Mussolini’s Rivals: The Limits of the Personality Cult in Fascist Italy

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new perspective. Volume 4. Number 2. December 1998

Summary: ‘The Cult of the Duce’ - the cultivation of Mussolini’s image as the leader and ruler of Fascist Italy - was a very complex phenomenon. It also differed in some very important ways from the leadership cults in two other totalitarian states between the wars, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. But the most serious difference was that Mussolini had rivals, representing influential, non-Fascist forces in Italian society. Eventually, these rivals eclipsed Mussolini in popularity among the Italian people.

The leadership cult in Fascist Italy, or the ‘cult of the Duce’ as it is better known, the word ‘Duce’ being the Italian equivalent of the German word ‘Führer’, started almost as soon as Mussolini came to power in 1922 and, by the end of 1925, his role as Duce of Fascism and Head of the Government had been sanctioned by changes to the constitution. The nature of Mussolini’s leadership and, above all, the quality of his political judgement, has been hotly debated among historians, most notably between Renzo De Felice and Denis Mack Smith. Though Mussolini had undoubted charisma and political intelligence with which to maintain his power over Fascism and the Italian people, Denis Mack Smith has tended to see his talents lying chiefly in the areas of acting and propaganda. The press, radio and cinema were all used to project his image as the omniscient, omnipotent and indispensable ruler of Italy. By the end of the 1920s, the process of what one could call Mussolini’s ‘image-building’ was well under way. The focus of this operation was on Mussolini as the sole Fascist saviour of Italy. Inevitably, this led to the emergence of the perception, which was especially widespread among foreigners, that Fascism equalled ‘Mussolinianism’ and was summed up in the phrase, ‘Mussolini is always right’, which you can still see on some walls in Rome.

Mussolini: the image

By the end of the 1930s, a whole set of regulations had been developed by the Ministry of Popular Culture for the treatment of Mussolini in the media under its control, that is newspapers, radio and cinema:

1. His name was always spelt with capital letters in newspapers.

2. Newspapers were instructed exactly what to say about him.

3. He was never to be portrayed dancing, or with priests, etc.

The image which was projected of him was usually an explicitly aggressive, ‘macho’ one - and this is clear from Mussolini’s extraordinary, theatrical ‘natural’ poses. But it was not as simple as that. As these pictures show, Mussolini could be portrayed in several different ways, as ‘Renaissance man’, ‘military man’, the ‘family man’ and even the ‘common man’.

This was a very important difference from the ways in which Goebbels’ Ministry of Propaganda portrayed the Führer in Nazi Germany. Hitler was almost always portrayed in a very aloof, sexless, distant, almost divine way; the very epitome of the ‘Superman’ of the German philosopher Nietsche. He was never shown semi-naked as Mussolini was in the picture below.

Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin: the differences

The explanation for this difference is fairly clear: Mussolini was a very different man from Hitler, and Fascist Italy a very different society from Nazi Germany. Mussolini was ‘of the people’ - his father had been a blacksmith. Fascist Italy was still a poor and economically underdeveloped country, a largely rural and agrarian society - in 1945, over 50 per cent of the employed populations were working on the land. So Mussolini, stripped to the waist, working in the fields alongside the peasantry in the ‘Battle for Grain’, the massive national campaign to increase cereals’ production and correspondingly lower dependence on food imports, was a vital propaganda device. For both strictly ideological and political reasons, the image of Stalin also had an element of ‘the man of the people’ in it, but it was not projected in the same raw, crude way that Mussolini was. The essence of Stalin’s appeal was as leader, general and, above all, father of his people - a sort of substitute tsar. On the other hand, Mussolini, like so many of his fellow Fascists, was part of the ‘new’, rising, war generation, a group of young men who were making their way and proving themselves in the world. Hence, the emphasis on achievement. The image of ‘Renaissance man’ was also a response to the strong intellectual element in Italian culture.

