



# Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915-1945

By R. J. B. Bosworth

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In his extraordinary new book, Richard Bosworth brings to life the period in which Italians participated in one of the twentieth century's largest, most notorious, and ultimately most ruinous political experiments-Fascism-under their dictator, Benito Mussolini, and his henchmen. The Fascists were the first totalitarians, and they provided a model for many other twentieth-century dictatorships, Hitler's first among them.

A regime based on a cult of violence and obedience, Fascism made immense demands on its subjects, killing many within Italy and its empire and ruining the lives of more. And yet one of R.J.B. Bosworth's most striking accomplishments is to show the gap that yawned between rhetoric and reality. Mussolini's Italy is lumped together with Hitler's Germany as a nightmarish totalitarian state that brutally reengineered an entire society. In fact, Bosworth argues, Fascism, though monstrous enough, had a far shallower impact on Italy because Italy was still such a traditional, undeveloped country, organized around family, tribe, and region, and because Italy's leaders were less ruthlessly ideological than the Nazis. Italians found many and ingenious ways of adapting, limiting, undermining, and ridiculing Mussolini's ambitions for them. The heart of this book is its engagement with the life of these ordinary Italians, struggling through terrible times.

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

*Starred Review.* With this insightful, comprehensive study, Bosworth secures his place as one of the two leading historians in the English-speaking world (the other being Paul Ginsborg) of 20th-century Italy. Bosworth begins with an admission that he has embarked on an "impossible project": "to unveil the lives of Italians" from all walks of life "under a generation of dictatorship." Impossible, indeed, but what a grand attempt at a synthesis of social and political history he produces. While Mussolini and the party officials are at the center of the story, Bosworth dips into the Fascist police files to see what ordinary Italians were up to during the dictatorship, in order to portray a "fascism of the everyday." A good-natured drunken night on the town, ending with the singing of antifascist songs in the streets disturbing the people's sleep could land you in some God-forsaken remote village as punishment; further, the dictatorship was a corrupt and compromising affair. Yet Fascism in Italy, Bosworth frequently shows, was tempered by the continuing influence of the family and other nonparty institutions such as the Church, the army, the diplomatic corps and the universities. Another important feature is Bosworth's refusal to let "Liberal Italy" (1860–1922) off the hook. From imperialism to racism, corruption to authoritarianism, liberal Italy, he says, laid the groundwork for the Fascist regime. And while he gives ample instances of the violent and at times murderous nature of the regime, Bosworth does exonerate the Italian people of falling for totalitarianism. If Italians come off well from 1922 to 1945, they look far less noble in the postwar period. Bosworth's last chapter, "The Fascist Heritage," is a disturbing account of the tenacious survival of fascism into contemporary Italy. While not as pessimistic as Ginsborg, Bosworth (*Mussolini*) still reminds us of the "eternal tendency toward fascism." 35 b&w illus. not seen by PW; 3 maps.

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From [Booklist](#)

Bosworth wrote a biography of Mussolini in 2002; here he investigates how fascistic Italian society became under the ministrations of Il Duce. Bosworth recounts the origin of fascism in both Italian indignation about its inconsequential gains from World War I and the unconsolidated nature of the Italian state. Within this framework, Bosworth explores in detail the Fascist Party's claim to expand territorially and unify the populace via an authoritarian nationalist revolution. Mussolini's regime aspired to totalitarian control with its aggressive propaganda ("believe, obey, fight"), secret police, youth organization, and military. Bosworth sharply characterizes the leaders of these forces of the regime, considering most of them, Mussolini included, to have been corrupt cynics; however, he is studiously analytical about their importunities upon Italian society. Well attuned to ingrained attitudes, such as trust in family and suspicion of government, Bosworth traces, with sympathy and insight, the fate of Italians and the catastrophe the regime visited upon them.

*Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

Shrewd, lucid, exhaustively documented and totally unsentimental. (David Schoenbaum, *The New York Times*)

With this insightful, comprehensive study, Bosworth secures his place as one of the two leading historians in the English-speaking world . . . of twentieth-century Italy. (*Publishers Weekly*, starred and boxed review)

A powerful work of scholarship, beautifully written, which should be read by anyone interested in twentieth-

century Europe. (*The Economist*)

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