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Mussolini's Ten Years of Power

By William Martin

[October of this year marks the tenth anniversary of Mussolini's rise to power in Italy. The following article by the editor of the *Journal de Geneve* attempts to assess the personality and work of Il Duce at the end of a decade of power. As a prominent resident of Geneva, Mr. Martin has had the opportunity to know many of the outstanding public figures of Europe, among them Mussolini and his former Foreign Secretary, Dino Grandi.]

The career of the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, is one of the most colorful and amazing in modern times. It begins in the village of Predappio, near Forli, where, the son of an illiterate blacksmith, he was born in 1883; it has carried him through various phases of the Italian Socialist movement into the World War; and today he sits in the Palazzo di Venezia in Rome directing the destinies of a great nation, while the eyes of the world are fixed upon him.

Probably the most decisive moment in Mussolini's life was when in his youth he took an examination for an appointment as schoolmaster at Forli. That represented the height of his ambition, and he was deeply disappointed when a formality caused his failure. What would have been the history of Italy and modern Europe if Benito Mussolini had been appointed schoolmaster at Forli? Perhaps his desire for power would have been satisfied by the opportunity to rule the children in his classroom. But today Mussolini would be unknown.

After his failure time hung heavy on his hands. His father's friends, wishing to help him, made him editor of a small local Socialist paper. Here he became so notorious because of his advanced opinions that he was forced to flee to Switzerland. When he returned to Italy, a marked man because of his persecution and exile, he became the managing editor of *Avanti,* the famous Socialist paper of Milan. But just then the war broke out and Mussolini, always eager for action, parted from his Socialist friends, who were opposed to Italy's participation in the conflict. He knew then, shrewdly enough, that if socialism was ever to have an opportunity to put its principles into practice it would be through war and the shock it would give to capitalism. But his war speeches soon brought him new contacts. He became less and less the internationalist and more and more the patriot. He fought with distinction in the trenches, and after the armistice he reappeared at the head of a powerful new party which had little in common with socialism and which opposed everything that he had formerly advocated.

When the war ended Italy was filled with idle men—former army officers and unemployed workingmen who in other days would have emigrated to the United States, but who were now forced by American immigration laws to stay at home. All those who sought a place in the sun—or anywhere else—enlisted under the banner of Mussolini; and it was at the head of this proletarian army of the unemployed that he marched on Rome in the Autumn of 1922. This was no march of conquest—it followed an appeal from the King. Yet, as a result of it, Mussolini found himself a dictator, and this year he celebrates what is unusual with most

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dictators—the tenth year of his reign.

To the outside observer Mussolini's career is full of contradictions—he has been internationalist, then nationalist; Socialist, then dictator; an advocate of the people's welfare, then a reactionary. Mussolini seems to have worshiped all political idols, professed all faiths. Even during the past decade it is not difficult to find in him many inconsistencies of word and deed. More than slight variations of mood appear in his thunderous praise of machine guns and rifles and his policy of disarmament, in his bellicose speech at Florence on May 17, 1930, and his peace message to America on Jan. 1, 1931.

But through the mazes of this brilliant, varied career there runs a guiding thread which gives it much greater unity than one would expect. Mussolini has not changed; only his environment is different. His temperament has remained the same, and fundamentally his opinions have altered very little; temperament and opinions, however, have been adapted to new conditions.

Mussolini has never believed in democracy. Even when he was a Socialist editor he hated Parliaments. This man who fascinates the crowd with his inflammatory eloquence has always detested parliamentary oratory, which never results in immediate action. He has sought the people's good, but in spite of them; he has never believed that the public is capable of recognizing its own best interests. Leaders must bestow blessings on the people—such is the formula of all dictators. Mussolini has always had a profound belief in force. He is not one who believes that truth beareth away the victory and that right makes might. On the contrary, he believes that might must precede right. In his youth, like Briand and many other radicals, he advocated the general strike and resistance to the police, but today he sees nothing inconsistent in employing the police to carry out measures which he wanted to effect by the people's will-power.

