bulletins from the trenches to be published in his paper. More aware than most of his fellow soldiers of the political forces in Italy, Mussolini's hatred of the anti-war groups increased. "The poisonous currents of non-intervention and neutrality were still spending their last strength upon us. I knew they were doing their utmost to minimize the energy and elasticity of our fighting forces."³¹

Although he was in the army for eighteen months, Mussolini's fighting experiences were limited. He spent only four months at the front – the rest of the time he was held in reserve – and only two and a half months in actual fighting. Nevertheless, he made himself and his paper into champions for the common soldier and the war cause. In 1916, he was wounded when an Italian mortar exploded behind the lines. Four soldiers were killed, and Mussolini received forty-four shrapnel wounds. He spent months of grueling recovery in a hospital, then returned home to resume his editorial position with *Il Popolo*. Soldiers credited him and his paper with maintaining morale at the front, even after Caporetto. After the war, Mussolini spoke out against Wilson, his opposition to Italy's postwar territorial demands, and the peace plan, as well as the horrible treatment

³¹ Mussolini, pp. 10, 46.

that returning soldiers were receiving, especially from anti-war factions. Mussolini was patriotic, but his vitriolic editorials served to divide the population even more.³²

Mussolini was tired of government by the aristocracy and the elite politicians, but he still believed in his motherland. He wanted a government for the masses. With his expulsion from the Socialist party, his time in the trenches, and the patriotic propaganda that he was publishing, Italy's nationalists congregated around Mussolini. He soon created a new movement centered on the *fasci di combattimento* that already had been formed. The *Partito Nazionale Fascista*, or PNF, was vehemently nationalist, anti-socialist, anti-communist, and anti-Liberal.

The old parties clung in vain to the rattling programmes. These parties had to adapt their theories as best they could to the new days. It was necessary to imagine a wholly new political conception, adequate to the living reality of the twentieth century, overcoming the limited horizons of various spent and exhausted democracies, and finally the violently Utopian spirit of Bolshevism.

In the 1919 parliamentary elections, Fascist party members ran for election for the first time. None of them, including Mussolini, was elected.³³

Mussolini's Fascism

Since he made his living as a newspaper editor, it is no surprise that Mussolini wrote often about his political and societal views. What started as tirades against the Italian Liberal government evolved into a doctrine of Fascist rule. The cornerstone of this doctrine, and of any Fascist regime, was the superiority of the state. "In Fascism man is an individual who is the nation and country," and instead of pursuing merely

³² Salvemini, p. 124; Collier, pp. 51-5; Seldes, p. 83.

³³ Mussolini, pp. 69, 81-2.

personal happiness, every citizen is in an “orbit of duty” to the welfare of the nation.

“Fascism reaffirms the state and the only true expression of the individual...a totalizing concept, and the Fascist State – the unification and synthesis of every value – interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of the people.”³⁴

Mussolini was a man of action, and he believed strongly that Fascism depended on constant action for its survival. It was born to sweep away the stagnant Liberal government. To Mussolini, the successful state always moved forward and never looked back or apologized for the past. Fascism is Machiavellian at its core. The need for violence to control the people, for expansionism, and even for war is justified by the necessity of keeping the people in a constant state of tension and anticipation of greatness. The state and the people are one, and all social and economic edifices are structured to serve the whole. In this way, Fascism unifies the people. This makes Fascism more than a rational doctrine; it imbues an emotional connection, a passion in its ardent followers. A Fascist government does not always adhere to one ideology in its methods (even Mussolini admitted that); it may draw from socialism, democracy, republicanism, or totalitarianism. It is pragmatic, doing whatever necessary to achieve the higher goals of the state. Mussolini attributed the intellectual impetus behind his vision to Nietzsche, Georges Sorel, William James, and of course, Machiavelli.³⁵

³⁴ Benito Mussolini, “The Doctrine of Fascism,” in *Readings on Fascism and National Socialism* (Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, 1958), pp. 8, 10.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 13-5, 21-4; Alfredo Rocco, “The Political Doctrine of Fascism,” in *Readings on Fascism and National Socialism*. (Denver, CO: Alan Swallow, 1958), pp. 27, 32-6; William Y. Elliott, “Mussolini, Prophet of the Pragmatic Era in Politics,” *Political Science Quarterly* 41 (June 1926), p. 164.

Although he had been expelled from the Socialist party and spent much of his effort in railing against it in his newspaper, Mussolini had maintained some socialist contacts during the factory takeovers of 1920 and was ready to support them if they chose to take their revolution to Rome. Although he stood on the right of the political spectrum, he was ready to return to the left to accomplish his ultimate goal of overthrowing the government.³⁶ After the workers relented, Mussolini knew that if he wanted a revolution, he would have to do it himself.

The Socialist party was splintering. In 1921, the communists broke away, and in Italy's proportional parliamentary election system, this split hurt the Socialists and gave an opportunity to the PNF. Hoping to neutralize a potentially dangerous political enemy and expecting to manipulate the Fascists as he had done to so many other political opponents, Giolitti, once again Italy's prime minister, invited Mussolini and the PNF to enter the April 1921 election. Thirty-five Fascists were elected to the Chamber of Deputies. Giolitti had turned a movement that was still localized into a legitimate, national force. Giolitti and many other Liberals did not understand Fascism until it was too late. They expected Mussolini and his cronies to act like other politicians. They did not appreciate the subversive nature of this paramilitary movement. They assumed that Mussolini would play by the rules, not rewrite them.³⁷

The Fascist party, however, was not a united one or a disciplined one. Although Mussolini was recognized as its leader, many local Fascist groups ran themselves as

³⁶ Seldes, pp. 93-5.

³⁷ Corner, "State and Society," p. 41. See also Hampden, pp. 56-7.

autonomous organizations. They conducted raids, bombings, and assassinations against their enemies. The fact that they used violence was not unprecedented in Italian politics and society, but its widespread nature and systematic operation was. Mussolini was organizing and mobilizing his troops in the way that the state had attempted to do for World War I. He was instilling in them a common cause and identity, and his speeches and newspapers provided the propaganda to rouse his loyal subjects. At times, however, his minions got out of hand. Mussolini proposed and concluded a “peace treaty” between the Fascist and Socialist parties in July 1921, and he urged his party members to restrain their violence. Most local groups paid him no heed. In protest and, it seems, genuine dismay, Mussolini resigned as head of the Fascist party. He hoped that this bold move would shock his unruly party members into acquiescence. Instead, new splinter groups of *fascisti* came into being, and the violence continued unabated throughout Italy. Unwilling to relinquish his influence, and realizing that the party was surviving (albeit tumultuously) without him, Mussolini accepted the Fascists’ brutal methods and reclaimed his leadership of the party. Fascism appeared to have conquered Mussolini.³⁸

Over the next year, the Fascists would muscle their way into power. Taking a cue from Lenin (ironic, considering their anti-communist tone), Fascist groups took control of cities across Italy, including Ferrara and Bologna. They took over public utilities and ran them effectively. During a general strike by the socialists in August 1922, Mussolini, enraged that Prime Minister Luigi Facta would not step in to break the strike, ordered his *fasci* to keep the trains running. At the same time, he ratcheted up his rhetoric against the

³⁸ Ibid.; Seldes, pp. 100-3.

state. By October, the cabinet was bordering on crisis. On 27 October, the anniversary of the victory at Vittorio Veneto, 40,000 Fascists started toward Rome. They surrounded the city and captured the vital utilities and transportation arteries. The king thought that he was about to be deposed by the *fascisti* revolutionaries. He feared a repeat of the French Revolution, and he knew he would receive little protection from his circle of friends and advisors. Even his cousin and mother were Fascist sympathizers, raising the specter of a potential overthrow of the crown from within the House of Savoy. Mussolini's representatives, however, promised the king that his throne was safe; their complaints were with parliament.³⁹

Facta suggested that the king declare a state of siege, but the king rejected it for fear of sparking a civil war. Instead, he distanced himself from Facta and told him that he would have to resign as prime minister. In a last ditch effort, the Liberal government offered a compromise to Mussolini: he and his Fascists would enter a new cabinet headed by Salandra. For a while, Mussolini considered it. In the end, however, he chose the more dramatic route. He told the king that he would only accept an offer to form his own government. Recognizing the encroaching mobs and the recent violence incited by Fascists in Genoa and other cities, the king relented. Mussolini arrived in Rome by train the next morning to take his seat as *il capo*.⁴⁰

³⁹ Collier, pp. 17-20, 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 22, 28, 32.

Chapter II: Italy in the Eyes of Americans

Mussolini inspired curiosity and admiration throughout the world, but nowhere outside of his home country was he more popular than in the United States. For over a decade of his tenure, he was the darling of most of the American popular press. He won the hearts of thousands of the huddled masses of Italian expatriates. He became a model for modern businessmen and was even appreciated by leading American politicians. His image was not untarnished, nor was this praise universal. On the whole, however, the Fascist dictator who hoped to lead his nation out from the shadow of the Great War saw his star rise the highest in the only Western nation to grow stronger from the war.

The Immigration Invasion

Most Americans did not take kindly to the influx of Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From 1870 to 1914, about four million Italians came to the United States, making Italy the second-largest donor of immigrants to the New World after Great Britain. The vast majority were poor peasants from southern Italy who came to America looking to escape poverty in their homeland and lured by the “land of opportunity” across the ocean. Their arrival created competing images within the minds of many Americans. There was first the “idea” of Italy: a romantic, historic, picturesque land, whose people lived a hearty, rustic life along the Mediterranean. This was the idyllic Italy that Americans longed to visit and idealized. It stood in sharp contrast to the reality of the boatloads of Italians arriving every day at the dock, whom

they saw as a poor, backwards, ignorant mass of humanity that would fall into corruption and crime at the first opportunity.⁴¹

Italians tended to congregate in the major East Coast seaports – New York, Boston, Philadelphia – but they slowly spread across the nation from there. Knowing little English and eager to take any job, no matter how menial or how little it paid, Italian immigrants soon felt the same anger that had been directed toward their Irish brethren a generation earlier. Lower-class Americans hated Italians for taking their jobs away by offering to work for less, middle- and upper-class citizens lamented them as another invasion on American culture, and Protestants (the large majority of Americans) spurned them as a new wave of Papists. Their southern European heritage did them no favors. The dark hair and swarthy features (especially among southern Italians and Sicilians) made them stand out among their Anglo-Saxon neighbors. Their culture and customs, more festive and uproarious than the reserved Victorian ideals, was an affront to most Americans. As a result of the language barrier, the discrimination, and their meager earnings, Italian immigrants usually settled into run-down tenements and clustered near one another creating a “Little Italy” in towns such as New York, Baltimore, and San Francisco. Some Italians turned to better-paying illegal activities, especially during Prohibition (since alcohol was a major ingredient in Italian culture). Many Americans suspected them of being anarchists, especially after the sensationalized Sacco and

⁴¹ Walter T. K. Nugent, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870-1914* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 95-8; Walter F. Willcox, ed., *International Migrations*, vol. 1 (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1929), pp. 418-442; John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 6-13. Annual immigration from Italy to the United States peaked at nearly 300,000 in 1914 before plummeting during World War I. It rebounded in 1921 to over 220,000. Beginning in 1899, these statistics were subdivided into northern and southern Italians; from 1899 to 1921, southerners made up 84% of Italian immigrants.

Vanzetti trial of 1921. This earned the entire Italian-American population an undeserved reputation as lazy, seedy, and dangerous as Americans' nativist fears ran unchecked.

This fear and bigotry extended beyond the Italian-American population. In the early part of the twentieth century, there was a general concern growing among "native" Americans that the hordes of immigrants arriving each year would slowly but insidiously co-opt the United States and its government. In particular, many Americans felt that immigrants – Italian, Russian, Irish, or any other ethnicity – would never fully assimilate into American culture and would always divide their loyalties between their motherland and their new home. Some took this a step farther, believing that immigrants were actively organizing to undermine the social, political, and racial fabric of the U. S. One alarmist author for *World's Work* (who, ironically, was named Gino Speranza), warned in a 1923 article that these immigrants "are also using that [coherent political] power more and more for non-American if not un-American ends." To prove his point, he cited an example of an Italian politician pressuring Italian-Americans (through an Italian-American publication) to vote for candidates in American elections that would work favorably with the new Fascist Italian government on immigration issues. His point was clear – immigrants' loyalties would always be with their homelands, and they cannot be trusted to be faithful, patriotic Americans.⁴²

The performance of the Italian army in World War I and that of Italian politicians at Versailles made matters worse. Italian soldiers were viewed by many in the western world, including the United States, as falling somewhere between weak and cowardly.

⁴² Gino Speranza, "The Immigration Peril," *World's Work*, December 1923, in *The Reader's Digest*, January 1924, pp. 683-4.

The crushing defeat of Caporetto overshadowed the later success of Vittorio Veneto. Prime Minister Orlando's demands at the peace table seemed petulant and greedy. Many Americans and members of the United States government bought into the theory that Italian nationalists, including Mussolini, had been promoting: that the socialists within Italy were undermining the war effort and were at the root of the failure at Caporetto. Designed to prevent Italy from following Russia down the path of Bolshevism, American-sponsored speakers, including then-Army Captain Fiorello LaGuardia, started a counter-propaganda campaign and made a series of rousing speeches to promote Wilsonian ideals of democracy and postwar peace.⁴³ The stain of Caporetto, however, was indelible. Although Americans revered Italy's culture and history, the view of a country with an inept army scrambling for the spoils of war at London and Versailles was never far from their minds.

After Germany's surrender, postwar America was tired of war, tired of peace negotiations, and tired of grandiose proposals of world peace and international organizations. Americans wanted Warren G. Harding's promise of a "return to normalcy." It was Europe's war; let the Europeans sort out the mess. The failure of Wilsonianism led many to question the supposed benefits of democracy. They further questioned whether democracy was the best form of government for all nations. Suddenly, a new leader emerged in Rome in 1922 among the ashes of the crumbling Liberal government. To most Americans, Mussolini initially appeared to be Italy's

⁴³ Louis John Nigro, "Wilsonian Propaganda and Italian Politics during the First World War, 1917-1919: Data and Hypotheses," in *Proceedings of the 9th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association, The United States and Italy: The First Two Hundred Years*, ed. Humbert S. Nelli (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1977), pp. 64-67.

savior. They expected *Il Duce* and his *Partito Nazionale Fascista* to straighten out the chaos of the Italian government and provide at least a little stability in Europe, even if they did not fully understand what Fascism was.⁴⁴

Exaltations came from those close to Mussolini and from those who never met him. They deified him as a self-made man and a modern Horatio Alger. He believed in order, business, and action. Most of all, he detested communism. He embodied everything that was good to Americans. *Saturday Evening Post* contributor and U. S. Ambassador to Rome Richard Washburn Child called him “the greatest figure of this sphere and time.” Charles M. Bakewell of Yale University commented that “he is a sort of Italian [Theodore] Roosevelt,” an often-made comparison due to his personality, his ruggedness, and his constant political motion.⁴⁵ Perhaps most important, Mussolini was different than any other head of state, and he appeared to be the exact opposite of his recent predecessors. He was decisive, stern, unwavering. He was a leader, and Americans love a leader.

The Marketing of Mussolini

Mussolini realized the value of good press abroad. He was, after all, a career journalist himself and had true journalistic talent. For Mussolini, however, the concept of

⁴⁴ Laylon Wayne Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini: Public Opinion and the Press in Italian-American Relations 1922-1930” (Thesis, College of William and Mary, 1967), p. 10; John P. Diggins, “Flirtation with Fascism: American Pragmatic Liberals and Mussolini’s Italy,” *The American Historical Review* 71, no. 2 (1966), pp. 490-1; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁵ Foreword to Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1928), p. xix; *Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 July 1925, p. 873; quoted in Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” p. 66.

“journalism” never equated to a dispassionate report of facts, but rather a mechanism by which to persuade others through sensationalism and reducing issues to simple black and white terms. As a political leader, he transferred his talents into his speeches, propaganda, and relations with the press and the people he met at home and abroad.⁴⁶

Mussolini was a gregarious character, but he carefully crafted his public image and the events and speeches that went into it. Depending on the nature of a speech, his voice could be calm and measured or booming with raw emotion; he selected the tone to match the spirit of his oratory. He wrestled with his pet lion cub. He harvested wheat alongside peasants, stripped to his waist, exuding strength and virility to the running newsreel cameras. He played his violin in tie and tails and played with his children at home. He drove fast cars, flew airplanes, and rode horses. Mussolini knew how to create a spectacle to get into the news. Whether it was his arrival by speedboat to the Locarno conference, the squadron of Italian planes he sent to fly over Chicago, or one of the massive parades with call-and-answer exchanges with throngs of Italians, *Il Duce* knew how to make the front page. In cultivating his cult of personality, he was helped by Giovanni Starace, who was appointed secretary of the PNF in 1931. Starace was a very dubious character in his own right, but he knew how to make the most of a public event. He helped to build a myth of *Il Duce* in Italy and abroad by encouraging the wearing of uniforms by government officials (at one point, there were up to twenty uniforms for

⁴⁶ Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 194.

different occasions) and by starting the cry of “Viva il Duce!” by the people at rallies and parades, building the impression that all of Italy was wholly behind their leader.⁴⁷

Mussolini also knew how to manipulate the press corps. Margherita Sarfatti, Mussolini’s biographer during his early political years, noted that “the journalist in Mussolini comes out in most of his public utterances.” His major speeches contained the equivalent of a modern “sound bite” – that phrase or sentence that jumps out to a reporter as tomorrow’s headline. He knew how to use “press leaks,” news conferences, and all of the other tricks of the trade because he had been on the other side for so many years. He gave emphatic, militaristic names for his domestic initiatives: the “Battle of Wheat,” the “Battle of the Lira,” the “Battle of the Birthrate.” These sobriquets were used in part to motivate the Italian populace, but also to gain headlines and give the impression of a dynamic political agenda, even when it was really just a catchy phrase to mask a confused or non-existent policy. Mussolini, through the Stefani agency, always tried to put Italian concerns and actions in the best light to the rest of the world, even when his bluster was at his greatest. At times, this meant saying one thing publicly while fully intending to do another. During the temporary occupation of Corfu in 1923, sparked by the murder of Italian agents on a Greco-Albanian boundary commission, Mussolini publicly asserted his intention to evacuate the Greek island once the Greeks had paid the demanded indemnity. In fact, he notified his subordinates there of his plans to stay in Corfu much longer. In this case and some others, this duplicity worked in the Duce’s

⁴⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 55-6; Edwin P. Hoyt, *Mussolini’s Empire: The Rise and Fall of the Fascist Vision* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), p. 114; Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 154.

favor. When his bid to annex Corfu failed, he was able to fall back on his public statement and claim that the occupation was a success while withdrawing Italian troops.⁴¹

His greatest marketing weapon was the interview. Mussolini granted countless interviews to reporters, writers, statesmen, and public and business figures from around the globe. After being snubbed by his counterparts at Locarno, he no longer traveled abroad, but he developed a world following that brought the important and lowly to him. Among them were some of the best-known Americans, including news magnate William Randolph Hearst, New York Governor Al Smith, banker Thomas Lamont, U. S. Army Colonel Frank Knox, and Archbishop of Boston William Cardinal O'Connell. Thomas Edison called him the greatest genius of modern times after a meeting with him. Between 1922 and 1929, Mussolini granted 60,000 audiences to people from all levels of society, and he replied to almost everyone who wrote him. (In return, he received up to 30,000 Christmas cards each year at the height of his popularity.) For most people, a visit with the *Duce* was a rapturous experience. His presence and vigor were imposing. Alexander Kirk, chargé d'affaires of the American embassy, accompanied Mussolini on a visit to northern Italy. "The outstanding feature of the visit," Kirk noted, "was the sincerity of the popular acclaim which greeted him wherever he went and which had created the general impression that fascism and its leader have today a firmer hold on the Italian people than ever before." Even hardened journalists succumbed to his charm – which, of course, was exactly what he wanted. "It is very difficult," noted writer John

⁴¹ Margherita Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini*, trans. Frederic Whyte (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), p. 340; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, p. 56; Kitchen, p. 147; Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*, pp. 115-6, 124.

