

The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism

Italy's dilemma—whether to stick with the Germans, whom her people hate, and face an almost certain beating at the hands of the Allies, or to join the United Nations and risk the full force of Nazi terrorism—gives added interest to this revealing picture of life in that unhappy country. The author, FRANCES BARRETT, has spent a good part of the past twenty years, off and on, in Italy, having left there last in 1941. Her official contacts and her family's social position were such as to give her access to invaluable sources of information.

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★ FASCISM IN ITALY presents two distinct aspects: the polished surface and the meaty core. To the outside world fascist accomplishments savor largely of intrigue, international diplomacy, politics and economics. Behind the borders which encompass Italy there is the second aspect of fascism—the totalitarian control under which the Italian people work and live. This is the core of the fascism that for years has been the established order of the country. Travelers in Italy since the advent of Mussolini have had their attention concentrated upon superficialities—the immortal works of art, the picturesque scenery, and the highly publicized claim that fascist trains run on time!

Since medieval times the Italian peasant has continued

tive, makes our claim of non-isolation a shabby pretense, our loans to foreign countries and other economic shots in the arm to the contrary notwithstanding.

When will our people arouse themselves from their state of economic illiteracy, shake off the bureaucratic incubus that threatens to strangle trade and production, and learn for themselves the truths that can lead them to economic salvation?

to live in a semi-feudal state, a wretched life but all he could hope for in exchange for years of toil on the estate of his *padrone*. Life and death are in the hands of his master, who, with his priest, molds and controls his mind and his soul. His children marry at a nod from the *padrone*, and prepare inevitably to replace him when he dies. He is a serf, a part of the soil, and the owner of the land owns him as surely as he owns the crops in the field or the beasts in the stable. Ignorant of reading and writing, he works, he eats, he reproduces—that is life.

Sometimes the Italian peasant is able to own a bit of land, but only if it is not sufficiently productive to interest the local land baron. A few goats and sheep, perhaps a warren of rabbits, and whatever the rocky field will yield, keep him and his family from starvation, with a few pennies for an occasional mass. Yet he is no worse off than his cousins in the city who work in factories or as servants in the homes of the rich. On the land or off, the poor Italian can hope for only a bare existence through his labor.

The peasant sees but a few coppers in cash from one end of the year to the other. The shepherd's wages are no more than 300 lira (about \$15) a year. The servant gets little besides room, food and clothing, and of the last, his ornate uniform is to be worn only when there are important guests; at other times he works in rags.

In the city the poor children go begging, and woe to the luckless child who doesn't bring home a lira's worth of coppers or a bag of bread. Worse, though this is true only in southern Italy, when the parents can contrive it, their offspring are sold into bondage as house servants. It is not uncommon to see children of seven or eight tending babies, washing clothes and dishes, standing on chairs to reach the stove. The breeding of children becomes a racket, for it is the father who is paid; the child receives nothing for his work.

Within an hour's travel of Rome are communities without running water. One or two of the super-rich may ostentatiously possess a bathroom, but since water must be transported miles, bathing is a luxury for the few. Here will be found servant girls whose sole function is to trudge interminably back and forth carrying water. It is a bestial existence, the servants being exploited to the point where they become tantamount to brutes, and even the nobles of great wealth lack many of the ordinary decencies of life.

No social services are available to the people. There are no such things as labor unions, unemployment insurance, old age pensions, health departments, free hospitals. For the man there is nothing but hard labor for a mere existence; for the woman, housework and child-bearing.

Such was the kingdom of Italy after the first war.

Then Benito Mussolini marched on Rome, bringing fascism, a social upheaval, a political revolution, an awe-inspiring experiment in national economic reform. The firm hand of the dictator was quickly felt. In it he held a surgeon's knife, for gradual change was not his method. Overnight there were promulgated new laws, new decrees and new demands by the government of Il Duce. Laborers whose rights had been non-existent suddenly found labor unions arranging better hours and pay; children were ordered to school and forbidden to beg; men were prohibited to exercise their time-honored custom of beating their women. There sprang up state medical care, old age pensions, job insurance and other undreamed-of reforms.

