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Mussolini's Italy

Twenty Years of the Fascist Era

Max Gallo



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Twenty Years of the Fascist Era



MAX GALLO

Translated by CHARLES LAM MARKMANN

Abelard-Schuman · London

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Preface to the English Edition

A HALF-CENTURY—that is precisely what lies between us and Mussolini's accession to power in Italy. At that time the word *Fascism* had barely been born. No one really knew that with the March on Rome on October 28, 1922, a new epoch of the twentieth century was beginning. Mussolini was seen as merely one of many leaders—more extreme, perhaps, more vehement; but it was assumed that he would blend into the parliamentary landscape after a few thunderous speeches. And, besides, gradually it had to be conceded that Il Duce had a new kind of politics.

Now fifty years have passed. Passions have not burned out, but it has become possible to look at that Fascist Italy with a view to understanding it rather than damning it or praising it. It is possible to X-ray the personality of Il Duce while avoiding peremptory judgments.

And the man Il Duce is fascinating. In the course of his life, which began at the most radical point of the extreme Left and ended in a summary execution, one encounters the pathetic side by side with the bombastic, the shrewdness of a great politician with the blindness of a fanatic. But one finds as well the mediocrity that is part of the normal man who, unlike Hitler, is not swept off balance by a political delirium.

Essentially, even in his worst moments, even at the peak of his cruelties, Mussolini was always a man torn. Torn between the drive of his desire for glory and his fear, his intuition of what was going to happen. For he sensed keenly, somewhere inside himself, that World War II could end only in defeat, that Fascist politics was

chiefly a stage-setting, that the government that he instituted in 1943—that doomed Fascist Republic, the creation of the Nazis—had no reality.

In this complexity of Mussolini's character is the explanation why his story borders at the same time on tragedy and on farce. Here too is the explanation why that story, in the end, is closer to us than is Adolf Hitler's. When we look at *Der Führer* we are fascinated, as we are fascinated when we stand face to face with monstrosity, with Evil. When we look at Mussolini we are looking at a man. Great and commonplace. Perceptive and blind. Intuitive and limited. Criminal and victim.

A man who was drunk on power and who played with its appurtenances as if he were a child whose dream had come true: he appeared on balconies, he thrust out his chin, he paraded with raised arm between two rows of cattle at an agricultural fair. But he was also the man who put forth a few excellent ideas that would find realization in the years between the two World Wars: corporativism, that economic system that was meant to transcend both capitalism and Socialism and that was a Fascist propaganda success. It was he who brought into being those enterprises that still exist today in Italy and in which private investment and state capital are commingled.

And it was the same man again who was caught in the teeth of tragedy and cowardice when, at the end of the war, he sacrificed his own son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, who was executed by a Fascist firing-squad in Verona.

Here this scene blends with some of Verdi's operas, with a whole Italian tradition that dallies with violence, that shifts from the farcical to the heroic, from smiles to tears, from friendship to treachery. Mussolini has been called a hero and a villain of opera. He was thoroughly Italian. He embodied the defects—and also the qualities—of an inventive, warmhearted people that was still in the process of being born as a nation in the decades between the wars—and this in spite of the antiquity of a culture that is at the very source of western civilization.

But Italy had not achieved national unity until 1870. The First World War—the 1914 war—was her first great national war. And Mussolini appeared immediately afterward, a kind of Nasser of the years between the wars. He renewed Italians' pride in themselves.

That was why he was popular for so long in the United States, for example. No one who lived in a Little Italy, dominated for years, more or less contemptuously, by Irish and WASPs, could have any notion of the domestic reality of Mussolini's Italy. They knew only that the country ruled by *Il Duce* was respected, and

that it was successful in some of its undertakings. When Italo Balbo arrived in New York at the head of an aerial squadron that was going around the world, his reception was hysterical. Italian-Americans reacted like men who had been wounded in their national pride.

But the war came, and eyes were harshly opened. Mussolini exposed his incapacities, his blindness.

Nonetheless, that ultimate failure cannot make us forget that he was an innovator, an inventor. The inventor of Fascism: a movement that proliferated in the world like a cancer. And, on October 28, 1942, Hitler could only acknowledge the accomplishments of Il Duce: "I am convinced that your historic March on Rome," he wrote to Mussolini, "created a turning point in the history of the world. When you were leading the Fascist Revolution to victory, Duce, I was still battling against fortune's reverses, and my struggle ended in a serious defeat and for myself, personally, imprisonment for more than a year."

In thus alluding to the failure of his beer-hall *Putsch* in Munich in 1923, Hitler clearly acknowledged that he had intended to emulate the March on Rome, as others sought to imitate it in Spain, in France, even in England, where there was a British Union of Fascists.

Moreover, it must be conceded that, until 1938–1940, Mussolini had succeeded in retaining control of his country without too much recourse to violence. The Fascist system, which forced thousands of opponents into exile, was a clear manifestation of an Italian reality. It was the war that sent the whole country into resolute opposition.

The story of Fascism in Italy and of Mussolini, then, is not a simple one. To understand it, one must attain to sympathy with a people.

I am of Italian origin through my mother. I was born in Nice, barely twenty miles from the Italian frontier. When the Fascist troops entered Nice in 1942, I was a child, but I remember those soldiers in their plumed helmets who paraded smiling through our streets.

From that moment forth I began to be marked by Italy, by her culture, by her traditions. Later I sought to understand how this nation—gay and solemn, optimistic and somber, frivolous and profound—could have fallen under the sway of the *fasces*. I began my investigation by questioning my relatives, my friends, strangers, notables. In newspapers and archives I discovered a reality that was neglected by historians too concerned with what goes on at the summit of governments. In short, I proceeded like a man who

sets off in search not so much of great events as of other men and of a climate—political, psychological, social.

I plunged myself into Italy's past. As if I were seeking personal recollections in my memory. And to a degree that was the case, for as a child I had indeed traveled to Bologna and discovered children of my own age wearing black uniforms and playing already at being soldiers.

In long hours of talk with Italians abroad—anti-Fascist refugees in France and workers who had gone to find jobs far from their peninsula—I learned also what Fascist Italy had come to mean to them.

In such ways, I think, I have been able to get into the heart of a country and into the hearts of its people.

My greatest satisfaction has been the translation of this book into Italian and its reception by Italian readers and critics as an authentic study of those twenty years of the Fascist era . . . those twenty dramatic years that began fifty years ago.

MAX GALLO

Foreword

ON OCTOBER 28, 1942, in the midst of the war, Adolf Hitler sent Benito Mussolini a message of congratulations on the twentieth anniversary of Mussolini's seizure of power at the time of the March on Rome:

"I am convinced that your historic March of twenty years ago created a turning point in the history of the world," Der Führer wrote. "When you were leading the Fascist Revolution to victory, Duce, I was still battling against fortune's reverses, and my struggle ended in a serious defeat and for myself, personally, imprisonment for more than a year."

These remarks by Der Führer do indeed correspond to the reality, but who today remembers that reality?

The eruption of the Panzer into history, the SS, Naziism, its flames and its ashes, the hoarse voice of Der Führer, have all thrust the Italian precursors into the background, overshadowed those young men in black shirts who began to wield their clubs in 1920, who bombed the Ethiopians, who hailed the bombastic grandiloquence of Il Duce in 1922.

Yet, when Hitler came to power in 1933, the great "strong man" of Europe for the past eleven years had been Il Duce of Fascism, and the prestige of Mussolini and his movement was such that Goering, Hess, and Hitler turned to the Fascists for counsel, for money, and for arms. The Italian ambassador in Berlin played Lord Protector to the nascent Third Reich.

This alone would be a great deal for Fascism and its leader, but it was not all. In Greece and in Ethiopia, as in Spain, it was Mussolini's Italy that was the first to shake the structure of Europe and

to hurl the most violent insults at the League of Nations. Here again Mussolini and Fascism made the breach in which Ribbentrop, Hitler, and their soldiers were to be swallowed. What is amazing is the fact that Mussolini's Italy, which evoked contempt and praise from 1922 to 1939 and remained at the center of European policy, should be buried today beneath so much ignorance, so many misjudgments, and, above all, oblivion.

