

Essay: The Importance of the Roman Empire to Benito Mussolini

Introduction

Benito Mussolini, the dictator of fascist Italy from 1922 to 1943, sought to forge a new Italian empire through the ideals of nationalism, militarism, and a restoration of Italy's historical glory. Among the many sources of inspiration for his fascist vision, the Roman Empire played a central role. Mussolini viewed the Roman Empire as a model of strength, unity, and imperial power. He sought to revive the Roman Empire through his Fascist ideology which in turn would influence and broaden his political and military goals. By invoking the legacy of Rome, Mussolini hoped to cement Italy's dominance in the Mediterranean and position it as a global power. This essay explores the significance of the Roman Empire to Mussolini's political ideology, imperial ambitions, and cultural propaganda.

Mussolini's Fascist Ideology

At the heart of Mussolini's fascism was the idea of creating a powerful, unified, and militarized Italy. Fascism, with its emphasis on loyalty to the state, aggressive nationalism, and anti-communism, drew heavily from the ideals of ancient Rome. Mussolini admired the Roman Empire for its ability to unite a large amount of diverse people under a single banner and for its militaristic culture, which he saw as central to maintaining national strength. The Roman Empire symbolized what Mussolini envisioned for Italy: a unified nation-state with a dominant role in world affairs.

For Mussolini, the Roman Empire represented the pinnacle of Italian civilization. His political philosophy was rooted in the belief that Italy had a glorious past and that it was the duty of the fascist state to restore Italy to its rightful place in the world. This vision of revival was not merely about economic recovery or military strength; it was about resurrecting the greatness of Rome itself.¹ In Mussolini's eyes Rome was a city with the aura of destiny and history and is the capital of the new Italy and the seat of the Christian religion. It was the city that gave legislation to the world.

Reviving Roman Glory

One of Mussolini's major goals was to resurrect the legacy of the Roman Empire in modern Italy. He did not just want to restore the glory of Italy in terms of military might but also wanted to reconnect the nation to its ancient cultural roots. Mussolini's regime made extensive use of Roman symbols, from the eagle (a symbol of the Roman Empire) to the fasces, a bundle of rods that represented Roman authority. These symbols were widely used in propaganda to evoke the strength and unity of ancient Rome.²

Mussolini also sought to recreate the grandeur of ancient Rome through monumental architecture and public works.³ In the 1930s, he ordered the construction of grand buildings, roads, and cityscapes designed to evoke the majesty of Roman imperialism. The Roman Forum

¹ "Lauren Sapic the Use of Classicism in Fascist Italy's 'Roman Empire' the Use of Classicism in Fascist Italy's 'Roman Empire.'" n.d.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

in Rome, for example, was partly restored to serve as a powerful symbol of Italy's imperial aspirations. Mussolini believed that by constructing such symbols of Roman glory, he could instil a sense of national pride and solidarity in the Italian people.

The march on Rome

Seeing an opportunity for change, Mussolini founded the National Fascist Party in 1919, one year after the end of the war. This party marked the inception of the first fascist movement to date. Mussolini, at the heart of this movement, observed his country at a low point not seen for centuries, feeling a sense of disappointment when considering their illustrious ancestors and rich history. With these sentiments in mind, Mussolini, akin to Augustus before him, aspired to restore Italy to its former glory. He adeptly employed propaganda as a tool. The initial use of fascist propaganda was through a newspaper called "The People of Italy," which focused on militarism and Italian nationalism. Propaganda became central to disseminating the message of the National Fascist Party.⁴

The Mostra Augustea della Romanità illustrated how Mussolini utilized ancient Roman history in fascist propaganda, focusing on militarism and expansion. By referencing the Roman Empire, Mussolini aimed to quickly attract supporters by highlighting the achievements and societal structure of ancient Rome. The Roman Empire had expanded widely and pushed societal boundaries during its time. Augustus, being a significant emperor in terms of advancements, was particularly inspirational for Mussolini's movement. In 1922, Mussolini emulated Augustus's march on Rome by organising his own, leading to his election as leader of Italy. Mussolini viewed himself as a contemporary Augustus, seeking to transform Italy's fortunes.

The Roman Empire and Imperial Ambitions

Mussolini's vision extended beyond cultural restoration; it included military and territorial expansion. He envisioned the creation of a "New Roman Empire," which would dominate the Mediterranean region, just as the ancient Roman Empire had done. This imperialist ambition was evident in Mussolini's military campaigns, particularly the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and the efforts to expand Italian influence in the Balkans and North Africa.

