

# Review Essays

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## INTERPRETING MUSSOLINI

Joes, Anthony James. *Mussolini*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1982. Pp. 405.

Knox, MacGregor. *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Pp. 385.

Mack Smith, Denis. *Mussolini*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982. Pp. 429.

The appearance of three new studies of Mussolini will perpetuate rather than resolve the longstanding controversies concerning the Duce and the significance of his role in history. Postwar interpretations of Mussolini have usually followed two main lines in English-language publications. One group of writers tends to stress his grand gestures and catastrophic failures, comparing him unfavorably with Hitler as an ideological dictator, and dismissing him in general as a political opportunist and ineffective military leader. Another but smaller group of scholars treats Mussolini with greater seriousness, noting the brutality of his regime both at home and in areas it tried to control, and seeking to identify the sources of Mussolini's goals and mistakes. All three of the new analyses fall into the latter category, but they take different approaches to their subject, achieving varying degrees of success in answering important questions.

Denis Mack Smith has earned his reputation as probably the English-speaking world's most respected authority on Fascist Italy. Any new study by such a noted scholar is bound to command attention, while a biography of Mussolini is particularly welcome, offering as it must the opportunity to bring together the historian's accumulated insights. The problem in studying Mussolini is no longer the discovery of essential facts, although archival research continues to reveal some additional information, but the interpretation of the data to explain Mussolini as a man and leader. Numerous questions must be answered by the conscientious biographer: How can we assess after so many years the elusive charm and genuine appeal that both followers and

unsympathetic contemporaries found in him? How do we reconcile his obvious intelligence and even occasional brilliance with the popular notion of a comic exhibitionist and incompetent imperialist? How can we explain his ability first to rise to power and then to sustain his dictatorship without a cadre of exceptional aides? Mack Smith has attempted to answer these and other similarly vexing questions, using a vast array of sources and notes to support his statements, but readers may continue to wonder if he has captured the real Mussolini.

The portrait of the dictator that emerges from the rich mosaic of detail assembled by Mack Smith is the picture of an actor whose role as star was beyond his natural abilities. Initial success came so easily that he found himself unable to provide the outstanding performance the public expected of him. For a while he was able to conceal his weaknesses, using a gift for eloquent oratory and guile, a skill in appearing to be just what each admirer and faction wanted, and a knack for showmanship and mass deception, but time and his own ambitions soon revealed his inadequacies. Mack Smith tells us much about both the mentality and the methods of Mussolini. He points out repeatedly that the Duce was not known for original ideas, lacked coherence and consistency in his intellectual processes, and ignored the tenets of Fascism just as he had those of socialism. In lieu of principles and meaningful programs there were only banalities, displays, postures, emotions, intuitions, and improvisations masquerading as policy and planning. It is unfortunate that the author so often relates his wealth of Mussolini arcana and anecdote in rather colorless prose and pedestrian style.

But what of those who saw, or might have seen, through such pretense and sham? Members of the first group who could be identified were handled by intimidation or brute force, the existence and extent of which are often overlooked by apologists and cursory observers of the regime, while men known to be perceptive and capable were excluded from the circle of the dictator, who did not solicit or appreciate advice and who disliked any contradiction or questioning of his will. It is hardly surprising that Mussolini was surrounded by obscure and mediocre subordinates, political and military, who were unsuited to the dynamic roles Mussolini himself expected of them. In the dictator's mind war was the true test of personal and national power; he and his regime collapsed after failing the very challenges he most welcomed. Mack Smith offers neither extensive discussion nor exceptional insights to the foreign relations or domestic institutions of Fascist Italy. He has covered some of those topics in other writings. Here his focus remains on the man and not the nation.

Several aspects of the biography are disappointing. One senses an underlying negativeness on the part of the author toward his subject that at times seems to color his approach and judgment. He tends to stress most the outlandish, the erratic or changeable, and the dramatic in his character sketch. Mack Smith finds it somehow notable that there are so many contradictions in the writings and recorded oral statements of Mussolini. Is it really so extraordinary that a man should change his thinking over four decades? Some of the author's psychological interpretations may also strike readers as both too facile and too readily capsulized. These are, of course, minor points. But the tone of the whole biography as an indictment of a superficial and transparent man may lead readers to wonder not only how such a preposterous figure managed to survive politically for so many years but also why such a respected historian felt it necessary to describe and annotate his weaknesses in great detail.

