

## **Back from the Dead: Benito Mussolini Is Fascism Next?**

And Mussolini is now reborn in Italy, which should be the cause of some concern. There is, seventy five after his demise, a neo-Fascist majority in Italy, and his granddaughter in Naples has received European fame.

Mussolini was "the greatest statesman of the century," proclaimed Gianfranco Fini, the leader of the neo-Fascist party, on April 1. April Fools Day. His party now calls itself the Casa Pound -- eschewing the word "Fascist," which is forbidden by the Italian Constitution. Fini has thought it politic not to insist on the repeal of that ban.

History does not repeat itself, but certain historical conditions do. And what are these conditions? Discredited old political parties; a parliamentary system racked by corruption; public services that are chronically inefficient and in disrepair; recurrent waves of strikes: in sum, the scandalous weakness of the state. Much of that is true -- in some ways -- of Italy now. Against these things the Fascists and Mussolini rose, more than 70 years ago. Fascism represented a third alternative, between an outdated parliamentarism and the radicalism of the Italian Socialists and Communists.

It was energetic, determined and modern, at a time when respect for law and order and for the governmental institutions of the state was breaking down. Seventy years later the neo-Fascists, too, insist on the recovery of the national authority of the centralized state, rather than extolling the benefits of "privatization" and of capitalism.

There is something to worry about when the once-execrated Mussolini is being rehabilitated in some circles. The reputation of the founder of Fascism has survived better than that of Hitler or Stalin, not because he was the greater statesman but because he was more human. Neo-fascism and a populist glorification of Mussolini's WWII regime is contaminating Italy's culture and politics, from street gangs to intellectual salons to the highest levels of government. And weak, divided liberal democrats are struggling to respond.

When Mussolini was still an infant, the Italian statesman Francesco Crispi wrote: "Italy has been constituted, but the national soul is wanting in energy; what is missing is the man who will inspire it and direct it to the path of audacious virtues that are proofs of the greatness of a nation. Will we see the rise of such a man? I so hope." When Mussolini was still a callow youth, Gabriele d'Annunzio wrote in a poem: "From your poor land, Italy/ will there rise a new hero/ of bitter peasant blood?"

His father was a romagnolo, a radical workingman and a Socialist. He named his son after the Mexican revolutionary Benito Juarez, who had the last Emperor of Mexico executed in 1867. And Benito lived up to his name and to his father's wish. He became a young radical and a Socialist, self-educated, with a quick mind, a voracious reader. His rise in the Socialist Party was amazingly swift. At 29 he was the editor of the Italian Socialist newspaper Avanti! Then he made a great discovery. He was an Italian Socialist; an Italian first, a Socialist second.

He was born in 1883, the year Karl Marx died; and Mussolini knew many things Marx did not know or refused to think about, the force and sentiment of nationalism chief among them. Marx was wrong: the struggle of nations was more important than the struggle of classes. Mussolini recognized that international socialism was an illusion. He was proved right in 1914.

International socialism could do nothing to stand in the way of the enthusiasm with which entire nations rushed into the war. And Italy -- still neutral in 1914 -- had to rush to war, too: it was her chance to recover those Italian lands still ruled by the old Austrian Empire. After the Socialists expelled Mussolini from their party, he told them, "In your hearts you know I am right." Italy and Mussolini went to war in 1915.

Four years later Italy was among the victors, but her national ambitions were partly unfulfilled and her social fabric was badly torn. There was disillusionment, widespread poverty and endemic violence. In 1919 Mussolini proclaimed the foundation of a "Fascist" party. The word had a double meaning: one was "fasces," the Roman symbol of justice, a two-headed ax within a bundle of reeds; the other was "fasci," groupings of radical Sicilian peasants in the 1890's.

Soon Fascism became a national force, because Mussolini made a second discovery, perhaps not less important than his first. Instead of emphasizing the revolutionary essence of fascism, he would appear as the leader of a party dedicated to law and order. He would acquire the support of the established powers of Italy, of society and of the state; and of the monarchy. He was now the head of a great nationalist movement, cutting across classes. Conditions in Italy approached anarchy because of the rabid demagoguery and agitation of the Socialists and Communists. All this worked in his favor.

He spoke in short, simple, declarative sentences, giving an impression of clear determination. His very voice was attractive, virile enough not to be unduly operatic, though perhaps just enough to appeal to Italian ears. Only on reading his speeches do the pathos and unreality appear. "Credere! Obbedire! Combattere!" ran his signature line, which became the Fascist credo. "Believe! Obey! Fight!"

