

Mussolini vs. Italy*

BY G. A. BORGESE

THERE are two contrasting conceptions of human society. First, that it is a collective effort toward a common goal; second, that it is the opportunity and stuff for the great individual, for the genius, or hero, or superman. History either records an objective will towards perfection and truth, or it describes a dark, passive soil which the subjective will of the individual tills for its own crop.

The first conception may be called socialistic, a term which, if broadly taken, includes the liberalism of Western civilization as well as the communistic endeavor of present-day Russia: in a word, anything the meaning of which resides in its good will towards the *res publica*, the commonwealth, the quality of opportunities of individuals in the framework of a collective society. The second conception is strictly anarchical.

Mussolini is an anarchist who has challenged more powerfully than anyone before him, the collectivity of human interests. At the threshold of any serious inquiry into his character and career, such an acknowledgment of the greatness of his significance is only fair.

After a relentless struggle for roughly thirty years he finally subjugated a whole nation, body and reluctant soul. This nation happened to be Italy, his native community. Under different circumstances, in times when military or diplomatic opportunities were open to aliens and Italy was divided and weak, he might have conquered France, as the Italians Mazarin and Bonaparte did, or another country. Italy as a nation, as a community, has a past and a future. She has hardly a present. Today she is a tool, or weapon, in Mussolini's hand. The title of Herman Finer's book, "Mussolini's Italy," is right.

The idea of a collective effort towards a human society whose ultimate aim was the increase of intellectual freedom and knowledge and whose reward was to be collective happiness, materialized in England earlier and with more steady progress than anywhere else. This happened because the spirit bloweth where it listeth,

A good many people a few months ago were saying quietly that Huey Long was a genius, that whatever his faults he had remade Louisiana. Sometimes they talked from knowledge of Louisiana, more often they just talked. The theory that geniuses are needed is evidently an attractive one just now. Granted that consummate executive skill combined with a passion for benefiting mankind makes genius in statesmanship, is Benito Mussolini a genius? Is his dictatorship justified by its results? The question is certainly not academic, since the fate of Europe in the next ten years may depend upon the answer. Has his career been that of a great man furthering civilization in his own country, increasing prosperity, improving the lot of the average citizen? Or has it been merely a display of vast energy, self-regardful, megalomaniac, and headed, like Napoleon's in 1812, toward a crash? Abundant material for those who feel, as we do, that the answer to these questions is of the first importance is to be found in two books just published and reviewed in Professor Borgese's article. An Italian, an exile but a lover of his country, he faces the issue squarely, and analyzes the quality of a dictator who now is able to act as if Italy were his own.—The Editor.

and because the economic and social circumstances favored its development there. But six centuries earlier Dante had deemed universal peace, and therefore a universal authority, an essential prerequisite to the improvement and welfare of the human soul. He did not hesitate between his personal motherland, Florence, and the impersonal promised land of world peace and world justice where his mind and heart had citizenship. Mazzini too, long before Woodrow Wilson, and in spite of all bias in his thinking and of all blunders in his acting, had striven unswervingly for the same hope.

Now, after many and often sorry vicissitudes of the League of Nations, England suddenly volunteers as the defender of the collective ideal, and policeman against the anarchism of Mussolini. It is more than likely that behind and with the ideal of universality she is shielding the particular conservative interests of the British community. It is beyond doubt that her transgression in past ages and her negligences, to put it mildly, in recent years, cast a shadow on the purity and consistency of her present will. And it is regrettable that the fight against Mussolini's Italy strikes more severe blows, at least for the time being, at Italy than at Mussolini. But these qualifications, however sad, do not alter substantially the scheme of things, and the meaning of the struggle: which is a struggle between society and a man. The Italian nation as a whole plays, even more than Ethiopia, the involuntary role of a victim.