Even internationally, Mussolini's mind has undergone no change. Certainly he was never a patriot in the bourgeois sense of the word. But he has always had great faith in the destinies of Italy, and when he sought to lead the Italian people into the paths of revolution, it was because he believed that they were summoned by long historical tradition to play a world rôle. From that point it was not far to the belief that Italy should participate in the World War, and thus recapture her historic position. Mussolini took this step without difficulty. Upon examining his ideas, one is struck by the bond between him and another Socialist who became a dictator, under very different conditions but for similar reasons—Lenin. In the same way one finds analogies with fascism in Germany's Nazi movement. Only those who are satisfied with surface indications can believe that Western European dictatorships are destined to save bourgeois society and capitalism. The dictators themselves think otherwise.

If, as a Socialist, Mussolini was not a democratic Socialist, but a revolutionary advocate of direct action, the same Mussolini as dictator is anything but reactionary. True, he has sometimes leaned upon the great bankers and industrial magnates of his country, but they, through fear of communism, gave him their support and aided him in his hour of success. It was no accident that fascism received its greatest impetus after the workers' seizure of the factories in 1921. Moreover, once in power, Mussolini could rely upon the esteem of the existing conservative interests—the banks, industry, the army and the court. He has given them pledges, has sought to remove their fears, but at heart he has remained determined upon social reforms, and the boldest of such reforms

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do not frighten him. Mussolini, while holding now, or in the past, several Cabinet portfolios himself, has accepted the advice of his technical collaborators in all departments which do not interest him directly. But there is one domain which he controls exclusively and in which the work of fascism is truly his own—that relating to economic organization and social reform. If you should ask Mussolini what he considers to be the greatest accomplishment of fascism, he would undoubtedly reply that it has been the granting of rights to labor and the organization of the "corporative" State, a nation united in all its functions.

There is no need here to pass judgment on this aspect of his work, for it could only be brief and superficial. But attention should be directed to three outstanding phenomena which have appeared in the chaos of modern society—first, the American experiment of high wages; second, the Bolshevist experiment in the dictatorship of the proletariat, and, third, the Fascist experiment in coordinating the welfare of the State with the interests of both workers and employers. To decide whether or not this philosophy has enduring vitality, one would have to see it operating, not merely under dictatorship, but also in a free society, for might can establish nothing permanent. Only the free play of forces can give institutions lasting character and sufficient reality. But with this proviso, which the Fascists themselves make, there is no denying that the social experiment of the present régime in Italy contains the basic pattern of a strong and valuable design. And this is the creation of Mussolini, who is more socialistic, more preoccupied with the welfare of the people and more in contact with the proletariat than is often believed.

Mussolini never misses a chance of recalling that he has sprung from the masses and of making clear that his sympathies are always with the people. In recent months he has expressed this thought many times and in various forms, notably in his speech at Naples on Oct. 24, 1931, which caused a great sensation throughout Italy and gave the industrial magnates no little uneasiness. The latter gained the impression that fascism was abandoning its conservative origin and moving toward a wholly Socialist concept of the economic rôle of the State. For this reason the present phase of development is extremely interesting.

It is well enough known that about a year ago one of the foremost banks of Italy, the Banca Commerciale, was in trouble. There was nothing unusual in that, in view of the economic situation in Europe, but the troubles of the Banca Commerciale arose from an unwise investment policy, which had given the institution control over a large part of Italian industry. No one knows whether the bank took this course under pressure from a government which sought to control the nation's economic life through an intermediary, or whether the bank's action was inspired by fear that the currency had been stabilized at too high a rate of exchange and was not sound. But it is at least certain that the government, in a most audacious fashion, made use of the bank's difficulties for its own ends.

Under the name of the Instituto Mobiliare Italiano (I. M. I.), Mussolini has founded an organization which has taken over all the industrial activities of the Banca Commerciale. It becomes at once apparent that this institution, managed directly by the State, is going to be in a position to exercise a determining influence on the enterprises in which the Banca Commerciale was interested—practically all the industries of Italy. Without a gesture, without a word, without any declaration of principle, but merely acting with full knowledge of what he was about, Mussolini has

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thus attained what it has taken bolshevism years to accomplish—the seizure by the State of the country's economic life. He does not hesitate to declare that his purpose is not to inject artificial life into unsound industries, but to separate those which pay from those which do not. In other words, he would achieve a controlled economy—the dream of all European governments. Have we not here the realization of precisely that State socialism which was the ideal of Mussolini's youth?

In the same way, the logic of his course in foreign affairs may be traced. Mussolini has never had but one idea—the greatness of Italy. What has differed according to time and circumstance has been merely the best means to attain that end. When he praised war, his purpose above all was to give his people a sense of discipline and sacrifice and the consciousness of nationality which centuries of foreign domination had somewhat blunted. But the greatness of Italy demands both moral virtue and economic strength. That is why Mussolini's bellicose utterances are always accompanied by positive promises concerning internal reforms and economic advancement.

Eventually, however, post-war financial stringencies demanded a choice between these conflicting aims. Italy can produce bigger and better armaments. She can fortify herself economically. But she cannot do both things at once, because she lacks the necessary funds. At this juncture Mussolini apparently hesitated; in the end he followed the advice of his Foreign Minister. His message of peace to the people of America on Jan. 1, 1931, marks exactly the date of his decision. Italy was to sponsor a policy of international disarmament which would provide her with sufficient financial resources to realize the great internal plans which fascism considers to be part of its program.

When Mussolini adopted this new policy he said that he reserved the right to abandon it if circumstances so demanded. "If the Disarmament Conference succeeds," he said in Rome in December, 1931, "I shall make the *Balilla* [the organization of Italian youth] part of the international Boy Scout movement; on the contrary, if it fails, I shall accentuate its military character." Unfortunately, Mussolini is an impatient man who likes rapid decisions. Unable to withhold judgment until the work of the conference was completed, he has condemned it at the end of only its first phase—and that undoubtedly explains the sudden removal of Foreign Minister Grandi. One must now wait to see whether Italy will revive her military plans and sacrifice to them her projected internal reforms.

In domestic affairs the end likewise justifies the means. Mussolini was opposed to the King when the monarchy seemed an obstacle to his plans, but the moment he saw that the monarchy would be useful to him, he rallied to the House of Savoy. At the beginning of his rise to power he attempted to govern with a Parliament which had been chosen by the people and with a coalition Cabinet in which there were only four Fascist Ministers. His opponents united with his own supporters to seat him in the dictator's chair. Yet there is no evidence that some day, when domestic affairs seem favorable, he will not return to the idea of a normal government of which we once heard so much in his speeches. Domestic affairs, moreover, may become favorable. External opposition to fascism is now practically non-existent. Within the Fascist party itself several currents can be noted, one of which is carrying the head of the government toward complete democracy. Circumstances, much more than any preconceived plan, will determine the future, for Mussolini, who seems so inflexible, is an opportunist at heart.

In Mussolini there is a symbol and

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there is a man. The symbol is fascism —a revolutionary doctrine of dictatorship which seeks to subordinate the individual to the good of the State as it is conceived by certain self-appointed leaders. At bottom this program is not new; numerous examples of it are to be found in the history of the medieval Italian republics. What is novel and daring is to have transformed the doctrine into a religion and to have proclaimed it in the twentieth century after three generations had accepted democracy as the last word in progress. Another innovation is to associate autocracy with the belief in progress rather than with reaction. Here Mussolini surely has exercised a profound influence on the development of modern political thought.

His part in international relations has been no less significant. He has posed as the champion of treaty revision, not because of direct national interest but because of temperament. A man for whom life must be activity cannot comprehend that international stability rests on the permanency of treaties. His conception of politics is dynamic; it is that, much more than Italian interests, which explains his friendship for Germany and his dislike for France. Some one who knows Mussolini intimately has said that toward France he feels no hate, only frustrated love. After all, there is a close resemblance between the two. Such is Mussolini the symbol—the incarnation of the belief in dictatorship and the idea of action.

As for the man himself, I have seen Mussolini in his immense study at the Palazzo di Venezia, a room so huge that as one enters the door he looks almost tiny behind his desk. I have seen him sure of himself and of his ideas, never conceiving the possibility of any view other than his own, and as dogmatic in his opinions as in his orders. But I have also seen him nervous, agitated, tired and almost uneasy. At such times, while he talks, he will sweep his arm over his desk with a terrific gesture and will sway back and forth in his seat as if he were in a rocking-chair. He is ever simple, direct and human—far different from the conventional portrait —but underneath he is lonely, separated from the masses, isolated by his position and authority even more than he could be by pride and majesty.

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