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Mussolini: A Biography

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For my book review, I chose to read “Mussolini: A Biography” by Dennis Mack Smith. Throughout this essay, I intend to summarize the text. Following that, I will examine and interpret different aspects of the book. I’ll talk about things I liked and things I think he could improve. Finally, I’ll either make an overall recommendation or dismissal of the book.

Going into the summary, Dennis Mack Smith pretty much follows Mussolini’s life chronologically. Benito Mussolini was born on July 29, 1883. His mother was a devout Catholic and his father was a blacksmith and a socialist revolutionary. Growing up, Mussolini attended a boarding school in Forenza. Young Mussolini resented the strict rules and teachings and eventually got kicked out.

His next school was Forlimpopoli, it was much less strict, but Mussolini still got in trouble from time to time. Reportedly, he even stabbed a student. In the early 1900s, Mussolini was a failing writer, during this time he grew hostile to the sort of reformist socialism that his father embraced. He also developed an anti-clerical streak as well, he often called upon God to strike him down and he criticized Christianity for its non-violence. He demanded that all Christian socialists be expelled from the party.

Smith asserts that Mussolini was an anarchist with a deep passion to assert his ego. He cites Marx, Nietzsche and later on Mazzini as influences towards Mussolini’s political views. Mussolini had been part of a socialist newspaper called “Avanti” but was eventually kicked out
for his support of the First World War. Afterwards, he started his own paper called “Popolo l’Italia” and began to grow more sympathetic towards nationalism.

Mussolini himself did fight in World War 1; he had been conscripted in 1915. Dennis Mack Smith talks about the difficulty of knowing what really happened in any point in Mussolini’s life due to the kind of exaggeration that Mussolini was notoriously guilty of. For example, Mussolini one time exaggerated an injury sustained in a mortar accident to make it seem like he got it in a heroic defense of his country. After the war, Mussolini started looking for an opportunity to gain power. In 1919, he launches the fascist party but still called himself a socialist because of the political popularity behind the name. Mussolini claimed that he had not only saved Italy from Germany in 1915 but also the Bolsheviks.

Eventually, Mussolini marched on Rome with 30,000 blackshirts, though he claimed 300,000. He even gained popularity amongst liberals and conservatives who saw fascism as a saving grace against socialism. An early threat to Mussolini’s power arose when socialist candidate Matteotti ended up tortured and killed by fascist thugs. Mussolini denied all involvement.

Diplomatically, Mussolini was a bully, he fostered tensions and postured himself in ways that encouraged international rivalries. In this way, he desperately hoped to distract the Italian people from their internal problems. In his propaganda, Mussolini portrayed himself as aggressive and muscular and depicted his rather apolitical and muted wife as an ideal fascist woman. Somehow, he was able to win over seemingly opposed political /interest groups. For example, he was able to win over bankers and industrialists while keeping the support of the poor. Moreover, he was able to win over the Catholic Church despite his vocal atheism and
criticisms of Christianity. In 1926, Mussolini was virtually unopposed as he outlawed political parties.

Mussolini made plans as early as 1930 to invade France and Yugoslavia. Because of this, he began to butter up the Germans, even before Hitler came to power. Mussolini sent money to Germany to help Nazis in elections. After Hitler established himself, the two countries flirted with each other. Hitler even put a bronze bust of Mussolini in his office and promised that an alliance with Italy would be the basis of his foreign policy. At this point, Mussolini began aggressive posturing in Africa. On one hand, he had been eying Ethiopia as early as 1925 and on the other, Mussolini was growing unhappy with his reputation in England and began making plans to confront the British in North Africa.

Despite this, Mussolini played a minor role as a peace maker during the Munich conferences of 1938 and in light of the annexation of Czechoslovakia. He was hailed as a hero upon returning home for this and felt conflicted by that fact, he began his aggressive posturing again in 1939. As the war started, Italy played a pretty minor role, Mussolini found himself scrounging for credit and glory in light of German’s victories. Mussolini himself launched an unsuccessful attack on Greece. As the war began to go sour, he blamed German leadership (Dennis Mack Smith points out Rommel especially) and a perceived inability of the Italian people to live up to his ideals. Mussolini had all sorts of desperate hopes about a miraculous collapse of the allied army; he thought perhaps that there would be a global Catholic revolution if the allies marched on Rome. In 1943, with the allies on his doorstep and failing mental and physical health, the Grand Council took away his powers and arrested him.
The Germans rescued Mussolini in a commando raid and reinstalled him as a puppet dictator, hoping to prevent the complete collapse of Italy. Mussolini had several of those who had voted against him executed as traitors, including his son-in-law. As the war drew to a close, Mussolini found himself lacking any real power. In April 1945, he made an attempt to flee towards either the Swiss or the allies. However, Mussolini was caught by partisans and eventually executed alongside his mistress on April 26, 1945.

As far as describing Mussolini himself goes, I feel like Smith did an admirable job. Throughout the book, Dennis Mack Smith tries to grasp at the nuances of Mussolini’s personality. Sometimes it’s hard to separate Smith’s characterization of Mussolini from his characterization of fascism. But the image that emerges of Mussolini is that of a very charismatic and shrewd politician who was utterly incompetent when it came to intergovernmental matters. He was an intense and bold man who at the same time was sickly and riddled with health problems.

I feel as though Smith tries to portray Mussolini as a deeply contradictory individual. In Smith’s view, Mussolini’s contradictions would ultimately be reflected in his political ideology. Smith’s assertions make Mussolini’s personality seem very clear cut and it’s hard for me to say if this is due to a well explained argument or perhaps due to exaggerations of Smith’s part.