Gunther, "for the average correspondent to write unfavorably about a busy and important man who has just donated him a friendly hour of conversation."⁴⁹

Mussolini walked a fine line during the early part of his dictatorship between giving access to the press and censoring it. After becoming prime minister, he ordered that journalists be given free use of telegraph and telephone lines. He made sure that foreign journalists had the finest working facilities, and he made himself readily accessible for interviews and comments. The Stefani news agency, which was controlled by the PNF, made contracts to provide information to many of the world's news organizations, including the Associated Press. This made news gathering about Mussolini and the Fascist party easy, but not necessarily objective. Not only did Mussolini the former editor know how to manipulate a young reporter, but he also knew that a private interview with *Il Duce* was a flattering invitation and a career opportunity that would cause the reporter to be more favorable and less objective. Negative stories would quickly make a foreign reporter unwelcome by the PNF. Chicago Tribune reporter George Seldes was the center of the most infamous case and was expelled from Italy after smuggling out stories implicating Mussolini in the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, a Socialist leader who was found murdered days after delivering a stinging tirade against *Il Duce's* abuses of power. This subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) censorship led to a press corps that often was not critical of Mussolini, even if their editors at home were.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, p. 48; Hoyt, pp. 116-22; John Gunther, "Mussolini," *Harper's Monthly*, February 1936, p. 302.

⁵⁰ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 41-47.

In addition to these indirect marketing ploys, Mussolini concocted plans for more direct propaganda targeting the United States. One instrument was the policy speech. Italy's dictator peppered many of his speeches with references to the United States. Most of them were quick, passing comments, but even those were geared toward maintaining good relations with the powerful potential ally across the water. At the same time, the Duce usually slipped in a phrase or a sentence concerning what he expected the U. S. to offer back to Italy. This began even before his March on Rome. In a speech in Milan in April 1918, Mussolini paid homage to the American intervention in World War I:

As Italy discovered America, so America and the rest of the New World must discover Italy, not only in the great towns, pulsating with life and humming in industry, but also in the country, where the humble laborers wait with quiet resignation for the dawn of a victorious and just peace to appear on the horizon.⁵¹

After welcoming the American troops to Europe earlier in his speech, Mussolini makes it clear that he demands respect for Italy and its workers from the United States, as well as a share in the spoils of war. A later speech, given soon after becoming prime minister, contained a similar veiled expectation and was typical of remarks he would include in speeches to come. "Our relations with the United States are very good," Mussolini told his audience, "and I shall make it my care to see that they are improved, especially as regards a close economic cooperation."⁵² The new Duce was already thinking about renegotiating Italy's war loans and building more trade with the wealthy United States.

In 1923, Mussolini had a golden opportunity to address the American government and, through the press coverage, its people when the Italo-American Association held a

⁵¹ Benito Mussolini, *Mussolini as Revealed in His Political Speeches 1914-1923* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976), pp. 49-50.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

banquet in Rome to honor American Ambassador Richard Washburn Child. By that time, Child had been converted to a true believer in Mussolini's expertise as a statesman and civic leader and in Fascism as an effective political alternative. Child spoke first, congratulating Mussolini on his ascension to power and for "giving to all mankind an example of courageous national organization founded upon the disciplined responsibility of the individual to the State, upon the abandonment of false hope in feeble doctrines, and upon appeal to the full vigorous strength of the human spirit." Child continued his effusive oratory, saying the world needed fewer "theories and dreams, but better men to carry them out," before extolling Mussolini as the ideal man for this mission.³³

After such obsequiousness (especially considering that the dinner was to honor Child, not Mussolini), one might think that Mussolini would humbly thank the Ambassador, compliment him on his firm grasp of the true meaning of Fascist government, and reiterate Italy's brotherhood with America. In fact, he did do all of this, stating his conviction in common beliefs and attitudes among Italians and Americans, reaffirming his desire for strong political and economic relations with the U. S., and lauding Americans who, without the weight of centuries of history to hold them back, "march today in the vanguard of human progress." But Mussolini did not miss this opportunity for a call to action. In almost the same breath in which he complimented Ambassador Child, the prime minister called for the removal of harsh immigration restrictions for Italians wishing to come to the United States and put in a plug for the possibilities available for investment of American capital in Italian industries. Mussolini

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 336-8

had the ears of the ambassador and the newsmen; this was his chance to make his voice heard across the ocean.⁵⁴

The relationship between Ambassador Child and *Il Duce* was a crucial conduit for crafting Mussolini's image in the minds of Americans, and he used it well. Just before attending a Fascist congress in Naples, in late October 1922, just days before his assumption of power, Mussolini called Child at the U. S. Embassy to inquire about the attitude of the American public toward the *fascisti*. Soon after the March on Rome, he called on Child again to express his desire to work with the United States and promised to end the incessant talk of intrigue and overlapping European alliances that formed the powder keg of pre-World War I Europe. Recognizing that he was already on good terms with Child (who maintained a high opinion of him throughout his reign), Mussolini also asked Child specifically to inform the American press of the premier's friendship toward America and belief in common ground and goals between the two nations. He would continue to make similar requests of Child, including the publicizing of Mussolini's statements promising to meet all loan obligations to the U. S., to boost American public opinion concerning the Fascist government and to negotiate good business and loan agreements (which would include a sweetheart restructuring of Italy's war loans). What is most interesting, however, is how Mussolini, ever the journalist, seized on a key, respected American official with ties to both the U. S. government and media and used that relationship to win the hearts and minds of the most powerful nation at the time.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 340-2.

⁵⁵ Louis Aldo DeSanti, "United States Relations with Italy under Mussolini, 1922-1941," (Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 1951), pp. 36, 42-8, 83-98.

As Mussolini's fame spread and grew, he continued to market himself, but he also became more marketable. Biographies, authorized and unauthorized, appeared in Italian and American bookstores. Those written by Italians were universally positive, predictable considering the censorship that abounded and his dominant rule. Mussolini endorsed one by Margherita Sarfatti by writing the preface.⁵⁶ Biographies published in the U. S. were more varied. George Seldes's pseudo-biography, *Sawdust Caesar*, was very critical of Mussolini and his Fascist regime, illuminating the more violent elements of the movement. It was so inflammatory and negative that publishers were extremely reluctant to publish the work by the *Chicago Tribune* reporter. (It would not be published until 1936, after Mussolini invaded Ethiopia and public opinion had turned against him.) Others were more positive, including Emil Ludwig's *Talks with Mussolini*.⁵⁷

Ultimately, Mussolini took control of this arm of his marketing apparatus by publishing his autobiography (although most of the actual writing fell to his brother, Arnaldo). It was eventually released as a book, but it was originally published in serial form in the popular *Saturday Evening Post* magazine. This was not a random event; during an interview by *Post* writer Issac Marcossou, Mussolini discovered just how large an audience the magazine had. "He was immensely interested in the circulation of the *Saturday Evening Post*," wrote Marcossou in his article. "He knew the weekly, of

⁵⁶ Preface to Margherita Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), pp. 9-10. In it, Mussolini protests that writing about himself is a painful chore he must endure as a public person, and he says that he detests people writing about him – a stirring bit of humility, but his track record in dealing with journalists and his autobiography suggest otherwise.

⁵⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 54, 59. See also George Seldes, *Sawdust Caesar* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935) and Emil Ludwig, *Talks with Mussolini*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1932).

course, but he had no idea of its far-reaching power. This detail touched the journalist and publisher in him."⁵⁸

Ambassador Child, who translated the tome into English, wrote a sycophantic foreword that compared *Il Duce* to Napoleon, Joan of Arc, and Leo Tolstoy, and described him as above petty politics and selfish economic gain. The book then takes the reader through Mussolini's childhood, his involvement in the army in World War I (which he over-romanticizes) and the socialist movement, his turn to Fascism, and his plans for Italy's future. Most of his book is a justification for his coup and his party's actions through 1928, the year of its publication, and a chance to put his own spin on his life. He claims that the Liberal democracy was little more than a bloated bureaucracy that did nothing for the Italian people. When he was invited to form a government by the king, Mussolini writes, he remained magnanimous and chose not to declare an absolute dictatorship or order reprisals against his opposition, although he could have.⁵⁹

Early in the book, Mussolini turns his attention to his American audience. "The American nation is a creative nation.... I admire the discipline of the American people and their sense of organization. America, a land harboring so many of our emigrants, still calls to the spirit of new youth." Later, he responds to his critics. Concerning Matteotti, he asserts that the whole incident was exaggerated by a disgruntled opposition that was looking to pin any scandal on him. He then provides a primer on Fascism, its effects on Italy and its people, and his personal beliefs on politics, social order, and progress:

⁵⁸ Isaac F. Marcossen, "After Mussolini - what?" *The Saturday Evening Post*, 29 May 1926, p. 141.

⁵⁹ Mussolini, *My Autobiography*, pp. ix-xix, 14-6, 103-10, 190-3

I must then conclude that a strong policy has yielded really tangible results.... A new sense of justice, of serious purpose, of harmony and concord guides now the destinies of all the peoples and classes of Italy. There are neither vexations nor violence, but there is exaltation of what is good and exaltation of the virtue of heroism.

Before beginning the final portion of his book, which lays out his agenda for improvements for the working class citizens of Italy, Mussolini sums up his personal doctrine, saying, "He who looks back over his shoulder toward those who lag and those who lie is a waster...."⁶⁰ As with all of his other efforts, Mussolini's autobiography and its initial publication in one of the most widely read magazines in the United States was calculated to produce a favorable image of the dictator among Americans. He hoped to build popular support throughout the U. S. for the Fascist regime, but also to gain political and economic support from American government and business leaders.

One group that remained steadfastly supportive of Mussolini and his aspirations was the Italian-American community. Centered in New York and other cities of the eastern seaboard, this sizeable and growing immigrant group became the target and the distributor of much of the Fascist propaganda emanating from Italy. Mussolini's appeal to Italian-Americans went far beyond simple national identity. Italian immigrants had never been fully accepted by the United States; many Italian immigrants, even those whose families had been in the United States for a generation or two, felt like strangers in the New World. Mussolini's rise to power instilled in them a new sense of pride. He appealed to their Old World traditions, especially as the second generation that was born in the United States seemed to be rebelling against those traditions. Mussolini, for his part, attempted to exploit their disillusionment with the American dream and their

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 26, 219-25, 240-3.

familial bond to their motherland by appealing to them to remember their homeland and to display the strength and virtue of the Italian people while in America.⁶¹

Fascist tendencies arose in Italian-Americans even before the March on Rome. The humiliation of Versailles was an especially poignant theme to these immigrants, who were experiencing their own personal humiliation. Although Mussolini had little to do with the initial rise of Fascism among Italian-Americans, he wanted to cultivate it and exploit it as a tool to export Fascist ideals to the United States and the world. His government was split over this idea. Some, including Ambassador to the United States Gelasio Caetani, feared that it would anger the U. S. government and that Italian-Americans would face even more discrimination from American citizens and the press, especially the anti-Fascist papers of the Hearst organization. Others salivated at this opportunity. By 1923, nearly forty *Fasci* organizations existed in North America, some of which employed the same violent methods of the Blackshirts in Italy. By taking advantage of the already pro-Fascist movement in the immigrant community, the PNF could further legitimize and strengthen its position, but early attempts to assemble a cohesive American wing of Fascism were disorganized and ineffective.⁶²

Mussolini himself was duplicitous with his policy: he publicly denied any connection between the PNF and the American *Fasci*, but secretly he made plans to organize these groups and use them as a propaganda tool. He sent Count Ignazio Thaon

⁶¹ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 78-80; Vittorio DeFiori, *Mussolini: the Man of Destiny* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1928), pp. 208-9.

⁶² Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 86-87; Alan Cassels, "Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties," *The American Historical Review* 69, no. 3 (1964): pp. 707-9. See also Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*, pp. 196-8.

di Revel to the United States to consolidate these different clubs into the Fascist League of North America (FLNA). The U. S. government initially was divided on its opinion of the *Fasci* and the FLNA. While some were sympathetic to their ideals, their denunciation of Bolshevism, and their First Amendment rights, others were wary of a possible “nation within a nation.” Soon, these arguments became academic as the court of public opinion rendered its decision. Negative press, particularly by *Harper's Weekly*, accompanied the rise of the FLNA. A Congressional Committee on Foreign Relations began an investigation into the subversive behavior of the *Fasci* groups. Much of the testimony was false or exaggerated, but the investigation coupled with the journalistic attacks killed the FLNA, which disbanded in 1929.⁶³ This ended the PNF's direct intervention in the U. S., but there was another tool at their disposal: the Italian-American press.

Italian-American newspapers became the major outlets for Fascist propaganda. Most were written in Italian to appeal to immigrants. The Stefani news agency directly supplied information to these papers and helped explain Fascism to Italian-Americans at the beginning of Mussolini's reign. Ever cognizant of his public image, Mussolini did not want a consolidation of these papers; instead, he relished the competition among them as each paper tried to outdo the others in their fawning praise of *Il Duce*.⁶⁴

The PNF also moved into radio by sending broadcasts across the Atlantic into major U. S. cities. In many ways, this was an even more powerful instrument than the press: it could be understood by illiterate immigrants, and it provided them another

⁶³ Cassels, “Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties,” pp. 709-11; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 89-90.

⁶⁴ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 81-5.

reminder of their eternal relation to the country of their birth. Until the mid-1930s, both the creators and distributors of this propaganda took great pains to avoid appearing anti-American. Rather, they concentrated on drawing parallels between the ambitions, past and present, of Italy and the United States. They compared Italy's territorial ambitions to Manifest Destiny and Mussolini's bid to rejuvenate the Italian economy to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.⁶⁵ Even during the Ethiopian conflict, Italian-Americans bought into these comparisons and felt great pride that their homeland was on its way to becoming in the Mediterranean what the U. S. was in the Americas.

Was Mussolini successful? There is little doubt that his wily charm manipulated more than a few foreign reporters into adding a more adulatory spin to their articles. His speeches directed toward Americans wooed some citizens and a few diplomats. His autobiography and other endorsed biographies certainly put him in a very favorable light. His attempts to export Fascism through Italian-American communities were much less successful and could have cost him dearly in the area of public relations had he not divorced himself from that process quickly. Ultimately, Mussolini's direct marketing efforts ended in mixed results, but his indirect maneuvers with American reporters showed more promise. The old journalist knew the power of the press, and perhaps nowhere else did it carry as much influence as in the United States.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-9.

Chapter III: *Il Duce* in American Magazines

The 1920s and 1930s were the heyday for magazines in the United States. Radio was still in its infancy – the first regular programming began in 1920, and the first national network did not exist until 1927. Television was little more than a pipe dream. Print still dominated American media. Newspapers delivered the general daily news, some more objectively than others, and with a few notable exceptions, their focus was mostly local in nature with a few national and international wire stories added to the front page. Magazines, on the other hand, had national subscriptions. Some were general interest news magazines, similar to newspapers, while some were the equivalent of modern cable television networks, each with its own niche market and specific offering to its subscribers. There were entertainment and society magazines, sports periodicals, literary journals, business publications, and editorial and compilation weekly and monthly magazines. The industry would soon be ravaged by competition from radio and television, but during the Roaring '20s and the early years of the Depression, magazines held staunchly, if tenuously, to their lofty lair in the realm of American media.

With a proliferation of national publications of both broad and specific interest, it is no surprise that it is difficult to glean a consistent, general opinion of American magazines toward Benito Mussolini. By clustering magazines into groups of common type and audience, it becomes easier to see patterns within each group. The bifurcation of this medium into popular magazines and high-brow journals is a clear and helpful method in unearthing their respective views of *Il Duce*. The popular magazines tended to

appeal more to the general public and had a readership that included people from all walks of life, but especially middle-class Americans. Magazines like *Time*, *The Outlook*, *Reader's Digest*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* published a variety of general interest articles, editorials, and synopses of articles and quotes from other sources, including newspapers. The high-brow journals had a more elite readership – mostly upper-class, college-educated Americans – and some had a more limited scope. Journals such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Century Illustrated* were primarily literary magazines that included opinion pieces on current events. Others, including *New Republic*, reported on broad current events, but did so with an eye toward their upper-crust audience. Many business magazines like *Fortune* and *Barron's* can also be included among these high-brow journals, as their core market was wealthy businessmen and industrialists.

Most American magazines of the 1920s were attracted to Mussolini, whether they liked him or not. Mussolini was a phenomenon – a new kind of political leader in a new Europe. One could agree with or decry his methods and rhetorical bluster, but they made news and attracted eyeballs, and magazines rushed to capture as many eyeballs as they could. As a result, Mussolini became the most widely covered foreign leader of his time. A crude search of the *Time* magazine archives for the last names of prominent contemporary statesmen provides some clues into his media appeal. Between 1923 (the year *Time* began publication) and 1935, Mussolini is mentioned in some way in 1,186 articles. During the same period, Josef Stalin appears in only 335 articles, Lenin in 245, and Hitler in 587. Admittedly, the dates for these leaders do not line up perfectly with Mussolini's tenure. However, even after restricting the search to 1932-1935 – just after

Hitler's political ascendancy and a decade after Mussolini's – *Il Duce* is still competitive with *Der Führer*, losing out 522–415. As for the two British prime ministers of the period, Stanley Baldwin and James Ramsay MacDonald, their combined cache resulted in a mere 760 articles, still far short of Mussolini's tally.⁶⁶ *Time* also pictured *Il Duce* on its cover eight times between 1923 and 1943 (although he was never named their "Man of the Year," a snub which always angered him).⁶⁷

The trend is far from universal, but on the whole, until the Ethiopian invasion in October 1935, the popular American magazines held a much more positive opinion on Benito Mussolini than the elite journals. There was the occasional castigating article after certain notable events, such as the Matteotti murder or the Corfu invasion, but for the most part, the magazines with the widest circulation printed some of the most flattering pieces on the Italian dictator. Their more elite counterparts, on the other hand, held markedly different views. Many of them took every opportunity to sound the alarm on the menace in Rome and printed few articles in his defense. These journals, however, did not fully reflect the mainstream of American views, nor did they have the circulation to disseminate their views widely throughout American society and to make a radical change in public opinion on Mussolini.

With these classifications in mind, it must be said that there were notable dissenters in each camp. Two popular compilation periodicals, *The Reader's Digest* and *The Literary Digest*, were especially negative toward Mussolini. They also had a unique

⁶⁶ Archive search conducted at www.time.com on 9 August 2005.

⁶⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*. p. 26.

influence on American opinion. First, they enjoyed a wide audience. Second, through the editing and selections of articles by their editors (and in the case of the latter, some editorial comment), the magazines could manipulate quotes from newspapers (in the case of *The Literary Digest*) or magazines (*The Reader's Digest*) to construct an overall impression of a topic based on seemingly "expert" and "objective" sources. In other words, these organs let others do the talking for them, but they were able to choose which others did the talking and make sure that they said the right things.

Meanwhile, business magazines, which can be classified among the high-brow journals due to their more limited and elite readership, almost universally affirmed the Fascist regime and its revitalization of Italy. In addition, these different types of publications did not cause a polarization of opinions about Mussolini between the more educated upper class and the "common folk." This was due in part to the schism among American intellectuals and academicians concerning *Il Duce*. For each respected professor or philosopher who was ready to throw roses at Italy's salvation, there was another ready to throw stones at the Latin Satan.