Mack Smith's book must nevertheless be considered an essential and probably for many years to come even the definitive biography of Mussolini. The author's mass of factual information drawn from a vast bibliography, his profound knowledge and understanding of the materials, and the book's thorough and intensive historical coverage establish its primacy. Yet it remains important to weigh Mack Smith's interpretations against the different but equally compelling views of Mussolini expressed in two other new studies.

It is always unfortunate when two or more books dealing with the same subject are published at nearly the same time. Mack Smith's *Mussolini* should not be allowed to obscure the sound new biography by Anthony James Joes. Many readers will find Joes's book much more appealing; the author has synthesized in his analysis all the most recent scholarship while including only the most essential reference notes; he has written the narrative with a clarity of direction and simplicity of style that non-specialists will greatly appreciate; his approach has made Mussolini a believable human figure. Two other merits of this work should also be mentioned. Joes has summarized in a strong introductory chapter those background conditions that help explain the rise of Mussolini; Mack Smith merely assumed that his readers would be historians thoroughly familiar with the modern history of Italy. A second asset of Joes's biography is the author's use of analogies and comparisons with other European leaders and failures. It is helpful to be reminded that others besides Mussolini also misjudged situations and pursued unrealistic policies.

Mussolini's adventurism in foreign affairs receives comparatively little space in Joes's biography and the discussion and analysis are limited to Chapters X and XI. The first of those sections focuses on the 1920s and African

events; the Balkans in World War II receive a scant twenty-three pages. Joes nevertheless stresses that an Italo-German alliance was certainly not inevitable and that the Axis Powers pursued different policies in Europe. He points out that Mussolini never really understood Hitler, that he perceived Italy's operations in the Balkans as a way to stop German encroachments there, and that he failed to foresee Germany's victories of spring 1940. Joes does not discuss the details of the war itself; rather he analyzes the motives and thinking of Mussolini. The result is a useful summary of why, not how, disaster soon came to his regime and nation.

Probably the most important of the new works is MacGregor Knox's careful study of Mussolini's ambitious foreign policy and plans for military expansion. The author has used both impressive amounts of archival materials and unusual skill in close reasoning to reach and support his thesis that basic elements of a grand strategy existed in the mind of the dictator and determined his course of action. Here is an interpretation that clearly opposes the widely accepted notion that Mussolini was a mere opportunist who acted with neither design nor decisiveness. Knox is well aware that his findings and analysis run counter to the views of historians like Mack Smith who tend to see and stress only the pretentious posturing and the ultimate failures of Mussolini. He believes that such approaches underestimate the brutality of the regime, "the vigor and extent of its expansionist ambition", and the degree of support it enjoyed while it remained successful. But the focus of his study is Mussolini's foreign policy during the years 1939-1941 and the background that produced it.

Mussolini described his perception of the situation in a speech in February 1939. Italy was a prisoner within the Mediterranean; from Gibraltar to Suez its expansion was blocked by French and British holdings; Mussolini therefore believed his real enemy was the West. Knox is convinced that the dictator saw his "long-meditated" plans becoming possible through adherence to the Axis, for Germany's growing power gave the Duce an "unprecedented leverage and freedom of action" to challenge Western preponderance in the Mediterranean, and Mussolini therefore accepted the notion of a "parallel war" without ever really liking or trusting Germany. Nor was he relying on military bluff, as writers like Giorgio Rochat have maintained, but instead had tried to make plans. They failed for various reasons. To dominate the Mediterranean he needed naval and air power, but army leaders resisted basic shifts in priorities; he knew his subordinates lacked the vision and drive to carry out his orders, but he himself remained a dilettante with respect to military matters; to be successful Mussolini needed rapid and decisive victories, but he never properly

prepared his armed forces. Mussolini may have lacked the human and economic resources available to Germany but he was certainly no less committed to aggression than Hitler. Thus he persisted in pursuing his own goals, acting not in imitation or jealousy of Berlin's great foreign policy successes, but because he felt his plans could be realized. Had he encountered more serious opposition to his occupation of Albania he might have discovered how risky his gamble actually was.