The preface of a book is meant to be an introduction to the book; in this case, Dennis Mack Smith basically offers a two page synopsis of the book. He points out some of Mussolini’s character traits. He goes on to describe Mussolini as the force that tied together fascism. Specifically, Dennis Mack Smith says that Mussolini was able to dress up fascism in such a way
that it looked “plausible.” Here, Smith is quick to emphasize the fact that this is a book about Mussolini rather than fascism.

The preface explains all of this in about two pages; a length that I think really suits it. Too often, prefaces are overlooked because they add little to the book while at the same time being prohibitively long. It almost sounds silly to say, but I feel like Smith’s preface sets a good example as to what all prefaces should be like. Furthermore, the information found within is extremely relevant to the overall narrative of the book. I think that it helps set the stage for the reading.

Going from the front to the back of the book, I want to look at Dennis Mack Smith’s bibliography and citation style. “Mussolini: A Biography” has a works cited page that climbs past a hundred pages. There are scarcely any names or sources repeated there within. The vast and varied repertoire of authors and sources leads me to believe that Smith put a lot of effort in getting a good background for his book. Throughout the book, Dennis Mack Smith makes extensive use of foot notes and it lends great credibility to his writing. As far as the repute of the sources themselves, I can’t really speak towards their credibility, but I can’t really speak against them either.

From an ascetic perspective, I think it could be useful to look at the cover and the illustrations in the book. It seems a trivial thing to point out, but the cover of the book seems to embrace a sort of slanted style. The title, “Mussolini: A Biography” is pitched at a 45 degree angle against a similarly slanted red and yellow back ground. Just below that is a painting of Mussolini’s head and shoulders, almost as if he is staring the reader right in the eyes. All of the writing on the cover is in bold, capital letters.
I feel as though Dennis Mack Smith (or whoever illustrated the cover) was trying to capture Mussolini’s character with the cover. Mussolini was a bold and intense man. At the same time, aspects of his personality and ideology aren’t exactly congruent. In that way, I feel as though the cover of this book is perfect in representing a certain flavor of Mussolini.

As far as pictures in the book go, I feel as though their placement might have been a bit arbitrary. I thought that the photographs themselves were very interesting. For example, in one picture, Mussolini is on horseback with a sword drawn. In another, Mussolini stands triumphantly on top of a tractor. Personally, these photographs really cemented the Smiths characterization of Mussolini for me. I think that the photographs themselves illustrate a grandness of Mussolini but at the same time goes to show a sort of misguidedness. In addition to that, we can see the kind of man Mussolini tried to present himself as. Mussolini wanted to be larger than life; giving speeches from balconies, leading his men from horseback, the stern man sitting behind the giant desk, etc.

I think that this book was mainly written with the general public in mind as an audience. I believe this mostly because of the playful and snarky nature of the writing. Despite that, I do think that it can straddle the line and appeal to more academic readers as well. Mostly, as I mentioned before, because it is so well researched and cited.

In regards to writing style, Dennis Mack Smith’s is very playful. I think that it’s clear that he took delight in creatively presenting moments of exaggeration and incompetence in Mussolini’s life. This made “Mussolini: A Biography” a very fun and enjoyable read and it managed to hold my attention throughout. In addition to that, Smith’s book is very well organized; each chapter is further split into what I can only describe as “mini-chapters.”
Personally, I appreciated this organization style because it made it easier to go back and reference specific sections of the book. Furthermore, the titles of chapters generally set the tone for the chapter ahead.

If I were to change anything about this book, I would slightly change Smith’s characterization of Mussolini. It could have been a more nuanced look at Mussolini’s personality. Instead, Smith opted to spend a lot of his time ridiculing Mussolini’s habits and traits. Though I think that Mussolini is very much deserving of any ridicule he receives, I think that it would have been interesting to see a more even handed approach.

I feel conflicted about this though, mostly because I found Dennis Mack Smith’s ridicule and utter damnation of everything Mussolini to be so entertaining. For example, in his writing, Dennis Mack Smith will use a lot of phrases like “for this very odd reason” or “even stranger still” when describing some of Mussolini’s actions. While these descriptions might be completely justified in their use, they are perhaps less than objective.

Another thing I would change is the amount of time Dennis Mack Smith spent on certain aspects of Mussolini’s life. The best example of this would be the amount of time Dennis Mack Smith spent on World War Two. Honestly, I found it strange that he spent less than a hundred pages on an event as large as World War Two. I would have probably spent less time on Mussolini’s childhood, although there were some aspects of it I thought were interesting (there was childhood stabbing incident, in particular that stood out).

Overall, I would definitely recommend this “Mussolini: A Biography.” Moreover, I would recommend it for people who are both interested in history and those who aren’t. I think that Dennis Mack Smith’s writing style by itself is entertaining enough to be engaging to those
who wouldn’t normally be interested in the subject matter. The book itself has a very good bibliography and footnotes so I think at the same time that it could prove useful to those seeking to use it for more academic purposes as well.

It’s a good thing that this book is good at grabbing attention because it demands it as well. There are a lot of complicated political conflicts and interpersonal issues that could be confusing to the casual reader. For that reason, I probably wouldn’t recommend this book for children or teenagers. Furthermore, I think it definitely helps to take notes while you are reading this book, just to keep track of the connections.

In conclusion, Dennis Mack Smith attempts to capture Mussolini’s personality in his book “Mussolini: A Biography.” In which he details Mussolini’s life from his birth to his death at the hands of Italian Partisans. I think that Smith does a great job at capturing Mussolini’s personality. Furthermore, I feel like his writing style is funny and engaging, perhaps at Mussolini’s expense. Smiths sources and citations are very detailed and varied, a fact that think definitely lends to his credibility. All in all, I’d definitely recommend his book.