Where once Churchill, Laval, Gandhi, and the world press acclaimed Il Duce's "handsome countenance of a peasant emperor" or that "Fascist movement that has rendered a service to the entire world" (Churchill), where once there was talk of nothing but "the new avenues opened by Fascist corporativism," transcending Socialism and Naziism, many people today view Fascism as a surrogate for Naziism. For some of them, Mussolini's Italy and the twenty years of Fascist rule were only the tale of a pallid clownish imitator of Hitler, a carnival Caesar devoid of historical significance, while for others those twenty years were a trivial parenthesis in the history of Italy.

Yet there is not a magazine in Italy that does not dedicate at least one article a month to Mussolini and Fascism; one party, the *Movimento sociale italiano* (Italian Social Movement), frankly avows Mussolini as its inspiration and even went to the extent of distributing photographs of him and recordings of his speeches in the electoral campaign of April, 1963.

These are significant indications: a system cannot survive for twenty-one years without impregnating, impressing, deeply marking a nation, even if its greatest imprint remains the resistance that it aroused.

In order to understand Italy, her past and her present, one must know Fascism; just as one must know it in order to grasp international policy during the period between the two World Wars and to uncover the origins of Naziism and of the war of 1939.

That is why I have sought to demonstrate the importance of Mussolini's Italy and of those twenty years of Fascist rule for the world and for Italy.

I have tried to sketch a complete but also a living history. Nor could it be otherwise, for that period of violence and unflagging passions—the history of a system, but also the history of a man who went from nothing to the seizure of power and whose corpse was tossed into a public square in Milan amid shouts, laughter, and spittle. Like, in an earlier time, the corpse of one of those gladiators or actors of that Roman Empire that, as Duce, he had professed to bring back to life.

M.G.

FREQUENT ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE BOOK:

Popolo or *P.d.I.*: *Popolo d'Italia*, Mussolini's newspaper

CGL: Confederazione generale del lavoro (Italian Federation of Labor)

PNF: Partito nazionale fascista (National Fascist Party)



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Part I

THE ORIGINS
OF FASCISM
AND THE
CONQUEST
OF POWER

(1883–October 30, 1922)



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II

A Young Country, A Young Man (1883–1914)

"Outside history, man is nothing."—MUSSOLINI (June 11, 1932)

AT ABOUT ELEVEN O'CLOCK in the morning of October 30, 1922, three taxis, trailed by a group of young men who shouted as they ran, stopped at the main gate of the Quirinal Palace in Rome. A crowd waiting nearby tried to identify the men who got out of the cars and were swallowed up under the portico. In a few seconds their silhouettes had vanished, and only the silent, braid-bedecked doorkeeper was left beneath the two statues by Bernini. The crowd had seen nothing, but a historic event had just taken place: Mussolini, black-shirted and bare-headed, was being received by King Vittorio Emanuele III, who was about to entrust the government of Italy to him. "The Fascist Era" was beginning.

Who was this thick-set, heavy-faced Italian who, at a resolute pace, had climbed the staircase framed by heavy bronze rails that leads from the square to the gate of the palace? The crowd of Romans waited outside the Quirinal as if hoping, at the sight of him, to identify the man and the meaning of the event. The crowd was curious rather than enthusiastic; it could not guess that for the next twenty-one years its fate and Italy's would depend on that thirty-nine-year-old man.

Young men in black-shirts came and went with much gesturing in front of the peaceable spectators in their ordinary business clothes. In the distance, as if nothing were happening, the street-cars and the workers' bicycles continued on their way, and it is against the background of these contradictory fleeting images that

one faces the question of the country that was accepting a dictator in that Roman morning.

But a country is first of all a history that does not readily lend itself to being fragmented into isolated periods. If one wishes to understand Mussolini's Italy and to know the man, antecedents and points of reference must be traced far in advance of that morning; one must go back to the major characteristics of Italy's personality as she was at the time when the man who would profess to recreate her was born and grew up.

Mussolini was born on July 29, 1883; twenty-two years earlier, on March 23, 1861, King Vittorio Emanuele II of Piedmont had been proclaimed king of Italy after a vote by both chambers of Parliament; but the ceremony was performed in Turin, for that sober city, cloaked in the fogs of the Po, was still the capital of the kingdom. Rome was not conquered until September 20, 1870, and it was not until a year later that the king took up residence in the Quirinal. It was at that time, after a long struggle, almost an Odyssey, that Italy had at last achieved unity and a capital. Thus the *Risorgimento*, that resurrection whose stages had been established and whose accomplishments had been garnered by Cavour, and in which Garibaldi had represented the vital essence of the people, reached its conclusion on the banks of the Tiber as a monarchist, conservative triumph. It was only twelve years after the king's entrance into his Roman palace that Mussolini was born.

In the life of a nation, a dozen years are youth itself, even if, as in Italy's case, the citizens of the peninsula derived a feeling of Italianness from the language of Dante, their civilization, their history, their struggle for unity. And it was this nation, whose regional differences set Milan against Naples, whose unification had been achieved by Cavour, a man born to the French language who had never seen Sicily, Naples, or Rome, it was this nation, still as puny as an adolescent, that in 1914 was to be confronted with a European war that was at times to shake the foundations of nations whose histories were counted in centuries. If one loses sight of these essential premises, one cannot comprehend the magnitude of the crisis that carried Mussolini to power between 1919 and 1922. Nor can one then understand the man who "was born on a Sunday, July 29, 1883, at Varano dei Costa, a little cluster of old houses built on a height of Dovia, a hamlet in the commune of Predappio, near Forlì in the Romagna,"¹ this Benito Mussolini who was the son of an Italy still in the process of being born, a

¹ Mussolini's *Autobiography*.

nation whose youth was evidenced by the persistence and the vigor of its dialects as well as its illiteracy and its violent customs.

It is enough to consider these simple statistics: in 1882, one year before Mussolini's birth, the right of suffrage was extended to every citizen who had completed his elementary schooling, and these totaled one and a half million voters; in 1892, when Mussolini was ten years old, the total was three million, or 9.57 percent of the population!

Under such conditions, political circles were isolated from the people, of whose real problems they were ignorant, and they rejected Catholicism out of fear of the Vatican: since 1871, after all, the church had forbidden the faithful to take part in elections and the pope had regarded himself as a prisoner in unified Italy. Hence parliamentary circles were cut off, torn by clannishness, by personal rivalries, by corruption, and by self-interest, and thus incapable of breathing life into political parties.

Such was the kingdom in which Mussolini grew up.

The peasants around him in the Romagna spoke in dialect. If its use was forbidden in the Mussolinis' home, it was because Signora Mussolini was a school teacher. Her husband, Alessandro, was a blacksmith, boastful, garrulous, a wencher and a drinker, and also a correspondent for the pro-anarchist newspapers of Forlì; he preened himself on being a writer on Socialism and the revolution.

Now the political and social system was already being challenged in this Italy in which public opinion was composed of some seven or eight hundred persons, because public expenditures and taxes were increasing. Whether arrogant or paternalistic, the members of Parliament whose dream it was to forge a mighty state never boggled in fact at casting the whole burden of their ambition on the shoulders of a population that was not allowed to vote. Suffering persisted, and sometimes it grew worse.

The Mussolini family was always short at the end of the month. But the father had built a small threshing machine, which he rented out to peasants, and the mother, Rosa, born Maltoni, contributed her salary to the family funds. When she died at the age of forty-six in 1905, worn out by work and devotion, Alessandro moved to Forlì and set up as an innkeeper. There he lived with Anna Guidi, the widow of a penniless peasant, one of those innumerable peasants overburdened with debts and taxes who had lost whatever little they had owned and become members of the vast army of *braccianti*, those miserable day-laborers. By way of illustration: in a large Sardinian village, Ottana, the peasants owed eighteen years' taxes! And none of these *braccianti*, like Anna

Guidi's husband, ever earned more than one *lira* (about twenty cents) for a day's labor!

