



Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance by Christian Goeschel.

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In *Mussolini and Hitler*, historian Christian Goeschel (Univ. of Manchester) offers a fresh new analysis of the alliance between the two major European Axis powers, with a sharp focus on the relationship—both public and private—between the dictators who led them. He argues that “The story of Mussolini and Hitler is best seen as an instrumental union and politically constructed relationship, rather than an ideologically inevitable pact or real friendship, although there was undoubtedly some ideological affinity” (3-4). Though he neglects neither the ideologies of Fascism and Nazism nor Axis strategies and policies in peace and war, he is chiefly concerned with the interactions and motives of the dictators and their portrayal of their relationship to the wider world. In particular, he succeeds in showing that the “social performance” of the two men was far more complex than most historians have thought.

After an introduction placing his work within the broader historiography, the author devotes eight chronological chapters to the period from the rise of the two dictators to their deaths in 1945. Only a single (first) chapter covers the years 1922-33, making for shallower detail than in the later chapters; this is understandable, however, given that this period preceded the first meeting of the dictators.

Chapter 1 demonstrates just how much Hitler admired (and envied) Mussolini and saw in him a possible ally and prototype for the success of his own movement. Hitler sent his first envoy to Mussolini in 1922 and made repeated efforts in the early days to obtain a signed photograph of him (17-18). Mussolini was initially standoffish, but the Nazis’ electoral success in 1930 persuaded him that he might gain influence in the otherwise potentially hostile state of Germany (27-28).

Chapters 1-2, on the early contacts between the dictators, establish two governing theses, one a constant throughout the book, the other emphatically reversed by its end. The first is that a general suspicion pervaded each state’s populace and elites regarding the others’ attitude toward them. Germans, in particular, saw Italians as cowardly and treacherous, owing to Italy’s siding with the Entente powers during the First World War. Goeschel explains the efforts of the dictators to mitigate this problem, specifically their exploitation of tightly controlled national media to project themselves as strongmen, capable of imposing their will on their populations (24, 40, 91, 107-8). At the same time, they were at pains to downplay such thorny issues as German designs on Austria and Italian ownership of South Tyrol (48-51).

The book’s second thesis concerns the balance of power early on in the leaders’ relations. Notably, Hitler treated Mussolini, as the elder statesman, with due deference. The Duce was allowed to choose meeting times and places and Hitler was often marginalized in press reports of their first meeting (50-51). The period was marked by a coolness, verging at times on hostility, between the two men and represented a learning process for each of them, especially Hitler.

Chapters 3-4 concern a shift in this balance of power by the mid-late 1930s, not only in terms of economic developments and military power and prestige, but also in the functioning of the relationship (71). Their now more frequent meetings were jointly stage-managed and international

media coverage begin to tilt in favor of Hitler. By leaving the League of Nations and invading Ethiopia, Il Duce had driven a wedge between Italy and the democracies, which forced him closer to Germany.

The myth of a close relationship between Hitler and Mussolini in the 1920s and early 1930s had become a reality by the mid-1930s. But Mussolini was no mere buffoon or lackey in this period. He used his considerable rhetorical skills to exaggerate his fascist regime's military capabilities on the international stage, including to Hitler. His securing a role in the Munich agreement was a diplomatic triumph (61, 118–19, 142).

Chapters 5–8 cover the lead-up to the German invasion of Poland, Italy's non-belligerency, and the pre- and post-Italian armistice war years. Given the vast historiography on this period, Goeschel has few original insights to offer readers. But he does make some interesting points, showing, for instance, that during its non-belligerency period, Italy spent more on defenses along its border region with greater Germany than on its border with France. While the Italian press suppressed this information, it was noted in German media and damaged the relationship between the two nations (170). That said, Hitler often observed diplomatic protocol and niceties with Mussolini even after the complete transformation of their relationship.

In December 1940, despite the failure of Mussolini's "parallel war" and the consequent need for German forces to be sent to the Mediterranean, Hitler avoided ordering the Duce to come to the Berghof to meet with him, instead suggesting a face-saving halfway point in the Brenner Pass (202). Indeed, Hitler was even willing to meet the Duce in Italy despite Mussolini's hugely diminished status before his overthrow in July 1943. When the Führer's aircraft arrived early at Treviso airport, the pilot was ordered to circle for a few minutes before landing so as to arrive right on time as per diplomatic protocol (246). While such acts were all part of the "social pageantry" of their relationship, Hitler still respected the Duce. Even after his overthrow, Hitler ordered his rescue, partly for propaganda reasons, but also because he still believed Mussolini alone could assert authority over German-occupied Italy and bring the Italian people into line (263).

There is little to find fault with in this book.¹ The exceptional scale of his archival research in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom has enabled Goeschel to open a new lens through which to examine the development and operation of the European Axis alliance.² *Mussolini and Hitler* makes a salutary contribution to the historiography of its subject. I highly recommend it to students of modern European history, the Axis powers and their ideologies, and the use of propaganda in general.

1. While the book's overall chronological structure is logical and effective, the division of its chapters into subsections that are sometimes as brief as a page or two can be bizarre and occasionally irritating.

2. As he notes, the only previous attempt to study the relationship between the dictators in this manner is F.W. Deakin's classic *Brutal Friendship: Mussolini, Hitler and the Fall of Italian Fascism* (NY: Harper and Row, 1962).