

Special issue: The cult of Mussolini in twentieth-century Italy

Introduction

Stephen Gundle, Christopher Duggan and Giuliana Pieri

For many years Mussolini's personality cult was viewed in a variety of mainly political ways. It was seen as 'an instrument of power' which served to justify personal rule and establish a way of conveying the meaning of Fascism to the multitude (Mack Smith 1981, 123). It was a tool for keeping leading Fascists in check and compelling them to engage in repeated public declarations of devotion to a leader whose popularity was greater than their own. It was also a system for regulating and organising the population since it was expressed in innumerable rituals and ceremonies. The cult was a factor of stability and a mechanism of social and political integration (Melograni 1976), but it was also linked to Fascism's efforts to enact an 'anthropological revolution' in Italy, to transform the Italians into a people of warriors and conquerors (Gentile 2002, 242–245). For Emilio Gentile, 'the glorification of the figure of Mussolini' established him as the prototype of the new Italian, the living and functioning model whom all were supposed to emulate (1993, 273). For this reason the cult 'became a predominant aspect in the activity of fascistising the young' (Gentile 1993, 272).

As secretary of the National Fascist Party through most of the 1930s, Achille Starace was personally responsible for 'the choreography of the regime and the deepening effort to detach the Duce's image from any base in reality' (Bosworth 2002, 260). Mussolini was presented in ways that were unreal not only in terms of the hyperbole that was involved but also in relation to the way he actually functioned on a day-to-day basis. 'The way charisma was inscribed on to the Duce meant that he had to be a spiritual vehicle of the nation and its revolution', R. J. B. Bosworth writes; in reality, he was a 'full-time dictator' who was 'an assiduous bureaucrat' whose spell-binding public performances were based on 'study and practice' (2005, 352–353). In any event, the cult meant that Mussolini became a construction of what Dino Biondi (1973) called the 'factory of the Duce'. That is to say, he was a figure who was experienced by millions in indirect form, via images and sounds, through ceremonies and practices. A whole apparatus was devoted to promoting and perpetuating attachment to a man whose personification of not just a political movement but of the nation itself was asserted as an article of faith.

The study of the Mussolini cult thus necessitates attention to a wide variety of phenomena. Precisely because so many facets of his personality and activities were given a mass projection, the cult can be approached in relation to political leadership, the forms of modern politics, collective rituals and social practices, but also in terms of the arts, mass communications and mass culture, education and leisure. In some of these areas, a focus on Mussolini's individual qualities and personal odyssey are important; in others more attention needs to be paid to the processes of propaganda and indoctrination. In addition to political history, social history, art history and visual analysis, sociology, and theatre and performance studies can all provide insights into a cult that was multi-faceted and which spilled over into many different spheres.

It would be wrong to suggest that traditional historiography has ignored the contents of the cult in terms of its production of artefacts, artworks, popular visual imagery, architectural innovations and moving images. After all, Renzo De Felice co-edited with Luigi Goglia the volume *Mussolini: il mito* (1983), which brought together for the first time a significant number of artworks, photographs, movie stills, cartoons and other material. However, this material was considered solely as propaganda. As De Felice wrote, ‘it is not a myth that we should really be concerned with; rather it is what an American scholar, Cannistraro, has opportunely defined as “the factory of consent”’ (De Felice and Goglia 1983, 4).¹ In other words, the focus needed to fall on the way the aura or legend of Mussolini was created and imposed in a ‘hammering, obsessive way’. ‘If one really wants to study Mussolini’, De Felice added, ‘it is not his “myth” that should be referred to but the “genius for propaganda” that, as Salvemini said, characterised Mussolini and his political action’ (1983, 4).

From this perspective, the cult was not in any way a fact with spontaneous aspects or something deserving of attention on its own. It was conceived as a fundamentally top-down phenomenon, a brainwashing operation in short geared to building and perpetuating the attachment of the Italians to the regime and its leader. There was no sense that it might in some way involve, or even require, voluntary participation or spontaneous enthusiasm. There was thus a single dynamic in operation; there was no room for conflict or variety, for inconsistency or for the input of factors outside the regime itself. The various examples of the cult contained in *Mussolini: il mito* are in fact mostly drawn from the propaganda machine: Istituto Luce photographs, artistic homages and published writings. The basic outlook is that the cult was entirely functional to politics and immediately legible in political terms. The material products of the cult, the objects and artefacts, were of no interest outside of this framework.