It is understandable that Alessandro Mussolini could assemble an enthusiastic audience when, before the marveling eyes of his son, he read aloud the articles that he wrote for such little newspapers as *la Rivendicazione* or *la Lotta*. His listeners applauded his forceful platitudes—"bourgeois society and justice are monstrous but crumbling structures"—and everyone had a drink on them.

Though in comparison to the miserable day-laborers Alessandro was privileged, he too experienced first-hand the hardships of his time. In his new household—Anna Guidi was already the mother of five daughters—the youngest girl, Rachele, who was born in 1892 and who was later to be Benito's wife, worked as a maid for a family named Chiadini in Forlì, earning three *lire* a month.

In the Mussolinis' home, as in many other Italian homes, there was one dish for the evening meal, *polenta*—maize flour—cooked in water: meat was a rarity, almost unknown. Yet the Mussolinis never suffered the hunger and the absolute destitution that were familiar then to many Italian families. Benito's childhood was sheltered from the hardships of labor and hunger. He was a quarrelsome, brawling boy, sharp in claiming his share in the petty thefts committed by the children who ranged through all the villages:

"Twenty-five years ago," he wrote later, "I was an arrogant and violent child. Some of my playmates still have scars on their faces from the stones that I threw at them. A nomad by instinct, I wandered along the river from morning until night, robbing birds' nests and stealing fruit. I went to mass. . . . I followed my mother. . . . I helped my father in his modest, difficult work. . . ."

At that time the Mussolinis lived in a house that was certainly simple—three scantily furnished rooms—but it contained the essentials: the iron bed, the sideboard, the wardrobe; one of the rooms, as long as Mussolini's mother was alive, was used as a school room. His mother, whom Benito loved devotedly, saw to it that he received a solid education. She enrolled him in the Salesian school in Faenza, where discipline was strict and inequality of treatment among the pupils was the rule: in the dining room there were three tables—one for the young nobles, one for the rich, and one for the poor. Arrogant and quarrelsome, Mussolini—who had told his mother: "One day Italy will be afraid of me"—chafed at the bit; he threw an inkwell into a teacher's face, he tried to run away, he was caught, he stabbed a classmate with a pocket knife. Nonetheless the school did not expel him: he was a good student. But his family had no money, and in the end Benito had to be with-

drawn from the school when a request for a scholarship was refused.

He was then sent to a boarding school in Forlimpopoli, but he was soon forbidden to live in the school because of his behavior, though he was allowed to continue his studies as a day pupil, lodging in the house of an old woman. A penniless scapegrace, he developed a sudden passion for music.

To be a student in such a school was a privilege that was anything but common among Italians of his age. At that time almost 80 percent of the population in the south was illiterate; that *Mezzogiorno* has always been the cancer of Italy. Circumstances unfavorable by nature were aggravated by the burden of history: uncultivated estates owned by absentee landlords side by side with inadequate little plots in a region of arid soil where peasants endure lifetimes in prey to malaria, hunger, exhaustion, and ignorance. The Mafia and the Camorra control the country, and their "clients" are the voters: such was the start of Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, who became Premier of Italy at the end of the First World War. In contrast to such conditions, of course, the Mussolinis' Romagna seemed a land of privilege.

And yet, even though the south was stagnating, even though the growth in the population was making the situation still worse (in spite of emigration, between 1871 and 1914 the Italian population increased by more than eleven million to a total of thirty-seven million, and population density rose from thirty-four to fifty-two inhabitants per square mile), there was a sharp upsurge in the Italian economy at the time when young Benito Mussolini left the school at Forlimpopoli in order to start his training as a teacher.

The years between 1880 and 1910 were in fact decisive for Italian capitalism; the impetus was especially strong after 1900. In that year FIAT was founded with a capital of eight hundred thousand *lire* and by 1913 Italy was already exporting four thousand cars; the textile industry expanded so much that in 1908 its cotton sector was menaced by overproduction; powerful hydro-electric installations were established on the rivers. But this development was peculiar to northern Italy, and in large measure it was accomplished at the expense of the Italian small farmers who were sacrificed to trade treaties, especially in the *Mezzogiorno*.

It was a Sicilian who presided over this immolation of the south to the north: Francesco Crispi, a disciple of Mazzini and a participant in the expedition of Garibaldi's Thousand. It was said of him that he sought to copy Bismarck and Boulanger, and, like the Iron Chancellor, he wanted to leave his mark on his country. His long

tenure of power—from 1887 to 1896—brought into the open the alliance that was being formed between the intellectual or agrarian middle class of the south and the industrial interests of the north.

One day Alessandro Mussolini said to his son: "You will be the Crispi of tomorrow."

Actually, regardless whether the elder Mussolini really said this, the remark has a certain validity, for Crispi's ideas and his style represent one of those deep-lying veins that exist in the history of a nation, revealing an aspect of its character, to which statesmen return at long intervals and under varying conditions, repeating, sometimes unconsciously, the language of remote precursors.

The Sicilian, Crispi, initially a revolutionary and then an authoritarian minister, the artisan of a policy of reaction and repression, projected himself as the defender of order against the extremist parties, even attempted a reconciliation with the Vatican, and, above all, undertook a program of prestige that culminated in an alliance with Germany and a colonial adventure in Abyssinia. In actuality Crispi was an admirer of Germany because he was a hater of France, but also because of the fascination in which he was caught by the strong state built by Bismarck.

The gradients that led from Crispism to Fascism were manifested thus in the field of foreign policy, in confirmation of the principle that the choices available to a nation are not infinite; and thus we can see what Fascism owed to Crispism and how, for all its appearance of being new, Mussolini's movement derived from a national tradition.

And Crispi, who loved to play at being chancellor, Crispi, who was so solicitous of the nation's honor, wore the chains of the Triple Alliance, accepted its contempt for Italy—"a whore who works the streets," Bismarck said in 1879—and led his country into the disaster of Adowa: five thousand men killed, including two generals and three hundred officers, and all the artillery left in the hands of the Abyssinians.

Standing erect with his companions in the school room, Benito Mussolini paid tribute to the dead of Adowa and swore to avenge them. This fact should be kept in mind because of what it demonstrates: the wound suffered by Italian national feeling at Adowa in 1896. But others reacted to the defeat at Adowa as a proof of the foolishness of colonial adventures. One of these was Alessandro Mussolini. He took up collections for the wounded and sick in the Abyssinian army; anti-militarist demonstrations broke out all over Italy. There were shouts of "*Evviva Menelik*," and crowds tore up railway tracks in order to prevent the departure of troop trains.

This was how the energy of the new Socialist tendency expressed itself.

In August, 1892, the Italian Workers' Party was created in Genoa. But this party was the heir to a long tradition. Alessandro Mussolini aptly epitomized all the idle talk, the generosity of spirit, the anarchy, and the confusion that co-existed in the ancestors of Italian Socialism.

He was a member of the International and his house was the theater of unceasing discussion. It was in tribute to Benito Juarez, the hero of Mexican independence, that he named his son Benito, adding Amilcare and Andrea in honor of two Italian Socialists, Amilcare Cipriani and Andrea Costa. And yet this revolutionary, this man of violence, whose influence on Benito was indubitable but difficult to measure, was also a reformist, a legalitarian like all the "great men" in the party—Leonida Bissolati, Ivanoe Bonomi, Claudio Treves.

These Socialists, however, proclaimed themselves Marxists when it came to philosophy. About 1890 Antonio Labriola discovered Marxism and wrote to Engels; in 1891 a young Socialist, Filippo Turati, and his comrade, Anna Kulishova, founded a magazine, *Critica sociale*, in Milan for the propagation of Marxist ideas; above all, in 1896, still in Milan, Bissolati founded *Avanti!*, a Socialist daily whose editor in 1912 was to be Benito Mussolini.

In 1896 he was only a student in the Forlimpopoli school—where he played the trombone in the band—a turbulent pupil who watched one day as a party of emigrants was leaving for Brazil. Nine families loaded down with bundles, and without a thought of ever returning, were leaving *la terza Italia*, "the third Italy"—"the middle-class Italy that denies the poor workers a hunk of bread," Alessandro Mussolini wrote in *Pensiero romagnolo*. Like his father, Benito was deeply moved, and he always remembered the tragic spectacle.