Besides his speechmaking abilities, Mussolini introduced a new element into the political arena: the militant organization and the militant image, the apparent visibility of his militant followers, storm troopers in black shirts. In October 1922 Mussolini threatened the inefficient Government of Luigi Facta, staging the March on Rome by the Black Shirts. The King and the army chose not to resist him. He became the Prime Minister of Italy.

Four years later he was much more than Prime Minister; he was the dictator of Italy, the leader, Il Duce. The great majority of Italians were behind him. He was the embodiment of a new alternative: neither that of a revolutionary upheaval, nor of the class struggle, nor of a corrupt and inefficient parliamentary rule or nonrule. This was achieved at the cost of certain political freedoms. Freedom of the press and parliamentary government ceased to exist.

When the Italian leader Benito Mussolini founded fascism in Milan in 1919, he was a journalist. He had been one for a decade, and knew well the power of news—real, or otherwise. Manipulating, controlling, and attacking information was at the core of his rule from the beginning, and as the fascist regime progressed and became more extreme, so did the measures employed to effectively destroy not just the institution of a free press, but any accurate information.

Soon Mussolini cowed the press by developing the so-called *veline*. These were messages with directives on how and what to report like Trump does now to FOX news. The role of the *veline* was to introduce suggestions, which quickly became orders, about things that ought and ought not be discussed, while providing direction on the tone, style, choice of words. Through the

years, papers published stories in which Mussolini raced (and won) against boats, and Italy had the world's most powerful arsenal. Italy was eased into a collective suspension of disbelief.

At the same time, Mussolini suppressed resentment by bringing "butter." Mussolini made the trains run on time, built the first automobile superhighways (before the German Autobahnen and 15 years before the first American one). For the first time in history the marshlands around Rome were drained. Mafia rule in Sicily was rather effectively suppressed. Mussolini, the erstwhile revolutionary and atheist, brought about the Lateran Treaty, establishing the autonomy and authority of the Vatican state. Unlike most of the achievements of other dictators, many of these proved durable.

The impression through the media was that under Mussolini's rule, Italy had become a bright, prosperous and powerful country. There were American members of Congress who declared during the Depression that what America needed was a Mussolini. A succession of American ambassadors to Italy admired him, one co-writing his "autobiography" for The Saturday Evening Post. Franklin. The majority of Italian-Americans, and their newspapers owned by the Generoso Pope family, were sympathetic to Mussolini and Fascism. Americans who visited sunny Italy in the 30's were, almost without exception, in favor of Mussolini. A 1935 version of Cole Porter's "You're the Top!" had as one of its stanzas: "You're the top! You're the great Houdini! You're the top! You're Mussolini!" -- two lines eliminated from the major Cole Porter songbooks, including "The Complete Cole Porter" and "The Unpublished Cole Porter."

In 1935 Mussolini was the most respected statesman in Europe. Yet, that year he provoked a war with Abyssinia, conquering it in eight months -- unopposed by any of the great European powers. For four more years he stood at the zenith of his power. Then his descent began -- because of Hitler.

Hitler admired and even imitated Mussolini for more than a decade. But by 1938 their relationship had been reversed. Now Mussolini felt constrained to emulate Hitler. There was, however, a difference between the two dictatorships. This has been obscured by the sloppy and illegitimate (and Marxist-inspired) employment of the term "fascism," applied to all dictatorships or mass movements of the non-Communist variety. Fascism was a particularly Italian phenomenon, whereas National Socialism was not only German but also Austrian and Central and Eastern European. And Mussolini and Fascism were not racist or anti-Semitic, surely not before 1938.