Readers will undoubtedly find Chapters IV-VI on the Duce's Balkan policy particularly interesting. There are few new facts but many new insights. Knox notes that Mussolini planned for a number of war and peace contingencies from summer 1939 through spring 1940. Yet the controlling objective was to establish his domination of the Balkans; the destruction of Yugoslavia had first priority; Greece might be induced through diplomatic pressure to accept rapprochement. The question was always when, not whether, he would begin his war. Here Knox calls attention to several paradoxes in the Duce's schemes. He expected Britain to be defeated by autumn 1940 and therefore welcomed the extra time to press his policy of intimidation in the Balkans; at the same time he wanted Italian military victories and glory in southeastern Europe on a scale that required immediate planning and surprise attacks. Germany's intentions also worried Mussolini. Hitler vetoed any military action against Yugoslavia and advised temporary restraint toward Greece. Mussolini suspected that Hitler himself wanted the Balkans. But Berlin knew that Britain was not about to collapse or seek peace, that any Italian operations in the Balkans might therefore lead to British intervention, and that Hitler was already considering attacking his Russian ally. Berlin wanted peace in the Balkans. Yet here was another paradox. Mussolini was relatively patient when he thought the war would end in easy victory in autumn 1940. Then his growing conviction that there would be no early peace with Britain that might frustrate his dream of empire persuaded the Duce that conditions were favorable for him to expand his war. Thus he gambled on a decisive victory when he should have been cautious and when the Libyan fighting showed signs of becoming an embarrassing stalemate and drain on his military resources.

Knox cites two factors that influenced the general and specific timing chosen by Mussolini. He wanted to exploit the sudden willingness of the Italian public after the *Blitzkrieg* to risk war in the expectation of easy spoils. And his decision to open a Balkan front against Greece in late October 1940 may have been prompted by Germany's pressure on Rumania and other disturbing activities. Knox thinks that without the threat posed by such German moves Mussolini might have postponed his own attack until spring 1941. The manner

in which the Duce concealed his intentions from Hitler and the disastrous repercussions of the Greek campaign for both the dictator and Italy are all well known. Mussolini's dreams became nightmares: there could no longer be a parallel war, or even an independent foreign policy, but only subservience to Hitler.

What is the ultimate significance of Knox's research and interpretations of the data? It rests in his view that the Duce was a man of purpose and plans; he had more substance than Mack Smith and other historians acknowledge. Knox believes that "Mussolini had a genuine foreign policy program: the creation of an Italian *spazio vitale* in the Mediterranean and Middle East". In the author's view Mussolini's expansionism was inspired by a personal vision of national greatness and not by a desire to bolster a shaky domestic structure through foreign conquests or what is often now called "social imperialism" by many historians. The purpose of his foreign policy was in fact the opposite: success abroad would allow the remaking of society at home. Knox therefore presents a case that challenges a popular explanation of the aggressiveness of the Duce. Nor does he think the dictator was a mere opportunist. Mussolini's attempts to attain his ambitious goals of regional hegemony were "remarkably consistent and tenacious" despite his lack of able lieutenants and the limited resources of Italy. In the end "the very magnitude of Mussolini's aspirations had brought disaster" to the regime. His dream may have lacked the enormous scale that characterized Hitler's megalomania, but it possessed a similar aura of grandeur, destroying Mussolini too by the same disparity between his vision and his capabilities.

In conclusion, the three studies offer various bases for comparison and contrast. All are works of impressive scholarship, although the notes and bibliography in Joes's book are intentionally restricted, and the index is rather inadequate, failing to list many European nations and centers of conflict. Joes and Mack Smith as biographers understandably stress the dictator's personal character and internal developments in Fascist Italy. But to the important question of explaining Mussolini's initial popularity and eventual failure as a national leader Joes offers a more generally satisfying answer. He suggests that the Duce's political reliance upon conservative groups he distrusted (such as the rich, the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the middle class) emerged because he could not unite the Fascists and socialists as a revolutionary force. Thus there was purpose and direction in his career despite disappointments and shifts. Mack Smith tends to overemphasize the importance of personality and opportunity in explaining Mussolini. The treatment of foreign affairs involves a similar disagreement. Was there really an underlying

logic or consistency that makes sense of Mussolini's ambitious military programs and successive foreign adventures? The presence or absence of basic ideas, plans, and strategies divides the three authors. Both Joes and Knox see in Mussolini the existence of fundamental principles and patterns of action, however badly he managed to prepare and carry out his schemes and campaigns, while it is the lack of any true program that characterizes the Mussolini of Mack Smith. For that very reason Mack Smith passes the harshest judgment on Mussolini as a national leader. But objective readers will want to weigh his conclusion against the careful reasoning of both Joes and Knox that Mussolini was a man of substance whose aims as well as failures must be studied seriously. All three books should be read for their respective merits and viewpoints.

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