



KEYSTONE-FRANCE/GAMMA-KEYSTONE VIA GETTY IMAGES

BOOKS

2 JUNE 2021

Mussolini and the rise of fascism

How did an obscure magazine editor become an idol, and then a scandal, and then reassert his authority and rule for a further 15 years?

BY [LUCY HUGHES-HALLETT](#)

Cannes, 1920. Quinto Navarra, servant to the Italian foreign minister, is approached by someone wanting an appointment with His Excellency. A journalist. Nobody special. Navarra asks for his name-card. Benito Mussolini.

Rome, 1923. Navarra is now Mussolini's valet. The latter has become somebody very special indeed. He is the prime minister. More – as he boasts to Navarra – he is an object of veneration, an idol. "If I slept all day, the Italians wouldn't ask for anything more. All they need to know is that I exist."

Rome, 15 June 1924. Five days previously the socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti, Mussolini's most courageous critic in the Chamber of Deputies, was abducted in broad daylight as he walked through the centre of Rome. Little boys playing on the pavement saw four men assaulting him and dragging him into a car as he struggled and screamed. His mutilated body will not be found for another two months, but it is widely believed that he has been murdered on the prime minister's orders. The crime was stupidly botched. It looks likely to bring down Mussolini. Support for his regime is draining away.

Now Navarra is in the antechamber outside his master's office, the room pompously entitled "the Hall of Victories". An urgent dispatch arrives. Navarra knocks and enters. He sees Mussolini in his throne-like chair "his eyes wide open... banging his bald skull right and left on the gilded uprights, like a rusty metronome inexorably beating time to mark its end".

How did it happen? How does an obscure magazine editor become an idol, and then a scandal, and then reassert his authority and rule for a further 15 years? In this vigorous account of fascism's first five years, translated into English by Anne Milano Appel, Antonio Scurati answers the question in exhaustive detail and from a legion of different viewpoints, taking us through the story week by week, sometimes even day by day.

We know that the First World War left Europe smashed-up, and that, in its aftermath, in the broken soil of the combatant nations, a variety of strange and toxic political fruit flourished, but seldom has the growth of one of those regimes been so fully described. Panoptic and polyphonic, Scurati's book gives us the experiences of the fearful and the feared, the rhetoric of both the revolutionaries and the reactionaries (and of those, like Mussolini, who veered between the two positions).

[See also: [*The German history wars*](#)]

He draws on letters and newspapers and political speeches and court proceedings and memoirs and tapped telephone conversations recorded by secret police. He quotes his sources verbatim and at length, or he weaves them into a flexible narrative in language that mimics that of his subjects. Scurati's book is very long; it is composed of a multitude of short fragments that collectively add up to an immense mosaic.

It is presented, perversely, as a novel, though it would be more accurately described as history-writing with a few liberties taken. Scurati hews very close to his sources. Occasionally he allows himself a fictional flourish. I don't suppose, for example, there is any documentary evidence for the existence of the spadefoot toad crushed beneath the wheels of a truck carrying a posse of drunken *squadristi* on their way to murder a socialist peasant. Nor do I imagine Scurati knows for certain about the "fine-grained vitreous" Chinese porcelain cup from which Mussolini's mistress Margherita

Sarfatti sipped a tisane (wild fennel, hibiscus and valerian) on the night a bomb exploded on stage at Milan's Diana Theatre, killing 20 people and wounding 80 more. But these are mere colourful extras. For nearly all of his narrative Scurati is paraphrasing historical sources, not making things up.

In Italy, Scurati's book has had an equivocal response. On the one hand, it was awarded the prestigious Strega Prize and topped bestseller lists. On the other, some Italian commentators have questioned the morality of writing a novel that might invite sympathetic understanding of a dictator who bludgeoned his way to power. I don't share those critics' way of thinking. We need writers, whether novelists or historians, who can take us inside the minds of those who created or submitted to fascism, and arm us against any return of such political thuggery. That is why I wrote my biography of Gabriele d'Annunzio, the flamboyant proto-fascist poet whose regime in Fiume was a model in miniature of what was soon to come in Rome.

In Scurati's case, anyway, those critics have nothing to fear. *M* does not justify or glamorise Mussolini. Where this book deviates from the conventional narrative is not in exalting him, but rather in suggesting that in the early 1920s the activists among his opponents – the communists and socialists – were as violent as those who eventually joined the ranks of the blackshirts.