Mussolini's actions were directly tied to his desire to restore Rome's imperial power. By invading Ethiopia, Mussolini sought to establish a new colonial empire that would rival those of Britain and France. This military aggression was framed as a continuation of the Roman Empire's expansion, as Mussolini promoted the idea of Italy as a civilizing force, bringing order and stability to "backward" territories, much as the Romans had once done.

Following Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and subsequent victory, leading to its colonization, Mussolini delivered one of his most notable speeches on May 9th, 1936. This speech highlighted his intent to revive the Roman Empire under his fascist regime.⁵ During the address, Mussolini declared the establishment of a new Italian Empire. This announcement was made

⁴ Scott, Kenneth. "Mussolini and the Roman Empire." *The Classical Journal* 27, no. 9 (1932): 645–57.

⁵ Lombardo, Ilaria. 2018. "Dossier for Critical Preservation and Re-Use of Casa Del Mutilato II. Interventions. 11 Decolonizing Architecture Advanced Course Palermo, 11. Mussolini Declared the Empire."

with considerable enthusiasm before a large crowd that had gathered in the streets below his balcony.

Throughout his speech he is quoted as saying:

“Italy has at last got her Empire, the Fascist Empire, which bears the indestructible signs of the determination and the power of the Roman Littorio, because this is the goal toward which, for fourteen years, the overflowing and disciplined energies of the young, sturdy generations of Italy were encouraged.”⁶

Cultural and Propaganda Uses

Mussolini skilfully used Roman imagery and ideas in his propaganda to cement his leadership and project his vision of a powerful Italy. The “Cult of the Duce,” which portrayed Mussolini as the modern equivalent of a Roman emperor, was central to this effort. Mussolini carefully cultivated an image of himself as a man of strength and action, drawing comparisons to figures such as Julius Caesar and Augustus.

Fascist propaganda emphasised the connection between Mussolini and the Roman emperors, with Mussolini often portrayed as a leader destined to restore Italy’s former glory. Statues of Mussolini in classical poses, references to the Roman military tradition, and speeches invoking the greatness of Rome were all tools used to create a narrative of Italy’s revival under fascist rule.⁷

When subsequently forming his new Empire, after colonising Ethiopia, Mussolini had to reiterated that this new Empire would be an Empire of peace because that is what Italy were striving for after the amidst of World War One. This propaganda technique is extremely efficient when threatening enemies coming from a far. The psychological impact of fear is a strong and uncontrollable and produces an idea of knowledge that reinforces the power and interacts with it.⁸ The occupation of the Ethiopian Empire had always been linked to that kind of power and had acted on creating a dominant narrative that excludes all the other existent narratives: in Italy’s interest, they wanted to civilise this Empire and in order to gain and bring peace. The consequences of the soldiers sent to fulfil this duty were just seen as collateral damage, necessary to pursue a greater cause.⁹

Conclusion

The Roman Empire was an essential component of Benito Mussolini’s vision for fascist Italy. By invoking Rome’s imperial legacy, Mussolini sought to establish a sense of national pride and unity, while also positioning Italy as a dominant Mediterranean power. His regime made

⁶ “Speech in Rome, May 9, 1936.” 2018. Blogspot.com. 2018.

⁷ Phone, Visiting address Georg Morgenstiernes hus Blindernveien 31 0371 OSLO Norway Mail address P. O. Box 1020 Blindern 0315 OSLO Norway, and fax. 2019. “Using Language as a Weapon: How Mussolini Used Latin to Link Fascism to the Mighty Roman Empire - Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas.” Www.hf.uio.no. 2019

⁸ Lombardo, Ilaria. 2018. “Dossier for Critical Preservation and Re-Use of Casa Del Mutilato II. Interventions. 11 Decolonizing Architecture Advanced Course Palermo, 11. Mussolini Declared the Empire.”

⁹ Ibid

extensive use of Roman symbols and propaganda to reinforce his leadership and legitimize his imperial ambitions. Furthermore, despite Mussolini's efforts, his attempt to recreate the power of ancient Rome ultimately failed. The Roman Empire's influence on Mussolini's regime was a contributing factor, having a lasting imprint on Italian culture and politics, shaping the legacy of fascism in the country, however, both Empires still had their fundamental differences, therefore influencing the Mussolini regime, it had a great impact, but then wanting to revive the glorious Roman Empire was going to be a difficult feat given their ideological differences and military superiority.

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