



Mussolini: A Biography

By Jasper Ridley

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Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) was the founder of Fascism and iron-fisted ruler of Italy for two decades. He was also an extremely able politician who won the esteem of many statesmen—including Winston Churchill and influential persons in the United States.

This biography describes Mussolini's childhood; his education (including his suspension from school for attacking other boys with knives); his World War I experiences and severe wounding; his involvement in, and eventual expulsion from the revolutionary Italian Socialist Party; his numerous love affairs, his early career as a journalist and his rise to power and brutal rule.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Hitler once allegedly told Mussolini that he was "too kind to be any good as a dictator." The remark, suggests prolific biographer Ridley (Thomas Cranmer; Lord Palmerston; Garibaldi; Tito), was "banter between friends in which an apparent censure conceals a compliment." Yet the line also anticipates Ridley's own approach to the brazen, boastful demagogue who ruled Italy ruthlessly for 21 years with the help of thugs and thieves who did Il Duce's bidding. Although Mussolini's revived Roman empire is generally seen as a house of cards, the corrupt creation of a shrewd phrase-maker, Ridley is nonetheless cautiously admiring. His Duce is a good family man (despite his mistresses), a patriot (beneath the propaganda), an adroit politician (except in foreign affairs), even a humanitarian (who didn't deport arrested Jews to death camps). He portrays Mussolini as a pragmatist in peacetime, a bumbler in war. In his account of the years from 1923 to 1940, Ridley writes that Fascism "did not greatly interfere" with ordinary lives and "brought some real benefits to the people," but any such benefits were undermined by an opportunist choice of wartime allies. Perhaps losing interest, or failing in sympathy with the wartime Duce, Ridley passes over the embarrassing and disastrous Axis years in relatively few pages, closing with Mussolini's summary execution by partisans in the last days of the war. Somewhat casual with facts and lacking the sharp candor of Denis Mack Smith's still-standard life (1982), Ridley's Mussolini is not a page-turner. Sixteen-page photo insert. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Ridley has written numerous biographies (e.g., Maximilian and Juarez, LJ 11/1/92), with Mussolini inspiring his latest but probably not his best work. The well-known tale of the poor Italian with the impressive speaking style and boisterous swagger who rose above his station in life to govern Italy during the tempestuous 1920s and 1930s is told rather ploddingly. Although uninspired, Ridley is evenhanded in his portrayal of Il Duce as the Italian strongman who made the trains run on time and his enemies disappear in the middle of the night. Mussolini was a master politician who invented Italian fascism and sought equal stature with Hitler but ended up butchered upside down at the end of a rope. Though told from a limited perspective, this book has great detail and remains the most comprehensive biography to appear in over a decade. For larger collections. AEdward Goedecken, Iowa State Univ. Lib., Ames
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From [Booklist](#)

The traditional view of Mussolini as an ego-driven, power-mad buffoon has recently been modified; a few of the more drastic revisionists portray Il Duce as a flawed but basically conventional, if authoritarian, politician. Ridley, a specialist in historical biography, stakes out middle ground. He shows how Mussolini, reared as a committed socialist with deep sympathy for the poor and powerless, gradually transformed his views and determined that national salvation must be found in the "corporate" state. Ridley acknowledges the "sincerity" of Mussolini's political beliefs. Yet, he is clearly appalled at his subject's cynicism, opportunism, and inability to separate his own ambitions from the welfare of his countrymen. In the end, this man of immense talent and grandiose dreams became what he claimed to despise: a petty, scheming politician. This is a well-written and balanced account of one of the more enigmatic figures of the twentieth century. *Jay Freeman*

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