An Englishman, Herman Finer, a scholar in the country which is leading in the ideas of liberalism and criticism and which consequently, although with an unfortunate delay, is now the *defensor Ligae*, went to Mussolini's Italy in January 1933. He spent there approximately nine months, and two more months in the following year; he listened to many people, openly Fascist or secretly Antifascist; he interviewed Mussolini himself; he looked at things; he toiled in the libraries. The fruit is a compact book, of nearly six hundred pages: the most comprehensive analysis of Fascism, both in its making and results, which has appeared to date, a storehouse of first-rate

information, and a commentary on it, always trustworthy, often brilliant and brilliantly written.

But the reader would be disappointed who, thinking in terms of England and Mussolini and realizing that the book was prefaced in March of this year and published as late as in October, should seek in it a portraiture of Fascism against the background of the present world crisis. Only fleeting sidelights are thrown upon the international policies and ideas of Fascism. It is probable that in the time of his inquiry, and even of his proof reading, Herman Finer belonged among the optimists who thought that Mussolini was "a barbarian grown cautious," as the American professor Brooks still wrote a few months ago, and who fondly believed that the capture of Italy was to him the final achievement, not the start, of his career. It does not seem that the English author anywhere envisages Fascism as a world issue and a world danger. Mussolini, he says somewhere, "has deliberately given national currency to an unknown

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THE THOUGHT AND CHARACTER OF
WILLIAM JAMES

By RALPH BARTON PERRY

Reviewed by Frank Jewett Mather, Jr.

WITH NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA

From the Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt

Reviewed by David Owen

* MUSSOLINI'S ITALY. By Herman Finer. New York: Henry Holt & Co. 1935. \$3.75.
SAWDUST CAESAR. By George Seldes. New York: Harper & Bros. 1935. \$3.

soldier's phrase: Better the life of a lion for a day, than that of a sheep for a hundred years! Yet, if he has continued to roar who will say that he still springs?" (Italics mine.)

It has been said that *Finer's* book is intentionally hostile to Mussolini's Italy, and that the author went to Italy with many prepossessions. The contrary seems true. He went there in a spirit of candor and impartiality, in the hope of understanding and possibly appreciating. He does not show a great familiarity with the personalities and publications of the exiles and leading Antifascists; he seems almost to shun too close contact with that suspicious section of opinion; at any rate, the material information which he draws from official Fascist sources prevails immensely over the moderate supply which he occasionally deduces from other sources. If he had gone to work under the command of a preconceived idea as to its conclusions, the book would have been more resolute in its design, more unified in coloring, more concise in its account of developments, and, from a literary standpoint, far better than it is. He does not devote much time or attention to the alleged or real responsibilities of Mussolini and other Fascist leaders in political and common crimes. He believes in Mussolini's personal honesty and poverty, although, he adds, his relatives are doing well. He thinks also that Mussolini is a "humane man," differing, for example, from Brooks who described him as "crude, vengeful, treacherous." Even in what concerns the Matteotti affair, he summarizes very briefly the events, and after that he confines himself to a cautious, and really humane, statement: that history "does not exculpate" the dictator. He accepts very much, too much, of the Fascist propaganda about the unruliness and unworthiness of the parliamentary regime which preceded Fascism. And most important of all, he keeps on believing and repeating, up to the final line of his work, that Mussolini is a genius.

This is very important. Over all the book looms the conception that democracy is the government of the average people by the average people for the average people, whereas dictatorship, or more precisely this Italian Fascist dictatorship, is the rule of the genius.

If that is so, why does this author stand so firmly for democracy against dictatorship, in the general issue as well as in the Italian case?

If this conception were true, not only would *Finer's* criticism of Fascism stagger, but any plea for democracy would be seriously imperiled. Indeed, we are allowed, both from a biological and an ethical point of view, to believe that the meaning of history is, or ought to be, the improvement of the human race, i. e., the heightening of the average. There is nothing

to object to Nietzsche's assumption that "man must be surpassed," although he is not to be surpassed by Nietzsche's "blond wild beast." Even Mussolini, when young and a revolutionist, wrote: "The bridge between man as animal and man as a human, the bridge between pre-history and history, the bridge which will lead humanity from the struggle for life, to an agreement for the sake of life, will be built." We can agree with his words. It is too bad that he himself cannot honestly sign them now.