Mussolini’s rivals

The most important difference, however, between the leadership cult in Fascist Italy on the one hand, and its counterparts in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union on the other, was that Mussolini had his rivals. As John Whittam has shown in his essay on ‘Mussolini and the Cult of the Leader’ (new perspective, vol 3, no 3, March 1998 pp 12-16), Gabriele D’Annunzio, the great poet and Nationalist war hero, constituted a real threat to Mussolini until 1922. Among his own party comrades Mussolini also had competitors and he therefore quite deliberately set about getting rid of them. All of the most important figures in the Fascist movement and regime in the early years - Grandi, Federzoni, Rocco, Balbo, etc. - had been edged out of the limelight by 1932, and henceforth Mussolini surrounded himself with mediocrities and non-entities, the worst of whom was the colourless, humourless Fascist party Secretary, Achille Starace. Only Italo Balbo remained as a serious Fascist rival to Mussolini. Youthful and vigorous, Balbo became an extremely popular figure in Fascist Italy, thanks to his flying exploits in the 1920s and 1930s and, but for his tragic and mysterious death in a flying accident in 1942, might well have succeeded Mussolini during the crisis of the Regime in the summer of 1943.

But the real competition and threat to Mussolini came from outside of the ranks of Fascism. There were two major non-Fascist rivals to the Duce in the affections of the Italian people, the King and the Pope. Thus, until the end, there remained major limitations to the effectiveness of the cult of the Duce and, more substantially, to the power of Mussolini and Fascist party from the Monarchy and the Church.

Mussolini and the Monarchy

The King represented a major grouping in Italian society, the upper middle class and aristocracy, and elements, like the Armed Forces, who never gave Fascism their full support. Ironically, Mussolini was a republican at heart, but he went along with the Monarchy because it gave historical and constitutional legitimacy to the Fascist take-over of power in 1922. In any case, the Monarchy was extremely popular with the middle classes in the early 1920s: the King was personally associated with Italy’s victory over Austria-Hungary in the First World War because he had been commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces. Had there been a serious dispute between the King and Mussolini, the King could always have counted on the loyalty of the Armed Forces, especially the Army and the Navy.

In fact, though Victor Emmanuel could count on the traditional allegiance of large groups in Italian society, he was not a man of great personal charisma - he was so small he had to use steps to get on his horse! He was also fairly docile in his relations with Mussolini almost to the end. So Fascist Italy remained a ‘Dyarchy’, that is a synthesis between the new - Fascism - and the old - the Monarchy - symbolised by portraits of Mussolini and King Victor Emmanuel III side by side in all state buildings. The relationship could be difficult and irritating, especially for Mussolini. He was acutely embarrassed when Hitler made a state visit to Rome in 1938 and it was the King, and not Mussolini, who rode with the German Führer. Mussolini was only the Head of the Government (prime minister) but not the State, unlike Hitler who combined both offices in his own person. The Duce of Fascism got his revenge by stripping the King of some of his most important prerogatives, including supreme command of the Armed Forces in time of war. When Fascism collapsed in July 1943, following a string of military defeats culminating in the Allied invasion of the Italian island of Sicily, it was the King who delivered the final blow to the tottering Fascist regime by dismissing Mussolini, having him arrested and appointing a general in his place. By then, Mussolini was the most hated man in Italy. The King, on the other hand, became the most popular man overnight. Unfortunately, Victor Emmanuel squandered his high credit rating with the Italian people by bungling the armistice with the Allies in September 1943: the bulk of Italy was taken over by German forces and thousands of Italian soldiers were either killed or carried off into captivity. The King paid for his mistake when the Monarchy was abolished by popular vote in June 1946.

Mussolini and the Church

The presence of the Papacy in Rome, the focus of intense sentiment on the part of Italian Catholics, was another problem for Mussolini. The Papacy was another institution with which Mussolini could not seriously hope to compete. Hence the fact that although Mussolini, like many of the Fascists, was an atheist and anti-clerical at heart, in 1929 he signed an agreement with the Church - the Lateran Pacts - which brought to an end the 60-year-old ‘Roman Question’, the dispute between the Papacy and Italy that had begun when Italian troops conquered Rome in 1870 and made it the capital of Italy, thus destroying the Pope’s rule over the Papal States of Central Italy. As a powerful, international institution, the Papacy could not be ignored or suppressed. And the Popes, Pius XI until 1939 and Pius XII thereafter, possessed their own strong charisma as the infallible heads of the Roman Catholic Church, that is they claimed not to be capable of making an error when they pronounced on matters of Catholic faith or morals. Mussolini became involved in disputes with Pius XI over such matters as youth and labour organisations in 1929 and 1931, and over the introduction of the Racial Laws against the Jews in 1939. As the 1930s proceeded, Italian Fascism became more and more of a rival ‘religion’ to Italian Catholicism, using much of its vocabulary and copying many of its rituals; it even created a ‘School of Fascist Mysticism’. But it was never able to oust the Catholic faith or loyalty to the Pope from the minds of the majority of Italians. This postcard (see below) showing the King, the Pope and the Duce, was produced to commemorate the signing of the Lateran Pacts. It is significant that Mussolini ordered the police to ban all sales of it. He did not want to be seen alongside his rivals!