Just as it is difficult to make generalizations based on the mission of individual magazines, it is also misleading to say that American media outlets had similar reactions to events in Fascist Italy and Mussolini's actions. Nevertheless, one can still show that many magazines in the U. S. did share common sentiments. At times, the type of response corresponded to the type of magazine (popular, elite, or business). At other times, those boundaries blurred. Mussolini's rise to power was an encouraging sign in most corners of the American media, although some were more skeptical. The Corfu and

Matteotti affairs inspired not only condemnation, but also apologists in some popular magazines (often through a rebuttal to a negative article). The economic revival of the late 1920s was hailed as a new type of renaissance by all but the staunchest opponents. Mussolini's peace overtures and mediations of the early 1930s elicited praise from even the most critical high-brow journals. And finally, regardless of their opinions before 1935, nearly every American magazine turned against Mussolini after his invasion of Ethiopia.

This thesis examines the opinions and views of major national American magazines toward Mussolini, as well as his reactions to them, based on chronology and major events. A similar study based on publication type would also be valid; both have inherent organizational advantages, and both have complications. This study is limited to major national periodicals, using a representative sampling of publications from the time. It does not delve into regional publications, trade magazines, periodicals targeted toward immigrants (and there was a substantial Italian-American press), or other publications with a more a limited scope; doing so would far exceed the space allotted for this thesis. Similarly, this study does not include religious magazines. Although many of these magazines, especially those for Catholic readers, had much to say on Mussolini, the nature of the publications and their smaller readership make them unsuitable for this examination. Indeed, one could easily write a separate thesis on the different and complex opinions of American Catholic publications and the Roman Catholic Church in the United States toward Mussolini and their impact on American citizens. These are all intriguing areas of study, but ones that will be left to other historians.

Regardless of how one reviews American magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, one must always remember that, especially with Mussolini, these articles did not appear in a vacuum. Benito Mussolini, always a journalist at heart, manipulated his image and the media representatives (Italian and foreign) who reported on it to create a desired effect. At times, he was more concerned about the persona he portrayed at home to Italians. Sometimes, he directed his energies and media savvy abroad. The important point is that the interaction between the reporter and the subject, while always influential in journalism, was certainly more pronounced when dealing with *Il Duce*.

Initial Reactions to the March on Rome

Americans may have disagreed on Mussolini's rhetoric, braggadocio, and heavy-handed methods, but most agreed that Italy before Mussolini (and much of the rest of Europe, as well) was a cesspool of corruption and laziness. After the March on Rome, Italy seemed to change overnight. Suddenly, the Fascists and Mussolini in particular appeared to be forcing the whole of Italy to follow an American-style work ethic. Americans and the press noticed the change. Although there were some negative side effects, most Americans were not educated enough in foreign affairs or the suppression of civil rights to understand fully what was happening in Italy. Rather, it was a romantic, historic nation that seemed to be crumbling after the Great War until a new, young, and dynamic leader arrived, promising to put its citizens to work, squash the communist menace pervading Europe, and make Italy great again. That is the image that many general interest magazines exploited, and *Il Duce* did his best to perpetuate it.

The Fascist coup of 1922 initially inspired a hopeful, albeit sometimes cautious, optimism among many popular periodicals. The most popular theme in the American media during the first years of Mussolini's reign was the pragmatic one: his methods may be a bit unsavory, but he gets the job done, and it is hard to argue with results. "By whatever methods, legal or illegal, it may have been brought about, in Italy today there is order and peace, and in Rome there is a Government of force, discipline and action," admitted *Current History*. "[Mussolini] belongs more to the Rome of the Caesars than to the Rome of the Giolittis." There was a general feeling that Italy was in a desperate situation that required desperate measures and new leadership, and Mussolini fit that mold. "The Fascisti came to the rescue, to restore law and order.... Fascismo gradually undermined the reign of terror which the Extremists had succeeded in establishing."⁶⁸

Many writers and editors defended Mussolini's early actions against accusations of tyranny. *Collier's* frequently apologized for Mussolini's dictatorial methods and even agreed with them at times. The weekly offered that Mussolini "often acts wisely" and had taken drastic measures in large part to ward off a communist takeover. Editor William L. Cheney admired his ability to take a stand and spark necessary action in Italy, writing that "[Mussolini] can compel his followers to adopt measures sensible but too unpleasant to be voluntarily accepted." Others viewed Italy's rapid progress under Mussolini as an obvious refutation of the charges of brutal tyranny. "I have lived in Italy at different times for over twenty years," wrote Dr. A. L. Frothingham for *Current*

⁶⁸ Jordan, "America's Mussolini: The United States and Italy 1919-36" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1972), pp. 42-4, 88-9; Louis D. Kornfield, "Benito Mussolini – Italy's Man of Destiny," *Current History*, January 1923, p. 574; Joseph Collins, "Italy's Bloodless Revolution," *The North American Review*, in *The Reader's Digest*, January 1923, p. 646.

History, “and I may be believed when I say that the Italian people, as a whole, have not been so happy, so light-hearted, so confident, so hard-working as they are now....

Mussolini is the one savior of their liberties, the one reorganizer of their present, the one guarantor of their future.” Reports of victorious rallies by over 100,000 Italians crowding into plazas around Italy to hear Mussolini speak, either in person or by radio, furthered the notion of Mussolini as an enlightened and benevolent dictator.⁶⁹

The Saturday Evening Post, one of the most popular American magazines, was a quick and outspoken convert to the Mussolini phenomenon. In serial articles by Kenneth Roberts and Ambassador Child, the *Post* described the evolution (and necessity) of Fascism in Italy and Mussolini’s March on Rome in vivid detail. These articles reiterated common themes from other periodicals: the feeble Liberal government was drowning under staggering deficits, a crumbling infrastructure, warfare between capitalists and unions, and rampant corruption. Mussolini assumed the grim task of rebuilding and reenergizing Italy. He swept away the excess and corruption; sped up the railroads, the telegraphs, and the postal service; harnessed the spirit of the *fascisti* while maintaining control of them, and served notice throughout the world “that a nation doesn’t have to endure the demagoguery that is based on lies and stupidity and perversity....”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ “Tyrants are Popular,” *Collier’s*, 31 July 1926, p. 20; A. L. Frothingham, “Mussolini Acquitted of Despotism,” *Current History*, July 1923, p. 561; “Veni, Vidi, Vici,” *Time*, 21 April 1924, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Kenneth L. Roberts, “The Ambush of Italy,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 25 August 1923, pp. 6-7, 34-8; Roberts, “The Fight of the Black Shirts,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 8 September 1923, pp. 19, 161-70; Roberts, “The Salvage of a Nation,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 22 September 1923, pp. 20-1, 132-42; Richard Washburn Child, “The Making of Mussolini,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 28 June 1924, pp. 3-4, 156-8; Child, “Open the Gates!” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 12 July 1924, pp. 5, 55-8; Child, “What Does Mussolini Mean?” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 26 July 1924, pp. 23, 87-90.

Most American business leaders and business magazines welcomed *Il Duce* with open arms. After visiting Italy in late 1923, Lewis E. Pierson, president of the Merchants' Association of New York, did not equivocate in his adoration. "Under the superb leadership of that truly great man, Mussolini, the Fascisti have revived the flame of Italy's aspirations." The *Journal of Commerce* was confident in Mussolini's ability to reorganize Italy's finances and to reduce its deficit. Within a few months, other business publications (as well as some popular ones) noted specifics of this revitalization, and their praise went beyond the balance sheet. "It would seem clear that Mussolini is determined to govern Italy by principles and not by parties or personalities."⁷¹

Those publications with more selective readerships were split on their initial opinions of the effectiveness of the new *capo* of Italy and his legions of followers. *The New Republic* initially accepted the Fascist coup as a success, especially in light of recent events in Italy. "Fascismo is not a party; it is a social movement. It is the reaction of the middle classes...against the oppression they were suffering...from the peasant and laboring classes below, and from the great capitalists above." *Harper's Monthly* praised Mussolini for keeping the faith of his followers, staying above petty politics, and tackling the corrosive and pervasive sloth and red tape that crippled the Italian bureaucracy.⁷²

Meanwhile, *The Nation*, perhaps the journal with the most consistently negative opinion of Mussolini throughout his tenure, saw little substance behind the Fascist

⁷¹ "Why Mussolini Charms the American Business Man," *The Literary Digest*, 9 June 1923, p. 72; "Italy's March Along the Road to Prosperity," *Barron's*, 31 March 1924, p. 12; C. W. Barron, "Mediterranean Issues: Mussolini's Redemption of Italy," *Barron's*, 23 April 1923, p. 3.

⁷² Giuseppe Prezzolini, "Mussolini's First Year," *The New Republic*, 31 October 1923, p. 252; T. R. Ybarra, "Mussolini - One Year After," *Harper's Monthly*, January 1924, pp. 206-14.

façade. Comparing the *fascisti* to the Ku Klux Klan in the early weeks after the March on Rome, the editors asked, "What do these Fascisti mean by 'goodness, civilization, beauty, and improvement?' They probably have no idea." For *The Nation*, the violence that accompanied the revolution sullied any possible advances that resulted from it. If a new regime tried such tactics in the United States, the whole populace would rise up against it, but no one raises a voice against Mussolini and his expansionist vision; the Italians have deluded themselves by their own idealism and the rest of the world is just happy to see the Italian government breaking out of its bureaucratic rut.⁷³

A second frequent theme was that a dictatorship, while anathema to American ideals, was tolerable or even preferred in Italy, a nation that had no experience with American-style democracy. "In the old days, Rome had dictators. Rome again has a dictator, one Benito Mussolini," reported *The Outlook*, but he is a dictator who is refashioning Italy into a strong, viable state.

If, then, an 'irregular' Premier must give special proofs of service, Mussolini certainly has already given them. He is a wonder, and no mistake. With all his possible bumptiousness and probable faults, he has succeeded, not only in bringing better and friendlier understandings all round, but in assuring long-needed efficiency and economy to patient, plucked Italy.⁷⁴

Italy was not the United States; therefore, one could excuse her for allowing a Mussolini to come to power. "It must not be thought that Mussolini is driving out democratic government from Italy," noted the editors of *The Outlook*, "for it would not be accurate to say that Italy has had democratic government in the sense in which we understand it. Italy has little to lose by scrapping many of its more recent experiments and theories...."

⁷³ "The Oath of the Fascisti," *The Nation*, 22 November 1922, p. 542; Carleton Beals, "The Black-Shirt Revolution," *The Nation*, 13 December 1922, pp. 655-6.

⁷⁴ Elbert Francis Baldwin, "An Italian Cromwell," *The Outlook*, 20 June 1923, pp. 214-217.

This line of reasoning was popular in the American media during Mussolini's early years. "We cannot understand Fascism till we realize what it replaced," according to Robert Sencourt. "Mussolini is not faultless; he and his party must be measured, however, not by a standard of perfection, but by a comparison with what he succeeded."⁷⁵

At the same time, perhaps Italy truly needed a Mussolini. *Collier's* tried to explain pre-Fascist Liberal Italy in terms that Americans of the time could understand: "Imagine a country of forty million people, governed as New York was governed in the time of Boss Tweed and Boss Crocker, with every government office a Veterans' Bureau and every government contract a Teapot Dome." Many Italians did not agree with or understand the political philosophy behind Fascism, "but the Fascists with Mussolini at their head are at the zenith of their popularity" because of the quick reversal of fortune and overhaul of government they effected. "If you ask an Italian about conditions, all he will do is express his happiness that things are again normal in Italy." Mussolini himself spoke of the need for strong leadership in Italy, with an obvious eye toward the future. "A dictatorship can last forever, if properly managed. A dictatorship has no doctrine, but when a dictatorship is a necessity, we must accept it.... Fascism knows we are far from equal. Take the great masses of human beings. They like rule by the few...." Whether or not Mussolini would continue to rebuild Italy in a positive way was a still in question. Also in question was whether democracy could even survive in 1920s Europe considering

⁷⁵ "Machiavellian Mussolini," *The Outlook*, 21 October 1925, pp. 265-6; Robert Sencourt, "Mussolini," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1926, pp. 693-4.

how much Italy was moving ahead in comparison to France, Germany, and even Great Britain. Perhaps Italy was not the only nation that needed a Mussolini.⁷⁶

Still, many writers and editors, especially those of the elite outlets, objected vehemently to Mussolini's usurpation of individual rights within Italy. *The Nation* led the charge, not only skewering the Fascists for their violent suppression of rights, but also castigating Americans for not speaking up against it. "At first sight, Fascism seems the essence of violence and revolution; certainly it is the avowed enemy of democracy." The Blackshirts had forcibly removed thousands of government workers in the name of efficiency, had manipulated elections by the threat and use of violence against voters, and had stifled opposition by imprisoning, beating, and even murdering those who spoke against *Il Duce*. "Instead of working through constitutional methods and attempting to improve them, [Fascism] glorified direct action and defied the 'outworn' principles of civil liberties. The end justified any means, and Mussolini and his friends were alone judges of the end." To the editors of *The Nation*, the *Fascisti* were no better than the Ku Klux Klan – patriotic, to be sure, and cloaking its violence in that patriotism. Still, many in the American public and government were so enraptured by Mussolini's dynamic figure that they overlooked the crimes of his followers. "This is dictatorship, the rule of force, the negation of democracy," the editors insisted. "But is there the world protest which greeted the dictatorship of the Bolshevik? There is not. Wartime methods killed a vast deal of respect for parliamentary institutions." Their frustration and cynicism would

⁷⁶ Frederick L. Collins, "Is It Good-by Mussolini?" *Collier's*, 27 June 1925, p. 7; "Che Cosa Fa, Mussolini?" *Time*, 24 December 1923, p. 11; "Apotheosis of Fascism," *Time*, 12 November 1923, pp. 11-2; "Mussolini's Road to Imperial Italy," *The Literary Digest*, 9 June 1923, p. 19. See also "Veni, Vidi, Vici," *Time*, 21 April 1924, p. 11.

only grow over the years. “[I]f such disorder had happened in a Spanish-speaking country of the New World, we should have instantly landed marines.”⁷⁷

The Nation was not alone; many of its peers echoed its concerns. “Instead of order following upon the wake of the Fascisti administration, disorder greatly multiplied,” lamented *Century Illustrated* in 1925. “Instead of peace, there now came upon Italy a reign of terror that has endured ever since. While Mussolini was winning the support of the extreme nationalists and chauvinists...he was abolishing the last remnants of civil liberty and instituting a Napoleonic despotism.” The editors of *The New Republic* concurred while aiming barbs at Mussolini’s supporters in the American business community. They saw Mussolini as the consummate Machiavellian (a sobriquet which probably would have made *Il Duce* proud) who was on his way to creating a full dictatorship. “The last vestiges of freedom are being stamped out in Italy with a scientific thoroughness which must excite the admiration of all those American business men whose avowed love for Mussolini is based on his ‘efficiency.’”⁷⁸

Even the popular digest magazines scorned him for his political machinations. *The Literary Digest* printed numerous quotes from both American and Italian papers complaining of Mussolini’s dismissive attitude toward Parliament, which gradually turned into an active campaign against its existence. It also used Mussolini’s own words

⁷⁷ Carleton Beals, “The Dictatorship of the Middle Class,” *The Nation*, 17 January 1923, pp. 64-5; “Mussolini and the Klan,” *The Nation*, 2 July 1924, p. 5; *The Nation*, 6 December 1922, p. 594; quoted in Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” pp. 187-8; Beals, “The Black-Shirt Revolution,” p. 655. See also Robert Sencourt, “Benito Mussolini – Italy’s Opportunistic Dictator,” *Current History*, March 1925, pp. 878-886.

⁷⁸ Charles Edward Russell, “New Phases in the Italian Struggle: Has Mussolini Justified His Dictatorship?” *Century Illustrated*, April 1925, p. 749; “The Week,” *The New Republic*, 13 January 1926, p. 199; Peter Brooklyn, “Mussolini vs. Fascism,” *The New Republic*, 8 December 1926, p. 65.

against him through a London *Times* quote responding to his comment that only a small number of Italians are unhappy with his regime. "If the discontented are but 'a small group,' why is it necessary to gag the press, to forbid free speech, to forbid public meetings, and to arm the Executive with arbitrary and practically irresponsible powers?" Meanwhile, *The Reader's Digest*, which had run some complimentary articles in the early months after the March on Rome, soon turned against Mussolini (and never turned back), even repeating Russell's article from *Century Illustrated*.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, it was easy for an American reporter to list Mussolini's accomplishments in his early years. To steal a line from the movie *Patton*, "Americans love a winner," and Mussolini was a catalyst for great change in Italy. The roll call of prominent Americans who praised *Il Duce's* success read like a *Who's Who* of 1920s America: California Senator Hiram Johnson, General Charles Sherrill, Boston Archbishop Cardinal O'Connell, Wall Street banker Otto Kahn, U. S. Steel's Elbert Gary, and suffragette Carrie Chapman Catt, to name a few. Many Americans returning from a trip to Rome or Milan or Venice could not help but notice the transformation in the atmosphere and character of Italy. The old "impotent bureaucracy" had been converted to an orderly, efficient society.⁸⁰ Frank Simonds, who reported for various popular journals, became smitten with Fascist Italy.

There is a new Italy which is a striking contrast to the old. There is a new sense of self-confidence.... Italy today is the liveliest thing in Europe. It is, one must concede...the one country which is governed in any real sense, the one country in which the business of national life is not

⁷⁹ "Mussolini's New Victory," *The Literary Digest*, 11 August 1923, pp. 19-20; "Mussolini Defines Fascism," *The Literary Digest*, 1 August 1925, pp. 20-1.

⁸⁰ Jordan, "America's Mussolini," pp. 82-6.

paralyzed by struggles among various elements within the nation, by the ineptitudes and supineness of the politicians and political parties.⁸¹

Perhaps most important to Americans was Mussolini's vehement opposition to Bolshevism, which seemed poised to envelop postwar Europe if left unchecked. "[F]ew will know," noted *The Saturday Evening Post*, "how close to the edge of Bolshevism Italy came." He stifled illegal strikes, the hallmark of socialism, while mandating an eight-hour workday. He slashed unemployment (according to official figures). He encouraged private enterprise as he built the Corporate State. He put indolent bureaucrats of the old Liberal regime back to work for the people after expelling the worst offenders from his visionary state machine. He fought the violence of communism with the Fascist nationalist fervor for *la patria* and aroused a "spiritual regeneration" among Italians, especially the youth. He made Italians feel strong and powerful again. "Every great movement has found and brought to power a great man," professed Italian war hero Carlo Delcroix to the Chamber of Deputies during a session that saw opposition leaders rail against Fascism. "You now have this great man. Let it not be said that Italy had at last found a great leader and that envy struck him down."⁸²

More than anything, Mussolini was *different*. He was the most atypical leader of the 1920s. This frightened the Old Guard European statesmen because "he had no precedent." He was young, and he was the apotheosis of a young Italy and the leader of a

⁸¹ Frank Simonds, "The Italian Revolution," *The American Review of Reviews*, June 1926, p. 636, quoted in Jordan, "America's Mussolini," p. 101.

⁸² Samuel G. Blythe, "A Latin Cromwell," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 24 February 1923, p. 98; Frothingham, p. 562-4; Tomaso Sillani, "In Defense of Fascism," *Current History*, May 1927, pp. 179-81; Ybarra, p. 208; Charles H. Sherrill, "Mussolini and the King," *Scribner's*, October 1923, in *The Reader's Digest*, October 1923, pp. 452-3; "Vote of Confidence," *Time*, 1 December 1924, pp. 9-10; "42," *Time*, 10 August 1925, p. 13.

revolution of youth.⁸³ He was outspoken and brutally honest. At times, he was brooding and pensive, but his speeches were dripping with emotion and occasionally venom. He made no apologies for his political tactics. He took quick action. He remade a government of “Old Europe” in a matter of days. He made his people feel proud about being Italian again, and made the world take notice of Italy as a real player in the European balance of power. He had exorcised the demons of Caporetto and the feckless legacy of the Liberal government. To many Americans, Mussolini appeared to be the only European leader doing anything constructive. By the end of the decade, many Americans began to wonder if the United States might need a *Duce* of its own.

War, Battle, Murder, and Prestige

While the American press was still trying to determine what kind of leader Benito Mussolini would be, the new Italian *capo* soon found himself embroiled in scandal and armed struggle. He had not yet finished his first year as premier before he faced his first international challenge over the Corfu incident. The next year brought the Matteotti scandal. Then, after disappearing from the international scene for a few months due to a debilitating stomach illness, Mussolini's returned with his infamous boisterous rhetoric. During the mid- and late-1920s, he instigated his domestic “battles” to rouse the Italian

⁸³ Blythe, pp. 101-2. Mussolini ascended to the premiership in October 1922 at the age of 39, the youngest premier in Italian history. His contemporary European leaders provide a remarkable contrast: Vladimir Lenin became chairman in 1917 at 47, Andrew Bonar Law became Prime Minister of Great Britain a week before the March on Rome at age 64, Stanley Baldwin (Law's successor in 1923) was 56, and France's Raymond Poincaré was 61 (he was 51 when he began his first ministry in 1912). The only major world leader of the time who approached Mussolini's youth was Theodore Roosevelt, who, at 42 years and 10 months, became President of the United States after the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 – yet another reason why so many drew comparisons between Mussolini and Roosevelt.

people to become more self-sufficient and to reinvigorate the national economy. At the same time, his blustery speeches increasingly contained references to Italian expansionism and allusions to the strength and reach of the old Roman Empire.

What were Americans to make of this Mussolini? Was he a vibrant, energetic, melodramatic leader trying to restore his people's pride and self-respect? Was he the vanguard of a new generation of European pragmatic political thinkers? Was he a violent and merciless tyrant, the second coming of Kaiser, about to launch his modern legions in an attempt to recapture the glory and power of the Roman Empire? Like the old story of the blind men and the elephant, it all depended on what part of Mussolini you chose to examine. Every American magazine had its own opinions of *Il Duce*, and those opinions often changed with the wind from the Mediterranean. But one thing was certain: no matter what he did, Mussolini was always interesting and always good for a headline.

The Violent Mussolini

The years of 1923 and 1924 were rough ones for Mussolini's image abroad. Many saw the invasion of Corfu as a thinly veiled imperialist annexation, a somewhat hypocritical view, considering that other nations, notably Great Britain and France, had taken similar actions in their recent histories. However, because those same two nations objected, Mussolini was vilified in Europe and America for the invasion of Corfu. The American press censured this "high-handed action" and "megalomaniac nationalism" as part of "an endemic European militarism." They warned that this could be proof that Mussolini's tough talk would be followed by a new wave of aggression in the Adriatic

and Mediterranean, making Italy another potential continental powder keg. *The Nation* commented that “Mussolini’s ultimatum to Greece was inexcusable swashbuckling.... One may even suspect that he would like to pick a quarrel.” Perhaps this was because “things have been getting dull at home,” and *The Literary Digest* ran a full page of political cartoons from American papers criticizing the Corfu takeover and assembled a long list of quotes calling *Il Duce* a bully and a new Caesar. Some even saw it as a ploy to mask divisions within the PNF in Italy. “Fascism lives by fighting.” Interestingly, however, many articles saved most of their vitriol for the League of Nations. It was as if people expected a leader like Mussolini to take advantage of such a situation and therefore did not fully blame him. The League, on the other hand, was designed in the wake of World War I to deal with just such a contingency. Thus, with Corfu, “the League is facing its supreme test, say many editors, [but] it is also facing its supreme opportunity.” Was the League simply a paper tiger? Or would it step up to the task and reproach Italy? Some reporters felt that Mussolini would back down from his warlike bluster once Greece met his demands, and most gave a sigh of relief when he did, but the League never lived up to its promises in the eyes of the American media. Its vacillations and sluggish response to the crisis doomed its reputation in the United States, making some editors happy that the Senate never ratified the Versailles treaty after all.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Robert Sencourt, “Benito Mussolini – Italy’s Opportunist Dictator,” pp. 881-2; “Mussolini’s Defiance of the League of Nations,” *The Literary Digest*, 15 September 1923, pp. 10-1; “Mussolini and Hughes,” *The Nation*, 12 September 1923, p. 257; Paul Blanshard, “Mussolini Starts a War,” *The Nation*, 26 September 1923, pp. 325-6; “How Mussolini’s Rumpus Strikes the Newspaper Artists,” *The Literary Digest*, 22 September 1923, p. 14; “Rome’s New Caesar,” *The Literary Digest*, 22 September 1923, p. 15; Sir Frederic Maurice, “The Italian-Greek Crisis,” *Atlantic Monthly*, in *The Reader’s Digest*, November 1923, pp. 527-8; Jordan, “America’s Mussolini,” pp. 53-6, 62-7.

Mussolini dodged another public relations bullet with the Matteotti affair. After Matteotti's body was discovered, rumors quickly spread that Mussolini may have been involved somehow. Documents smuggled out of Italy in 1933 by a PNF squad leader indicate that Mussolini did indeed approve the murder (although not necessarily order it). In the immediate weeks after the incident, however, no one knew just how high up it went. With a few exceptions, most American magazines did not single out Mussolini as the provocateur in the Matteotti affair. Rather, many saw it as a sign that the violent elements within the Fascist party were getting out of control, and some truly believed that Mussolini would bring justice to these rogue elements and purge the party of such murderers. Of course, not everyone subscribed to *Il Duce's* innocence. *The New Republic* was convinced that Mussolini was little more than a fervent disciple of Machiavelli, and Matteotti's ignoble disposal was just another necessary act to keep the PNF alive and in power. In a scathing article for *Current History*, H. G. Wells lambasted Mussolini for killing (literally, in some cases) criticism and free speech in Italy, comparing the PNF to the Soviet Communists and the Kuomintang. "Away with them! Nitti, Amendola, Forni, Misuri, Matteotti, Salvemini, Sturzo, Turati! Away with all these men who watch and criticize and wait!" Wells saw Fascism as unidimensional, demanding conformity and unquestioned loyalty from its citizens. "[Italy] sees taking thought in the light of treason, discussion as weakness, and the plainest warnings of danger as antagonism to be beaten into silence and altogether overcome."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ DeSanti, p. 52; "What Keeps Mussolini in Power," *The Literary Digest*, 9 August 1924, pp. 16-7; Brooklyn, "Mussolini vs. Fascism," pp. 65-7; H. G. Wells, "Italy Under Mussolini: Fascism - Its Consequences," *Current History*, May 1927, pp. 176-7.

With violence within Italy, Italian troops on the march outside of Italy, and Mussolini's persistent, passionate, and increasingly imperialist speeches to Italians, two concerns began to creep into American magazine articles written in the mid-1920s. First, perhaps Mussolini's control over the *fascisti* was not as strong as the world was led to believe. Instead of a regime that was the model of efficiency, Fascism may be splintering into warring factions. The opposition press, often cowed into submission, was becoming more vocal, and its quotes were finding their way into American publications. They railed against Fascist violence and questioned Mussolini's leadership, calling him a sixteenth-century anachronism and proclaiming that "Italy cannot be governed by a man who is implicated in a criminal trial."⁸⁶

Second, instead of just rattling his saber, maybe Mussolini was sharpening it. He was certainly manipulating the Italian populace into believing his nationalist message. "Every dream, every hope, every desire of every true Fascist and nationalist was captured and held. Everything was engulfed in Mussolini's triumphant imperialism." Some saw Mussolini as another in a long line of antagonistic European dictators who inflamed their peoples with nationalist zeal and ultimately brought their nations into war. "He was '*Il Duce*' as Napoleon was 'The Man.' He won the same plaudits in speaking of his 'iron hand' as the Kaiser won in speaking of his 'mailed fist.' Bismarck with his 'blood and iron' and the Kaiser with his 'mailed fist' never used stronger language than does Mussolini." The ultimate fear was Italy would spark another world war, and that the United States would be dragged into another intercontinental struggle. "What the Italian

⁸⁶ "Flaming Oratory," *Time*, 12 January 1925, p. 6.

superman is aiming at is a sort of Holy Roman Empire – at the head of it, God and his Superman.” Even Frank Simonds, one of the most pro-Mussolini American reporters, was worried, although he also was impressed by the “fire and frenzy about this patriotism” in Fascist Italy. “Can Mussolini, great man as he certainly is, control and canalize this enormous and explosive patriotic force which he has aroused? Can he lead it into safer channels and direct it to the development of national resources? Or will he, in the end, be captive of the forces which he has roused and loosed?”⁸⁷

The Resilient Mussolini

Nevertheless, throughout the 1920s, Mussolini had an uncanny way of distancing himself from at least some of the intrigue within Italy. Even his inflammatory speeches were forgiven by some in the American media. The 1920s was an era of pragmatism in the United States. Business became king, as did the Hamiltonian principles that accompanied it. As Jeffersonian liberalism waned, so did some of the concern over the loss of certain liberties in Italy. Mussolini was changing Italy and making it look more like the United States, partially by placing business at the fore. American businessmen liked it for obvious reasons, but the rest of the American populace also took note. With vast improvements to public utilities and roads, the drainage of swamps for more living and working areas, the demolition of slums, unemployment and pension programs, and

⁸⁷ Brooklyn, “Mussolini vs. Fascism,” p. 66; Frederick Palmer, “Does Mussolini Mean War?” *The World’s Work*, in *The Reader’s Digest*, September 1926, pp. 263-4; Shaw Desmond, “Fascism: The New World Issue,” *The Forum*, 26 April 1926, p. 485, quoted in Jordan, “America’s Mussolini,” p. 126; Frank Simonds, “The Italian Revolution,” *The American Review of Reviews*, June 1926, p. 638, quoted in Jordan, “America’s Mussolini,” p. 123. See also “Imperial Bunk,” *The Outlook*, 21 April 1926, pp. 593-4 and “The Week,” *The New Republic*, 13 January 1926, p. 199.

efforts to curb street begging, Italy was becoming “modern” by American standards and began to mimic the United States. Americans saw this progress and saw how Italians responded to Mussolini – according to many accounts in popular magazines, by chanting his name in unison by the thousands – and they were willing to accept that loss of liberty in exchange for results.⁸⁸ By the end of the decade, *Il Duce* was still a controversial figure, but his accomplishments and his longevity as a leader in a nation that saw previous governments turn over like pancakes in a diner made many American journalists, some more grudgingly than others, offer him respect.

What made Italy different from other European nations of the time was a sense that there was real progress occurring on the peninsula. As mentioned before, this stood in stark contrast to the Italy of the first two decades of the century. In a response in *Current History* to H. G. Wells’s attack, Roman newspaper editor Tomaso Sillani emphasized the restoration of order after years of socialist violence and the high esteem in which Italians hold the concept of “the nation.” “Nationalism acquires the value of a religion,” justifying some of the apparent abuses of power by the Fascist government. The truth, according to Sillani, is that Italians revere Mussolini for bringing them out of chaos, eliminating class conflict, modernizing their economy and infrastructure, and restoring their national pride.⁸⁹

The economic recovery was of special interest to American businessmen and the U. S. government. Not only did it signal more opportunities for worthwhile investments

⁸⁸ Jordan, “America’s Mussolini,” pp. 143-161.

⁸⁹ Sillani, pp. 179-186.

of American capital (which Mussolini always courted), but it also meant the Italy would be more likely to pay its war debts. J. P. Morgan and Company's extension of \$50 million in credit to Italy certainly made headlines in the American press. If J. P. Morgan had faith in the Italians to pay up, noted some media outlets, there must be something to this Mussolini fellow. The editors at *The Outlook* agreed. "The prevailing sentiment in Italy appears to be a desire to do the right thing" in maintaining strong relations with the United States and paying off the debt.⁹⁰

Obviously, the opinion of American magazines on Mussolini's greatness covered the entire spectrum. Some, such as *Current History* and *The Outlook* as seen in previous examples, tried to give him the benefit of the doubt by including positive articles and editorials while also being ready to cast stones at his menacing speeches and tyrannical methods. *Time* did the same, but also offered more objective views, which occasionally meant rising to Mussolini's defense. While many U. S. journalists condemned a 1927 speech by *Il Duce* as a prelude to a declaration of war, *Time* looked a little deeper. *The Literary Digest*, for example, covered the speech in an article titled "Mussolini Rattles the Sword" and began with "Is Mussolini mad?" The crux of the issue was his quote about the need to build up the Italian military machine.

"It is a fundamental duty to perfect our armed forces. We must at a certain time be able to mobilize 5,000,000 men. We must be able to arm them. We must fortify our navy and make our air force so strong and numerous that its roaring motors will drown all other sound, its shadow hide the sun over Italian soil. We will be able then, between 1935 and 1940, when I believe there will be a crucial point in European history, finally to make our voice heard and see our rights recognized."⁹¹

⁹⁰ "Morgan Million to Aid Mussolini," *The Literary Digest*, 20 June 1925, p. 12; "Italy's Debts and Other Troubles," *The Outlook*, 18 November 1925, p. 427. See also "On the Road to Sound Finances in Italy," *Barron's*, 2 February 1925, p. 11.

⁹¹ "Mussolini Rattles the Sword," *The Literary Digest*, 11 June 1927, p. 11.

The American press exploded. Newspapers and magazines across the country were calling him a warmonger who had learned nothing from World War I and who was ready to crown himself Benito I of a new Roman Empire, perhaps starting with an invasion of France or the Balkans. But *Time* noted that there was more to the speech than this one quote. American correspondents had twisted his meaning in a new form of yellow journalism, when in fact Mussolini was speaking of defensive measures. Europe was still a dangerous place, said *Il Duce*, especially to the north in Germany. His mobilization was not to attack Europe, but to defend Italy against an attack, which he saw as his primary duty. “The story was treated in the U. S. press like the confession of a man who publicly admits that he is going to buy a rifle and expects some day to practice on his neighbors. The real story was that Signor Mussolini spoke as might a sturdy householder who said: ‘There are burglars in the neighborhood and so I am going to keep a pistol under my pillow.’”⁹²

Not to say that *Time* was always pro-Mussolini. At times, its articles took a sarcastic, even mocking tone toward Mussolini’s histrionics. The editors were also especially offended by the continuing bullying of citizens and visitors, including American tourists, by *fascisti* and the suppression of freedom of the press by the PNF. But Mussolini was news, even if the news was simply the release of his romance novel that he wrote as a younger man. Moreover, his domestic rejuvenation and diplomatic successes later in the decade – with the Vatican, Albania, Tangier, and even Abyssinia

⁹² Ibid., p. 11; “Mussolini Bids for More Power,” *The Outlook*, 8 June 1927, p. 176; “‘Profoundly Humiliated,’” *Time*, 6 June 1927, pp. 19-20.

(which would soon be broken) – were impressive. “In general terms, it may be said that Benito Mussolini can point today to more diplomatic victories and near-victories than any other Chief Executive.”⁹³

Other publications were more consistent in their praise of *Il Duce*. Perhaps the two most influential of these pro-Mussolini magazines were *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The pro-Fascists leanings of *Collier's* editor William Cheney have already been discussed. Although the periodical did include some barbs against him, the vast majority of articles on Mussolini were favorable. (It should be noted that much of the magazine was devoted to serialized fiction and American human interest stories; only a small portion of the articles concerned Mussolini or other foreign leaders.)

“A Rooseveltian World Tonic,” he was called by Frederick Collins. Comparing someone to the venerable President Theodore Roosevelt was high praise in the 1920s, and there were many willing to make that comparison in the case of Mussolini. *Collier's* was willing to look past some of *Il Duce's* indiscretions and apologize for him when necessary. “Dictators are endured and embraced not for what they say but for what they do. Mussolini has a genius for bombastic nonsense but he often acts wisely.” Collins even defends how Mussolini “sequesters’ a newspaper once in a while,” claiming that the writings of hotheaded Italian editors would spark lawsuits in America. Better, then, to focus on his achievements – his leadership against Bolshevism, the Italian economic miracle, the end of government corruption – and the throngs of Italians shouting “Viva

⁹³ “Adventure Continued,” *Time*, 26 April 1926, p. 13; “Cheka,” *Time*, 15 November 1926, pp. 13-4; “Weasel,” *Time*, 27 December 1926, p. 12; “Press On!” *Time*, 22 October 1928, pp. 15-6; “Grande Romanzo,” *Time*, 13 August 1928, pp. 16-7; “Duce Deeds,” *Time*, 5 November 1928, p. 24; “Fascist New Year,” *Time*, 5 November 1928, pp. 24-5.

Mussolini!" in the streets. "We Americans ought to be able to understand such a man and to judge his chances of continued success, for he is more like Theodore Roosevelt than Roosevelt himself." But not even *Collier's* could avoid poking fun at the living caricature that was Mussolini. A tongue-in-cheek look at a hypothetical visit by *Il Duce* to the United States had him summarily deciding to move New York City, to abolish Congress, and to add more rules to the game of baseball until the rules were completely undecipherable to anyone. "Add to this [his reckless overhaul of Italian society] that the Fascist never shaves, that he doesn't believe in democracy, that he hates people and that he won't stand for any back talk from anybody, and it is clear that the new doctrines will make a tremendous hit on this side of the water."⁹⁴

With its circulation of over three million by 1930, the *Saturday Evening Post* was able to reach a wide and varied audience. Like *Collier's*, the *Post* avoided taking a crusading position in an effort to appeal to its mass audience, but it did have a decidedly pro-Mussolini slant. George Horace Lorimer, its editor during Mussolini's rise, echoed the same sentiment held by *Collier's* Chenery: Mussolini's dictatorship, while restrictive and tyrannical, was appropriate for Italy at the time. The United States would never accept such a rule, but "circumstances alter cases" and "in many ways Italy is not doing so badly." Lorimer pointed to Italy's modernization in both agriculture and industry, its stabilized economy, and the general social order of the country as proof of the benefits of Fascism at a time when many other European nations, including a France that had fallen into gridlock with its bloc politics, seemed to be teetering on the brink of collapse. "One

⁹⁴ Frederick Collins, pp. 7-8; "Tyrants are Popular," p. 20; Stephen Leacock, "What the Duce!" *Collier's*, 3 July 1926, p. 15.

hesitates to commend dictatorships...but one must not hesitate to condemn democracy that wastes itself.” It may be an autocracy, but at least *something* was happening.⁹⁵

The *Post's* adulation was not confined to its editor. Its battery of writers, including Roberts, Child, Isaac Marcossou, and the witty and trusted Will Rogers, contributed almost universally positive commentary on Italy. Echoing *Collier's*, Marcossou called Mussolini “a sort of super-Roosevelt in dynamic energy.” After meeting with *Il Duce* on separate occasions, Marcossou and Rogers were both impressed with his benevolent but stern leadership and his lack of pretension. He was a doer, not just a dreamer (like Lenin), who “weeded out the sluggards” in government and commerce. Mussolini was proof that postwar dictatorships (with the exception of the Bolsheviks) were a good thing for Europe and especially Italy, having brought about a political and a commercial renaissance. “You may not approve of Mussolini’s methods,” wrote Marcossou, acknowledging the continued criticism of his harsh style and fear over his expansionist policies, “but you must admire his results, and it is by results that the human being is measured.” Child continued that theme in one of his sycophantic commentaries. “Change the facts upon which Mussolini has acted and he will change his action. Change the hypotheses and he will change his conclusions.” Quoting Mussolini, Child wrote that while it may not be right for America, “Fascism was built for Italy – for our need, our emergency, our character, our growth, our soil....”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ “Dictatorship or Blocs,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 10 April 1926, p. 34.

⁹⁶ Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” p. 154; Marcossou, “After Mussolini – what?” pp. 3-4; Marcossou, “Italy Stands Pat,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 29 October 1927, pp. 12, 87; Richard Washburn Child, “Mussolini Now,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 24 March 1928, p. 135.

Meanwhile, Will Rogers, in his inimitable down-home style, took a closer look at Mussolini the man, not just Mussolini the premier. In one of his “letters to the President,” Rogers notes great similarities between *Il Duce* and American politicians and business leaders (including Henry Ford and, of course, Teddy Roosevelt). As for his periodic militaristic boasts and imperialist rants, Rogers says those are just meant for his Italian audience, which is accustomed to such melodrama. He quotes the Italian leader’s appeal to Americans, replicating *Il Duce*’s broken English: ““You tell ‘em Mussolini, R-e-g-u-l-a-r Guy.... Mussolini no Napoleon, want fight, always look mad; Mussolini laugh, gay, like good time same as everybody else....””⁹⁷

The *Post* went one step further when it published Mussolini’s autobiography (written by his brother and translated by Child) in installments in 1928. Here, the *Duce*’s eye for propaganda opportunities intersected with the *Post*’s pro-Mussolini tenor and desire for increased readership. The series had little effect on circulation, but the *Post*’s attitude toward Mussolini became clear. (Of course, it was no wonder that Child would be involved. He had also written a piece for the *Post* purporting that the death knell was already ringing for democratic self-government in Europe: “there is the inevitable conclusion in Europe that parliamentary democracy, in the main, is a failure.”⁹⁸)

With so many trusted voices praising the Fascist dictator, it is no wonder that many Americans began to see him as at worst the lesser of two evils – tyranny vs.

⁹⁷ Will Rogers, “Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 31 July 1926, pp. 8-9, 82-4.

⁹⁸ Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” p. 170; Child, “Did They Want It?” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 26 May 1928, pp. 14-15, 182. Installments of Mussolini’s autobiography appeared every two to three weeks beginning in May 1928. For an example, see Benito Mussolini, “The Garden of Fascism,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 7 July 1928, pp. 3-4, 99-105.

anarchy – and at best a benevolent and constructive leader. Even after scandal and the threat of war, Mussolini's image in the United States had remained, for the most part, intact and encouraging. There were still voices of dissent crying out in the wilderness. *The New Republic* continued to lead the charge among elite journals, labeling him “the blackest shadow which lies over Europe at the present time” and “the most dangerous and disruptive force at work anywhere on the continent,” threatening war to win concessions from a war-weary Europe. *The Living Age* published a short piece on the Fascist reprisals against the insurgent population of Molinella, a small town near Bologna, and how it may have inspired a boy to shoot at Mussolini. *Harper's* printed an exposé on press censorship in Italy written by George Seldes of *The Chicago Tribune*. He detailed the PNF's subtle and explicit methods of suppressing negative coverage about Fascist violence in Italy and showing the world only Fascist successes (which were real but not universal), and he illustrated how “the foreign press in Rome have to ask themselves every day, ‘Is this piece of Fascist terrorism worth mentioning? Am I ready to risk being thrown into the Queen of Heaven Jail or being thrown over the frontier for this small item?’” Seldes elicited sympathy from some of his compatriots at other magazines, including *Time*. Nevertheless, these protests were limited primarily to the high-brow journals; with most of the popular press, Mussolini was a rising star once again.⁹⁹

Most, but not all – the two main digest magazines were not convinced. *The Literary Digest*, though always including more positive quotes from American and

⁹⁹ “The Week,” *The New Republic*, 13 January 1926, p. 199; Brooklyn, “Mussolini and the Powers,” *The New Republic*, 22 December 1926, pp. 133-4; Pierre Dumas, “Insurgent Echoes: Why a Boy Shot Mussolini,” *The Living Age*, 1 January 1927, pp. 31-2; George Seldes, “The Truth about Fascist Censorship,” *Harper's Monthly*, November 1927, pp. 732-43; “Cold Welcome,” *Time*, 26 October 1925, p. 14.

foreign newspapers, took an obvious turn against Mussolini following the Matteotti affair. Except for a couple of articles on the high opinions of Mussolini held by the American business community, most pieces expressed serious concern over his imperialist motives. Even the titles are provocative: “The Mussolini ‘Empire,’” “Mussolini as the ‘Menace’ of Europe,” “Mussolini Rattles the Sword.” A second major fear for *The Literary Digest* was a concerted infiltration of Fascist elements into the United States. From the FNLA to “recreational centers” in American cities sponsored by the Italian government to Mussolini’s instructions to Italian émigrés about how to remain proper *fascisti*, Mussolini and his PNF seemed to be reaching their tendrils into American society. *The Reader’s Digest* soured on the Italian premier at about the same time. Except for one item about economic recovery, nearly all of the articles about Italy that its editors chose to publish in the mid- to late-1920s were negative. Among these were *The Living Age’s* “Why a Boy Shot Mussolini,” Seldes’s commentary from *Harper’s*, and a personal reflection by the nephew of ex-Premier Nitti on his treatment as a political prisoner of the Fascist party. More curious was the inclusion in the January 1927 issue of a piece written by Oswald Garrison Villard for *The Nation* more than three years earlier, positing that Mussolini has created an oppressive regime with an economy propped up like a house of cards simply for his own aggrandizement, but Americans are letting him get away with it because they only listen to “official” statements. Instead of printing it soon after its original publication in November 1923 – a time when *The Reader’s Digest*

was still pro-Mussolini – the editors dredged it up years later when they were of a very different opinion of *Il Duce*.¹⁰⁰

Mussolini is Italy

“Italy and Fascism, Fascism and Italy, Mussolini and Italy, Italy and Mussolini – all three are inextricably mixed up with one another. There is no more hint of conquest and conquered; you simply don’t know where one leaves off and the other begins.”¹⁰¹

By the latter half of the 1920s, Mussolini had established himself as a political force in Europe and, more important, as the personification and identity of Italy. After surviving political trials in his first years as *capo* and the physical trial of a long, debilitating stomach illness, he began to craft a social program designed to lift Italy up by its bootstraps and reduce its dependency on foreign aid. The goal was an independent and self-sufficient Italy that would be better prepared for the next conflagration. He dubbed them “battles” in an effort to motivate the populace (which further dismayed some foreign observers, who also saw a subtext of hardening the citizens to the

¹⁰⁰ “Why Our Bankers Like Mussolini,” *The Literary Digest*, 13 February 1926, pp. 11-2; “The Mussolini ‘Empire,’” *The Literary Digest*, 6 March 1926, p. 18; “Mussolini as the ‘Menace’ of Europe,” *The Literary Digest*, 8 May 1926, p. 19; “Fascism as Seen by Its Critics,” *The Literary Digest*, 23 April 1927, pp. 27-8; “Mussolini Rattles the Sword,” pp. 11-2; “Mussolini’s Hand Across the Seas,” *The Literary Digest*, 26 December 1925, p. 10; “Mussolini’s Orders to Italians Here,” *The Literary Digest*, 25 February 1928, p. 12; “Does Mussolini Rule Millions Here?” *The Literary Digest*, 16 November 1929, p. 14; Alfred Pearce Dennis, “How Mussolini Works His Plan,” *World’s Work*, August 1929, in *The Reader’s Digest*, September 1929, pp. 405-7; Pierre Dumas, “Insurgent Echoes: Why a Boy Shot Mussolini,” 1 January 1927, in *The Reader’s Digest*, February 1927, pp. 591-2; George Seldes, “The Truth about Fascist Censorship,” *Harper’s Monthly*, November 1927, in *The Reader’s Digest*, December 1927, pp. 465-6; James Waterman Wise, “In Blackest Italy,” *The Century Magazine*, April 1928, in *The Reader’s Digest*, May 1928, pp. 31-2; Francesco Fausto Nitti, “Prisoners of Mussolini,” *The North American Review*, March 1930, in *The Reader’s Digest*, May 1930, pp. 33-4; Oswald Garrison Villard, “What Cost Mussolini?” *The Nation*, 17 November 1923, in *The Reader’s Digest*, January 1927, pp. 537-8.

¹⁰¹ T. R. Ybarra, “Il Duce: So You Won’t Talk,” *Collier’s*, 23 March 1935, p. 58.

inevitability of war). Thus was born initiatives such as the “Battle of Wheat” to spur domestic food production, the “Battle of the Lira” to stabilize and strengthen the fluctuating currency, and the “Battle of the Birthrate” to reverse the decline in Italy’s population caused by poverty, mortality, and emigration. Mussolini led these charges with his fiery oratory and some well-timed photo opportunities (including the famous photograph of a bare-chested *Duce*, pitchfork in hand, hard at work in a wheat field).

Why the attempt to cultivate a “spirit of battle, this fighting temper on the part of forty million people?” Beyond the outward signs of economic progress and modernization, much of Italy was still in poverty. American reporters who wandered beyond the Italian cities could see this quickly, and Mussolini realized it as well. “Italy’s greatest foe is poverty,” wrote Edward Corsi for *The Outlook*. “Poverty is the key to the Italian situation. It explains Fascism. It explains the excesses of Fascism. It explains the Kaiser-like utterances of the Duce.” In a sense, Italy was at war with its own demons, and Mussolini was ready to take the reigns as a wartime leader.¹⁰²

Mussolini was honest with Italians about the obstacles, and he challenged them to overcome them. In doing so, he gave them hope, and they rallied around him. Meanwhile, he continued to revolutionize the Italian economy into his “Corporate State” model, subordinating all private business interests to those of the state, as well as labor issues, but still allowing for private control of business. Since the state was of primary importance under Fascism, the utility of workers and capitalists alike must be organized by the state, linked together by syndicates and managed by the Ministry of Corporations.

¹⁰² Edward Corsi, “Italy: A Nation at War,” *The Outlook*, 11 May 1927, pp. 47-9.

In doing this, Fascism was promoting Italian business – part of the “Battle of the Economy” – but also building a lasting economic edifice and cooperation between government and business. In a sense, it was a compromise between a free-market economy and a state-run system.¹⁰³

Thus, by the end of the decade, Mussolini, already the head of government (and at one point, as many as seven other government positions) and undisputed voice and embodiment of Fascism to the world, had made himself the de facto leader of the Italian economy and Italian social order. On 11 February 1929, Mussolini signed the Lateran Pacts with Pope Pius XI, establishing the sovereign Vatican City state, restoring diplomatic relations between Italy and the church (severed after the annexation of the Papal States during the *Risorgimento*), and making Catholicism the sole state religion of Italy. Mussolini was now present in virtually every facet of Italian life.¹⁰⁴

This did not go unnoticed by the American press. Reporters noticed a change in tenor among Italians – the shouts of “Viva Fascismo!” by the blackshirted youth was being replaced by a more widespread “Viva Mussolini!” As one Italian said, “I’m not a Fascista. I’m a Mussolina!” Mussolini became bigger than his party, and in many ways larger than life. Associated Press reporter Percy Winner saw him as little more than “a master at posing” whose “vanity is colossal,” who succeeds by exploiting a situation and playing on people’s emotions rather than through intelligence or true leadership, and who is surrounded by yes-men. Peter Brooklyn of *The New Republic* agreed. “The Duce has

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 48-9; “The Corporate State,” *Fortune*, July 1934, pp. 57-9, 132-40.

¹⁰⁴ Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” p. 215; “One Man Majority,” *Time*, 31 December 1928, p. 13. At one point, Mussolini acted as Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, War, Navy, Air Force, Corporations, and Colonies.

played his hand so well that millions of Italians believe him when he says, as he often does, that he is not a tyrant or a dictator, but the servant of the people." Still, Winner acknowledged that Mussolini, with his overwhelming personality, was probably the only person in Italy who could bridge the cleavages among Italians and the PNF and steer the ship of state. "Mussolini alone can hold the wheel, but he cannot chart the course."¹⁰⁵

The next question from the press was logical: if Mussolini is Italy and Italy is Mussolini, what does the future hold for both? Regardless, the fate of Italian citizens would follow that of their *Duce*. "In Rome there is indeed a constantly present undercurrent of uneasiness," wrote *The Nation's* Mary Kelsey, as she sensed the palpable tension caused by the ever-present and ever-suspicious blackshirted *fascisti*. She reminded her readers of the "Ten Commandments of the Militiamen" and especially number eight: "Mussolini is always right." With that sense of blind allegiance, it was easy for one to believe that Mussolini could take Italy to war and expect and receive the full support of the entire populace. In fact, the editors of *The New Republic* envisioned just such an occurrence and came close to predicting the events of ten years later. "What he is most likely to choose, if the prophets are correct, is an effort at colonial aggrandizement, perhaps in northern Africa. Such an attempt, however, might easily lead to international friction of the sort which culminates in war."¹⁰⁶

All this is not to say that Mussolini was unopposed in Italy, and American foreign reporters knew it. Former Italian parliamentarian and political prisoner Gaetano

¹⁰⁵ Frederick Collins, p. 8; Percy Winner, "Mussolini – A Character Study," *Current History*, July 1928, pp. 517-27; Brooklyn, "Mussolini vs. Fascism," p. 66.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Kelsey, "Cross Currents in Italy," *The Nation*, 17 October 1928, p. 396; "The Week," *The New Republic*, 13 January 1926, p. 199.

Salvemini expounded on the anti-Fascist opposition working in Italy in the mid-1920s for *The New Republic*. Even Mussolini knew of them, mocking them in a July 1924 speech, calling them “a great, but at bottom, a grotesque army.”¹⁰⁷ But none of these groups were able to organize into a large scale, effective counterweight to the PNF. Mussolini was a one-man show. Everyone knew it, and most Italians and Americans accepted it. The bigger concern, morbid though it was considering his relative youth, was what would happen to Italy upon Mussolini’s death.

Premier Mussolini has been compared by some to Atlas, Hercules, Julius Caesar, Septimius Severus, Cromwell, Napoleon, etc. It would, perhaps, be premature to place him among great Italians, let alone the great of the earth. In a sense the Premier still has to achieve permanent success. What he has done for Italy is indeed immense; but who can say that it is permanent? Many feel that his dictatorship has been harmful; few deny that his rule is not strictly personal. But who can say that with the man Fascism and all it stands for will disappear?¹⁰⁸

Mussolini was the glue that held Italy together during the 1920s. He was recognized around the globe for bringing Italy out of the postwar bedlam and building it into a modern state. There was no successor waiting in the wings; Mussolini himself said that his successor was not yet born. Would Mussolini be a flash in the pan for Italy, and all his reforms (good or bad) go for naught? “Such a government as that of England will never experience the benefits of a Mussolini; but it also will never suffer the sort of shock that apparently is inevitable for Italy when Mussolini is carried off by a motor accident, or a disease germ, or an assassin’s bullet.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Gaetano Salvemini, “Who Opposes Mussolini?” *The New Republic*, 9 February 1927, p. 324. See also Marcossou, “Italy Stands Pat,” p. 94.

¹⁰⁸ “42,” *Time*, 10 August 1925, p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ Marcossou, “The Comeback of Europe,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 10 September 1927, p. 220; “When Mussolini Dies?” *The Outlook*, 2 December 1925, p. 504.

The Unlikely Example

While the media pondered an Italy after Mussolini, the head Fascist was remaking his image and repositioning Italy within the context of Europe. He still made speeches with great vigor and visionary plans, but the caustic edges were less acute. Meanwhile, as Europe faced the continued threat of communism from the east, and the growing cloud of Nazism became more prominent in the north, Mussolini sought to reassure the world that he had no desire for war, whether caused by his actions or those of another autocrat. After all, by the early 1930s, Italy and the rest of the world had bigger concerns. The ripples of the Great Depression had reached the shores of the Mediterranean, and Minister of Corporations Benito Mussolini struggled to keep the resurgent Italian economic machine from breaking down. By the middle of the decade, he had earned plaudits from even some of his harshest critics among American magazines, but to most American reporters and readers, Mussolini and his intentions were as confounding as ever. As one reporter observed in summation of Fascist progress over the first ten years of Mussolini's rule, "Mussolini has not changed; only his environment is different."¹¹⁰

Peacemaker or Warmonger?

For a time, it seemed as though the rambunctious boy from Predappio had finally grown up. The firebrand socialist had abandoned his impractical ideas. The soldier had laid down his arms. The journalist had softened his tongue. The rabid Blackshirt had eschewed his violent days and looked ahead to an Italy of peace and prosperity. He now

¹¹⁰ William Martin, "Mussolini's Ten Years of Power," *Current History*, October 1932, p. 34.

stood as a bulwark against the ever-fractionous political turmoil of Europe. In the United States, some began to see a new maturity in *Il Duce*, and they began to pin their hopes of a peaceful Europe on the one leader who seemed to have enough sanity, magnetism, and pragmatism to prevent its devolution into continental warfare.

But had this leopard really changed his spots, or was he just hiding them? This question sparked debates among American media outlets. Some were ready to embrace this new, amicable Mussolini. Others were much more skeptical, reading between the lines to uncover his hidden agenda. Regardless of who was right, as the global economy faltered during the Depression, and as an ominous budding movement began to take hold in Germany, Italy was at the center of European affairs. Mussolini was Italy, Italy was Mussolini, and the rest of the world held its breath to see what he would do.

The new, hopeful view of Mussolini began to take hold with the Lateran Accords. The Concordat with the Holy See healed a sixty-year rift between the Roman Catholic Church and the Italian state. Instead of promoting the supremacy of Fascist Italy over everything else, Mussolini had relented and recognized the sovereignty of the Vatican and its spiritual importance in Italian society. In fact, he made his first public overtures of reconciliation before the March on Rome. After King Victor Emmanuel authorized Mussolini to begin negotiations in December 1926, talks were sporadic and sometimes heated. Fortunately, both Mussolini and Pope Pius XI were determined to settle “the Roman question,” and the treaties were signed on 11 February 1929.¹¹¹ It was certainly a

¹¹¹ Kirkpatrick, pp. 255-70. The Lateran treaties did not end the feud between church and state in Italy. In a May 1929 speech to satisfy Fascist extremists, Mussolini affirmed his supremacy of power and declared, “We have not resurrected the temporal power of the Popes, we have buried it.” An outraged Pope

boon to the papacy and gladdened Italian citizens, and it was also a diplomatic coup for the PNF. Some, however, questioned the motives behind it, seeing it as a ploy to shore up support at home and abroad and to extend Fascist influence even more into the lives of Italians. *The Nation*, always suspicious of Mussolini, summed up the argument. "On the face is an attempt to vest the Pope with nominal sovereignty, temporal power, but the power is a shadow. Underneath the outward semblance is a move by Il Duce toward his own ends, through the hierarchy. With the priest as his friend, he is assured of absolute contact with the whole social and political life of Italy."¹¹²

Nevertheless, the Lateran Concordat was a change in tone for Mussolini. It continued with his proposals for European disarmament, reorganization, and unity. These were new words in his rhetorical repertoire. Even the editors of *The Nation* were taken aback, calling his statements "encouraging and surprising," but difficult to interpret in light of his previous outbursts and overt efforts to increase its military armaments and readiness. Still, it was a step in the right direction. "[Mussolini] declared that it was unrealistic to talk of 'legal equality among nations when on one side they are armed to the teeth and on the other they are condemned to be disarmed.' This is a considerable distance from the bellicose and highly nationalistic attitude taken by the Premier a year or so ago." He reinforced this *volte face* by bringing his message directly to the American people through a speech in English broadcast by radio to the United States in January

Pius felt tricked and protested the remarks through diplomatic channels and the Vatican press. *Il Duce* was more conciliatory in later speeches. See also Benito Mussolini, *Discorsi del 1929* (Milan: Alpes, 1930).

¹¹² Adam Day, "The Pope and Mussolini," *The Nation*, 20 February 1929, pp. 221-2. See also W. Y. Elliott, "Mussolini Turns to Peace," *Current History*, April 1932, in *The Reader's Digest*, June 1932, pp. 43-5.

1931. "Italy," he pronounced, "let me repeat it – will never take the initiative of starting a war. Italy needs peace; Fascism desires to secure for the Italian people in co-operation with all other peoples of the world a future of prosperity and peace."¹¹³

Mussolini was also winning praises for his continued resistance against Bolshevism. With the onset of the Depression in the United States, this became a more pressing concern for Americans. While few expected a workers' revolt in the United States, there were fears that Bolshevism could gain a foothold as capitalism began to collapse. Italy's Corporate State, with Mussolini at its head, appeared to be unyielding to communist influence, making it an inspiration to Americans. Although American journalists occasionally compared Mussolini and Fascism to Lenin and communism, almost all of them saw the Soviet Union as a much greater threat to the United States and world stability. "If peace is menaced by Benito Mussolini, at least, like an honest rattlesnake, he jangles his sword. Stalin acts without warning," noted *Time*. "Compared to Stalin and Communism, Mussolini and Fascism are negligible forces."¹¹⁴

As whispers of general European disarmament grew into reality, Mussolini became a more active advocate of the process. Officials in the Hoover Administration were happy to goad *Il Duce* into pressing his point; unlike their European counterparts, President Hoover and his cabinet wanted to see an arms reduction deal concluded, but without American involvement. Most American reporters, however, were dubious.

¹¹³ Editorial, *The Nation*, 20 February 1929, p. 215; editorial, *The Nation*, 16 July 1930, p. 53; editorial, *The Nation*, 4 November 1931, p. 473; "Benito in English," *Time*, 12 January 1931, p. 15.

¹¹⁴ Jordan, "America's Mussolini," pp. 200-6; "Everybody's Red Business," *Time*, 9 June 1930, p. 24. See also Gamaliel Bradford, "Benito Mussolini: A Portrait," *Harper's Monthly*, November 1930, pp. 748-59; Percy Winner, "Who Opposes Mussolini? The Factions Working for the Duce's Overthrow," *The New Republic*, 5 November 1930, pp. 318-20.

Despite his assurances to Americans, Mussolini's war rhetoric had recently taken a more threatening tone, especially in reference to France and her African colonies. Mussolini felt that Italy needed to gain more territory, especially in Africa, to allow his burgeoning population to spread out and continue to expand. He also wanted Italy to be on the same military footing as its neighbor. French Africa and the slowly resurrecting French war machine stood in his way. Thinly veiled references to France appeared in his fiery speeches, eliciting shouts of "Down with France" from the crowds and bands of *fascisti*. He began hinting, then plainly declaring, that Italy would leave the League of Nations unless it was reformed into a less democratic body. "America needs a trusted partner" in Europe, wrote Pasquino Ianchi for *The New Republic*. "But here the question arises: How real is Mussolini's pacifism? How sincere is he in now advocating peace at all costs?" The key phrase came from Mussolini's lips: "Italy is disposed to accept the lowest figure of armaments...provided no other nation has more." This seemed to be evidence that Mussolini's peace overtures were disingenuous.¹¹⁵

The real reason, posited some writers, was that Italy could no longer afford to keep up in a European arms race. The expensive military expansion of the last decade, the enormous public works programs, and the deepening Depression had coalesced into a immovable financial roadblock to future military development, but Mussolini would not accept falling behind the British and French (and soon, German) war machines. He held

¹¹⁵ "Mussolini's War Dare," *The Literary Digest*, 14 June 1930, pp. 8-9; Pasquino Ianchi, "Mussolini in Sheep's Clothing," *The New Republic*, 24 February 1932, p. 36-8; "Grand Fascist Blank," *Time*, 18 December 1933, pp. 12-3. Beyond Italy, there was also a general concern that Europe was drifting back into pre-World War I alliances and tension. For an example of this concern, see Frank H. Simonds, "Europe Headed for War?" *The American Review of Reviews*, January 1928, in *The Reader's Digest*, February 1928, pp. 583-4.

true to his goal: "I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared; I want to render my nation worthy of her noble and ancient traditions." Doing so would be difficult. "In short, Fascist Italy is finding that the price of Roman grandeur comes beyond its powers of payment. A parity with France, dictated by prestige, is out of economic reach."¹¹⁶

For all of these disparaging comments, when the disarmament conference convened in Geneva in 1933, many looked to Mussolini as a crucial swing vote in the final deal. British Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald visited *Il Duce* in Rome to pitch his arms reduction plan (Mussolini would later counter with his own plan), proving just how important the Italian premier's consent on the final agreement would be. After the conference, Mussolini reaped the rewards of his attempts to broker the arms control agreement. His reputation changed overnight among world leaders and many American news reporters. He was no longer seen as the inflexible, dogmatic warmonger, but rather as a practical, "sober statesman" and "conciliator" who seemed committed to preventing another European implosion.¹¹⁷

Among the representatives involved in the Geneva conference was the new chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler. Although Mussolini would later call Hitler "certainly mad, possibly a liar," he pursued a somewhat friendly policy with Germany, causing some (including prominent journalist Walter Lippmann) to question exactly on whose side Italy was. Pessimists saw a Mussolini who was positioning himself for an alliance with Fascist partisans in Germany and Austria, a reprise of the original Central

¹¹⁶ Ianchi, p. 36; Elliott, p. 44.

¹¹⁷ "Ramsay, War & Benito," *Time*, 27 March 1933, pp. 14-5; Jordan, "America's Mussolini," pp. 306-13, 331-2; Anne O'Hare McCormick, "Mussolini, the Peacemaker," *The Review of Reviews and World's Work*, July 1933, p. 53, quoted in Jordan, "America's Mussolini."

Powers of World War I. Others saw simply a realistic leader who could be an effective counterweight to and mediator between Hitler and the rest of Europe. Mussolini's actions toward Germany over the next two years would assuage many fears. Although he started an amiable relationship with *Der Führer*, the assassination of Austrian Chancellor Englebert Dollfuss in July 1934 brought Mussolini to the side of Austria and caused him to lash out against the violence of the Nazis in Germany and Austria. Italy's participation in the Four-Power Pact and its reconciliation with France in early 1935 further solidified Mussolini's stature as a pragmatic and peaceful statesman. A world growing increasingly wary of Adolf Hitler now saw Mussolini as the only European leader willing to make a public stand against Germany's aggressiveness.¹¹⁸

The Italian Miracle

While the world kept one anxious eye on Germany, it used the other to find a way out of the deepening Depression. That eye often turned to Fascist Italy, which seemed to be the only major economy weathering the economic storm. Could the Corporate State be a model for the United States to follow? There were no masses of ragged men selling apples on the streets of Florence. There were no bands of hungry veterans setting up ramshackle camps outside the Palazzo Venezia. There appeared to be only discipline, order, and nationalistic pride. As one American living in Rome attested to reporter T. R. Ybarra, "it is a great source of satisfaction to be able to leave my place of business at

¹¹⁸ Jordan, "America's Mussolini," pp. 331-9; "Mussolini Snaps His Teeth Again," *The Literary Digest*, 15 November 1930, pp. 12-3; "Dictator & Dictator," *Time*, 23 June 1934, pp. 16-7; "Death for Freedom," *Time*, 6 August 1934, pp. 17-9; "Pact Making," *Time*, 18 February 1935, pp. 19-21; "Island Diplomacy," *Time*, 22 April 1935, p. 19.

night and walk to my home, through one of the poorest quarters of the city, without the slightest fear of being molested. Really, I do not believe that you fully appreciate what this means to me. I come from Chicago.”¹¹⁹

For a decade, American admirers of Mussolini, especially those in business and finance, paid tribute to the miracle wrought by Fascism in Italy. A lawless society, bungling government, and fractured economy had been reinvented into an integrated system that would make Henry Ford jealous. As castigations against Herbert Hoover and his *laissez-faire* policies grew more heated, the Corporate State began to look like an attractive alternative. Italy’s network of labor, capital, the state, and the party gave the government (read, Mussolini) control of production and the power to umpire disputes and force contracts upon employers and employees alike. It also gave business leaders great autonomy (for as long as it benefited the state). It organized labor and capital and linked them in syndicates, managed by the Ministry of Corporations (headed by Minister Benito Mussolini). While such a system would be anathema to American labor leaders, many businessmen and politicians saw promise in replicating the Corporate State in some form in the United States as a way to meet the economic crisis of the 1930s. They had had enough of Hoover; perhaps the U. S. needed a Mussolini, if only for a while.¹²⁰

American magazines had printed such suggestions off and on since the mid-1920s, but the comments usually came from business journals or the pro-Mussolini popular weeklies (i.e., *Collier’s*, *Saturday Evening Post*, etc.). Occasionally, another

¹¹⁹ T. R. Ybarra, “The Tenth Year,” *Collier’s*, 28 May 1932, p. 22.

¹²⁰ Jordan, “America’s Mussolini,” pp. 172, 177-83, 209-10; “The Corporate State,” *Fortune*, p. 57. See also James E. Boyle, “The Mussolini Regime: Order out of Chaos, and with it Economic Prosperity,” *Barron’s*, 17 May 1926, p.10.

publication such as *The Literary Digest* or even *Harper's* would throw in an article praising the new Italy and its resurgent economy and social order, only to be tempered in the next issue by reports of Fascist violence, oppression, and international aggression.

The Literary Digest was a prime example, publishing perhaps one positive article for every ten negatives ones, and even the favorable ones contained accusations. But even its editors relented from time to time and included quotes defending the Corporate State, including this quote from the *Providence News* in an October 1927 issue:

Are we really any freer in this country than are the Italians under Mussolini? We like to think we are, of course, and it may be that we are. But take the steel workers of western Pennsylvania, for instance. Are they freer than they would be if the Steel Trust were compelled by law to negotiate all disputes with its workers? At times it is very difficult to define freedom, but we are all agreed that a great people should have the sort of government it wants. Italy evidently wants the Fascist regime, and, by all accounts, wants it because the Mussolini method has brought the people of the country prosperity, freedom from grafting bureaucrats and an amazing vision of their own future.¹²¹

After the stock market crash and the ensuing economic collapse, Mussolini's Corporate State gained new popularity in the United States. As Hoover was replaced by Franklin Roosevelt and his promises for a "New Deal," American magazines, some more subtly than others, exuded an admiration for an Italian economy that still seemed to be working, even as it was feeling some of the effects of the Depression. "As 1933 opened," reported *Time*, "some 950,000 Italians were unemployed, but Il Duce's program of public works continues on a nationwide scale, new jobs are being constantly created and the State's direct dole expenditure was kept down to just under \$1,000,000 last year." Fascist Italy seemed to be in the vanguard of reorganizing the economy to meet the challenges of the time. It had some financial issues, especially debt, but its credit was

¹²¹ "American Democracy vs. Fascism," *The Literary Digest*, 15 October 1927, p. 16. See also "How Fascism is Solving Italy's Economic Problems," *The Literary Digest*, 23 April 1927, p. 84-7.

still good. Both its people and government seemed “hell-bent on economy,” and Mussolini used his autocratic authority to force his citizens to economize and to work harder and sacrifice more for the good of *la patria*. Meanwhile, the Italian people and its government did not seem to feel the burden as heavily nor show the attitude of defeat that was growing prevalent in a Hoover-led United States. Instead, they carried a newfound sense of pride in being Italian, and the Italian spirit was noticeable to foreign reporters. They may be a bit down, but they certainly were not out – or at least, not officially.¹²²

The phenomenon of the Fascist Corporate State reached its zenith in July 1934. That was the month that *Fortune* magazine devoted its entire issue to Italy, Mussolini, Fascism, and the Corporate experiment. It explored the history and culture of Italy, from ancient times to contemporary, but its main focus was on the economic theory that had been intriguing American businessmen. *Fortune* took a very favorable view of *Il Duce* and the Fascist party. It seemed to them that he had restored national pride and credibility to Italy through a series of programs designed to “unwop the wops.” As for the litany of criticisms against the Fascists for curtailing liberties, the editors explained that Americans simply do not understand what is meant by the “totality of the state” because they have been brought up in the tradition that government is best when it stays out of the way of the people and that American prosperity was due to its citizens, not the state. The Corporate State, borrowing from Hegel, takes the opposite tack – the individual cannot be divorced from the state and vice versa. It is the government’s duty to direct the efforts of the people to the common welfare of the state (and, by extension,

¹²² “Pumping & Pruning,” *Time*, 20 February 1933, p. 16; Ybarra, “The Tenth Year,” p. 22; “Fascist Finance,” *Fortune*, July 1934, pp. 72-3.

the entire citizenry), but it *needs* the people to be willing partners in order to succeed.

“The interesting point (and a point that is invariably missed by all off-hand anti-Fascists) is that in this new kind of autocratic state, the autocrat actually seeks the consent of his people.”¹²³

As for Benito Mussolini, *Fortune* saw him as the dynamo at the heart of Italy’s noble revolution. His energy almost leaps off the page, especially in an almost comical montage of photographs of *Il Duce* during one of his many vigorous speeches. The writers admired him for his refusal to back down from his beliefs, first as a young Socialist and later as the rising star of Fascism. They applauded him from rebounding from the Matteotti scandal after taking responsibility for it as the head of the party (even though they went out of their way to avoid any intimation that Mussolini was directly involved). They extolled his recent diplomatic achievements, especially the Lateran treaties. The only blight they saw on his record was Italy’s “moth-eaten, scrubby, parched, fourth-rate” colonies in Libya and the horn of Africa, but they congratulated his efforts in turning them into a commercial conquest without taking new land.¹²⁴

The opinions of *Fortune* aside, not all was rosy in Fascist Italy, and the more astute members of the media knew it. Even Mr. Ybarra, who submitted generally upbeat articles about Italy, saw some cracks in the Fascist veneer. Anti-Fascist graffiti artists were becoming more brazen and more prolific on Italian streets. Opponents of Mussolini, now exiled to Paris and other major European cities, were organizing an

¹²³ “The State: Fascist and Total,” *Fortune*, July 1934, pp. 47-57.

¹²⁴ “Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini,” *Fortune*, July 1934, pp. 102-125.

underground railroad to smuggle their colleagues out of Italy while exporting anti-Fascist propaganda back into the country. Percy Winner, who was decidedly less enamored with *Il Duce*, saw a dying party in the 1930s. “Fascism is ailing. As a typical Italian dictator, Mussolini is finding the task of providing the people with *panem et circenses* increasingly difficult.” Fascist Italy had lived under Mussolini’s invented state of war and its associated “battles” for so long that Italians were weary, in Winner’s opinion. Mussolini’s inability to prevent rising unemployment in the wake of the Depression denied Italians of bread, and the tired Fascist rhetoric now made for a boring circus. Even the *Post*’s Marcossan admitted that the pendulum was swinging the other way in Italy. He described demonstrations in Genoa in 1930 with banners declaring, “Viva Mussolini, but we are hungry.” He admitted the *Post* was one of the first American magazines to join the Mussolini bandwagon, but “ambition began to overreach itself,” and now “in [Italians’] faces was etched unmistakable resentment. It is almost precisely the same kind of look that I found everywhere in Russia. It is the face that reveals acquiescence to intolerant rule that must be tolerated.”¹²⁵

As for the Italian Miracle, the great Corporate State, many still saw it as a façade for a brewing Fascist war machine, and not a viable solution to the economic downturn. Even *Fortune* had to admit that “Italy has a grievous unemployment problem; in Italy there are many who are poor and some who approach starvation.” Mussolini’s “Battle of the Grain” and “Battle of the Birthrate” were deemed to be failures, but just enough of a success to build a new army of loyal automatons out of the children of “battle.” Against

¹²⁵ Ybarra, “The Tenth Year,” pp. 22, 50; Percy Winner, “Who Opposes Mussolini?” pp. 318-20; Marcossan, “The Dictator Business,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 15 March 1930, pp. 3-4, 56.

whom they would fight was still a mystery: either some aggressor, real or imagined, or their own fears.

Il Duce looks forward to Der Tag, a crucial day when the Italians will be obliged to fight against their own destruction.... Il Duce is not getting his maximum birthrate. But he is getting millions of lusty young soldiers. And he is regimenting his people – whether they are soldiers or not – by propaganda of the most persuasive sort. He has his people solidly behind him *now*.¹²⁶

But for how long? Mussolini was making speeches about the future of Fascism that looked to a sixty-year horizon, predicting the dominance of an expanded Italian state in the Mediterranean and North Africa.¹²⁷ But to what lengths would his people follow him? And to what lengths would the powers of Europe and America allow him to go?

Benito Mussolini was ready to find out.

Hubris

Throughout this extended honeymoon with the American press, Mussolini proved to be quite resilient. His armor of popularity was dented by the Fiumè and Matteotti incidents, but he escaped major criticism because his “action” in the late-1920s and early-1930s stood in sharp contrast to the apparent lethargy of other European nations and the Hoover administration in the wake of the 1929 crash. Mussolini’s Concordat with the Vatican was a public relations coup and elicited great support from American Catholics, including commendations from Archbishops O’Connell of Boston and Hayes of New

¹²⁶ C. H. Abad, “Mussolini is Always Right,” *Current History*, July 1932, in *The Reader’s Digest*, October 1932, pp. 15-17; “Body and Soul for Italy,” *Fortune*, July 1934, in *The Reader’s Digest*, September 1934, pp. 49-51. Of all of the articles in the July 1934 issue of *Fortune*, the vast majority of which were very positive, *The Reader’s Digest* chose to reprint the most negative portion of the most negative article in the issue. This was the only article it printed from *Fortune*, continuing its decidedly anti-Mussolini stance.

¹²⁷ “Mussolini’s Sixty-Year Look Forward,” *The Literary Digest*, 31 March 1934, p. 13.

York. Detroit's famous radio priest, Fr. Charles Coughlin, became one of his most vocal supporters through his weekly radio broadcasts that reached nearly ten million Americans. Perhaps most important was Mussolini's adept maneuver to distance himself from the other rising Fascist, Adolf Hitler. Americans may have harbored concerns about *Il Duce's* ambitions, but they were dwarfed by fears of the motives of the swastika-wearing corporal to the north.¹²⁸

But those ambitions never completely died away. Benito Mussolini still imagined a new Roman Empire. Not the hegemonic dominion of Caesar Augustus; such grandiose visions were unrealistic in a modern Europe so recently torn apart by war. Not the commercial dominance of medieval Venice; the world was still in the grips of the Depression. Not just an outlet for the Italian population, although Mussolini saw that as a necessity. Not simply colonies in the Balkans and Africa; Mussolini expected that Italy had a right to these and would pursue them, regardless of British and French exhortations against it. There was also that quintessential Italian feature that so often obscures rational behavior: pride. To Mussolini, Italy's pride still had a wound that had not healed and continued to fester, even more than the bitter defeat at Caporetto. Its name was Adowa.

In the late-nineteenth century, a newly unified Italy yearned to spread its power and influence to Africa, joining its European brethren as colonial overlords. Its first foothold was Eritrea, near the horn of Africa along the Red Sea routes used by Italian traders and migrants. Further inland was the independent empire of Abyssinia, later to be known as Ethiopia. Italian leaders saw Abyssinia as a natural direction for colonial

¹²⁸ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 33-40, 183.

expansion, but Abyssinia Emperor Menelik II would not submit quietly. In 1896, after disagreements over an earlier treaty and repeated Italian encroachments on Ethiopian territory incited a war, Menelik's armies met the Italian colonial army at Adowa. The Italians and their Eritrean mercenaries were terribly outnumbered on rough terrain and far from their supply lines. As the battle was joined, the Ethiopians took control of the high ground, the Italians became lost and separated, and Menelik's armies exploited these advantages. The end result was a horrible, humiliating defeat for the Italians that stopped their colonial ambitions cold and sent shock waves throughout Europe. It remained a stain on the pride of Italy, one that Mussolini was determined to erase.¹²⁹

Beyond Italian dignity, there were issues of parity and security. *Il Duce* had often railed against the inequity of wealth and power among European states. Dredging up a refrain from Versailles, Mussolini believed the time had come to expand Italy's African colonial empire – at the time consisting of Libya, Italian Somaliland, and Eritrea – especially considering the vast acreage controlled by France and Great Britain, and to give a necessary outlet for a growing Italian population and economy. But always in the back of his mind was the blight of Adowa on the Italian ego. As preparations for a campaign became action, Mussolini made references – some veiled, some not – to the need to avenge the forty-year-old loss and to take Ethiopia into the Italian Empire.

Mussolini had been working on a plan to take over Ethiopia since 1932. He believed that Britain and France had tacitly agreed to stay out of Italo-Ethiopian affairs

¹²⁹ Overy and Wheatcroft, pp. 166-7; Collier, pp. 122-3. For more on the war, see also A. J. Barker, *The Civilizing Mission: The Italo-Ethiopian War 1935-6* (London: Cassell, 1968); George Baer, *The Coming of the Italian-Ethiopian War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). For more on Italian colonialism in Africa, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

and that they recognized that area of Africa as under Italian influence. He had also convinced himself that neither would protest an invasion for fear of driving him into a friendlier relationship with Hitler. Meanwhile, Mussolini felt that he had little choice but to carry out his plan in 1935. In March 1935, Hitler announced the rearmament of Germany, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. Now, Italy seemed to have another competitor for colonial Africa, but more important, Mussolini was sure that Hitler's action would make Britain and France even more likely to give Italy a free hand in Ethiopia (which, in fact, French Prime Minister Pierre Laval had done in the accords that ended the Franco-Italian feud). In addition, Mussolini needed to act. He needed to act before Hitler did. He needed to act before Britain and France objected. Finally, he needed to act for the Italian people. He and the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* had built their power base because they took action, and Mussolini's own philosophy was that a Fascist leader must always move forward to stay powerful. In the midst of a global economic depression, and with a rising adversary on the other side of the Alps, that would be difficult to do in Italy. He had to act in Ethiopia – to restore Italy's pride and his own. On 3 October 1935, the attack began – with a bombing raid on Adowa.¹³⁰

The American press had heard Mussolini's proclamations and rhetoric, so the invasion was not a surprise to anyone. The backlash from the American press was immediate and nearly universal. Condemnations rang out from magazines and newspapers across the nation, calling the invasion unjustified and "murder." At the same

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 183-7; Jordan, "America's Mussolini," pp. 344-5; Collier, pp. 124-5. Robert Anthony Eden, then Great Britain's minister for League of Nations affairs, made one last offer to Mussolini to avoid war and ensuing League sanctions against Italy: part of the Ogaden desert bordering Italian Somaliland and the British port of Zelia on the Gulf of Aden, which only had access to land by camel. Mussolini's response was "I am not a collector of deserts."

time, however, many in the press and many American citizens recognized that Italy's actions were not unprecedented. They saw Ethiopia as a backwards, barbaric, slave-holding nation, and they drew parallels between Italy's attempted conquest to similar moves by Great Britain and France in Africa, India, and the Middle East, and even with the United States that decimated the Native American population in the name of Manifest Destiny. But that did not stop them from castigating Mussolini's aggression. He was even hanged and burned in effigy in some American cities. In larger cities, including New York, African-Americans, who were especially angry at the invasion, clashed in bloody urban brawls with Italian-Americans, many of whom were ardent supporters of Mussolini. Above all else, however, Americans and their journalists were adamant the United States must not get involved in the conflict, no matter how distasteful it was.¹³¹

That did not stop American magazines from heaping scorn upon *Il Duce*. Even his most stalwart advocates had to muffle their praise somewhat as their readers responded vehemently to the war. Business publications that heretofore had laid their palms at *Il Duce's* feet were now divided, with many of them, including *Fortune*, trying to stay neutral on the Ethiopian War. Others, such as *Business Week*, did not hesitate to support Italy's designs on Africa. Indeed, they reinforced Mussolini's arguments, claiming that Italy needed raw materials for future economic growth and should have the same colonial opportunities in Africa as those enjoyed by her European neighbors. Such open support, however, was rare. Most were either quiet on the subject or simply critical

¹³¹ Jordan, "American's Mussolini," pp. 347-53.

of war in general, while some saw this war as a tragedy for both Italy and Ethiopia and a signal of the end of Mussolini's power.¹³²

The Saturday Evening Post, probably the most pro-Mussolini American magazine and the one with the widest circulation, hedged in two post-invasion articles, focusing more on issues external to the war. An editorial a week after the invasion was mostly a call for the United States to stay out of the fray. "We cannot take up the case of native people versus Europeans in all parts of the world." A month later, Frank Simonds, who had shown great admiration for Mussolini throughout the years, wrote of the reasons for the invasion in a low key article. Although offering the requisite criticism for starting another war, especially against a fellow member of the League of Nations, Simonds sees the war almost a necessity because of Italy's domestic and financial conditions. France had agreed to it and the British had stayed silent until it was too late; by the time they raised objections, Mussolini could not withdraw without losing face and committing political suicide. "But what could he do?" Simonds asks. "His armies were already poised to strike.... And why, again, were the British, who had refused to lift a hand to arrest Japan in Manchuria, ready to go so far to stop Italy in Ethiopia?" Simonds does not congratulate Mussolini, but he reserves the bulk of his damnation for Great Britain for setting up Mussolini to take the fall. Simonds contributed another article to *The Atlantic Monthly* based on the same themes, but also claiming that Mussolini was driven to violent imperialism by the poverty, lack of food, and economic stagnation at home.

¹³² "Abyssinia for the Italians," *Business Week*, 23 February 1935, p. 24; "Ethiopia is an Enigma for Europe, but is a Tragedy for Mussolini," *Barron's*, 15 July 1935, p. 4; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 297-8.

The rest of the world ignored those concerns and naively believed Mussolini would do the same to keep the peace, even as Italians starved and Mussolini made his plans known. “Whatever judgment History may ultimately pass upon Benito Mussolini, it can hardly deny him recognition as the symbol of a new revolt against another inequality.”¹³³

Time initially defended Mussolini’s reasoning to take Ethiopia about six months before the invasion, but followed the crowd in turning against him after the first bombs fell. In May 1935, its writers agreed with the Fascist party line that great natural resources could be found in Ethiopia, which would be a boon to Italian industry but would go to waste under Emperor Haile Selassie’s primitive people. As for Britain and France, they had more to gain from Italy’s annexation than from opposing it, and their criticisms seemed empty compared to their own imperialist past and present.

In essence, this [Imperialism] was the keynote of Britain's Victoria more than half a century ago. The great Queen, with her pride in British valor and her joy that backward peoples should have the benefit of British rule, has a superficially different but basically similar counterpart in the Dictator of 1935, with his rousing trumps to Fascist valor and his real conviction that Ethiopians are savages who can properly be brought under Italian rule.

By October, the stories were quite different. The focus was now on Italians attacking Ethiopian towns with wild abandon as they exorcised the demons of Adowa, while the Ethiopians put up a futile but spirited defense. Ethiopia was no longer described as the land of riches, but rather as an albatross that would require “fifty years of sacrifice before reaping the commensurate reward.” In letters to *Time’s* editor, readers lampooned the

¹³³ “European Wars for Europeans,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 12 October 1935, p. 26; Frank H. Simonds, “Another War to End War?” *The Saturday Evening Post*, 23 November 1935, pp. 5-7, 93; Frank H. Simonds, “Benito Africanus,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1935, pp. 542-50.

perennial “Man of the Year” candidate as “Aggressor of the Year.” As a final shot at Mussolini, *Time*’s “Man of the Year” for 1935 was Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie.¹³⁴

While the *Post* and *Time* waffled, many other American magazines did not mince words. *Collier*’s had already become more adversarial, lumping Mussolini in with Stalin and Hitler as “foes of liberty.” After the invasion, its editors were even more outspoken. “Certainly no observing traveler returns from Germany or Italy without vivid impressions of the soul-sickness with which dictatorship has afflicted once-proud people. Dictators are efficient, but their efficiency is directed too often to evil ends.” This was a remarkable change of opinion from the same editors who once defended Mussolini’s tyrannical rule because he could “compel his followers to adopt measures” that were necessary but unpopular.¹³⁵

Other journals saw the Italo-Ethiopian War as simply a confirmation of what they had been saying all along. *The New Republic*, for example, pulled no punches against Mussolini in the wake of the invasion. Absolute power had absolutely corrupted *Il Duce*. “This is not war; it is murder.... [T]he spectacle of half-naked, practically unarmed, semi-savages, men, women, and children, being mowed down by machine-guns, tanks, and aerial bombardment has shocked and sickened the civilized world, and the repercussions will cost Italy dear for a long time to come.” *The Nation* pondered whether Mussolini’s ultimate goal might be to supplant the British Empire with a new Roman one, beginning

¹³⁴ “Intolerable Presumption!” *Time*, 27 May 1935, pp. 23-4; “Marie Antoinette & Sanctions,” *Time*, 14 October 1935; “Solemn Hours,” *Time*, 14 October 1935; Letters to the editor, *Time*, 16 December 1935, p. 12; “Man of the Year,” *Time*, 5 January 1936, pp. 13-7.

¹³⁵ Ybarra, “So You Won’t Talk,” pp. 9, 58-9; “We’ll Have Our Way,” *Collier*’s, 9 February 1935, p. 54; “The Rights that are Ours,” *Collier*’s, 26 October 1935, p. 66; “Tyrants are Popular,” p. 20.

in Africa and spreading through the Middle East. *The Reader's Digest*, ever critical of Fascism, continue to publish only articles disparaging Mussolini and sympathetic to Ethiopia, including one *Current History* article calling Haile Selassie "that grave and cultured little Semite" who, along with his ministers, "outslave any of Ethiopia's 3,000,000 serfs" in their death struggle with the Italian armies. *The Literary Digest* was already skeptical in an April 1935 piece, in which Mussolini was quoted repeatedly as promising, "I will not break the peace." After the invasion, there was no dearth of quotes from newspapers and world leaders condemning Mussolini and his defiance of the League of Nations. A 1935 *Harper's* biography by John Gunther compared him to Adolf Hitler – already a hateful comparison – and called him a "prima donna" who never takes advice from others.¹³⁶ Just a year or two prior, even some of the most critical voices in the American press were offering grudging admiration for Mussolini's peaceful resolutions with the Holy See and France, his vocal support for Austria, his exhortations against Nazism, and his attempts to keep Italy's economy alive. By the end of 1935, he was *persona non grata* throughout most of Europe and the United States.

Mussolini's image in America never recovered from the Ethiopian war. His mercurial career had made him the centerpiece of the American foreign press and had brought him fame throughout the world. Now, his most resolute devotees were suddenly

¹³⁶ "The Week," *The New Republic*, 16 October 1935, p. 253; "Mussolini: Megalomaniac," *The New Republic*, 20 November 1935, pp. 41-3; Albert Viton, "After Ethiopia – England?" *The Nation*, 16 October 1935, pp. 429-30; Ignatius Phayre, "Has Ethiopia a Chance?" *Current History*, September 1935, in *The Reader's Digest*, October 1935, pp. 5-8; Edward Price Bell, "Mussolini Vows Not to Break the Peace," *The Literary Digest*, 27 April 1935, p. 11; "Sanctions, Economic Dilemma for Mussolini," *The Literary Digest*, 19 October 1935, p. 36; "A Sword of Damocles over Mussolini," *The Literary Digest*, 26 October 1935, pp. 8-9; "Mussolini's Defiance of the League," *The Literary Digest*, 2 November 1935, p. 11; Gunther, pp. 296-308. Gunther, while professing that the Ethiopian invasion was for Mussolini's personal ambition, was somewhat of an apologist of the invasion, noting in the same article that "Abyssians are not necessarily to be lamented."

quiet. His most scornful critics were louder than ever. The American press no longer viewed him as the practical, realist, hard-nosed leader that had saved Italy, but rather as a violent, imperialist, war-hungry tyrant threatening the stability of Europe. As the press went, so went public opinion, and later, governmental policy. In a matter of months, Mussolini's popularity plummeted in the United States and around throughout Europe. Soon, only one major political leader would be willing to work with him, and the price of friendship with Adolf Hitler would prove to be terrible. Benito Mussolini had no idea that, by invading Ethiopia, he had signed his own death warrant.

Chapter IV: American Public Opinion

Sixty years after his death, it would be very hard to find an American who would have a favorable opinion of Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini. He has been relegated to the ignominy of a compatriot of Adolf Hitler, almost universally recognized as one of the most evil men of the twentieth century. Mussolini, then, has become evil by association. The idea that he may have once been idolized by Americans seems anathema at best, perhaps even blasphemous.

And yet, that is indeed the case. The idolatry was not unanimous, nor was it always especially vehement. Nevertheless, for most of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, most Americans held very favorable views of the Italian dictator. There were pockets of resistance, especially among intellectuals (some of whom were émigrés from Italy), some journalists (as discussed earlier), and other American liberals, including a few pockets within the Italian-American community. These voices, however, were drowned out by the louder outcries of support from more conservative Americans, who encompassed the majority of citizens at the time. Even some liberals had reason to support Mussolini, although they did not always agree with his practices. On the whole, aside from Italy, Mussolini found his greatest well of support within the United States.

The All-American Duce

A primary reason for that support was Mussolini's vocal resistance to Bolshevism. Americans, aside from the far-left of the political spectrum, were opposed

to the rising Red tide emanating from the Soviet Union. For those on the right wing, the fear of Bolshevism was supplemented by a general distrust of internationalism, immigrants, and progressive agendas. They lamented the chaos of World War I and its fractured aftermath and the rise in popularity of socialist ideas, unionism, and social welfare legislation. It was little wonder that groups like the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan ascribed to Fascist doctrines. Woodrow Wilson's legacy was an end to America's isolation, and that scared not only the xenophobes, but also many in the middle-class who worried about the degradation of American values. This *bourgeois* class saw Mussolini as an enforcer of conservative values against unrestrained liberalism. A common chorus during the 1920s was that perhaps the United States might need a Mussolini to protect against Leninism crossing its borders. As for those on the left wing, many of them ignored Fascism at first. They did not see it as a threat to communism and socialism until the 1930s (in part due to Hitler's violent anti-Bolshevism), and some even saw Italian Fascism as an outgrowth of socialism. They reserved their vitriol for the socialists who missed their opportunity in Italy and allowed Fascism to take the stage.¹³⁷

But the real battle for public opinion was in the center. It was here that the competing themes of "Mussolini, the pragmatic statesman" and "Mussolini, the oppressive tyrant" were the most pronounced. As Wilsonianism and progressivism were viewed more and more as failed experiments, many Americans agreed with editors from

¹³⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 205-20; "Mussolini and the Klan," p. 5. Of course, the KKK never publicly supported Mussolini, as it was anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant. For more on the reactions of right-wing Americans, see Norman Hapgood, *Professional Patriots* (New York: Boni, 1927); Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1924); and Lawrence Dennis, *The Coming of American Fascism* (New York: Harper, 1936). For more on the attitudes of liberal Americans, see William Y. Elliott, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics: Syndicalism, Fascism, and the Constitutional State* (New York: Macmillan, 1928).

The Saturday Evening Post and *Collier's* and writers like S. S. McClure and Ida Tarbell. Fascism was succeeding in Italy because mass democracy was on the wane. To these adherents, Mussolini may have been Machiavellian, but he was getting the job done in Italy. Intellectuals, including Herbert W. Schneider and Charles Beard, praised the Corporate State as an enlightened economic theory with national planning that transcended class. At the same time, Fascism was an open, experimental doctrine that preached national pride and spirit. This made some Americans see it as an improvement on the American system, especially as they read about the great advances in the Italian economy and infrastructure and Mussolini's legions of loyal followers – a stark contrast to the scandal of Harding, the lethargy of Coolidge, and the ineptitude of Hoover. But others saw the violence and repression of the Fascist regime and saw a statesman who would turn pragmatism into unyielding dogmatism. To them, the words of *The Nation*, *The Reader's Digest*, and *The New Republic* rang more true. They also listened to Gaetano Salvemini, the leading exiled Italian intellectual and later Harvard professor, spearheading the accusations of tyranny against *Il Duce*.¹³⁸

Despite the rifts among the journalistic and intellectual communities over his merits, the American public as a whole maintained a largely complimentary view of Mussolini. By heaping honors upon him, the popular press gave Americans what they wanted to hear: a new man was in Rome who was strongly anti-Bolshevik and believed in order, stability, and industry. He was Italy's Henry Ford, a man of action, and many Americans identified with the man and his vision.

¹³⁸ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 220-39; Salvemini, "Who Opposes Mussolini?" p. 324. See also Herbert W. Schneider, *Making the Fascist State* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1928).

The Matteotti affair of 1924 caused some of the first widespread criticism of Mussolini and his tactics. After avoiding any major public relations disasters for the rest of the 1920s, Mussolini saw his popularity in America fade during the 1930s as he made his ambitions more apparent. Nevertheless, as late as 1939, Americans did not see Italy as a threat. In a September 1938 Gallup Poll asking whether President Roosevelt should "openly criticize Hitler and Mussolini for their war-like attitude," 62 percent of Americans responded "no." An October 1939 poll found that 73 percent of Americans did not feel that Italy would pose a "serious threat" to the U. S. in the next fifty years.¹³⁹

Catholics in America

The United States has always been a Protestant nation. By the early twentieth century, American Catholics had begun to break through into higher echelons of society and influence. New York Governor Al Smith and Ambassador to Great Britain Joseph P. Kennedy were two examples of prominent Catholics who wielded great influence in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, American Roman Catholics, many of whom were immigrants or only a generation or two removed from their immigrant ancestors, were still fighting for legitimacy when Mussolini appeared on the world scene. Their opinions of *Il Duce* were colored not only by the press, but also by their personal experiences.

On the whole, American Catholics were biased favorably toward Benito Mussolini during his first twelve years of power. Catholicism and democracy have never

¹³⁹ Gallup Poll, 25 September 1938, "Public Opinion Online," Lexis-Nexis (12 November 2000), Accession no. 0277886; Gallup Poll, 5 October 1939, "Public Opinion Online," Lexis-Nexis (12 November 2000), Accession no. 0273910.

meshed well; a strong leader who inspired loyalty and obedience among his followers to do what was best for all, even if it was not always pleasant, fit much more cleanly with the Church's philosophy. So, many American Catholics could understand Mussolini's intent, even if they did not want it from their own government. It was even easier to swallow when American luminaries such as Archbishops O'Connell and Hayes and Monsignor Fulton Sheen raved about the "resurrection" of Italy and its spiritual life under Mussolini. And then there was Father Charles Coughlin, Detroit's famous and influential "radio priest" who broadcast his unabashedly pro-Mussolini message nationwide to an audience of ten million listeners in the early 1930s. He backed the Corporate State and defended Mussolini after the Ethiopian War and even after he agreed to deport Italian Jews to German concentration camps. But the event that most captured the allegiance of American Catholics was the Lateran Concordat of 1929. Although many had always viewed Mussolini as sympathetic to the Church, the official burying of the hatchet made him a champion for Roman Catholicism in the eyes of the faithful around the world.¹⁴⁰

This is not to say that the praise was unanimous among Catholics. There were many Catholics, both ordained and lay, who echoed the concerns of the liberal press: the lack of personal freedom in Italy, the violence of the *fascisti*, and even the erosion of spiritualism among Italians, in contrast to the comments of others. Nevertheless, most of the American Catholic flock was predisposed to view Mussolini in a favorable light, and many of their shepherds bolstered that view. The most vociferous calls for support among Catholics came from an obvious quarter: Italian-Americans.

¹⁴⁰ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 183-197.

Italian-Americans and *Il Duce*

Italian-Americans felt a double sting of discrimination. First, as has been discussed earlier, they were unwanted immigrants, mostly poor, and a threat to many Americans who feared losing their jobs to cheap labor. Their Mediterranean complexion (at least for the southern Italians, who made up the bulk of Italian immigrants to the United States) and their louder, livelier, and to some, lazier culture made them stand out among the more reserved and austere “native” Americans in the Northeast cities where most of them settled. Second, they were nearly all Roman Catholic adherents in a Protestant nation. Not only were they different, but their God was different, too. They were the downtrodden masses struggling in *terra incognita* and looking for a hero.

Benito Mussolini became that hero for many Italian-Americans. It has already been discussed how his ascendancy provided a boost of national and ethnic pride to these immigrants, and how some of them formed *ex patria* Fascist organizations in major American cities, later confederated into the FLNA. These groups, with some direct help from the Italian government, spread Fascist propaganda among Italian-American communities through pamphleteering, radio broadcasts, social organizations such as the The Sons of Italy and the Balilla youth group, and the Italian-American press. Although many Italian-American newspapers had a small circulation, a few – including New York’s *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* and San Francisco’s *L’Italia* – were quite influential in the community and in political circles. When propaganda failed, some Italian-American *fascisti* turned to violence and blackmail to gain support for Mussolini. However, the solidarity with *Il Duce* professed by many Italian-Americans was often

merely nostalgia for their homeland rather than ideological allegiance. Mussolini's calls for national pride resonated deeply within their hearts, but they were still aliens and alienated in a foreign land where democracy reigned supreme. When the American press praised the rebirth of Italy under Mussolini, Italian-Americans echoed the cheers. When it condemned Fascism's excesses, they stayed quiet. Perhaps more than anything, they were just trying to become good Americans.¹⁴¹

While Italian-Americans were Mussolini's staunchest supporters, they also spawned one of the first anti-Fascist movements in the world. This backlash was centered among Italian-American workers, and like many labor movements, embraced the communist, socialist, and even anarchist traditions of the left. These groups took to the streets in protest in New York and other major cities soon after Mussolini's coup. They countered the pro-Fascist press with their own newspapers, most notably *Il Nuovo Mondo* in New York. They were encouraged and aided by the *fuorusciti*, the anti-Fascist political exiles from Italy who had escaped to the United States. They knew what Mussolini's Corporate State meant for Italian labor, and they felt a duty to set the record straight for the American public.¹⁴²

The anti-Fascist movement among Italian-Americans was handicapped from the beginning. It was never very large: at most, it included about 10 percent of Italian-Americans. It received little support from the U. S. government, which was still trying to maintain friendly relations with Italy, or from other labor leaders and organizations. In

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 84, 95-110. See also Giovanni E. Schiavo, *The Italians in Chicago: a Study in Americanization* (Chicago: Italian American Publishing, 1928; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1975).

¹⁴² John P. Diggins, "The Italo-American Anti-Fascist Opposition," *The Journal of American History* 54, no. 3 (1967): pp. 579-80.

fact, Samuel Gompers of the AFL actually supported Mussolini's economic policies for Italy. Groups clashed repeatedly with pro-Fascist mobs, at times resulting in bloodshed. Anti-Fascists would resort to violence of their own, including mail bombs to *Fasci* leaders and newspapers. This only undermined what little credibility these opposition groups had among Italian immigrants and with the rest of the American populace.¹⁴³

Ultimately, these opposition groups became their own worst enemy. Italian workers were never fully united in their opposition to Mussolini. The Fascist propaganda worked, and the old nationalistic feelings were still strong. Local and federal officials stepped in to curb the violence, and in the process, they helped split the opposition. The members could not even agree on a common ideology. The Anti-Fascist Alliance of North America survived only briefly in the mid-1920s before disintegrating over arguments between the anarcho-communist wing and the socialist-liberal wing.¹⁴⁴ These internal disputes allowed the Fascist propaganda to continue to stir up patriotic passion among Italian-Americans and smothered any chance for the anti-Fascists to become a viable social or political force in the United States.

The Italian-American anti-Fascists did have the support of the liberal intellectuals. Most American politicians also agreed with their platform, although some kept their views quieter than others did. LaGuardia, the former army captain and traveling salesman for Wilsonianism, became openly opposed as a congressman to the Fascist League of North America chapters in New York that pledged allegiance to Mussolini.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 582-6.

¹⁴⁴ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 114-7.

The movement gained a little momentum in the wake of the Matteotti murder, but this was short-lived. It came back to life again after the outbreak of the Ethiopian War. At long last, the American public was willing to listen as it became disillusioned with Mussolini and his ambitions for conquest. The war, however, caused most Italian-Americans to rally around their homeland, the cause, and its leader, which alienated the anti-Fascist sect even more from the rest of the Italian-American community.¹⁴⁵

Labor and Business

Most members of American labor unions echoed the concerns of their Italian-American brethren. Although their leaders may have ignored or even supported Mussolini, most of the men in the trenches saw *Il Duce* as simply a capitalist opportunist. To them, his Corporate State was a conspiracy in which American business was inextricably intertwined. Like many of their Italian-American counterparts, they believed that the same corruption and violence that built Fascism would soon destroy it. Mussolini would survive and even prosper, however, in large part due to the efforts of American businesses. To many American CEOs, Italy was “ruthlessly efficient – seemingly non-political and non-bureaucratic,” emphasizing discipline and production in all business practices.¹⁴⁶ They also envied Mussolini’s ability as dictator virtually to outlaw labor unions. Perhaps there was some truth in the unions’ accusations after all.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 88, 95; Diggins, “Anti-Fascist Opposition,” p. 589. For more about the opinions of Italian-Americans concerning the Ethiopian War, see John Norman, “Italo-American Opinion in the Ethiopian Crisis: A Study in Fascist Propaganda” (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 1942).

¹⁴⁶ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 176-8; Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” p. 87.

Although not universal, American business was hearty in its approbation of *Il Duce*. The list of business leaders who extolled the virtues of the Fascist Corporate State was a roll call of the influential and well connected, many of whom had personally visited Italy and Mussolini. From U. S. Steel's Elbert Gary to Wall Street investor Otto Kahn to U. S. Chamber of Commerce head Julius Barnes, the list was long and impressive. Thomas Lamont, head of the J. P. Morgan banking network, soon became a *de facto* business consultant for the Italian government and was instrumental in securing large loans for Italy, including \$100 million in 1926 alone.¹⁴⁷

Eventually, the American business world had to address the fact that they were supporting a man whose political methods were antithetical to the beliefs of the nation that had made them what they were. Most leaders apologized for Mussolini's authoritarianism, saying that Italy was just going through a phase, like a teenager who rebels against the mainstream until he learns to act like an adult. Italy was young and still reeling from the Great War. It would grow up soon enough and learn to play the game of democracy with all of the other nations. Some, however, made no apologies for Mussolini's dissatisfaction with democratic ways, and others even publicly agreed with his policies, at least as far as economic issues were concerned.¹⁴⁸

The business press, for the most part, mimicked the feelings of their audience. At first, most praised Mussolini's leadership style, some tried to ignore it, and a few journals, including *Forbes* and the *Journal of Commerce* were outspoken opponents of it.

¹⁴⁷ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 147-8. See also Thomas Lamont, "Italy's Economic and Social Progress Since 1922," *Survey*, 1 March 1927, pp. 723-5.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

Even those critical of his authoritarianism felt obligated to applaud him for “rescuing” Italy from the threat of a radical communist or socialist takeover. In 1927, after Mussolini challenged the world that no country had made as much material progress as Fascist Italy had, some editors turned against him. Later, while the U. S. was in the depths of the Depression under President Hoover, Italy was able to continue production and maintain wages. This caused most of the American business world, including some of those that had previously eschewed him, to praise Mussolini as an ideal example of what a modern, corporate-minded leader should be.¹⁴⁹

As he did with the foreign press, Mussolini put on a good show for visiting businessmen to encourage American ventures in Italy. He implemented a “most-favored-nation” style treaty allowing U. S. imports into the country without harsh duties. When the U. S. pressured Italy to repay its war loans, however, Mussolini played the pauper. It was here that his efforts to woo American business paid the greatest dividends. In part due to the lobbying of Thomas Lamont and others, and in part due to the excellent bargaining skills of Italian Finance Minister Count Volpi (chosen because his negotiation style was similar to those of American businessmen), the U. S. in 1925 renegotiated these loans, giving Italy an absurdly low interest rate of 0.4 percent on \$2.4 billion and an upward sliding payment scale that stretched out to the year 1987. In essence, this deal was a cancellation of nearly 80 percent of the total amount that Italy would have paid.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-62.

¹⁵⁰ Jordan, “The American Image of Mussolini,” pp. 84, 101-2; DeSanti, pp. 83-98. Great Britain and France also renegotiated the terms of their loan agreements, resulting in effective interest rates of 3.3% and 1.6%, respectively, still making the Italian agreement a major coup for Volpi and Mussolini.

The Government: Official and Unofficial Views

This deal in particular shows the attitude of the U. S. government, influenced by business interests and the American public, toward Mussolini in the early years: he was a man with whom the United States could do business. Washington did not perceive him as a threat; in fact, he could be a useful counterweight to the threat of Bolshevism in Europe. He had legitimate authority, personally bestowed upon him by King Vittorio Emmanuel III. He did not threaten U. S. trade or interests abroad; rather, he actively sought to do business with the United States. With the wane of Wilsonian liberalism in Washington, any opposition to dealings with dictators was weak at best. Finally, many of the heavy hitters in Washington enjoyed working with Mussolini because he was willing to work with them. Frank Kellogg, Henry Stimson, and even Franklin D. Roosevelt admired him for his cooperation in disarmament and peace negotiations. The U. S. State Department appreciated him for supporting the Kellogg-Briand Pact and the Dawes and Young loan plans. President Calvin Coolidge agreed with Mussolini's stance on labor issues, especially when he declared strikes and lockouts illegal in Italy. Meanwhile, Mussolini continued to market himself as a powerful but moderate statesman. Perhaps his most significant domestic feat was the Lateran Concordat of 1929. To many, this was proof that Mussolini was rational, not radical, in his governing of Italy.¹⁵¹ For over a decade, Mussolini found helpful partners across the Atlantic.

Still, there were concerns in Washington. The United States had just fought in a bloody global war to make the world safe for democracy. Now, it was tacitly approving

¹⁵¹ Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 267-70; Jordan, "The American Image of Mussolini," p. 215.

the installation of a dictator in Italy, an ally during that war. Although the United States sent congratulations and cordial platitudes to Mussolini in his first days, it did not send a high-level delegation to Rome to meet him. Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes bypassed Rome during a visit to Europe soon after the March on Rome, perhaps to distance America from Fascism and to avoid the appearance of an official endorsement. Nevertheless, the three American presidents of the 1920s – Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover – said virtually nothing about Mussolini or Fascism, either for or against, during their terms in office. Harding’s short tenure was marred by scandal, and Coolidge brought public reticence to a new level (although he privately concurred with some of Mussolini’s actions). Although Hoover was quiet during his presidency, he was more vocal before (as Secretary of Commerce under Coolidge) and after he was in office. Secretary Hoover saw great economic prospects in Mussolini’s Italy. “Italy offers a special opportunity for American investment in reproductive enterprise,” he wrote to President Coolidge, adding that Ambassador Child’s replacement should be “a man of large industrial, financial and commercial vision.” Ex-President Hoover, however, compared Mussolini to fellow despots Stalin and Hitler and the Corporate State to Roosevelt’s NRA.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt ascended to the presidency in 1933, he held a sincere respect for Mussolini and his achievements thus far, partly because of the similar economic challenges that each leader faced. Roosevelt considered Mussolini to be a “comrade in crisis.” He also wanted to continue diplomatic ties with Italy and hoped to use Mussolini as a mediator for peace, if necessary, against an increasingly militant Nazi

Germany. Mussolini held a similar respect for Roosevelt as a leader, although he did not necessarily like him or fully trust him. He even read Roosevelt's book, *Looking Forward*, and wrote a critique on it.¹⁵² Nevertheless, this mutual respect would not be enough to prevent the inevitable rift between a champion of liberty and an imperialist and revisionist state.

America Sours on Mussolini

In the first half of the 1930s, Mussolini was still on good terms with the United States. The U. S. Embassy in Italy held mostly favorable views of the Italian *capo*, reporting back to Washington that the Fascist domestic program had created stability and popular support for Mussolini. He was good for Italy, even though he was a dictator. This opinion soon changed dramatically. On 5 December 1934, small bands of Italian and Ethiopian troops clashed at Wal-Wal near the Ethiopia-Italian Somaliland border. Two weeks later, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie requested a gesture for peace from the United States. For almost seven months, Washington avoided the fray. Many officials did not believe that Mussolini would risk a war over such a minor incident. In July, Selassie made stronger appeals for U. S. intervention. This time, Secretary of State Cordell Hull rejected his appeal, leaving the issue in the hand of the League of Nations. At the same time, however, he did put Mussolini on notice that the United States would not welcome an annexation of Ethiopia by Italy. On the suggestions of France and Great

¹⁵² DeSanti, pp. 72-4; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, pp. 267-8, 279-81.

Britain, Roosevelt sent a personal appeal to Mussolini to keep the peace. Mussolini responded that it was too late – he needed a military victory over Ethiopia.¹⁵³

Roosevelt and Hull knew that they could not stop the war. Americans would never support another entanglement in a foreign war, nor did they care about the fate of Ethiopia. With Great Britain and France standing on the sidelines, Roosevelt had no plans to make the U. S. a third-party combatant. He did prohibit private loans to Italy, restrict its credit with the U. S., and embargo arms and other goods. Mussolini was outraged. He compared Roosevelt's actions to the disputes over Texas and Cuba that respectively resulted in the Mexican and Spanish-American Wars. He denounced the sanctions, claiming that other countries had made similar moves without such reactions, "but when Italy proceeds to rectify the wrongs which have been committed against her...and to proceed to a legitimate expansion...they talk about sanctions."¹⁵⁴

It was obvious to Roosevelt that Mussolini would not retreat. In a speech on 2 October 1935, just before the invasion of Ethiopia, Roosevelt alluded to the conflict and portrayed Italy as a belligerent nation. Later, in a letter to the editor of *Fortune*, he labeled Mussolini and Stalin as "blood brothers." The love affair between Washington and Rome was over. Roosevelt could no longer trust Mussolini to uphold treaty commitments or to act as the ally that Italy once was. The disillusionment would extend to the American populace. They began to realize that Mussolini's ambition would not be easily checked and that he was not the benevolent leader that he portrayed himself to be.

¹⁵³ DeSanti, pp. 57-9; Mary Ruth Millsap, "Mussolini and the United States: Italo-American Relations, 1935-41" (Thesis, University of California-Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 5-20.

¹⁵⁴ Long to Hull, 17 September 1935, *US Foreign Relations, 1935*, Vol. 1, pp. 752-61: quoted in Millsap, p. 34.

Businesses began to lose interest in Italy. The only group that continued in its support was the Italian-American population. However, even their enthusiasm waned after the creation of the Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936, the anti-Semitic decrees of 1938, and Mussolini's support of Generalissimo Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Any remaining support would almost completely vanish after Italy's invasion of France in 1940.¹⁵⁵ Once idolized, Mussolini was now vilified, and he had brought it all upon himself.

¹⁵⁵ Millsap, p. 40-1; Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism*, p. 278; Ernest E. Rossi, "Italian Americans and U. S. Relations with Italy in the Cold War," in *Proceedings of the 9th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association, The United States and Italy: The First Two Hundred Years*, ed. Humbert S. Nelli (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1977), pp. 111-2.

Epilogue: The *Duce* that Could Have Been

During the 1920s and 1930s, Europe was groping its way through the darkness left by the horror of World War I. The once-great powers of Britain and France were struggling to rebuild. Spain was drifting into civil war. The old empire of the Habsburgs was now a collection of minor states starting over again. Germany was the focus of all the hatred and vitriol left from the war. It had its own problems and spent most of the 1920s trying to recover from an economic catastrophe. It would not be until the mid-1930s that Hitler and the Nazis would have enough power to make their nation strong again. Finally, there was Italy, a nation barely fifty years old when Mussolini assumed power. Italy and its leader found little respect and less cooperation from its European neighbors. Britain and France shunned their former ally, and the rising Nazis in Germany saw little value in the other Fascist European state. Italy was almost entirely isolated.

The one nation that held the most promise for friendship and partnership in global affairs was the United States. In thirteen years as prime minister, Mussolini won the hearts and minds of the most powerful nation on the globe at the time. From trade to diplomacy to public relations, *Il Duce* was a poster child for Dale Carnegie. He knew the value of image. By chance, he had entered the world scene at the right time and was able to bill himself as the model of the new, vibrant, proactive leader. Although they may not have wanted him as their leader, most Americans agreed that he was a perfect match for Italy. Mussolini could get things done.

Then came the Ethiopian invasion, and Americans soured on Italy. Great Britain and France were still smarting from Mussolini's disregard for their opinions on the matter; now, they neither trusted nor respected *Il Duce*. The Ethiopian fracas forced him to look elsewhere to fulfill his goal of gaining legitimacy for Italy. He did not like Hitler, nor did he fully agree with the head Nazi's politics, but Hitler was willing to listen to Mussolini – something that most other world leaders refused to do. Their marriage was one of convenience for Hitler and necessity for Mussolini. Unfortunately, for Mussolini and all of Italy, there were strings attached to the deal. This was no cooperative venture to Hitler; it was simply a way to secure one front so that he could concentrate on his plans for the other two. By the time Mussolini fully understood Hitler's intentions, it was too late and he was in too deep. Ultimately, Hitler led Mussolini into a war that the latter did not want when he and his nation were not ready to fight. The master Machiavellian had been used by a more sinister one. It would eventually cost him his life.

The United States in the 1920s and 1930s seemed ready and willing to work with Mussolini. The U. S. government would even have agreed to allow Italy to have economic and political influence in Ethiopia, as long as it did not include complete military annexation. But Mussolini could not restrain his ambition. His greed alienated the one nation that was his best hope for becoming a major player in world affairs. The U. S. would never have fully accepted his autocratic style, but Italy was never a pariah nation like the Soviet Union. America could have found a way to do business with Italy, and Mussolini would have benefited tremendously.

This opens the door to one of myriad “what-if” questions in history. What if Mussolini had not attacked Ethiopia, thus remaining on good terms with the United States? Would the two nations have formed even closer ties? Would Italy have sided with the Allies in World War II? Would Hitler have risked war in 1939 with a potential enemy, rather than an ally, on his southern front? Alas, the Ethiopian War did occur, thus making it impossible to answer these questions. World War II still would have happened, but the events and the outcome may have been profoundly different, if not for one man’s hubris. After all of the propaganda, all of the public relations, and all of the business and political deals, Mussolini destroyed in a few months the delicate favorable relationship he had built with the United States for over a decade. In the end, he destroyed himself.

Sixty years later, the legacy of Mussolini has started to fade. He is not seen as the personification of evil like Adolf Hitler. His name has no connection to the Cold War’s “Evil Empire” of the Soviet Union. He is not vilified for mass genocide (although he eventually yielded to the Nazis insistence on deporting Italian Jews to concentration camps). Instead, to many Americans, he is slowly becoming a footnote in history, “that other guy” who fought against the Allies in World War II. For Italians, the relationship is much more complex. He is inextricably intertwined in their history and their coming of age as a nation and a people. He led them to war and ruin, but first, he made them an international power and restored their pride and prestige. Even today, the name “Mussolini” carries a wealth of connotations, both good and bad, for Italians. His name is rarely mentioned in conversation. He is still a touchy subject: a source of pride for some, and embarrassment for others. Nevertheless, his influence is still evident in Italy,

from the political parties that still draw from Fascist ideas (and his granddaughter, Alessandra, who is a Chamber deputy) to the *autostrade* that slice through the Apennines to Turin's renovated and rebuilt *Stadio Olimpico*, home of the 2006 Winter Olympics and first built under the name *Stadio Mussolini*.

Few Americans realize today how friendly the United States once was with Mussolini. Few would believe how easily Italy could have been an ally in World War II instead of an enemy. But there once was a time when *Il Duce* ruled not only Italy, but also the American press. In both cases, he allowed his ego to take control and squander the opportunity. He once told Isaac Marcossou that his successor had not yet been born. He was right. There never could have been another Mussolini.

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