

Incredible Story of 'Il Duce' Given the Ring of Truth

MUSSOLINI, by Laura Fermi [University of
Chicago Press, 480 pages, \$5.95]

Reviewed by Carter Jefferson

"IL DUCE." they called him—the leader. And he led 40,000,000 Italians into stark disaster. Benito Mussolini attempted for 20 years to convince the world that he was a purposeful, powerful man dedicated to the salvation of his native land. "He made the trains run on time," we heard, and if we also heard that his black shirted followers quieted opponents by dosing them with castor oil or beating them to death, too often we remembered that you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

Only when Mussolini became Adolf Hitler's junior partner in crime did his legend really crumble. Only then was it clearly understood that he was breaking men, not eggs.

Against that legend of a strong, self-assured, intelligent man who committed errors, not sins, Laura Fermi has set the garish image of a tortured, unprincipled neurotic who craved not power but the unstinted adoration that power brings.

In this fascinating biography, the author portrays Mussolini as cold and cruel from his earliest days; intelligent, but so blinded by his desire for adulation that he was an easy mark for any flatterer; brave when bravery was thrust upon him, as it was when he was a conscript in the army, but so timid when success hinged on daring that fellow conspirators almost had to force him to seize power.

The Mussolini she recreates was a pure opportunist. He broke with the Socialist party in World War I because he saw that the party's policy of nonintervention was becoming unpopular. Later he changed the doctrines of fascism whenever he thought it politic. He never worked for a cause; he let causes work for him.

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Mussolini's personal assets were, Mrs. Fermi indicates, a look of determination, a talent for oratory, and a flair for divining changes in public opinion almost before they occurred. He was not really a leader, for the goal he sought was purely selfish. He was able to take power not because he convinced the masses of Italy that he was right but because they convinced themselves that he could solve their problems. He finally willed his own downfall when, surrounded by sycophants and still craving glory, he refused to face the reality of Italy's weakness and entered World War II.

Based as it is on published documents, this book contains no revelations: Mussolini's "treasure" is still hidden, the exact legal status of his execution is still undetermined, the precise nature



Mussolini. Portrait by George Sottung.

of the illness that plagued his later years is still in doubt.

Instead of trying to solve little mysteries, Mrs. Fermi uses established facts to explain the far more significant mystery that lies in the life of every man of great historical importance: how did he accomplish what he accomplished, and, where he failed, how did he fail?

To prove her contention that Mussolini was a plaything of fate, swept into power by waves of hatred and suffering over which he had no real control, Mrs. Fermi has to lead her readers thru the jungle of pre-World War I socialist politics and the chaos of post-war Italy. Because she does it so skillfully, she is able to give her almost incredible story the ring of truth.

In the process, she creates a great deal of sympathy for the Italian people, so wracked by war and depression that in desperation they put their nation's destiny into the hands of a political hoodlum.

Mrs. Fermi grew up in Italy, but "Mussolini" is a popular biography, not a memoir. Undoubtedly the author's personal experience helped her recreate the scenes of Mussolini's triumph, but most of her material obviously is the fruit of long study. The book has no footnotes, but the bibliography is ample. Excellent illustrations accompany the text.

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With "Mussolini" Mrs. Fermi, who has written highly praised popular works in the field of nuclear physics, turns her talent from the frontiers of science to the highly unscientific world of ruthless politics. The transition is a resounding success.

"Mussolini" is well written, quite objective, and utterly absorbing.

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