Emigration in those declining years of the nineteenth century was increasing. While Crispi, with all the impulsiveness of an authoritarian southerner, was conjuring up the grandeur of Italy, whole masses of Italians were abandoning their young country, driven out of it by hunger; and this was taking place precisely when Italian capitalism was growing in the north. More than eight million Italians left their country between 1876 and 1914. Between 1900 and 1914 there were four hundred thousand departures every year. Alessandro Mussolini and his son were rightly disturbed, for these emigrants were packed together on decks and in gangways for an arduous journey from which there was no return.

There were those in the Veneto and the Romagna who, seduced by fraudulent advertisements, sold all that they owned in order to pay their passage and then, completely ruined, appealed across the Atlantic for help.

This hemorrhage of population, corroboration of the misery of the southern masses, explains many aspects of the Abyssinian undertaking, which was not so much an attempt to obtain raw materials, markets, and profits—Italian capitalism was far from having reached that stage of maturity—but rather an endeavor to export the misery by exporting the miserable.

Starting with Crispi, then, Italian colonial policy laid its stress on the necessity of finding areas to be populated by its proletarians. This was the origin of the idea of a "poor nation's colonialism" of a "proletarian Italy" guided by need, not by the desire for conquest that inspired the insatiable imperialist nations, Great Britain and France. These themes were to be those of Fascism.

The word *Fascio*,* furthermore, began to appear in Italian political life at this time—in Sicily, from which so many of the emigrants had gone. Workers' *Fasci*—Workers' Associations—were founded in May, 1892, first in Palermo and then throughout the island. The movement spread rapidly, spontaneously, and violently, demanding the redistribution of the land and reductions in taxes. Riots broke out in 1893. In 1894 Crispi proclaimed a state of siege in the whole of Sicily. Anarchist violence grew in the north. At the same time, in France, Sante Caserio, an anarchist, assassinated President Sadi Carnot on June 24, 1894. It was a time when, in the absence of legal representation, revolt was expressed through assassination. There were heated arguments in Alessandro Musso-
lini's house and Benito was present at excited discussions. The sections of the Workers' Party were dissolved. In 1897 another anarchist, Acciarito, attempted to assassinate King Umberto I. Social tension, heightened by the scandals and corruption of parliamentary circles, reached its climax in Milan. Crispi had been replaced by the Marquis di Rudinì when the outbreaks began on May 6, 1898.

The riot—a spontaneous, unarmed hunger riot—raged in the center of the city, which General Bava-Beccaris put under a state of siege. *Avanti!* and the *Osservatore cattolico* were suspended,

* Literally, *fascio* means a bundle or a sheaf. Its use in this political sense goes back to nineteenth-century Sicily, and the word was chosen to emphasize the extremely close bond that united all the members of the group. The *fascies*—bundle or sheaf of rods—carried by the *lictors* in ancient Rome became the official Fascist emblem.—Translator.

and their editors, Turati and Don Albertario, were arrested: manacled at the wrists and chained to each other, they were paraded through the city, where the rising was crushed with a minimum of one hundred dead, including women and children.

It is interesting to reflect that it was in Milan that the first demonstrations for participation in the war were held in 1914, it was in Milan that Fascism made its great start, Milan where in 1898 "the bourgeoisie thought for a moment that the end of the world was at hand, the authorities thought that they were not strong enough to resist, and the revolution that did not exist became in the end a real fact because everyone thought that it must exist."² Repression, however, did not prove fruitful: in the elections of June 3, 1900, the Socialists won fifteen seats.

A man of fifty-eight, a cautious Piedmontese with regular, delicate features, had led the opposition against Crispi. He was Giuseppe Giolitti, a native of Mondovì, whose personality was to dominate the history of Italy until Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922. A brilliant jurist, he had had a long administrative career before he became a deputy in 1882 and a minister under Crispi. His administration began in 1902 and lasted until 1914, with a few brief interruptions. But, as the final manifestation of the crisis of 1898, Gaetano Bresci, an anarchist chosen by lot among his comrades for the purpose, returned to Italy from Paterson, New Jersey, in 1900. Two years earlier, Umberto I had decorated General Bava-Beccaris for his achievement in Milan and his defense of civilization. On July 29, 1900, as the King was leaving Monza for his palace after having attended a gymnastic contest, Bresci, standing on a seat, fired four revolver shots at the King and killed him. The reaction was intense.

Benito Mussolini was now seventeen years old. He wore a flowing black tie, like the poets and the anarchists, and in *Avanti!* for February 1, 1901, there was a story that the student comrade, Mussolini, had paid tribute to Giuseppe Verdi in a much applauded speech.³ With the twentieth century Italy acquired a new king, Vittorio Emanuele III; a new statesman, Giolitti; and, somewhere in the mass of her inhabitants, a thin young man who liked to recite poetry and who had just graduated brilliantly as a teacher.

"I too had a diploma . . . a diploma that made it possible for me to earn my livelihood," Mussolini wrote in his autobiography. "I was eighteen years old." This autobiography is the first of his writings that has come down to us. It shows him as he was then, a

² Villari, quoted by M. Vaussard, *Histoire de l'Italie contemporaine*, p. 59.

³ Quoted by Paolo Monelli in *Mussolini: The Intimate Life of a Demagogue*, trans., Brigid Maxwell (New York: Vanguard, 1954).

nervous, temperamental young man, walking quickly along the paths of the commune of Predappio with a book in his hand, walking without raising his eyes from it, declaiming. He had joined the Socialist Party in 1900 and, to the despair of his extremely pious mother, he no longer went to church. One can picture him, ill-dressed, fueling his inner fire with heroic reading, proud of his brand-new yet superficial culture, overflowing with energy, and doing nothing. For in those early years of the twentieth century Italy had a plethora of teachers and a dearth of schools. Straining at the leash, Mussolini spent an entire year in the search for work. He was *disoccupato*: the Italian word is the best for that condition in which anger and violence accumulate little by little. He tried to get a job as a secretary in the town hall of Predappio. The mayor turned him down. "One day you'll accept him as your boss," Alessandro Mussolini threatened. But that accomplished nothing, and Benito went on trying to find some way of "earning his keep." For every job that became vacant—this happened to him in Ancona and again in Legnano—there were dozens of applicants, mature men but reduced, like Mussolini, to unemployment. What better soil for rebellion than a young intelligence confident of its achievements (these latter confirmed by a diploma), flattered by its scholastic successes—Mussolini had topped his class in Italian literature and history in the normal school—and feeling rejected by an established society that was unjust in its refusal to recognize either certificates or the worth that they represented.

Full of bitterness, his mouth acrid with sarcasms, the young "outsider" Mussolini, stripped of his class, talked of setting fire to his books and his diploma.

That was not enough to assuage his thirst for action, his thirst for being. He was eighteen years old; he threw himself desperately into amatory diversions, chasing girls and having them on stairways, quickly, brutally, trying to relieve himself of his desire and, in vain, to lose himself, to satisfy himself in the frenzy. He frequented village dances, he got into fights. In remembrance of this chaotic period he retained throughout his life a preference for quick copulations . . . and a syphilitic infection about which he did little. Fortunately for him, in February, 1902, the Socialist municipality of Gualtieri, near Reggio Emilia, was looking for a substitute teacher, and, out of political sympathy for the father and the son, it chose Mussolini. From February to June of 1902, then, he performed the duties and became familiar with the life of a teacher. It bored him. He was like an unused force. He became the lover of a married woman whom he dominated, he continued getting into fights, he went to dances; violence flashed from his eyes; even his

attire was disturbing. He wrote a few articles for *la Giustizia*, the paper belonging to the Socialist, Camillo Prampolini, and he established contacts with the Socialists who had formed the local cooperative. There he found good, peaceable peasants who, just as in the whole Po Valley, had organized solidly based cooperative organizations that were beginning to centralize purchases and sales and that constituted the economic foundation of reformist Socialism. Young Mussolini was disappointed: here was no revolution, only legality and mutual help.

