

Romano Mussolini. *My Father, Il Duce: A Memoir by Mussolini's Son.* Introductory essay by Alexander Stille. Carlsbad: Kales Press, 2006. 163 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9670076-8-7.



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Sins of the Father, Whitewashed by the Son

When Benito Mussolini is remembered today, he is often seen as a comic figure of ineptitude, clowning from his balcony on the Piazza Venezia, bouncing about, jowls rolling, head flung back, spouting absurd rhetoric in Italian. His works are seen as farce (the manifold failures of his armed forces) or as tragedy (the destruction of defenseless Ethiopia).

It is difficult to remember now that when Mussolini first took power in Italy, and indeed, until he invaded Ethiopia, he was not seen as a clown, but regarded as a “superman” who reformed and modernized the backward Italian nation, dragged its peasantry kicking and screaming into the twentieth century, unifying it with a mixture of grand programs and grander ceremonies. He may have ordered his blackshirted goons to beat his opponents savagely, but by golly, Mussolini made the trains run on time. After Mussolini’s troops suffered massive defeats at the hands of smaller and weaker British and Greek forces, however, his image became that of a buffoonish and incompetent clown, dragging an unwilling nation to hopeless defeat in order to satisfy his vanity and arrogance.

To these two Janus-like views of Il Duce, his son, Romano Mussolini, adds another, that of paterfamilias. Romano survived the chaos of World War II to become a highly distinguished jazz musician, performing with legends like Lionel Hampton and Dizzy Gillespie, and living in Rome until his death in February 2006. In 2003, he wrote a short memoir of his father and of growing up in Italy’s first family. Initially published in Italy where it became a best-seller, Kales Publishing acquired the American rights to the work. Kales added an introductory essay by Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism professor Alexander Stille to provide depth and perspective to the memoir.

And a fascinating memoir it is, but in a dark and opposing way.

Romano Mussolini is understandably an admirer of his father, seeing him as a tragic victim of the Second World War, rather than one of the architects of the horror. In describing his father’s role and works, Romano turns Benito Mussolini into a victim of events, rather than an author, and makes unsubstantiated claims about Il Duce that stand in opposition to documented historical

record.

For example, on page 25 Romano writes about his father's dismissal at the hands of King Victor Emmanuel III in 1943, claiming, on the basis of "previously undisclosed documents" that the dismissal and arrest "prevented Il Duce from executing a sensational political maneuver he had studied on several occasions with his closest collaborators." Romano does not explain further, beyond suggesting that his father's passive reaction to the Grand Council's vote dismissing Il Duce from his posts was part of a personal plan to take Italy out of the war.

Although a fascinating theory, as Stille harshly points out in the introductory essay, Romano does not elaborate. None of the other accounts of the Grand Council meeting, contemporary or later, give any support to the idea that Mussolini was seeking a way out of the war for Italy in 1943. Indeed, they indicate quite the opposite—Mussolini wanted to continue the war, but his colleagues, advisors, and monarch wanted Italy to find a quick exit. Most importantly, Romano does not tell the reader what these "undisclosed documents" are, where he found them, or what they say.

Furthermore, Romano undercuts his own position when he describes Mussolini's return to Italy after a trip to Germany. On July 20, 1944, "Il Duce met Hitler in Germany, and upon his return, told us about the secret factories producing 'flying bombs,' the famous V1 and V2 rockets that everyone had been talking about for years." Mussolini had seen the rockets "and had no doubt that once they were put into use, the enemy would have no recourse but to surrender" (p. 123). Clearly, this is a Benito Mussolini who does not seek a humble or honorable peace, but complete Axis victory. Moreover, Romano does not mention that Benito's meeting with Hitler that day came hours after the failed bomb plot on Hitler's life. The conference was the last time the two dictators met, and all accounts of the event show Mussolini swearing loyalty to the shaking Fuhrer during the conference, and afterwards cackling with glee at Hitler's vulnerability. Yet, Romano does not discuss any of this.

Romano is also weak and evasive on the grimmer aspects of Il Duce's reign, ignoring such horrors as Italy's use of poison gas in Ethiopia; the imprisonment and death of 100,000 Libyans in Italian concentration camps; Mussolini's support of Francisco Franco; the alliance with Hitler; the Italian invasions of Ethiopia, Albania, and Greece; and Mussolini's aping of Hitler's anti-Semitic policies that sent thousands of Italian and Greek Jews to their deaths in Nazi extermination camps. Nor

does Romano discuss at any length or with any concern the fate of Italian service members and civilians who died for Il Duce's vanity, either on battlefields in Libya and Russia, or in the bloody 1943-1945 campaign that turned Italy into a slaughterhouse

Romano seeks to scrub his father's stone further, describing how he destroyed some of Benito's documents. Romano asks, "What did those pieces of paper contain? Undoubtedly, there were several documents of historical significance." He continues, saying that these documents "contained proof of Il Duce's efforts to prevent the conflict, an important subject whose relevance historians have only recently come to recognize" (p. 147).

Actually, historians have not revised their understanding of Mussolini's role in the war. Moreover, Romano gives us no sense of what was in those documents. And, since he burned them—supposedly to save himself from execution—he can be extremely vague on their contents for all time. Romano's views of Benito's politics point in one direction: Mussolini was a good man, betrayed by allies and enemies. These are the views of a loyal son, but are historically inaccurate.

Romano is on firmer ground when writing about his family, offering descriptions of the complex Mussolini family life that are stronger and carry more weight than his attempts to explain his father's political actions. Romano presents readers with a father who cheated on his wife, fathered children outside of wedlock and ignored them, survived assassination attempts, enjoyed Charlie Chaplin, showed joy over his daughter Edda's wedding, and then stunned incomprehension over his son Bruno's death in an air crash. We also feel a tremendous sense of the special hell Donna Rachele Mussolini must have endured as wife to Il Duce, coping with a strutting, adulterous, and egomaniacal husband. Romano provides us with gripping accounts of Donna Rachele's confrontation with Benito's mistress, Claretta Petacci, the family's struggle to flee to Switzerland, and the moment when the family learned that Italian partisans had murdered Benito.

The Benito Mussolini presented by Romano is not the Mussolini of history—Alexander Stille's introductory essay is actually more useful in that area than the memoir—but neither is it the Benito Mussolini of a thousand cartoons, newsreels, or comedians' punch lines. Benito Mussolini was vain, arrogant, and tyrannical. But he was also a human being, and Romano Mussolini's memoir of his family, while clearly an attempt to clean the image of a man who should remain tarnished, reminds us of that fact.

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