But it is quite clear that a genius, if there are geniuses, may contribute to the collective improvement of mankind much more than millions of average people ordinarily do. There is no ethical or biological reason why the average man should not be sacrificed to the genius, if he is a genius whose creative work is conditioned by the sacrifice of others. The inference would be that, when and if a genius of statemanship appears, it is good that he be entrusted with dictatorship, cost what it may to the average individual.

Is, then, Mussolini a genius?

If the evidence is to be sought in the positive results of thirteen years of absolute rule, as *Finer* enumerates them, the sum of the addition is less than nothing. Fascism has killed the spiritual life of the nation, has exploited the best of human nature for its own purposes, has the "children by the throat," bringing up a generation mentally perverted and emotionally intoxicated; it has debauched the Church and made it subservient to profane, nay, blasphemous ends. Have there been any material goods delivered at such a price? Fascism has ruined the national finance and disordered the budget; it has impoverished the economy, cut the wages, lowered the standard of living. The Corporative State, Mussolini's creation, is just a name, a sham, a curtain before an empty stage. True, he has painted over some very visible spots of the country's façade, thereby delighting the tourist's eye and recruiting every summer a flock of foreign-language speaking propagandists. The author of this book is no tourist. He does not care particularly for façades.

Where is the genius?

Maybe, his master stroke is in the past, in the early beginning and at the very origin of Fascist rule. It has been endlessly repeated, and innumerable people still believe it, that Mussolini, in 1922, rescued Italy, and Europe with Italy, from the Bolshevik peril. This is a legend, long exploded. There was no Bolshevik peril in Italy in 1922.*

Or, maybe, his triumph is in the present and the near future: in the steadfastness with which Mussolini is avenging Italy for the defeats she suffered in the treaties

of peace, solving her problems of expansion and economic opportunity, restoring the stained honor of her army.

It was often said (in Italy) that Italy won the war and lost the peace. It is fair to assume that such opinion is not shared in Austria, Hungary, Yugo-Slavia, or Germany. Italy won the war and won the peace. No other nation attained a final result comparable to Italy's: namely, the final destruction of the hereditary enemy, which, in Italy's case, was the Hapsburg empire.

True, Italy badly needs, as other nations do, outlets for her overpopulation, a fair distribution of raw materials, equality of economic opportunity among the other nations. It is highly questionable whether the conquest of Ethiopia would afford any relief, worth speaking of, from such difficulties. It is also more than questionable whether the conquest of Ethiopia would crown the Italian army with the glory which the Italian army is supposed to need. The honor of the Italian army was not stained when, forty years ago, an expeditionary force of 14,000 men was annihilated in their blood by 100,000 natives. Six hundred thousand Italians gave their lives in the World War; they had defeats, they had victories too, and the victories were decisive. Not Italy, but the man who masters Italy, needs military glory.

The League of Nations is the institution which could, and should, confront the problems of emigration, raw materials, equal opportunities for all nations. It was never approached by Mussolini in this spirit and with these intentions. He tried only to sabotage and cripple, finally to kill it.

Even at this moment, newspaper headlines make a sharp distinction between Mussolini and the Italian people. Nothing would be easier than an honorable peace, and the progressive settlement of other problems, if only he, Mussolini, would listen to the only suggestion that might come to him from real greatness, and by resigning from power clear the way between his nation and the nations. Even if, as *Finer* says, he has a reading more vast than any statesman since Gladstone, what did he learn from the books he read, except to lead Italy and the world into their present distressing situation?

Unfortunately, not even a sober writer like *Finer* is always free from the influence of the romantic idea of genius. A dangerous idea, a mischievous word.

A genius, if the word has to be preserved, is an individual exceptionally endowed by nature with powers which he uses for the knowledge of truth and for the creation of the beautiful and the good.

But there has been a tendency, especially in recent times, to disembodify the idea of genius of its spiritual quality, and to conceive of genius in terms of sheer

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* See, for example, *Finer*, pp. 126ff and 161, *Seldes*, p. 98 and *passim*.