Especially were the younger children benefited by the new regime; nothing was too good for them. The national habit of fecundity was encouraged; the people were rewarded for being more prolific. Fathers fared better than they had in the days of child-selling and child-contracting. But each child had to be enrolled in the *Balilla*, the fascist youth organization. The State took over their upbringing, caring for them with the utmost generosity and consideration. Clad in handsome military uniforms and housed in modern government buildings, the wide-eyed children found themselves in a new world of schools, libraries, physical training, swimming pools and athletic games.

And not alone were the children showered with benevolence from their new government. The common people, the backbone of the nation, who for generations had known nothing but exploitation and deprivation, now found themselves the recipients of blessings they had never imagined. In every village, no matter how remote, there was built a *Casa de Fascio*, where nuns in immaculate white welcomed mothers and prospective mothers, teaching them, caring for them, clothing them, and helping them through the tiring days before and after birth. Convalescent homes and nursing sanatoriums opened their doors, offering expert care to mothers and children. Upon all this, the people of Italy looked as if it were a veritable miracle; it was too good to be true, yet it was there!

The peasant suddenly found himself the beneficiary of every possible assistance that up-to-date science could give. Experts from the universities brought him tools and seeds and showed him how to farm in twentieth century style, in place of the mode used by his ancestors from the time of Christ. Government agricultural officials visited him regularly, lectured to him and his colleagues, taught him how to increase his crop. High prices were fixed by the State for all farm products, and the farmer forthwith became an important citizen, honored in every newspaper, in every government report, in posters all over the land. No longer did he have anything to fear from the *padrone*. Fascism was good to him; when the *vivas* were sounded, his palm was extended high in the air as a token of devotion to Il Duce.

It was like a dream. It seemed to fill bellies that long had been empty; it seemed to make men of what lately had been but animals; it seemed to promise a place for

everyone in Italy, and a place for Italy among the nations of the world. It was almost too good to be true.

Then came the first disillusionment. When the early patriotic fervor had evaporated, Fascists who had felt well repaid by accomplishing a task for Duce and fatherland, sought to take care of themselves, too. Graft and official corruption arose and began to spread. Moneys appropriated for the poor found their way into already well-lined pockets; the weak began to flounder again, exploited anew ('twas ever thus!) by those who were favored with privilege. In the early, rosy beginnings, Mussolini sought to nip the incipient return to official banditry; in the heavy-handed fascist way he punished the guilty. If he didn't find the guilty, then he punished all as an example; whereupon the innocent, knowing they would suffer anyway, decided that they might as well get their share before the axe fell.

The central fascist councils became infested with parasites whose sole thought was selfish gain. It became impossible for Mussolini even to think of cleaning the rascals out. He would have had to strip the Party of men, a purge that was inconceivable. Thus, in a short time, the poor who had learned the taste of joy reverted to their old misery. Once again begging became prevalent, as the efficiency of the revolution was prostituted by its greedy adherents.

Yet, in the big cities of Italy, the fascist organizations continued to develop. Most important to the regime were the youth's and women's groups. The women of Italy found themselves emancipated from old-fashioned customs. For the first time, girls were permitted to go out alone; they learned sports like bicycling and skiing, and were trained in physical culture just as their brothers were. They were even admitted into the universities. Whereas no decent girl had ever been allowed to speak to a man unless a chaperone were present, now girls were free to come and go, to meetings, to classes, drills and all kinds of youth activities. To both young men and young women, all this was a revelation, a welcome and wonderful kind of personal freedom bestowed on them by their beloved Leader. The growth of the youth organizations was the growth of fascism.

As the years passed the people grew restive. The young, trained for warfare, chafed at restraint. The older citizens began to count the cost of fascism in the dawning realization that the benefits from the State were becoming fewer and fewer. The propertied classes began to exert pressure upon the State, urging a complete cessation of social advances and a return to normal business. The government found it more and more difficult to pay the cost of fascist rule. It was the beginning of a crisis. Something was needed to rekindle the flames of patriotism, to bring the people again under the hypnotic spell of fascist propaganda.

Ethiopia must be conquered! The battle cry was raised throughout all Italy. Another land to join the Italian Empire's subject nations was nominated by Mussolini. When the Ethiopian campaign started, the Italians enthusiastically sprang to the colors. Youths who a few years before had been children in the *Balilla* were now

trained soldiers, ready to do and die for Italy. To the Italian people, Ethiopia was a land of promise; land for their children, a market for their goods, coffee for their tables—honor for their country. Conquest; wealth; independence! But slowly they realized that painful consequences were to ensue.

War with Ethiopia cost Italy whatever respect it had among other nations. It cost the Italian people money, goods, lives. It curtailed Italy's foreign exchange to the point of nearly bankrupting her economics. It struck the lives of all Italians with restrictions, taxes and appropriations. Much was needed to carry on the battle; all was taken from the Italian people. No more were benefits given to them; all was taken away. Disillusionment was great; it marked the beginning of the decline of Benito Mussolini—and this despite the ostensible victory that came to Italy when it acquired the territory of ravished Ethiopia.

But with the Ethiopian campaign ended, the masses hoped anew. A hundred thousand families were outfitted and sent to colonize the new African possession. A new life started overseas, relieving much of the misery at home, providing work for thousands and bringing hope for the future. No world war had resulted (as many had feared) and foreigners returned to Italy, reviving trade, circulating money, filling hotels and restaurants and generally awakening normalcy again. It was all over; no great harm had resulted so far, and all Italy more or less thankfully took a deep breath and prayed for better days thereafter. The greatest change was the reaction toward fascism; its gilding had come off; it seemed not so attractive as once it had.

Mussolini had suffered most from the change in public opinion. No longer was he the unconquerable lion, the supreme leader. The people became cynical as they thought of the slogans and mottoes and speeches that had blinded them in the past. Mussolini was no longer a roaring warrior; he was only a politician who might have been worse, and whom some one else would soon replace. In the meantime, Italy was satisfied to let him remain, happy in his tremendous vanity; the country confidently expected a successor to come from around the corner soon. (Prince Umberto? Count Ciano?)

But while Italy prepared to sit back and breathe again, its neighbor and "best friend" had other plans. The Germans, whom Italians called *I Barbari* (the barbarians), invaded Poland. Furtively, fortifications were built at the Brenner Pass and the Tarvisio border. While Italian diplomats continued to profess great friendship for Hitler's Germany, the people laughed in their sleeves at the credulousness of the Teutonic mind. It was an open secret that as soon as fortifications were completed, Italy would turn upon Germany, just as it had in 1914. In the meanwhile, Italian business boomed; everyone looked forward to much profit from the delivery of war materials, sufficient to wipe out the deficit remaining from the Ethiopian campaign which had cost 80,000,000,000 lira without any part of the investment having been returned.

The sanguine expectations of the populace were short-

lived. It was not long before Germany bared her teeth by making demands upon her unwilling ally. First, Germany insisted upon having prior claim to all goods produced in Italy; second, shipments were to be made on a credit-exchange basis. It meant farewell to Italy's war-boom prosperity. Again the country faced a bleak depression—and worse. Germany demanded manpower as well as goods. She backed her demands with a show of power in the form of a million Nazi "tourists," who had entered Italy during the days when "friendship" was the by-word. All of the "tourists" actually were hand-picked German soldiers, ready at a moment's notice to take up arms against Mussolini and his people. Il Duce quickly capitulated; he agreed that every province in Italy would send from ten to twenty thousand men to Germany as labor battalions.

Worse was to come. Before the Italians were through rubbing their eyes in incredible wonder, Italy had declared war, becoming a belligerent side-by-side with the Nazi hordes. It was incredible to the mass of Italian people; they just would not believe it had happened. Even a week after the war they said to each other that it was only a bluff, soon to be called off. Authoritative quarters claimed the war declaration was a clever diplomatic maneuver, made to enable Italy to effect a negotiated peace and thus assure her future neutrality. The whole affair was said to be a brilliant coup, after which Italy would be able to avoid unwanted war and obtain much welcome business. Again, however, Germany had other opinions. Thousands upon thousands of Nazi troops poured into Sicily until it was so covered that many battalions had to return to Calabria because there wasn't enough room for the men to spread their air-mattresses. Two Italian regiments, in fact, were transported from their comfortable southern quarters to Northern Italy, swearing vociferously at the damnable Germans who had pushed them from warm sunshine to cold rain.

It was at that period that Ciano, with tactful regard for his person, made a diplomatic junket to Zurich and Berlin, so that he might enjoy a change of air until the muttering blew over. Mussolini, too, found other things to think about; he retired to the seclusion of his villa on the Monte Mario. Victor Emmanuel was scheduled to abdicate his throne, Crown Prince Umberto being prepared to take it over, but unexpectedly the old king refused to relinquish the crown. Probably he didn't trust the clique that was behind his heir's aspirations. Anybody in Italy with a strong hand at that moment could have taken over the country without a struggle, but for the fact that Germany had worked too fast and too well. The Gestapo had a strangle-hold on Rome and the Vatican City. Convents and monasteries throughout the country were raided on the pretense that they had engaged in political intrigue, and hundreds of nuns, monks and priests were bundled off to concentration camps high in the mountains.

By the winter of 1941 Italy contained more concentration camps than cities! One of them, Camp Matera, in Calabria, held over 20,000 prisoners. Concentration

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camps in Italy are operated by the Gestapo differently from those in "barbarian" Germany. Prisoners are herded into villages of a few scattered huts and left to themselves. Each camp is guarded by soldiers to prevent escape—and that is the only expense the government has. Shelter, food and clothing are problems for the unfortunates who have been imprisoned. They must sell their few possessions, and then write heartbreaking letters to their friends and relatives, begging for food.

In this manner, Germany took the situation in hand. Then the Gestapo sounded the all-clear signal and Mussolini and Ciano, after the greatest precaution, returned from their hideaways—Monte Mario and Berlin. Il Duce reviewed a grand parade in his honor! By then, fascism had lost favor with almost everyone except the youngsters of 12 or less who had been bred from birth to believe in it, and had not yet been disillusioned. Thousands of members slipped out of the Fascist Party, a move which led to a law compelling every citizen to join the party and thus make up for the losses.

Ciano suddenly decided that the scene required more action. Without Mussolini's knowledge or consent, he started the war on Greece. Soon it was evident that Italy was ill-prepared for this war, but the Count wanted to show his independence. The result was two weeks of fighting wherein the Italian forces were almost annihilated. Mussolini stormed down from his mountain retreat and with a last show of power dismissed generals right and left. But Greece still repulsed every soldier that Italy could send across its borders. The whole of Italy waited with bated breath, anticipating the long-expected revolution, while Mussolini and his family had it out in a series of internal squabbles. Finally the back-stage arguments were settled; Old Benito lost his power, but retained his prestige. He held on to the strings of leadership, albeit very loosely, and went to a remote part of the Roman *Campagna* "for reasons of health," the official bulletin said.

With *Il Duce* out of the way, German troops were hurried to Greece to save the situation. Mussolini's picture was removed everywhere, to be replaced with posters heiling Hitler, whose face now greets everyone from the empty windows in the empty shops on the Via Vittorio Veneto. And Italians whisper to each other (under the eyes of the Gestapo): Eins, zwei, eins, zwei, the German march rhythm, to explain the whole incredible situation. Now they know!