

Who are the War Criminals? George Orwell

On the face of it, Mussolini's collapse was a story straight out of Victorian melodrama. At long last Righteousness had triumphed, the wicked man was discomfited, the mills of God were doing their stuff. On second thoughts, however, this moral tale is less simple and less edifying. To begin with, what crime, if any, has Mussolini committed? In power politics there are no crimes, because there are no laws. And, on the other hand, is there any feature in Mussolini's internal régime that could be seriously objected to by any body of people likely to sit in judgement on him? For, as the author of this book (The Trial of Mussolini by 'Cassius') abundantly shows – and this in fact is the main purpose of the book – there is not one scoundrelism committed by Mussolini between 1922 and 1940 that has not been lauded to the skies by the very people who are now promising to bring him to trial.

For the purposes of his allegory 'Cassius' imagines Mussolini indicted before a British court, with the Attorney General as prosecutor. The list of charges is an impressive one, and the main facts – from the murder of Matteotti to the invasion of Greece, and from the destruction of the peasants' co-operatives to the bombing of Addis Ababa – are not denied. Concentration camps, broken treaties, rubber truncheons, castor oil – everything is admitted. The only troublesome question is: How can something that was praiseworthy at the time when you did it – ten years ago, say – suddenly become reprehensible now? Mussolini is allowed to call witnesses, both living and dead, and to show by their own printed words that from the very first the responsible leaders of British opinion have encouraged him in everything that he did. For instance, here is Lord Rothermere in 1928:

In his own country (Mussolini) was the antidote to a deadly poison. For the rest of Europe he has been a tonic which has done to all incalculable good. I can claim with sincere satisfaction to have been the first man in a position of public influence to put Mussolini's splendid achievement in its right light. ... He is the greatest figure of our age.

Here is Winston Churchill in 1927:

If I had been an Italian I am sure I should have been whole-heartedly with you in your triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism... (Italy) has provided the necessary antidote to the Russian poison. Hereafter no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means of protection against the cancerous growth of Bolshevism.

Here is Lord Mottistone in 1935:

I did not oppose (the Italian action in Abyssinia). I wanted to dispel the ridiculous illusion that it was a nice thing to sympathize with the underdog. ... I said it was a wicked thing to send arms or connive to send arms to these cruel, brutal Abyssinians and still to deny them to others who are playing an honourable part.

Here is Mr Duff Cooper in 1938:

Concerning the Abyssinian episode, the less said now the better. When old friends are reconciled after a quarrel, it is always dangerous for them to discuss its original causes.

Here is Mr Ward Price, of the Daily Mail, in 1932:

Ignorant and prejudiced people talk of Italian affairs as if that nation were subject to some tyranny which it would willingly throw off. With that rather morbid commiseration for fanatical minorities which is the rule with certain imperfectly informed sections of British public opinion, this country long shut its eyes to the magnificent work that the Fascist régime was doing. I have several times heard Mussolini himself express his gratitude to the Daily Mail as having been the first British newspaper to put his aims fairly before the world.

And so on, and so on. Hoare, Simon, Halifax, Neville Chamberlain, Austen Chamberlain, Hore-Belisha, Amery, Lord Lloyd and various others enter the witness-box, all of them ready to testify that, whether Mussolini was crushing the Italian trade unions, non-intervening in Spain, pouring mustard gas on the Abyssinians, throwing Arabs out of aeroplanes or building up a navy for use against Britain, the British Government and its official spokesmen supported him through thick and thin. We are shown Lady (Austen) Chamberlain shaking hands with Mussolini in 1924, Chamberlain and Halifax banqueting with him and toasting 'the Emperor of Abyssinia' in 1939, Lord Lloyd buttering up the Fascist régime in an official pamphlet as late as 1940. The net impression left by this part of the trial is quite simply that Mussolini is not guilty. Only later, when an Abyssinian, a Spaniard and an Italian anti-Fascist give their evidence, does the real case against him begin to appear.