In the AHRC project that we conducted between 2006 and 2011 (*The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians 1918–2005*), we aimed to explore the phenomenon of the cult in a different way. In our view, the dictator’s cult of personality was a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon to which various factors contributed. The tradition of exceptional figures within Italian nationalism and the widespread belief that the nation’s future required a new hero provided a template for the ‘myth’ of Mussolini. The nascent cinematic star system created the premises for the arousal of popular interest in an individual who appeared repeatedly on screen. The dictator’s desire to be seen widely throughout the peninsula necessitated the management of his appearances. At the same time, the persistence of primitive religious practices in large parts of rural Italy meant that Mussolini could be seen as extra-human, a saviour or saintly figure. The cult in this sense was the particular combination of the traditional and the modern, of historical motifs and contemporary themes, the organised and the less organised. Together, these factors produced a cult that manifested itself in many different ways. It did not function in a vacuum but in a society in which people lived, worked and passed time in ways that were only ever partially Fascistised. In the volume containing the project findings,² several of these particular features are highlighted. The cult is related to distinctive features of the Italian nation-state as it had developed since unification in 1861. Emphasis is also given to the way the cult manifested itself in different contexts, from the city of Rome to Predappio – Mussolini’s birthplace – and further afield to the Italian colonies. The cult is interpreted as a cultural phenomenon and not simply as the by-product of a system of rule, not least because the vast array of representations of the dictator included not just artworks of dubious quality but works by Italy’s most celebrated and talented artists, most notably those associated with the avant-garde. Finally, the cult is not seen as having been limited in time to the period of the regime’s heyday or, indeed, to have come to a final end with the liberation of Italy in April 1945.

In this special issue of *Modern Italy*, we present five articles which are concerned either with aspects of the cult that in different ways left, or were intended to leave, legacies, or with posthumous resonances and resurrections of the cult. The aim is to deepen the understanding of the cult as a feature of twentieth-century Italian culture and society which continued to reverberate long after the demise of Fascism and the death of Mussolini. All the articles focus in one way or another on how people encountered the Duce and responded to him or his legacy.

Paul Baxa provides a detailed account of one of the many visits to Italian towns and cities that Mussolini undertook in the course of his rule. It might be thought that few things could be more ephemeral than a visit, even one by a dictator. Even for the people who saw him, it would have been a fleeting experience of limited consequence. In fact, visits were eagerly sought by different localities and were prepared long in advance, with the population being carefully groomed for the great moment.³ They did not only involve set-piece addresses, but inaugurations of buildings, inspections of factories, encounters with groups and individuals and so on. They were filmed and photographed, as well as reported, and were often also written up in glossy illustrated publications. Moreover, in contrast to Hitler, who addressed crowds in sports stadia and specially constructed arenas, Mussolini preferred to hold his rallies in the historic squares that for centuries had been the focus of civic life. Indeed, as Mario Isnenghi notes in his history of the Italian piazza, 'the itinerant practice and the success of these periodic encounters between the Duce and the crowd in canonical places of civic sociability owe much to the culture of the piazza' (1994, 313). 'The ubiquitous oratory of Mussolini', he adds elsewhere, 'was rooted in the deep texture and in the specific character of many urban histories and town squares' (1997, 50). For these reasons they long survived in popular memory.

Paola Bernasconi offers an analysis of a selection of the many letters sent by schoolchildren to Mussolini. As Tracy Koon has observed, Fascistisation of schools took many different forms. These included: 'an increase in the blatantly political content of school curricula and the introduction of state text-books; ever-tighter control and subordination of teachers to make them faithful servants of the state and eliminate academic freedom; more rigid centralization of the school administration to bring all academic personnel under close supervision of the ministry; the use of the school as an agency of military regimentation; and the establishment of paramilitary party youth groups that would complement the political work of the schools' (Koon 1985, 63). In this context, the sending of letters was anything but spontaneous. Bernasconi speculates that many will have been dictated by Fascistised teachers. They provide testimony not so much of the loyalty Mussolini attracted as of the way the young were indoctrinated under the regime. What traces this left on the mental outlook of that generation is a matter that needs to be addressed in relation to what Mirco Dondi has termed 'the issue of cultural continuity in Italy and thus . . . the survival of the Fascist mentality in the Republic' (1999, 141). It proved less than straightforward 'for many Italians to shake themselves free of the Fascist mind-set' (Dondi 1999, 154). This was so also because, as Leonardo Sciascia argued, Fascism implanted itself in a society that itself was neither liberal nor entirely modern, thus creating an order that was 'doubly unfree, doubly non-rational' (cited in Wren-Owens 2007, 20). In a provocative conclusion, Bernasconi draws a possible link between the education received by the generation born in the 1920s and 1930s and the support for personalised forms of political leadership in the late twentieth century.

Enrico Sturani explores the world of Mussolini postcards, a field to which he has devoted many years of close study. He stresses, first, the enormous number of cards of many different varieties that circulated under the regime. Postcards were a mass medium of the early decades of the century and the cult of Mussolini was amply reflected by them. Sturani also stresses that,

before the war years, the majority of cards were printed by commercial publishers and offered for sale along with every other type of postcard. Only a proportion was produced by Fascist organisations for explicit propaganda purposes. He provides evidence that in this popular medium the cult of Mussolini functioned alongside practices of devotion to saints and modern attachments to film stars and entertainment personalities.

