

Benito Mussolini: template of the modern dictator?

By R.J.B. Bosworth

Reading University, UK, and University of Western Australia

One hundred years ago, at least in the world that thought itself civilized, dictators were rare and half-admirable beings. They were men summoned in an emergency who, once the time of trial was over, retreated to their farms and ordinary virtues. This had been their constitutional role in the Roman Republic and this was how Cincinnatus and Fabius Maximus were still remembered in school history and Latin texts. This was how George Washington was thought to have behaved in that new and ideal Republic, the United States.

How completely matters have changed since then! In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a long list of dictators presses forward on a register of cruelty and shame: Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe, Augusto Pinochet, Saddam Hussein and, dominating them all in his embodiment of genocide and evil, Adolf Hitler. Mention of the German *Führer* is a reminder that, between the wars, Europe was scoured by such men; by October 1938, authoritarian regimes ruled every European state from the USSR in the east to Spain and Portugal in the west, with only Scandinavia, the Low countries, Britain and France remaining liberal democracies. The period that separated the First and Second World wars, then, was what historians have called the 'age of dictators', the 'locust years' of Hitler, Stalin, Franco and the rest.

Yet the first dictator to take over a European country in this era and, in manifold ways, the template for all dictators there and elsewhere in the world also after 1945 was none of the above. This model of the malign and malevolent modern dictator was the Fascist *Duce* (Leader), Benito Mussolini. He became Prime Minister of Italy, aged only 39, after his armed followers marched on the capital, Rome, on 28 October 1922. His regime hardened into an open and 'totalitarian' dictatorship (the word totalitarian thereafter spread from Italian into other languages) from 3

January 1925, when Mussolini took full responsibility for the violence that had been employed by Fascists since their foundation in 1919 (and had caused some 3000 political murders).

Over recent months, Mussolini has been back in the news for reasons great and small. Slivers of his brain matter were put on sale on E-bay last November and, after an outcry, had to be withdrawn in embarrassment. The long suppressed diaries of his last lover (on an endless list), Claretta Petacci, were published in Italian edition (and badly need translation into English). They portray a bored, brutal and blustering fifty-five year old who can talk cheerfully of murdering all the Jews in Italy, as well as 'four million' of his subjects, bizarrely deemed the lineal heirs through 'fifty generations' of the freedmen of classical Rome, who had never lost the imprint of slaves. This same racist killer on the loose also found time and purpose in ringing his lover (she was younger than Mussolini's elder daughter) twelve times and more per day, to be assured that his body was beautiful, to calm her irritation at his latest infidelity or just to reiterate that his wife had never really understood him.

Despite such stark revelation of the dictator's animality, egoism and banality, Mussolini is making a comeback in the Italy ruled by the not totally dissimilar figure of Silvio Berlusconi (and in some emigrant communities). Early in 2010, there was further bathetic evidence of the widespread contemporary ignorance of Mussolini's inadequacies and crimes when a brief storm broke out over news that a collection of his speeches had become Italy's best selling iPhone application. Mussolini's bones may rest in a family tomb at Predappio in the Romagna but the dictator's ghost still stalks abroad.

There are many explanations for this Mussolini revival. The prime one is that Hitler, the *Duce's* Axis partner in launching the Second World War, is such a talismanic figure in present memory, especially given that the evil of this conflict is to a great extent confined to being the 'war against the Jews'. If Hitler is the sole agent of the Holocaust, Mussolini can wriggle free of guilt, even

from his regime's adoption of cruel Anti-Semitic legislation from 1938.

The appalling shadow of 'Auschwitz', however, should not be allowed to cloak other features of Fascism's 'black record'. Here was a dictatorship which suppressed all other political parties and free trade unions, rigorously censored the press and blocked its subjects from receiving needed information. It sponsored a pervasive secret police and regularly infringed the rule of law. It celebrated war and waged it, ruthlessly killing 100 000 Arabs in Libya and at least 300 000 Ethiopians. It used period 'weapons of mass destruction', including poison gas. And, when it came to the Second World War, it at once showed itself to be grossly incompetent, worst of all the combatants at mobilizing its economy and society, despite the stentorian past propaganda and boasting.

Perhaps a veil of Catholic mercy can be extended over Mussolini, given that he does on occasion seem to have had a half-awareness of his own weaknesses and failure. Yet, in our own age too ready to worship celebrity and 'leadership', it is important to remember that democracy is to be preferred to dictatorship and that those who aspire to absolute power are likely to find the experience absolutely corrupting of their own personality and purpose. The Fascist *Duce* was indeed a historic villain.