Now, the book is a fanciful one, but this conclusion is realistic. It is immensely unlikely that the British Tories will ever put Mussolini on trial. There is nothing that they could accuse him of except his declaration of war in 1940. If the 'trial of war criminals' that some people enjoy dreaming about ever happens, it can only happen after revolutions in the Allied countries. But the whole notion of finding scapegoats, of blaming individuals, or parties, or nations for the calamities that have happened to us, raises other trains of thought, some of them rather disconcerting.

The history of British relations with Mussolini illustrated the structural weakness of a capitalist state. Granting that power politics are not moral, to attempt to buy Italy out of the Axis - and clearly this idea underlay British policy from 1934 onwards - was a natural strategic move. But it was not a move which Baldwin, Chamberlain and the rest of them were capable of carrying out. It could only have been done by being so strong that Mussolini would not dare to side with Hitler. This was impossible, because an economy ruled by the profit motive is simply not equal to rearming on a modern scale. Britain only began to arm when the Germans were in Calais. Before that, fairly large sums had, indeed, been voted for armaments, but they slid peaceably into the pockets of the shareholders and the weapons did not appear. Since they had no real intention of curtailing their own privileges, it was inevitable that the British ruling class should carry out every policy half-heartedly and blind themselves to the coming danger. But the moral collapse which this entailed was something new in British politics. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British politicians might be hypocritical, but hypocrisy implies a moral code. It was something new when Tory M.P.s cheered the news that British ships had been bombed by Italian aeroplanes, or when members of the House of Lords lent themselves to organized libel campaigns against the Basque children who had been brought here as refugees.

When one thinks of the lies and betrayals of those years, the cynical abandonment of one ally after another, the imbecile optimism of the Tory press, the flat refusal to believe that the dictators meant war, even when they shouted it from the house-tops, the inability of the moneyed class to see anything wrong whatever in concentration camps, ghettos, massacres and undeclared wars, one is driven to feel that moral decadence played its part as well as mere stupidity. By 1937 or thereabouts it was not possible to be in doubt about the nature of the Fascist régimes. But the lords of property had decided that Fascism was on their side and they were willing to swallow the most stinking evils so long as their property remained secure. In their clumsy way they were playing the game of Machiavelli, of 'political realism', of 'anything is right which advances the cause of the Party' - the Party in this case, of course, being the Conservative Party.

All this 'Cassius' brings out, but he does shirk its corollary. Throughout his book it is implied that only Tories are immoral. 'Yet there is still another England,' he says. 'This other England detested Fascism from the day of its birth... this was the England of the Left, the England of Labour.' True, but only part of the truth. The actual behaviour of the Left has been more honourable than its theories. It has fought against Fascism, but its representative thinkers have entered just as deeply as their opponents into the evil world of 'realism' and power politics.

'Realism' (it used to be called dishonesty) is part of the general political atmosphere of our time. It is a sign of the weakness of 'Cassius's position that one could compile a quite similar book entitled The Trial of Winston Churchill, or The Trial of Chiang Kai-shek, or even The Trial of Ramsay MacDonald. In each case you would find the leaders of the Left contradicting themselves almost as grossly as the Tory leader quoted by 'Cassius'. For the Left has also been willing to shut its eyes to a great deal and to accept some very doubtful allies. We laugh now to hear the Tories abusing Mussolini when they were flattering him five years ago, but who would have foretold in 1927 that the Left would one day take Chiang Kai-shek to its bosom? Who would have foretold just after the General Strike that ten years later Winston Churchill would be the darling of the Daily Worker? In the years 1935-9, when almost any ally against Fascism seemed acceptable, left-wingers found themselves praising Mustapha Kemal and then developing tenderness for Carol of Rumania.