In 1943, even before the Duce’s overthrow, Pope Pius XII effectively eclipsed the cult of the Duce by visiting the bombed quarters of Rome when Mussolini failed to do so. The contrast between the Duce, skulking in his offices, and the Pope moving among the people in the bombed areas could not have been more brutal; it did not help matters that Pius XII was himself a Roman.

Mussolini and the ‘block of consensus’

Ultimately, the rivalry at a personal level between the Duce on the one hand, and the King and the Pope on the other, represented the very unstable compromise which had been reached between Fascism and the forces of the establishment which the King and the Pope represented. The Italian historian Alberto Acquarone has described those forces as the ‘block of consensus’ - Monarchy, Armed Forces, Church and the business and agrarian interest groups. Without their consent, Fascism would not have come to power. On the other hand, the survival of the ‘block of consensus’ limited the power of Mussolini’s Fascist regime. It was thus impossible for Italian Fascism to be a truly ‘totalitarian’ regime in the way that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were. In Germany, the only major independent force, the Army, came to heel when Hindenburg died in 1934 and its officers swore a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler as Hindenburg’s successor. In Russia, Tsarism had collapsed because of the defeats and disasters of the First World War: the other organs of the State were entirely remade by the Bolsheviks during the course of the civil war that followed their revolution in October/November 1917, and the power of other interest groups was swept away in the nationalisation and collectivisation programmes of the 1920s, and the purges of the 1930s. As the Diary of Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini’s son-in-law and foreign minister show, by the end of the 1930s the Duce was regretting the compromises which he had made with both the Monarchy and the Church. He thus viewed the prospect of war on the side of Hitler against the Western Democracies, which both the King and the Pope opposed, as his opportunity to finally break free from the chains imposed by the ‘block of consensus’. He hoped that, following success in war, he could launch a second ‘Fascist revolution’ in Italy and settle his accounts with the King and the Pope once and for all. But it was a ‘Catch 22’ situation: his failure to carry out a real revolution in Italy and to mobilise the country’s resources for an all-out, total war, not to mention his choice of the losing side, doomed Fascist Italy to an almost unbroken succession of disastrous military defeats and thus ensured, as we have seen, the triumph of Mussolini’s rivals.

Words and concepts to note

Charisma: ability to inspire followers with devotion and enthusiasm; to attract a wide following.

Propaganda: a means to spread a particular idea or image which often involved distortions of the truth.

Omniscient: having extensive knowledge.

Omnipotent: having full, absolute, power.

Epitome: a person who embodies a particular quality.

Ideological: associated with a particular set of ideas, theory or standpoint.

Legitimacy: having lawful, proper, rightful authority.

Prerogatives: rights or powers.

Atheist: a person who does not believe in God’s existence.

Anti-clerical: opposition to the influence and power of the Church.

Lateran: literally, the cathedral of St John Lateran, in Rome, used to refer to matters relating to the Pope.

Consensus: the view of a substantial majority.

Questions to consider

w What does this article indicate were major differences between Mussolini’s Fascism and Hitler’s Nazism?

w How important was propaganda for Fascism?

w What is suggested, by the existence of rivals, for Mussolini’s control over both the party and the country?

w How far is it fair to claim that Mussolini’s hold over the Italian state and Italian society rested on compromises with powerful interest groups?

Further reading: M. Muggeridge (ed.), Ciano’s Diary, 1939-1943, Heinemann, 1947; D. Mack Smith, Mussolini, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982 and Italy and its Monarchy, Yale, 1989; P. Melograni, ‘The Cult of the Duce’, Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 11, no. 4, 1976; J.F. Pollard, The Experience of Italian Fascism, Routledge, 1998 and The Vatican and Italian Fascism, 1929-1932, Cambridge, 1985; J. Whittam, Italian Fascism, 1919-1945, Manchester, 1985.

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