In contrast to these settled, mature men, he embodied the young man of uncertain fate, the unsatisfied semi-intellectual—he was earning fifty-six *lire* (about eleven dollars) a month—who is looking for a road to glory. He thought of going to Madagascar, and then in June, 1902, when his work as a substitute ended, he telegraphed to his mother, received from her the money that he had requested—forty-five *lire* (nine dollars)—and went to Switzerland.

Switzerland at that time was the haven of everything that Europe contained in the way of outlaws, Socialists, revolutionaries, anarchists. Pursued by the Okhrana, the Russians in particular were numerous: Plekhanov, Axelrod, Vera Zassulitcha, who had fired at the chief of police of St. Petersburg in February, 1878. They were concentrated in the Carouge quarter in Geneva, and they gathered at the Landolt beer saloon. It was from Geneva that the parcels of *Iskra*, the newspaper inspired by Lenin, were shipped to Russia. He and his wife, Natasha Krupskaya, moved to Geneva in April, 1903, less than a year after Mussolini's arrival. Young Benito wandered about that exiles' Switzerland. Just as he was crossing the border at Chiasso, he had learned of the arrest of his father, who, with several other Socialists, was wanted for having destroyed the voting urns in Predappio.

In Switzerland, Benito was a nobody who had to survive. He worked hard at a stonemason's job and yet he went hungry, and the lushness of the tourist palaces revolted him; he read the menu of a hotel: "enough to drive you mad, those swine. . . ." His clothes grew frayed and filthy. He took a certain satisfaction in fantasy: "I was filled with an immeasurable melancholy," he noted, "and on the shore of the Lake of Geneva I asked myself whether it was worth the trouble of living through another day." He spent one night in an empty packing crate under the arches of the big bridge in Lausanne and, as he came out in the morning, he was arrested for vagrancy. He had hit bottom. But not for long. Among the Italian emigrants there were few intellectuals. Very soon Mussolini acquired the stature of a daring rebel. He had arrived at the age

for military service and, since he had not gone home, he was sentenced *in absentia* to a year in prison as a deserter. He began to rise. He became secretary of the masons' union in Lausanne, he gave Italian lessons, he wrote a few articles. Rather than misery, it was a romanticized and disordered bohemianism that began for him.

On March 18, 1904, at a meeting in Geneva, he met a Russian revolutionary, Angelica Balabanova. An ugly little woman, she was quite cultivated and multi-lingual. She became interested in the young man, the worst dressed and dirtiest of all the exiles, a constant blasphemer, who at the same time kept thrusting out his jaw and assuming the postures of a leader. She thought him timid, initiated a friendship with him, and found work for him: every morning Mussolini pushed a wine merchant's loaded handcart through the streets. Above all, Balabanova made him study.

Actually, although he always wore a medallion bearing the likeness of Karl Marx, Mussolini had read nothing by Marx except *The Communist Manifesto*. Stimulated by Balabanova, he began to attend the university in Lausanne and to visit the library; he learned French and German. With Balabanova he translated Karl Kautsky's pamphlet, *Revolution on the March*, from the German, and Prince Kropotkin's *Remarks of a Rebel* from the French. He broadened his reading—Nietzsche, Max Stirner, Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Schopenhauer—and engaged in discussions with the exiles: the Russians, the Poles, and of course the Italians, including the Socialist, Giacinto Menotti Serrati. He was offered a job in New York on the staff of a newspaper called *The Proletarian*, but his mother was ill and he had to refuse. At last he had emerged from anonymity.

In that crucible of men and ideas that was Switzerland at the beginning of the century, Mussolini worked himself free of the "regionalism" that is so common among Italians. He had broken the chafing yoke of the Romagna. He would go back there, of course, but in Switzerland he lived and vibrated with all the revolutionaries of Europe. However superficial it might have been, he acquired a certain culture; above all, he met men, he held his own among them, occasionally against the most illustrious of the time. In a controversial lecture, for instance, he debated the Belgian Socialist, Emile Vandervelde, on the subject of Christ.

For this young man, who used to follow his mother to church, was extremely anti-clerical. On September 7, 1903, a pastor named Tagliatella spoke about God. Mussolini rose, pulled out his watch, and placed it on a table.

"God does not exist," he declared. "You want proof? Here. God, if you exist, you have five minutes in which to strike me dead. I spit on you. I curse you." He waited in silence, and then he said: "As you can clearly see, God does not exist."

This often-told tale is an excellent picture of him as he was in those days—and as he would always be: adept at finding the right gesture, the right attitude to cause surprise. There was much of the showman in him. There was also, in this young man who stood up in the middle of a lecture hall against accredited orators, a determination to push himself into the foreground, to achieve distinction, and it appears in that comic challenge to God: "Strike me dead."

He succeeded so well in acquiring a name that on April 6, 1904, he was expelled from the canton of Geneva after he had been denounced to the Italian consul as an anarchist. He moved to France, lingered briefly in Annemasse, and, if certain reports are to be credited, became a stool-pigeon for the French police. In Switzerland a Socialist councilor, Dr. Wyss, raised a question in the Grand Council of Geneva concerning his expulsion, and the Roman newspapers reported that "Geneva has gotten rid of the Socialist agitator, Mussolini."

Thus matured and imbued with the revolutionary climate of cosmopolitan Geneva, he returned to Italy in November of 1904. Under a new law an amnesty for minor offenses had been proclaimed, by way of celebrating the birth of Umberto di Savoia, but Mussolini remained in the police files as a "dangerous anarchist." And in truth he was no longer merely the young school teacher with inchoate aspirations. Undoubtedly his stay in Switzerland had confirmed him in the conviction that he could "succeed." He had written for foreign newspapers, he had given lectures, with Serrati he had founded an International Library for Rationalist Propaganda. He had already known prison and the exaltation of being chosen as a leader by compatriots; he had been the lover of exiles, including a Russian woman with whom he had gone to the French border. And he was only twenty-one years old.

He returned to Italy in order to perform his military service, but he could consider that in Switzerland he had completed his schooling as a revolutionary.

When Mussolini returned to Italy, the political situation had altered.

The Socialist tendency to which he adhered had broadened. In 1903 there were thirty-three Socialist deputies in the Italian Parliament. Paradoxically, however, although they had gained in impor-

tance, the leaders of the Socialist movement had in all essentials reinforced their reformist beliefs.

This was because in Giolitti they had found a statesman who had evolved a policy of collaboration. The problem was to win participation in the government for the Socialists. In 1903 Giolitti offered a ministry to Turati, who had been imprisoned in 1898. Turati refused it, but the significance of Giolitti's gesture was in no way diminished thereby: the Italian government was giving up violence and systematic repression and turning toward conciliation. Social legislation was enacted, and workers' cooperatives obtained the right to take part in enterprises of public utility. They were to assemble large financial contributions, run large enterprises, and distribute the profits among their members. Laws governing a weekly day of rest, night work, contracts, and workmen's compensation brought improvements in the lot of labor. Under Giolitti a middle-class Italy founded on a contented proletarian class strove to come into being. In the workers' houses the whitewashed walls bore two portraits: one of Karl Marx, the other of Giolitti.

If Giolitti was thus able to apply a social program that benefited certain sectors of the Italian proletariat, it was because the economic upsurge was vigorous and brought forth an aristocracy of labor that was cognizant of the advantages of Giolitti's government. This aristocracy was the rock on which the parliamentary Socialist group led by Turati, Bissolati, Treves, and Bonomi built. It would be impossible to under-estimate the importance of these men: as reformists, they were in effect accepting the monarchy, no doubt implicitly, but in fact they were united with the king, who was the personification of the nation. Hence it was clear that, thus interjected into the monarchist state, they could form a Socialist and national left wing in the face of crisis.

Young Mussolini was then at the opposite extreme from this deferential Socialism. After his military service—during which his mother died—with the Tenth Bersaglieri of Verona, from 1904 to 1906, Benito Mussolini obtained another teaching position. During his two years in uniform he had shown himself to be a good soldier: this young anarchist under police surveillance had made a show of practiced patriotism and consistent discipline. "Why," he wrote, "should a good soldier not at the same time be a fighter in the class struggle?"