Mussolini's birthplace, Predappio, benefited enormously under the regime. It was effectively rebuilt, received substantial investment and was turned into a site of pilgrimage. In the postwar years, the town was administered by the left, while nostalgic Fascists continued to come to visit, a phenomenon which mushroomed following the burial of the dictator's body there in 1957.⁴ In her article, Sofia Serenelli reflects on the recent history of the 'town of the Duce', the way it is seen by visitors and the way the population and politicians have negotiated the problematic legacy of Fascism. In a context such as this, in which an enormous Casa del Fascio (House of Fascism) still dominates the town's main square despite having stayed empty since 1945, and in which souvenir shops are dotted along the main street, Mussolini remains a 'live' presence whose historical and material legacy cannot be ignored but must be acknowledged and in some way managed.

Finally, Stephen Gundle considers the way in which the media of cinema and television have explored in dramatised form Mussolini's personal and political trajectory. He finds that his decline and fall have been represented more insistently than any other phase and that increasing emphasis has been placed on the personal and domestic aspects of his life. Despite the declared anti-fascist intentions of at least some film-makers, Mussolini has been humanised in an effort to make him palatable to contemporary television audiences, in keeping with the way in which the memory of the Duce and his regime was constructed in the popular illustrated press in the years after the war. Particular importance is accorded to female figures, notably Rachele and Edda Mussolini, and Claretta Petacci, in narratives which accord at least equal importance to family and private life as to political events. All the four main actors who have played Mussolini in significant Italian films and television productions have been foreign, two of them Oscar winners, a fact which endowed representations of the dictator's fall with a dark theatrical glamour.

Historians are agreed that the regime's efforts to turn the 'Mussolinism of the common people' into 'fully-fledged Fascist Mussolinism' ultimately failed (Gentile 2002, 132). But that does not mean that both these phenomena – popular Mussolinism and the Fascist cult – did not leave a legacy of memories, mentalities and cultural products. What the articles in this issue show is that the Mussolini cult impacted on everyday life in different ways and was perpetuated in posthumous form by means of innumerable reminders, echoes, memories, residues, re-enactments and debris.

Notes

1. The reference is to Cannistraro, 1975.
2. S. Gundle, C. Duggan and G. Pieri, eds. *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians*. Manchester, Manchester University Press (forthcoming 2013). See also the project exhibition catalogue, R. Cremoncini and others, eds., *Against Mussolini: Art and the Fall of a Dictator*. London, Estorick Collection, 2010; and website: <http://www.mussolinicult.com>.
3. See also S. Gundle, 'Mussolini's Appearances in the Regions', in Gundle, Duggan and Pieri, *The Cult of the Duce*.
4. See S. Serenelli, 'A Town for the Cult of the Duce: Predappio as a Site of Pilgrimage', in Gundle, Duggan and Pieri, *The Cult of the Duce*.

Notes on contributors

Stephen Gundle is Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. His books include *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943–91* (2000), *Bellissima: Feminine Beauty and the Idea of Italy* (2007), *Mass Culture and Italian Society from Fascism to the Cold War* (2008, with David Forgacs), *Glamour: A History* (2008) and *Death and the Dolce Vita: The Dark Side of Rome in the 1950s* (2011). His *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* is forthcoming in 2013.

Christopher Duggan is Professor of Modern Italian History at the University of Reading. He is the author of many works including *Fascism and the Mafia* (1989), *Francesco Crispi: from Nation to Nationalism* (2002), *The Force of Destiny: a History of Italy since 1796* (2007) and *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (2012).

Giuliana Pieri is Reader in Italian and the Visual Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her main research interests are in the fields of post-war Italian popular fiction, Anglo-Italian cultural relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Italian modern art and design.

References

- Biondi, D. 1973. *La fabbrica del duce*. Florence: Vallecchi.
- Bosworth, R. J. B. 2002. *Mussolini*. London: Arnold.
- Bosworth, R. J. B. 2005. *Mussolini's Italy*. London: Allen Lane.
- Cannistraro, P. V. 1975. *La fabbrica del consenso: fascismo e mass media*. Rome–Bari: Laterza.
- De Felice, F., and L. Goglia. 1983. *Mussolini: il mito*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Dondi, M. 1999. "The Fascist Mentality after Fascism." In *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation*, edited by R. J. B. Bosworth, and P. Dogliani. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Gentile, E. 1993. *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*. Rome–Bari: Laterza.
- Gentile, E. 2002. *Fascismo: storia e interpretazione*. Rome–Bari: Laterza.
- Isnenghi, M. 1994. *Italia in piazza: i luoghi della vita pubblica dal 1848 ai nostri giorni*. Milan: Mondadori.
- Isnenghi, M. 1997. "La piazza." In *I luoghi della memoria: strutture ed eventi dell'Italia unita*, edited by M. Isnenghi. Rome–Bari: Laterza.
- Koon, T. H. 1985. *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922–1943*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Mack Smith, D. 1981. *Mussolini*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Melograni, P. 1976. "The Cult of the Duce in Fascist Italy." *Journal of Contemporary History* 11: 221–237.
- Wren-Owens, E. 2007. *Postmodern Ethics*. Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars.