Least of the Dictators?

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R.J.B. Bosworth

Mussolini

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n Australian Tourist visiting Italy in the mid-1930s wrote home: ‘you may say what you like about Mussolini but you cannot deny that he has done a more amazing thing than anyone else in history.’ Unstinting admiration for Fascist Italy was common in Australian references to Italy in the interwar years; politicians, businessmen, Catholic prelates, Protestant pastors and middle-class tourists all sang his praises. They were also at one with the view expressed by R.G. Menzies, at the 1934 Conference of the Victorian Young Nationalists, that Italy’s transformation was the product not of Fascism but of its charismatic leader and his untrammelled power. In the eyes of the rarely well-informed Australian observers, Mussolini had resurrected Italy, ‘made over his people’, ‘intensified and completed the creation of Italian nationality’, and erected an efficient and effective state. Trains not only ran on time but also at a profit, according to Sir Hal Colebatch, Premier of Western Australia.

Richard Bosworth, in this superb biography of Italy’s Duce, is critical of ‘the great man in history’ and intentionalist approaches that vest all power, initiative and control in leaders, particularly in the case of Mussolini, a leader more driven by, and adaptive to, events than driven by them. Unlike Hitler, the Duce was impelled by no credo, his Fascism was vague, undefined and opportunistic, his politics governed not by ideology but by compromises and deals, by short-term tactics not long-term strategies and goals. Thus the man whose only consistent position until he came to power may have been virulent and vociferous anti-clericalism signed the Lateran Pact with the papacy in 1929.

Bosworth would, however, agree with the young Robert Menzies that Mussolini was a charismatic leader. The nature of that charisma is one of the problems that Bosworth investigates — did Mussolini ascribe it to himself or was it ascribed to him? How did charismatic governance work? Did it change over time? To what extent, as Ian Kershaw has explored in the case of Hitler, was Mussolini’s power ‘a social product — a creation of social expectations and motivation’ vested in him by his followers.

In accepting Mussolini’s charismatic leadership, Bosworth takes issue with the jejune observations of Mussolini’s Australian admirers on the impact of his leadership. To the questions of whether Mussolini’s régime revolutionised Italian society, nationalised the masses or modernised the country, his reply is a resounding negative. Mussolini’s Italy was a society and state where the centuries-old ubiquitous bonds of family, patrons and clients still prevailed. The lives of rural dwellers, the majority of the population, were for the most part barely touched by the Fascist régime — until they were conscripted into armies, rendered widows or orphans, or sent as forced labourers to Germany. Mussolini’s totalitarianism was a shambles of competing vested interests and appalling inefficiencies. His foreign policy and his chimerical aspirations to make Italy a Great Power were little more, as Bosworth has argued in previous work, than the continuation of the nationalist and imperialist imperatives of the post-Risorgimento Liberal state. Thanks to a war for which the state was even more ill-prepared and ill-equipped to fight than its predecessor had been in 1915, and which delivered leader and country into the maw of Nazi Germany, Mussolini left his country defeated, divided and devastated. He was, in Bosworth’s conclusion, a leader who failed in every sense of the word.
to his ignominious end on the shores of Lake Como in April 1945. He tells the story with both condemnation and humanity, with Manning Clark’s ‘eye of pity’ but with no belief that to understand all is to forgive all. To understand all, Bosworth argues, it is necessary to locate Mussolini in his time and place, and to consider his social and gender position. This he has very persuasively done.

In writing his anti-Fascist biography of Mussolini, Bosworth believes that his stance is out of kilter with the times, our era of the death of history and of the ‘pacification’ of the past. He is critical of recent ‘anti-anti-Fascist’ Italian writing on Mussolini and Fascism, in its most monumental form in Renzo De Felice’s seven-volume biography, which underlined Mussolini’s positive achievements. The Australian historian is disturbed by the repercussions in Italian political and intellectual life of the decline of passion for politics, the marginalisation of the Resistance tradition and the cancellation of the moral stance towards the Fascist years: Fascists and anti-Fascists become two morally indistinguishable groups who both killed Italians.

Bosworth’s biography of Mussolini is the culmination of a thirty-year career researching, teaching and writing on post-Risorgimento Italy. His work has been underpinned, on the one hand, by thorough documentary research and theoretical sophistication and, on the other, by what one Italian historian has described as the passion of a participant in the events he narrates, and by the assumption that one rôle of the historian is to expose and debunk myths. These characteristics are all present in the biography of Mussolini, but moral indignation is here muted by an under-thread of elegiac sadness. The biography is in part the testament of a scholar who is a social democrat by conviction and now bears witness to the disintegration of his values in the transformation or marginalisation of social democratic and socialist parties in Europe — and Australia. For Bosworth, the heirs to the Fascist parties of the interwar years are not the growing far-right parties in Europe but global capitalism with institutions and a capacity for persuasion that make Mussolini’s totalitarianism ‘quaint indeed’.

Richard Bosworth has made his contribution to our understanding of the history and historiography of modern Italy and early twentieth-century Europe from Australia, first from the University of Sydney and, more recently, from the University of Western Australia. His research and writing, like that of other Australian Europeanists, was made possible by generous university and government funding policies and practices that were not driven by narrowly utilitarian definitions of knowledge or of national interest and national priorities. Will new priorities and agendas allow for an Australian scholar working in an Australian university to write a splendid and challenging biography of a major figure in the imagery of early twentieth-century European politics and international relations? Let us hope so.