Although it was in every way more pardonable, the attitude of the Left towards the Russian régime has been distinctly similar to the attitude of the Tories towards Fascism. There has been the same tendency to excuse almost anything 'because they're on our side'. It is all very well to talk about Lady Chamberlain photographed shaking hands with Mussolini; the photograph of Stalin shaking hands with Ribbentrop is much more recent. On the whole, the intellectuals of the Left defended the Russo-German Pact. It was 'realistic', like Chamberlain's appeasement policy, and with similar consequences. If there is a way out of the moral pigsty we are living in, the first step towards it is probably to grasp that 'realism' does not pay, and that to sell out your friends and sit rubbing your hands while they are destroyed is not the last word in political wisdom.

This fact is demonstrable in any city between Cardiff and Stalingrad, but not many people can see it. Meanwhile it is a pamphleteer's duty to attack the Right, but not to flatter the Left. It is partly because the Left have been too easily satisfied with themselves that they are where they are now.

Mussolini, in 'Cassius's' book, after calling his witnesses, enters the box himself. He sticks to his Machiavellian creed: Might is Right, vae victis! He is guilty of the only crime that matters, the crime of failure, and he admits that his adversaries have a right to kill him – but not, he insists, a right to blame him. Their conduct has been similar to his own, and their moral condemnations are all hypocrisy. But thereafter come the other three witnesses, the Abyssinian, the Spaniard and the Italian, who are morally upon a different plane, since they have never temporized with Fascism nor had a chance to play at power politics; and all three of them demand the death penalty.

Would they demand it in real life? Will any such thing ever happen? It is not very likely, even if the people who have a real right to try Mussolini should somehow get him into their hands. The Tories, of course, though they would shrink from a real inquest into the origins of the war, are not sorry to have the chance of pushing the whole blame onto a few notorious individuals like Mussolini and Hitler. In this way the Darlan-Badoglio manoeuvre is made easier. Mussolini is a good scapegoat while he is at large, though he would be an awkward one in captivity. But how about the common people? Would they kill their tyrants, in cold blood and with the forms of law if they had the chance?

It is a fact that there have been very few such executions in history. At the end of the last war an election was won partly on the slogan 'Hang the Kaiser', and yet if any such thing had been attempted the conscience of the nation would probably have revolted. When tyrants are put to death, it should be by their own subjects; those who are punished by a foreign authority, like Napoleon, are simply made into martyrs and legends.

What is important is not that these political gangsters should be made to suffer, but that they should be made to discredit themselves. Fortunately they do so in many cases, for to a surprising extent the war-lords in shining armour, the apostles of the martial virtues, tend not to die fighting when the time comes. History is full of ignominious getaways by the great and famous. Napoleon surrendered to the English in order to get protection from the Prussians, the Empress Eugénie fled in a hansom cab with an American dentist, Ludendorff resorted to blue spectacles, one of the more unprintable Roman emperors tried to escape assassination by locking himself in the lavatory, and during the early days of the Spanish Civil War one leading Fascist made his escape from Barcelona, with exquisite fitness, through a sewer.

It is some such exit that one would wish for Mussolini, and if he is left to himself perhaps he will achieve it. Possibly Hitler also. It used to be said of Hitler that when his time came he would never fly or surrender, but would perish in some operatic manner, by suicide at the very least. But that was when Hitler was successful; during the last year, since things began to go wrong, it is difficult to feel that he has behaved with dignity or courage. 'Cassius' ends his book with the judge's summing-up, and leaves the verdict open, seeming to invite a decision from his readers. Well, if it were left to me, my verdict on both Hitler and Mussolini would be: not death, unless it is inflicted in some hurried unspectacular way. If the Germans and Italians feel like giving them a summary court-martial and then a firing-squad, let them do it. Or better still, let the pair of them escape with a suitcaseful of bearer securities and settle down as the accredited bores of some Swiss pension. But no martyrizing, no St Helena business. And, above all, no solemn hypocritical 'trial of war criminals', with all the slow cruel pageantry

of the law, which after a lapse of time has so strange a way of focusing a romantic light on the accused and turning a scoundrel into a hero.

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