

Mussolini's Roman Empire by Denis Mack Smith

(Viking; 288 pp.; \$12.95)

Anthony James Joes

Denis Mack Smith, perhaps the most distinguished British student of modern Italian history, has produced another well-written volume, this one on the foreign policy of Fascist Italy. He demonstrates the degree to which later fascism was debilitated by the techniques of its own propaganda, the essential amorality of Mussolini, and the absence of first-rate henchmen on whom the Duce could rely.

Striking is the complete absence of the ritual expressions of indignation that make many studies of European fascism so boring. The calm tenor of the writing serves to emphasize the increasing bankruptcy of the regime's foreign policy as it approached World War II. Equally refreshing, Smith stresses the importance of ideological and prestige considerations in shaping Fascist policy. This is in dramatic contrast to traditional pseudoexplanations of fascism as the tool of Monopoly Capital, whoever he is.

Despite these strong points, this picture of the dictator is deeply unsatisfying. Smith's Mussolini is constantly deluded by his own rhetoric, petulant and changeable as a child, almost an imbecile. There seems to be an underlying determination on Smith's part to prove (paraphrasing a famous slogan) that "Mussolini was always wrong." It is difficult to find in this portrait any hint of the politician who seized power in a major European country and held on to it for more than two decades; the man who won the admiration of Churchill, Hitler, Gandhi, Lenin, Shaw, Marconi, and Pius XI; the man who tamed the Socialists, conciliated the Church, opened the factories, drained the marshes—in short, made the trains run on time. Instead, we have the Mussolini of wartime propaganda films.

The key, I think, to Smith's failure to present a more realistic portrait of Mussolini (and a major weakness of the entire volume) is his distressing tendency to write history backwards. Mussolini's eventual alliance with Hitler looms over the book with choreographed inevitability, artificially coloring events that happened years before. For example, in 1934 Mussolini responded to Hitler's moves against Austria by sending Italian troops to the frontier. This dangerous bellicosity was successful, but Smith hardly alludes to it, and ignores the extent to which Mussolini was shaken by the apparent willingness of London and Paris to let him stand up to Hitler and defend the Treaty of Versailles all by himself ("I cannot always be the only one to march to the Brenner!"). Most important, there is little effort to convey to the reader the degree to which Mussolini was handed over to Hitler on an iron platter by the grotesque Anglo-French performance over the Ethiopian war.

Italy's ambitions for colonial expansion long antedated Mussolini's tenure of power. The massacre of Italian troops at Aduwa in 1896 had deeply seared Italian national self-confidence. The Treaty of London had indicated that Italy would receive colonial compensation at the end of the World War, but Italy's anticipated gains were gobbled up by the already declining British and French empires. By 1935 British leaders had apparently forgotten that colonial disappointments had once before turned the Italians toward Germany (the Triple Alliance), or failed to appreciate the folly of again wounding Italian pride in this sensitive area. Thus, Italy's long-planned invasion of Ethiopia was greeted by quite unexpected British attempts to organize League of Nations

"sanctions" against Italy, and by naval demonstrations in the Mediterranean. Even to the eyes of internal enemies of the Fascist regime like Croce and Albertini, Franco-British moralizing over Italian imperialism appeared as so much hypocritical posturing.

As a consequence, writes A.J.P. Taylor, the victorious Western alliance of 1918 "was gone beyond recall, Mussolini forced on to the German side. This outcome was unwelcome to him." The Franco-British exercise in schoolboy morality had turned into a demonstration of titanic irresponsibility. "By estranging Italy," growled Churchill, "they had upset the whole balance of Europe and gained nothing for Abyssinia." A result of all these blunderings was Mussolini's conviction that, in his post-Ethiopia isolation, he was no longer able to resist the *Anschluss*, which was consummated at last in 1938. Henceforth Italian foreign policy would be made in the knowledge that the Wehrmacht was within striking distance of Milan.

Not only are these enormous consequences of the Ethiopian affair downplayed, but Smith criticizes the Italians for not winning the war in half the time it actually took. That is, a country of twelve million, four times the area of Italy, a mountainous country quite without highways or bridges or even maps, should have been overrun in fifteen weeks. Mussolini was always wrong.

These regrettable lapses aside, Smith has provided us with numerous and intriguing insights and sidelights, both new and old. Among them:

—Mussolini, ever suspicious that Hitler really was a madman, remained reluctant to become involved in a military pact with Germany right up until 1939.

—Italo Balbo, perhaps the ablest and most attractive of the men around Mussolini, requested in 1932 that he be appointed coordinator of defense plans. Partly through Mussolini's jealousy he was turned down. Consequently, rivalry among the Italian armed forces was allowed to reach truly catastrophic proportions. The air force, for instance, encouraged Mussolini in his belief that Italy was "one big aircraft carrier." Thus the growth of a naval air arm was retarded, and its absence rendered the fleet cruelly vulnerable during the war.

