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Stephen Gundle, *Mussolini's Ghost. The Afterlife of a Dictator*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2026, 328 pp.

by Jeremy Black

Emeritus Professor, University of Exeter
(jeremy.martin.black@gmail.com)

As a case for the prosecution, this study by Gundle, Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick and an expert on modern Italian cultural history, says it all. Mussolini's afterlife is presented as very important and is used to argue that Italy has failed to come to terms with World War Two. Germany, in contrast, is presented in a far more positive light, which suggests that Gundle needs to consider the nature and causation of recent and current electoral trends.

The book explores the resonances of Mussolini in every corner of culture and popular culture – from novels and films, to art, waxworks and bric-à-brac as well as ideas of the masculinity and the family. Gundle explores all this and looks at what was going on in each field to assess whether it amounted to a “working through” or not, and to try and uncover the dynamics of Mussolini's resonance.

His assessment of Italian developments, rich in its discussion of cultural items and images, not least novels, might have benefited from more consideration of contrasts within Italian political culture, although Gundle's aim is explicitly to shift the focus from politics to culture and it is important to note that he has an enviable grasp on the width of modern Italian culture. Moreover, his is a granulated account, alive to the ambi-

guities of texts as well as to the multiple meanings of culture, its numerous formats and the related symbolisation. The streets might have lost their Fascist names but town-planning frequently reflected the era.

My emphasis is on politics simply because I wish to underline to readers why there is a range of views within Italy. First, the reputation of Mussolini, and not least over the popularity of his Salò Republic in northern Italy in 1943-5, was directly linked to the legitimacy of political groupings across the spectrum from Communists to neo-Fascists. These groupings looked back to the 1940s and earlier for evidence of their probity and of the iniquity of their opponents. As a result, the reputation of Mussolini had (and has) a greater resonance in Italian politics than that of Hitler in Germany, and it is not surprising that it has continuing resonance and remains varied and controversial.

In Italy, the Left sought a praiseworthy origin in terms of its wartime and earlier hostility to Mussolini, but, more generally, the emphasis in Italian public culture was not on alliance with Germany in 1940-3, but rather, very much, on opposition in 1943-5. Thus, the focus was on a war of liberation, with the Resistance presented in a heroic light, not least as a redemption from Fascism. This provided an appropriate lineage for the post-war democracy, and, separately, shifted attention from the Italian imperial role, both pre-war in Libya and Ethiopia, as well as in Greece and Yugoslavia in 1941-3. In all of these cases, opposition had been harshly treated, and ignoring this helped the Italians in their self-presentation as victims of the war. Indeed, Italian troops were frequently contrasted with their German allies and seen as *brava gente* who had not been involved in war crimes, and this contrast was more generally applied by Italians to wartime occupation by the two powers.

There were also competing attempts by the different political parties to annex the positive reputation of the Resistance to their benefit. Thus, on the model of Gaullists in France, the Christian Democrats challenged the Communists' effort to present the Resistance as their movement. In turn, the radicals of the 1968 generation criticised the Christian Democrats' usage of the Resistance by arguing that the true radicalism of the Resistance was thus neglected. For example, Church participation in the Resistance was limited, although in some areas, such as Lucca where many priests were as a result shot, this was not the case. Radicals also claimed that the extent to which the post-war government, although dominated by the Christian Democrats, owed much to the practice of Fascist

government, was downplayed, and they criticised the 'Establishment' and the Church for backing Fascism. This argument was taken to vindicate radical opposition to the existing system in the 1960s and 1970s.

From another direction, from the Right, there was a widespread (although far-from-universal) positive re-evaluation by some of Mussolini and Fascism. He was treated as a far more benign figure than Hitler. Mussolini indeed was, but that was scarcely a comparison to be proud of. In particular, it was claimed that, in a self-sacrificing fashion, he had agreed to head the Salò Republic in order to protect northern Italy from harsh German rule, a claim, typical of the later Neo-Fascist attempt to justify themselves, that research in the German archives has failed to substantiate.

The decline in the reputation of the Italian Communists in the 1980s was a factor in the positive re-evaluation of Mussolini, and one that gathered pace following the end of the Cold War, with Italy sharing in what was a general development in Europe, one seen for example in Romania and Hungary. In part as a result of this decline, there was a reduced stress on the role of the Resistance in Italy. Moreover, the Resistance itself was called into question by some commentators arguing that part of it had been compromised by its Communism. Large numbers of Italians had supported the Salò Republic and fought the Resistance in a low-level counter-insurgency conflict in 1943-5, and their history came to be more favourably treated by some. Already, during the Cold War, the pressures of Italian politics, and the anti-Communist position of the Italian state, had ensured a degree of acceptance by some for those termed the *bravi ragazzi di Salò*.

In the 1990s, however, the Right changed with the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement, MSI), the Fascist Party, moving from the political margins. As late as 1992, the MSI marked the seventieth anniversary of Mussolini's seizure of power by donning black shirts and giving the Fascist salute. However, in 1994-5, the leader, Gianfranco Fini, as part of a reconstruction of the Right linked to the decline of the Christian Democrats and to the formation in 1994 of the first Berlusconi government, changed the MSI into the more moderate, post-Fascist *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance). The latter kept some aspects of Fascist social thinking, but sought acceptance, not least by a rejection of anti-Semitism. Distancing himself from the party's legacy, Fini, who made repeated trips to Israel, declared in 1996 that the verdict on Mussolini was

«best left to the historians». This was a rejection of his 1994 claim that Mussolini was «the greatest statesman of the twentieth century», on which he commented in 2009, «If I still took that view I would be a schizophrenic, given everything I have done in the past fifteen years». Also in 2009, Fini (from 2008 until 2013 President of the Chamber of Deputies) declared, «We have come to terms with our past, we have said clear words of condemnation on Italian history between the two wars».

Moving Fascism from the margins, as Fini did, made it more difficult to use the resistance to Fascism in 1943-5 as a convincing national myth for present purposes. Nevertheless, it is still the founding myth of the Republic, notably on the Left where the role of Britain and the United States in the Liberation is downplayed, if not ignored, in favour of the idea of a spontaneous, national, left-wing Resistance that liberated Italy.

An unwillingness to let well alone was shown by Berlusconi, the erratic head of Forza Italia, and, as such, the leader of the Italian Right in the 1990s, 2000s and early 2010s, as he sought to defend the Fascist era from attacks. For long, Berlusconi, who saw historical revisionism as a means to provide unity to his coalition of support, refused to take part in the annual 25 April commemoration of liberation from Fascism. His defence of the Fascist era indicated the degree to which totems had changed in Italian politics, with Mussolini now more broadly semi-acceptable to a wide current in Italian opinion.

Aside from defending the Fascist era from attack, Berlusconi introduced legislation in 2009 that would have given pensions and honours to those who fought in the war, whether for the Resistance or for the Salò Republic. The proposal, which, in effect, equalised the two, was not approved.

Gundle's book offers much of interest. It is well-written, ably structured, and draws on a wide range of sources and texts which are carefully discussed. Possibly readers would have benefited from more of a contextualisation in terms of countries other than Germany, but only so much can be offered. This study deserves attention even if it is necessarily incomplete.