BYRON AT DRURY LANE

The Napoleon of Rhyme

BYRON: THE YEARS OF FAME. By Peter Quennell. New York: The Viking Press. 1935. \$3.50.

Reviewed by SAMUEL C. CHEW

ON the day before he sailed from Dover in April, 1816, Byron visited the grave of Charles Churchill, the satirist, and found melancholy satisfaction in contemplating the obscure resting-place of him who had "blazed the comet of a season." Years later, in his Italian exile, Byron looked back, in a mood of irony touched with complacency, upon the "considerable time" when he had been "the Grand Napoleon of the Realms of Rhyme." He was thinking of the four years between the spring of 1812, when "Childe Harold" was published, and the spring of 1816, when the scandal of the separation from his wife, with its accompanying rumors of iniquity, burst with a fury that resulted in his social ostracism.

It is with these four years that Mr. Quennell, who has already published a little biography of the poet, has here to deal. He calls them the "years of fame," but rather they were the years of notoriety as distinct from fame, of social success and popular applause. The implication is not a little ridiculous that when Byron left England for good, and for his poetic good, he left also his "fame" behind him. Rather the departure was the entrance into a far wider renown. It is true that his social prestige had suffered a blight which was presently to be more deeply tarnished by association with Shelley and later with Hunt; true, too, that some years later (about 1822-23) there was an abatement in the enthusiasm with which his poetry was received (and for this the tediousness of the "regular" tragedies and the slackening tempo of the middle cantos of "Don Juan" were

in part to blame); but there was no real decline in his renown as a poet till long after his death. The disappearance of "Byronism" about the middle of the century coincided in date with the triumph of Victorian ugliness, vulgarity, and pretentiousness—a fact which it is difficult to reconcile with Mr. Quennell's theory (though ingeniously argued) that the taste for shoddy and flashy and sensational verse for which Byron's early verse was responsible in a "vast middle-class public" was itself in turn responsible for the grotesque and ugly exoticisms of Victorianism. Why, then, did people drop Byron just at the time when velvet tassels and antimacassars and carved oak furniture and aspidistras (which Mr. Quennell especially dislikes) were most in vogue? The biographer does not explain. But, after all, the vagaries of Victorian taste are not his subject.

He tells a tale already told a hundred times, and tells it well, with an appropriate mingling of witty and sympathetic

comment. He does not fall into the error of taking Byron's life and character as the text for a sermon (as so many of his predecessors have done) or into the opposite error of condoning or explaining away or brushing aside the poet's transgressions. If he does not see very deeply (not so deeply as, for example, M. Charles du Bos), he sees clearly and steadily. Apologists and theorists and special pleaders have drawn a hundred red herrings across the trail; but Mr. Quennell is not to be turned aside at any false scent, however pungent. His narrative begins with Byron's return from the Levant in 1811; but it is permitted to fold back upon itself sufficiently often to make comprehensible the childhood influences, the heritage, and environment, which helped to form the extraordinary young man who, after the melancholy months of moody disillusionment that immediately followed his return, blazed suddenly as the comet of the London season of 1812. That comet continued, though with somewhat diminished splendor as gazers became accustomed to its brightness, to hang in the sky for three years. It waned perceptibly, at any rate in the eyes of young romance, after the poet's marriage; and though not quenched, it changed utterly in character after the scandal of 1816. Mr. Quennell's planetarium sets before us the stars and constellations among which this great erratic body traced its path. Each star, some now through distance so small as to be perceptible only through the telescope of research, is described and properly placed, whether in conjunction or opposition. Let us drop the metaphor before we press it too far, and say that Mr. Quennell paints for us a lively picture of Regency society, corrupt, disillusioned, unstably brilliant on the surface of widespread discontent. It was hard-drinking, hard-riding, hard-gambling, and hard-wenching. In the Mayfair crowd of beaux and fops Byron would not have been conspicuously different from other handsome young men who scored successes with many ladies had he not been a poet. A



BYRON AT HYDE PARK—Contemporary caricatures on this page reproduced from "Byron: The Years of Fame."