—Although the Italian economy had

always been hobbled by lack of fuel, and although Libya had been a source of hydrocarbons from ancient times, there was little real effort to search for oil in that Italian colony.

—In 1940, the year Italy came into the war, Italian arms were being sold literally around the world, weapons that were sorely needed by the armed forces at home, so depleted after five years of campaigning in Ethiopia and Spain.

—Learning that the blitzkrieg was about to strike Holland and Belgium, Mussolini alerted the Brussels Government (which ignored him).

—There was never anything like total

mobilization for war under Mussolini. He wanted Italian life to be as little disrupted as possible. As a war leader he was not better than Asquith or Chamberlain, but there was no Parliament that could topple him in time to avert disaster.

One principal lesson above all emerges out of this spacious and leisurely book. It is the enormous price paid by a society that, in exchange for a presumed efficiency, sacrifices those institutions—a free press and a vigorous opposition—which alone can protect it from the arrogance, incompetence, and corruption of people in power.

diverse figures as Marx, Dewey, Hegel, Adorno, Milgram, Solzhenitsyn, Skinner, and Kristol. One doubts that so many subjects can be dealt with adequately in such short space, and one wonders whether Molnar (or any other scholar, for that matter) has the professional competence equal to so broad and all encompassing a task.

Even the title subject of the book, authority, seems to present Molnar with difficulties. Rather than offering a systematic treatment of the term Molnar barrages his reader with any number of possible conceptions. First we are told, authority is the mediating agent between man's desire to be free and his desire to be part of a group. Then authority is based on one's right and ability to enforce norms. But it is also exercised exclusively with the community's benefit in mind; it is "analogous to love." Yet authority is valid only insofar as "the community understands its *raison d'être*." On the other hand, the community cannot be too conscious of authority's role, for authority also "has a mysterious aura about it"; it is "transcendent." Nor, one is led to assume, can we pick and choose authorities. Authority presupposes a "rock bottom inequality" among human beings, a "natural hierarchy" that ordains "natural leaders" with the task of lording over the community. One way or the other the purpose of authority is ultimately rational, its substance eminently "moral." It is moral not only because it binds society together, but also, Molnar informs us mysteriously, because it trains man in the perception of "higher law," and, as "we are links in the transcendental order," leads us to the "fullness of our human vocation." All of these conceptions may be perfectly valid, but the fact that they are never systematically tied together makes it difficult for the reader to appreciate whatever arguments Molnar may want to introduce.

Lack of precision is not the only flaw in this account. *Authority and Its Enemies* suffers most from its central thesis, a perspective that is not so much incorrect as it is trivial. According to Molnar, the critical problem in modern America is the weakening currency of authority. Authority is not taken seriously. Its power has waned in the family, in the school, in the church, in the courts, in the workshop, in the army, and in the state. This decline in salience augurs

Authority and Its Enemies

by Thomas Molnar

(Arlington House: 142 pp.; \$7.95)

A. James McAdams

In the publishing world Arlington House is recognized as the principal mouthpiece of the American Right, an alternative outlet for those conservative intellectuals whose ideas, opinions, and tastes are not well received by the country's larger and more liberal publishing firms. In addition, Arlington House is unusual in that many of its books are not spontaneously submitted but are commissioned. A conservative scholar is contacted and asked to write a book-length analysis of a pressing social or political concern; in return he is guaranteed a substantial audience through the agencies of Arlington's Conservative Book Club. Arlington House publications are not necessarily of poor quality—Kevin Phillips's *Emerging Republican Majority*, a controversial but reasonably sophisticated study, is a case in point. Nor are its writers lacking in skill or expertise; many, in fact, would number among America's leading intellectuals. But even allowing for exceptions, the problem with Arlington House is that it often—too often—fails to get such writers at their best, and thus many of its books are simply breezy and unoriginal accounts geared to a captive audience that doesn't mind being fed the same old arguments over and over again. This is not the best way to make the case for American conservatism, and, as a con-

sequence, many conservative thinkers have sought to peddle their wares elsewhere. Others, however, have chosen to remain attached to the fold, to the benefit or detriment of their careers and talents.

If *Authority and Its Enemies* is any indication of its author's sympathies, Thomas Molnar is clearly such a hanger-on. This work, if we take the word of Conservative Book Club propaganda, is "must reading" for the traditionally minded. Molnar, we are told, "dares to lay it out straight"; his case is "compelling," his observations "piercing," and his prescriptions are "sure to stir debate." The descriptions could hardly be further from the fact. Molnar's case is dull, his observations predictable, and his prescriptions far from truly polemical. His argument simply never gets off the ground. He rambles on in an annoying stream of consciousness fashion, jumping from one subject to another without ever really moving to the heart of the issues under consideration, without ever really offering insights of substance and consequence. In just 142 short pages the reader is treated to Molnar's personal opinions on such a vast array of topics as politics, philosophy, ethics, genetics, religion, education, and aesthetics, and to his ad hominem appraisals of the works of such