Once he was discharged, however, Benito returned to a life of disorder. He taught in Carnie and Tomezzo, earning fifty *lire* (ten dollars) a month, but it bored him; he was often drunk and there were more and more one-night loves. At the end of this "year of

brutalization," during which he even contemplated suicide—he learned now that he had syphilis—he went to France. He organized the Italian workers of Marseilles, from which he was soon expelled: the police escorted him to the border. He spent a few months in Predappio, then in Bologna, dabbling; he managed to acquire a certificate as a teacher of French literature and went off to teach French in a technical school in Oneglia, near Genoa. But everywhere he was either preceded or followed by his police record. In Oneglia, after he had gotten his job, he was described as "a dangerous revolutionary Socialist expelled from Switzerland and France, the organizer of insurrectional demonstrations in the Romagna." The prefect attempted, without success, to exert pressure on the director of the school to dismiss Mussolini. But the director stood firm, and Mussolini, who had met in Oneglia a son of Serrati, the Socialist whom he had known in Switzerland, wrote articles for *la Lima*, the Ligurian Socialists' newspaper. For the most part his articles were directed against the clergy, but he also expounded Georges Sorel's views on violence. For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, on March 14, 1908, he wrote: "What we must do is not study the world but transform it. . . . The interests of the proletariat are opposed to those of the middle class. No agreement between them is possible. One or the other must disappear."

Thus Mussolini's antagonism to the reformists was borne out. What was important was the fact that, while his categorical position ran counter to the thinking of the parliamentary group and the Socialist leaders, as well as the privileged element in the proletariat, it voiced the feelings of many Italian workers and peasants.

For the benefactions of Giolittism had reached only a part of the proletariat—could it have been otherwise? Above all, they had been achieved only in the north of Italy and in the industrial sector, which distributed high pay within the limits of constant and protected expansion.

Many of the workers, especially those of the *Mezzogiorno* and all the *braccianti*, found little in Giolittism to interest them. Indeed, between 1900 and 1914 the rural proletariat increased by fifty percent, and Gaetano Salvemini, a southern intellectual, could write:

"For us in the south, social legislation is a phrase almost devoid of meaning, for we have nothing to do with those relationships that social legislation intends to regulate. Rather than being protected against exploitation, our proletariat still needs to be exploited."⁴

⁴ Quoted by R. Paris in *Histoire du fascisme en Italie* (Paris: Maspero).

The general strike of 1904, which, moreover, had been preceded by a number of other walkouts, was to demonstrate the strength of this opposition to Giolittism. In April, 1904, the southern Socialists had proclaimed the necessity for the seizure of power by force, the general strike being the privileged weapon of the masses.

In Sardinia a striking miner was killed. In the Milan Labor Exchange, forty-five thousand strikers adopted a resolution proclaiming the general strike. This movement was to be marked by two facts gravid with consequences for the future. First, in many factories labor set up workers' councils, and Giolitti was careful not to interfere with this trend: strategic points were occupied by the army, but the government allowed the movement to "fall apart" in the factories. The general strike was a failure. Sixteen years later, in September, 1920, both the workers and Giolitti were to follow their tactics of 1904: workers' councils on the one hand and clever governmental watching and waiting on the other. It was indeed in this period before 1914 that the middle class, the government, and the proletariat adopted styles and solutions that they endeavored to apply after the war in a completely different situation. Besides, being in a position of strength, as he was after 1904, Giolitti knew how to exploit intimidating action. In 1908 it was decreed that strikes by government employes in all categories were tantamount to resignation.

In 1908 Mussolini left Oneglia for Predappio. Before his departure, he addressed an open letter to the authorities through *la Lima*:

In a few days I am leaving, and, so that you can report me, I am giving you my exact address: the house stands on the provincial road at Rabbi, at kilometer-marker 15, in the hamlet of Dovia, commune of Predappio, province of Forlì. Make a record of it and think it over . . . perhaps it will be possible to throw me out of my own house too.

The month was June, and he arrived in the Romagna in the midst of an agrarian crisis, when the *braccianti* were battling the tenant farmers. It was a major problem: fifty-five percent of the Italian population still lived by the soil: there were only five million owners of land, and nine-tenths of them owned less than two acres each—in other words, there were fewer than seven million acres for twenty-two million farm workers. In order to live, the vast majority of the peasants had to become *braccianti* or else rent land from large or medium owners. The situation was most serious for

the *braccianti* of the Po Valley (the region of Bologna, Ferrara, Cremona, Mantua, Piedmont itself in the area of Vercelli and Novara), who literally lived only by their "arms" and who represented the surplus manpower of the great estates. The conflict between these two social groups—landowners and *braccianti*—was simple and bitter. The landowners wanted "free" labor, so that the drifting mass of jobless men would enable them to dictate wages; the *braccianti* demanded that the employment offices be controlled by peasant leagues that would distribute work equitably over the whole year and establish wage scales, whatever the season or the economic conditions.

So there was fighting: over the threshing machines that the landowners refused to rent to the small farmers, over wages, over recognition for the freedom of labor; there was fighting between tenant farmers and *braccianti*. All this unrest was at its height when Mussolini arrived in Predappio in 1908: the organized peasants were battling the "yellows," the Krumirs—the scabs—and violence was built into all these peasant conflicts. Mussolini threatened a landowner with his stick and he was sentenced to three months in prison, but after two weeks he was set free on probation. Once again he had drawn attention to himself, and the Socialist newspapers lavished praise on him.

These agrarian conflicts in which he was thus for the first time engaged were a major theme of the Italy of the time. In 1911 and then in 1920 Giolitti recognized the right of the peasant leagues to organize and to control hiring, and thus protect the *braccianti*; problems, and violence, were to arise afresh after 1919, and it was in that same Po Valley, rent by the strife between farmers and *braccianti*, that Fascism took root. Certainly by 1920 Mussolini would have changed sides; but the fact remains that he served his apprenticeship in peasant problems in 1908.

Released on probation, Mussolini went back to Forlì. His father and Signora Guidi had a *trattoria*, the tavern called *Al Bersagliere*, in via Mazzini opposite the railway station.

For several months Benito spent his time waiting on customers, reading, and falling in love with Rachele, the youngest—she was sixteen—of the five daughters of Anna Guidi, born Lombardi. Rachele was blonde and graceful, and there was a rumor that she was Anna's illegitimate daughter by Benito's father, but this did not disturb the son. When he was about to leave Forlì, Benito staged a small family party. There were drinking and dancing. He played the violin and then, taking Rachele to one side, he asked her to wait for him. When he came back, he would marry her.

Mussolini was leaving Forlì for the Trentino. In 1909 that province was part of the Tyrol, which was in turn a province of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Mussolini established himself in Trento, a city of seventy thousand, to work with the *Popolo* and later with *l'Avvenire del lavoratore* (*The Worker's Future*), both Italian-language newspapers. Though administratively subject to Vienna, Trentino was inhabited by thirty-eight thousand Italians who submitted to Austrian rule but demanded reunion with Italy. The editor of the *Popolo*, Cesare Battisti, was the spokesman for the irredentist movement;⁵ in contrast, though Mussolini openly proclaimed his anticlericalism—he engaged in controversy with Alcide de Gasperi, who was the director of the Catholic newspaper, *il Trentino*—he was not an irredentist. Collected into a pamphlet entitled *The Trentino as Seen by a Socialist*, his articles became the target of fierce attacks by Italian nationalist circles. Later, when he became Il Duce, Mussolini was to order the excision of these heretical texts from his official biographies and his collected works. Nevertheless the Austrian police kept an eye on him, and he was imprisoned after a number of demonstrations. He went on a hunger strike. In spite of the fact that a general strike was called by the Trento workers on his behalf, he was expelled. Leading Trentino Italians accompanied him to the border, where there were dramatic hand-shaking farewells across the markers defining the limits of the Habsburgs' empire. And again the Italian press devoted articles to Benito Mussolini.

It must be pointed out that irredentism had never died out of Italy since the *Risorgimento*. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century it received a new impetus because it was based on a self-strengthening foundation: nationalism. Thus in 1903 the Trento-Trieste Association was formed, and its local committees multiplied throughout the peninsula, waving their banners at every public demonstration. Of course nationalist ideas were nothing new. When Crispi was in power, he sought to make them reality through his program of grandeur. What was new was the fact that these ideas were taken up, expanded, and propagated by groups of intellectuals who established publications, inspired little organizations, and gradually evolved a coherent nationalist ideology without which it would be impossible to understand Italy's entry into the war in 1915 or the later rise of Fascism. This ideology was the link that connected Crispi with Fascism: it was the foundation on

⁵ *Irredentism* was the name given to the thesis according to which Italy should include, beyond her pre-1914 borders, all the areas that were connected with her by language and customs but separated from her by politics. These areas constituted *Italia irredenta* (enslaved or unredeemed Italy).

which the interventionist movement of 1914-15 and, later, Mussolini's party were based.

The themes of this ideology were simple, often quite literary and rhetorical, and well suited to the captivation of a lower middle class that had retained from its classical studies the memory of "the grandeur that was Rome," together with the exaltation of a few heroes of the *Risorgimento*—in short, the image of an idealized and aristocratic history.

Gabriele d'Annunzio, the theatrical, high-flown poet, fully epitomized the love of language, of spectacle, of antiquity, of empire that was the basic style of Italian nationalism and that foreshadowed the "Mussolinian gesture," his pomps, his bombast, his absurdities.⁶ When Crispi launched his Abyssinian adventure, the novelist, Alfredo Oriani, declared: "All the millennial efforts of Italy to become a nation have been directed only to this day."⁷

Exaggeration already, and then above all the harsh lesson of reality with the disaster at Adowa on March 1, 1896. D'Annunzio too exalted Rome in his *Elettra* in 1904:

O Rome, O Rome, only in thee alone,
Within the circle of thy seven hills,
The long divided multitudes of man
Will find, sublime and broad, their unity,
New aliment for body and for soul.⁸

When one recalls that d'Annunzio consistently peopled the stage with supermen acting beyond the law, interpreters of destiny, "leader[s] . . . breaker[s] of unknown paths . . . discoverer[s] of new planets," one sees how great a debt Mussolini and his movement owed to this precursor who later joined the ranks of Fascism. Enrico Corradini played a comparable part, but on the theoretical level. In 1902 he published a novel called *Julius Caesar* and a year later, with a group of loyal followers, he launched a magazine of minimal circulation, *Il Regno* (*The Kingdom*). Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini inspired similar groups through little periodicals. All of them declared themselves to be imperialists and championed the necessity of war: "The Roman reapers of men are sacred. Napoleon is sacred. Conquerors enjoy the sanctity of destiny."

They set the "great proletarian" Italy—in the words of the poet,

⁶ An essential reference in this regard is M. Vaussard's *Évolution du sentiment nationaliste italien*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Giovanni Pascoli—against the plutocratic nations. These were the constant themes in Crispi's time: Fascism was to enlarge on them. Other of Mussolini's utterances, too, seem to have been built on these fragments from Corradini: "we shall never be a nation without a war"; and "the inviolability of human life and pacifism are to be discarded with the old idols of the idealist and sentimental patrimony of the men of the past."

Such notions—which, in all honesty, were part of a general European tendency on the eve of the First World War—attracted the support of the "futurist" poets, who issued manifestos from both Paris and Milan. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who soon became a friend of Mussolini and a Fascist, announced that he wished "to sing of the love of danger, the habit of strength and boldness . . . to glorify war, the world's sole health, militarism and patriotism"; that "blood, you must know, has neither worth nor beauty but when it is set free by fire and sword from the prison of the arteries! And we shall show all the world's armed soldiers how blood ought to be shed."

The first futurist gathering was held in the *Teatro lirico* in Milan against a music of clamor and shouts. It was February 15, 1910, and the audience howled: "Up with war! Down with Austria!"

In December of the same year the first nationalist congress was held in Florence. A nationalist association was formed, and its members included Corradini, Luigi Federzoni, Minister of Colonies and president of the Senate under the Fascist government, and Francesco Coppola, all of whom we shall encounter again at Mussolini's side. Beginning on March 1, 1911, the movement had its own weekly, *l'Idea nazionale*, which was already talking about Nice, Corsica, Tunisia, Monaco . . . like Mussolini thirty years later. But, while it was the spokesman for imperialism, this weekly also showed the other side of Italian nationalism, which was also to be that of Fascism: the preference for a totalitarian doctrine that subordinated the individual to the nation defined as a whole. Corradini, who, like Mussolini, had come under the influence of Georges Sorel, wrote: "In thought and action nationalism was always anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-parliamentarian, anti-Masonic, its goal being the exaltation of the morality of man as soldier . . . and the creation of the cult of warrior morality in Italy."

Thus imperialism and war implied dictatorship within. Fascism was to receive the heritage of nationalism as well as that of Crispi.

But in 1911 everything was to set the nationalists against Benito Mussolini, who still represented the most violent, the most interna-

tionalist, and the most anti-militarist tendencies of Italian Socialism.

In October, 1909, after his expulsion from the Trentino, Mussolini had gone back to his father's house in Forlì and been reunited with Rachele, the pleasant, much courted waitress. A young surveyor from Ravenna, Olivieri, had just proposed marriage to her. Furious, Mussolini prevented Rachele from going to work in the tavern; then he had to overcome the opposition of their parents. One evening, with his characteristic propensity for the melodramatic, he burst in on Anna and Alessandro in the girl's presence. He tossed a pistol on to the table. "There are six bullets in it," he shouted. "One is for Rachele, the rest are for me."

Alessandro and Rachele's mother gave in, and without either a civil or a religious ceremony the young couple established residence in two gloomy rooms—a bedroom and a kitchen—whose only luxury was Benito Mussolini's violin. On September 1, 1910, Rachele gave birth to Edda, the future wife of Galeazzo Ciano. A short time later Benito's father, Alessandro, died.

Living now with Rachele, Benito no longer looked for a teaching post. For one hundred twenty *lire* (twenty-four dollars) a month he was the publisher, the editor, and the make-up man for Forlì's Socialist newspaper, *la Lotta di classe* (*The Class Struggle*), whose title alone stated its policy. His articles were violent, anti-clerical, and anti-reform: "Socialism," he wrote, "is perhaps the greatest drama that has stirred the human race."

He was the panegyrist of regicides and Russian terrorists. At the news of the execution of Francisco Ferrer, a Spanish anarchist, Mussolini made a speech to a large crowd and then led the demonstrators through the streets, hurling stones at the archbishop's palace and knocking down a statue of the Virgin. He also took part in the peasant conflicts that were so acute in the Romagna; he castigated those who, "having been representatives of the Socialist Party, have become the shyster lawyers of a few little groups and keep their mouths shut in Parliament so that they can speak for their clients in the ministries. This is a harsh truth, but Truth it is. Impotence is aggravated by baseness."

These attitudes and their inflexibility excited the devotion of his Socialist comrades in the Romagna. He was offered a rise in salary, but he refused the extra fifty *lire* per month: "I do not wish," he said, "to become a parasite of the Socialist organization."

He made no attempt to husband his efforts. He was a correspondent for *Avanti!* and in addition, in the first three months of 1910, he delivered sixteen lectures. As soon as he would appear on the platform, a little knot of faithful comrades would burst into noisy

applause. Little by little, as he gave so abundantly of himself, he made an impression, driven as he was by his thirst for action and his hunger to be in the forefront.

Naturally, when the Socialist Party held its national congress in Milan in October, 1910, the Romagna group sent Mussolini as its delegate. For the most part the proceedings droned on routinely, but, when Mussolini's deep voice and violent tone erupted in the hall, the audience was impressed and momentarily taken aback. He went home disappointed, however, and, under his leadership, the Socialist federation of the Romagna declared its autonomy in order to break with the reformism and compromise of the national party. This break revealed the ambitions of the young Mussolini, already resolved to forge and wield his own political instrument. But no one paid any attention to him in October, 1910. Very soon, however, there occurred an event that seemed tailor-made for Mussolini's talents: the war over Libya, then a Turkish possession. For Italy Libya represented the mirage of colonialism. When a ship carrying ten thousand rifles left Constantinople for Tripoli, the Italian ambassador had his pretext: on September 28, 1911, he handed Turkey an ultimatum that sparked the Italian-Turkish war.

Giolitti had not listened to the experts who told him that Tripolitania was the poorest and most barren country in the world. He hoped that the war would satisfy nationalist circles, who considered that expansion in Africa was the basic pre-condition of existence for a country seeking to become a great power. But he thought it would also enable him to offer the *disoccupati* of the south, the *braccianti* of the Romagna—all the discontented in a country that was beginning to suffer from overproduction in certain sectors—the hope of populating a colony as the veteran soldiers of the Roman Empire had populated Rome's conquered territories. The press trumpeted the resources and history—Imperial Rome's granary—of those flat shores where the Arabs were waiting for their Italian deliverers.

That nationalism had taken deep root was demonstrated by the fact that certain Italian Socialists—Bissolati, Bonomi, Arturo Labriola—approved Giolitti's course. Deputies of the extreme left put the number of Italians who would be able to emigrate to Tripolitania at two million. The country must be conquered. But this Socialist support of the monarchy and the nationalists produced a serious crisis within the Socialist Party, for the mass of the people was intuitively hostile to the venture, and, wherever there was a strong leader to marshal it, this opposition was manifested.

Such was the case in Forlì, where the Socialist federation led by Mussolini waged an increasingly violent struggle against the war. It soon came to rioting. Mussolini had only one slogan: "The main thing is to fight!" Besides, the majority of the Socialist Party was opposed to the war, and so was the CGL (Confederazione generale del lavoro—Italian Federation of Labor): a strike call was issued, and there was a general cry: "Not one man, not one *lira*!"

Mussolini took that literally. He led the proletariat of Forlì in an attack on the railway station to prevent troop trains from moving. With him there was a young man of twenty, the secretary of the Republican Section of Forlì: Pietro Nenni. For three days the workers of Forlì were the masters of the streets. The telegraph lines were cut and the rails were pulled up. Mussolini himself was seen attacking the tracks with a pick. Three times the cavalry charged; barricades were thrown up and stones rained down on the troops. In *la Lotta di classe* Mussolini hailed the revolt: "The workers have shown that they understand the full revolutionary meaning of the general strike."

But a state of siege was declared in Forlì. On October 14, 1911, Mussolini was sitting on the terrace of the Caffè Garibaldi when he was arrested. The police chained his wrists. "Now I can finish my book on Jan Huss," he said. Nenni was arrested on the same day.

Two days later, during the prison exercise period, Nenni climbed the wall of the inner courtyard. In the neighboring courtyard he saw Mussolini, squatting and pouring water from a bucket over his freshly shaved head.

"Good God," Mussolini said, "I didn't think you were here."

"Are there any other comrades with you?" Nenni asked.

"I should think about a dozen."

"We'll cost quite a lot," Nenni said as he prepared to climb down.

"And to think of those cowards who won't pull a general strike!" Mussolini raged.⁹

That remark was already the complete portrait of the man. That resentment and that contempt characterized the arrogant individualist always ready to condemn.

Benito Mussolini was transferred to the prison of San Giovanni in Monte, in Bologna, and indicted on eight criminal counts, including incitement to an insurrectional strike, sabotage, and violently resisting arrest. A month later he went to trial in Forlì.

Mussolini faced his judges elegantly beside the young Nenni. He conducted his own defense with great skill, and it was surprising

⁹ Pietro Nenni, *Six ans de guerre civile en Italie*, p. 12.

how he sought to minimize his own part in events, juggling words and reiterating a distinction between "moral" and "physical" sabotage. This was already an early indication of his tendency not to accept the full consequences of actions for which he was responsible when they threatened to burden him, as if Mussolini were led blindly by words, phrases, whatever was immediate, without considering the consequences of a decision. Nonetheless he behaved well throughout the trial, frankly stating his desire to build an Italy that would have none of conquests and empires, "a prosperous, free, rich Italy." He added: "I should rather be a citizen of Denmark than a subject of the Chinese Empire." Erect before his judges, he told them proudly: "If you acquit me, you shame me; if you convict me, you honor me."

Nenni was sentenced to one year and two weeks in prison, Mussolini to one year. An appeal was quickly taken, and Mussolini's sentence was reduced to six months, which he spent in the prison in Forlì. As a political prisoner he spent his time reading, and also writing an autobiography and the essay on Jan Huss.

The riot in Forlì, the arrest, the trial, and, a year before, the 1910 party congress, had drawn attention to him. To many he was now the incarnation of rigid, extremist Socialism. Therefore he took the Romagna Socialist federation back into the party when he came out of prison. He aspired now to become a national leader, and the Socialist congress that was held in Reggio Emilia from July 7 to 10, 1911, was to give him the opportunity.

Thin and in frayed clothes, he appeared there with the aura of his prison term about him. He appointed himself spokesman for the young and prosecutor of the reformists and all who had approved or countenanced the Libyan war. His favorite target was Leonida Bissolati: not only had Bissolati supported Giolitti; he had paid a call on the King after an anarchist had unsuccessfully made an attempt on his life. "How often, Bissolati," Mussolini shouted, "have you gone to pay your respects at the funeral of a mason who fell off a scaffold, or a cart-driver crushed under his vehicle, or a suffocated miner? For a king an assassination attempt is just an occupational hazard!"

Everyone in the congress who had grown weary of the pedestrian rhetoric of the usual leaders immediately recognized that he had found a spokesman in Mussolini. As Margherita Sarfatti, Mussolini's confidante and biographer, put it, he became, in Reggio Emilia, "the anti-pope of the official Socialism of Rome and Milan." His victory was assured when he cried to the congress: "Can Socialism be reduced to a theorem? We would prefer to think that mankind needs a credo."

This fresh wind swept the majority along. The young voted for him. Bissolati and Bonomi were expelled from the party and later founded the Reform Socialist Party. Others, such as Turati, Treves, and Modigliani, lost control of the leadership and, above all, of the party's daily paper, *Avanti!*, which was turned over to Bacci. Mussolini had won the battle: he had been able to seize the leadership of all those to whom Socialism in collaboration with Giolitti meant compromise. As against this Socialism that accepted bribes or nationalism in order, as Bissolati said, "not to leave the monopoly of patriotism in the hands of the enemies of Socialism," many preferred Mussolini's credo and gave him their unreserved confidence.

There were those, however, who did not trust him. Turati's nihilist comrade, Anna Kulishova, penetrated Mussolini's contrived mask in Reggio Emilia and recognized the individualist, the buccaneer. "He is not a Marxist at all," she cried; "he is not even a Socialist." And it was true that, in his speeches, even when he was talking of idealism, of "the religious soul of the party," Mussolini had betrayed flashes of the arrogant skepticism of the autocrat: "Illusion," he said, "is perhaps the only reality in life." But this remark, though already pregnant with "realism," with disenchantment, with superficial Machiavellianism, was forgotten by the majority, which regarded the young hero of Forlì as "the complete revolutionary" or "the man of the barricades."

After the congress, Mussolini returned to Forlì, but he did not remain much longer in the little town of the Romagna. The party leadership decided unanimously to appoint "Professor Mussolini editor of *Avanti!*." For Forlì it was a day of rejoicing and glory. The comrades gave him a banquet the night before he left for Milan. "He has been our Duce for three years," they said. On December 1, 1912, Mussolini took over control of *Avanti!*, the Socialist Party's daily and a newspaper of national stature.

At the culmination of a stormy, fiery youth he had finally reached the front rank. He was twenty-nine years old.

In 1912 the major newspapers played a decisive part in that Italy in which political formations still embraced only a small number of the citizens. Only the newspaper could reach the mass and disseminate ideas and slogans. *Avanti!*, therefore, gave Mussolini real power. He was not slow in increasing it and concentrating it in his own hands.

The newspaper immediately became his platform. Its old staff was dismissed, even the best-known members such as Claudio Treves, and Mussolini forced his own thinking on everyone. Angelica Balabanova, who had at first been appointed assistant to the