With hindsight, because under fascism they were so ruthlessly suppressed, it is easy to see the leftists as high-minded martyrs haloed with pathos. Scurati reminds us how brutal they, too, could be. In the countryside they burned crops and barns, killed animals, tortured fellow-peasants. In the factories they occupied they stored arsenals ready for a bloody revolution.

Even Matteotti, who after his murder in 1924 was mythologised as a saintly victim, is seen here as only human – clever, resolute and phenomenally brave, yes, but also the fighter who told his supporters: “Sell the grain and buy a revolver.”

Scurati writes with gusto. His style is that of a man unfamiliar with the adage “less is more”. His prose is as verbose and elaborate as his subjects'. He piles on ever more adjectives, more adverbs, more extravagantly protracted sentences. He says things three times over in slightly varying ways. It is as though his researches have left his mind saturated with a blend

of d'Annunzio's florid linguistic curlicues, Mussolini's oratorical thunder and the fervour of communist rhetoric.

[See also: [*What the Hitler conspiracies mean*](#)]

Milano Appel's translation keeps up gamely: where meaning occasionally vanishes into a haze of highly-charged verbiage I suspect she is being true to the original. I don't object to Scurati's taking us inside the collective mind of fascism to show us what it is like. Immersing us in it without the life-belt of irony, however, is likely to leave readers gasping for air. Its language is bombastic, grandiose, exhaustingly irrational. A spritz of something tart would have helped to make it more digestible.

Just as Scurati doesn't invent much, he doesn't deploy a novelist's other tools either. He doesn't select his incidents to shape a streamlined story. He puts everything in straightforward chronological order. He doesn't bring his readers close to his protagonist: the Duce is absent from much of the narrative. It's not that Scurati can't evoke a character. Here is Italo Balbo, the chieftain of Ferrara's fascists:

With his curly hair, scandalously long and teased in back to make it fuller, he strolls, lanky and grinning... If some blundering admirer gets in the way, Balbo immediately clears a path with a couple of angry cudgel blows. Then, amiably, still in a good mood, he continues on, not turning to look at the individual who was clubbed.

Scurati's depiction of Mussolini is comparatively flat.

This is the story of a movement, not of a man: it begins not with Mussolini's birth but with that of fascism. Scurati is not interested in his psychological development or the evolution of his political creed. Mussolini's back-story is given in one paragraph, and not until nearly halfway through the book.

The future idol, slab-faced and socially maladroit, moves through his own story as though he was already an effigy of himself. Even when he is in the frame he is often inactive. Like a malign version of Tolstoy's General Kutuzov – defeating Napoleon by doing nothing, refusing provocation and forever retreating – Scurati's Mussolini bides his time, taking credit for

atrocities he didn't initiate, and waiting impassively while his competitors self-destruct.

When he strikes though, he delivers a knockout. Scurati ends this volume (more are planned) six months after Matteotti's murder. Mussolini the human metronome, whom his valet saw apparently trying to knock his own brains out in a transport of self-disgusted fury, pulls himself together. In January 1925 he reasserts his power with a speech climaxing with the defiant, self-aggrandising words:

I and I alone assume political, moral and historical responsibility for everything that has happened... If fascism has been a band of criminals, I am the leader of this criminal band!

This is untrue. As Scurati's account confirms, Mussolini didn't create fascism. He alone did nothing. Rather he learned from d'Annunzio, whom the socialist Angelo Tasca described as the victim of the "greatest act of plagiarism history has seen".

Mussolini saw that disgruntled militarists were numerous but uncoordinated and, cuckoo-like, he ousted their leaders and took over their command. He was an opportunist who caught the wave of violence engulfing postwar Italy and rode it. This book is a fittingly energetic account of that baleful ride.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett is the author of "The Pike: Gabriele d'Annunzio, Poet, Seducer and Preacher of War" (Fourth Estate)

M: Son of the Century

Antonio Scurati, translated by Anne Milano Appel

Fourth Estate, 784pp, £18.99

[See also: [Why Trump isn't a fascist](#)]

Lucy Hughes-Hallett is a cultural historian, biographer and novelist. Her most recent book is *Fabulous* (Fourth Estate)