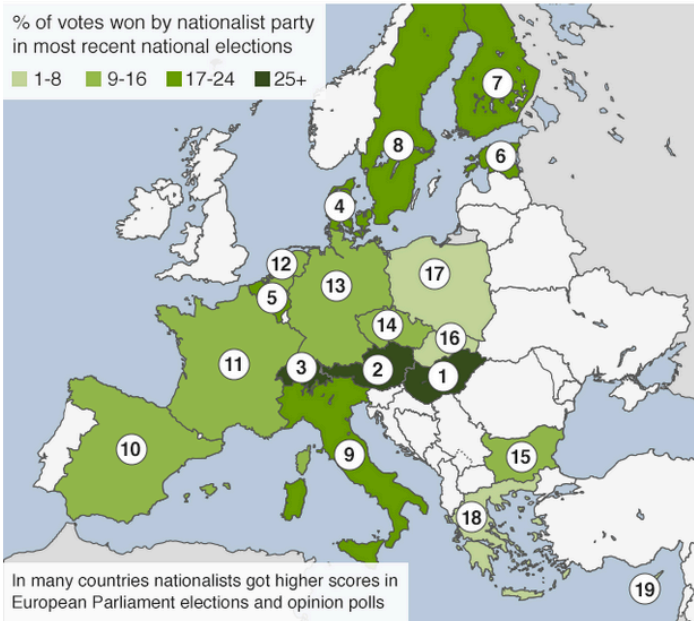
After 1936, when he felt more and more overshadowed by Hitler. His characteristic postures now included those appearances of his on the balcony of Palazzo Venezia, with his jaw stuck out, hand on his left hip. His big brown peasant eyes narrowed; his mouth turned almost froglike. Something about these transformations was ludicrous, as was his 1938 order that the Italian Army adopt the parade march of the German goose step. Worse, that same year he declared an Italian racial policy restricting the freedom of and imposing humiliating restrictions on the small number of Italian Jews.

Italians -- and some other people, too -- thought Mussolini would restrain Hitler. Wrongly so; long before his demise, his influence on Hitler had become nil. He was no longer an important statesman, or even an undisputed national leader: he had become an Italian Faust, someone who had sold his soul to the Devil.

## Rise of nationalism in Europe

% of votes won by nationalist party in most recent national elections

1-8 9-16 17-24 25+



In many countries nationalists got higher scores in European Parliament elections and opinion polls

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ① Hungary<br>Fidesz 49% Jobbik 19%             | ⑪ France<br>National Rally 13%                     |
| ② Austria<br>Freedom Party 26%                 | ⑫ Netherlands<br>Freedom Party 13%                 |
| ③ Switzerland<br>Swiss People's Party 25.8%    | ⑬ Germany<br>Alternative for Germany 12.6%         |
| ④ Denmark<br>Danish People's Party 21%         | ⑭ Czech Republic<br>Freedom & Direct Democracy 11% |
| ⑤ Belgium<br>New Flemish Alliance 20.4%        | ⑮ Bulgaria<br>United Patriots 9%                   |
| ⑥ Estonia<br>Conservative People's Party 17.8% | ⑯ Slovakia<br>Our Slovakia 8%                      |
| ⑦ Finland<br>The Finns 17.7%                   | ⑰ Poland<br>Confederation 6.8%                     |
| ⑧ Sweden<br>Sweden Democrats 17.6%             | ⑱ Greece<br>Greek Solution 3.7%                    |
| ⑨ Italy<br>The League 17.4%                    | ⑲ Cyprus<br>ELAM 3.7%                              |
| ⑩ Spain<br>Vox 15%                             |  |

That was the end of Benito Mussolini, 75 years ago. It was not the end of the quarrel about his fame, about the proportion of his virtues to his vices, that divides Italians to this day

Nationalism, in one form or another, is still the most powerful political force in the world, a surrogate religion, different from old-fashioned patriotism, appealing to tens of millions of people. It remains a potentially dangerous radical force, especially when the corruptions and weaknesses of parliamentary government become sadly apparent. And poorly placed nostalgia for Mussolini, ignoring his constriction of freedoms and the horrors of WW2 bodes well for Nationalism today.

Nationalism has always been a feature across Europe's political spectrum but there has been a recent boom in voter support for right-wing and populist parties. It is visible from Germany, where the AfD has become the biggest opposition party in the Bundestag, to Spain, where Vox has become the third largest force in parliament. Italy's Matteo Salvini - leader of the League - is a key figure in Europe's nationalist scene

On a Sunday morning in 2016, Donald Trump retweeted a quote from Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, Nazi ally, and leader of the first major Fascist movement. An account called @ilduce2016 had posted, "*It is better to live one day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep.*" When Trump appeared on "Meet the Press" later that day, the host, Chuck Todd, asked Trump whether he liked the quote—and wanted to be associated with Fascists.

"Chuck, it's O.K. to know it's Mussolini. Look, Mussolini was Mussolini," Trump, then in the early days of his Presidential run, replied. "It's a very good quote, it's a very interesting quote, and I know it." Trump then asked what difference it made whether the quote came from Mussolini or somebody else. "I want to be associated with interesting quotes," he said. "And people, you know, I have almost fourteen million people between Instagram and Facebook and Twitter and all of that. And we do interesting things. And I sent it out."

Trump, it turned out, had been duped. The now-defunct Gawker Web site had set up a phony parody account, @ilduce2016, to test Trump's political views. It posted quotes from Mussolini's writings and speeches, adding Trump's hashtag and "#MakeAmericaGreatAgain" to each. After Trump's retweet, Gawker wrote, "Is Donald Trump a fascist? Experts, historians and pundits have debated the question for months. One thing has been certain for a while now: He *tweets* like one."

It had been such an obvious ploy that John Cook, then Gawker Media's executive editor, feared that it "wouldn't trick anyone but a complete idiot." The photo on the account was of Mussolini's face with Trump's bouffant coif.

Mussolini called on his followers to believe in an Italy that would be "prosperous because it was self-sufficient and respected because it was feared," Albright writes. "This was how twentieth-century fascism began: with a magnetic leader exploiting widespread dissatisfaction by promising all things." Il Duce, who was Italy's Prime Minister from 1922 until 1943, said that his mission was "to break the bones of the democrats . . . and the sooner the better." He used the term "*drenare la palude*," or "drain the swamp." He had a talent for theatre, Albright notes, and was a poor listener who disliked hearing other people talk. He discouraged cabinet members from "proposing any idea that might cause him to doubt his instincts," which, he insisted, were always right. He also promoted the idea of national self-sufficiency "without ever grasping how unrealistic that ambition had become."

The United States was not immune to the temptation of Fascism. In 1939, Fritz Kuhn, who led the Nazi-affiliated German American Bund, famously attracted twenty thousand followers to an event at Madison Square Garden, which echoed with shouts of "*Seig Heil*." (He ended up serving a four-year prison stint for tax evasion.) Senator Joe McCarthy, a Wisconsin Republican, was a showman who had "the mentality of a Fascist bully" and "the instincts of a Mussolini," but lacked the intellect, Albright writes. McCarthy fooled many by using the demagogue's trick: "repeat a lie often enough and it begins to sound like it must—or at least might—be so." In 1940, the America First Committee included Nazi sympathizers—and claimed eight hundred thousand members within its first year.

The premise of Albright's book is that the Fascism of a century ago was not atypical. "In hindsight, it is tempting to dismiss every Fascist of this era as a thoroughly bad guy or a lunatic, but that is too easy, also dangerous," she writes. "Fascism is not an exception to humanity, but part of it." In the early twenty-first century, authoritarian demagoguery and nativist populism are making inroads in Egypt, Hungary, North Korea, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and Venezuela. It's part of a global trend. Worldwide, seventy-two nations had limited freedoms and a decline in democratic health according to *The Economist's* Democracy Index

"We are not there yet," she acknowledges, "but these feel like signposts on the road back to an era when Fascism found nourishment and individual tragedies were multiplied millions-fold." Mussolini's political strategy, she notes, was to pluck a chicken one feather at a time, so that each squawk will be heard separately "and the whole process is kept as quiet as possible."

The future of American politics is the subtext of Albright's book. "The elephant rampaging through these pages is, of course, Donald Trump," she writes. He won the Presidency "because he convinced enough voters in the right states that he was a teller of blunt truths, a masterful negotiator, and an effective champion of American interests. That he is none of those things should disturb our sleep, but there is a larger cause for unease. Trump is the first antidemocratic president in modern U.S. history."

There are other worrying signs. *The Economist's* index—which factors in due process, individual freedoms, and space for civil society—reduced the United States' ranking from a full democracy to a "flawed democracy." In the early nineteen-sixties, more than seventy per cent of Americans told Pew researchers that they had faith in government "most of the time" or "just about always."

In 2016, faith had sunk below twenty per cent. American politics is increasingly defined by contempt rather than a sense of common good.

Fascism depends on a submissive populace that placidly accepts, or “gets over,” state criminality. Unless patriotic Americans put aside party in favor of the national interest concerning the illegalities of the Trump administration is America doomed to succumb to even worse horrors, ones similar to those visited upon Germany and later all of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s?

*Article taken from New York Times Magazine 1994, New Yorker April 24, 2018, Wiki Democracy Index*

---

**Summary:**