

Mussolini: Son of the Century - Benito Mussolini and the rise of Italian fascism

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Joe Wright's eight-part limited series *Mussolini: Son of the Century* (original title: *M. Il figlio del secolo*), adapted from Antonio Scurati's Premio Strega-winning novel, chronicles Benito Mussolini's rise to fascist dictator of Italy.

First released at the Venice Film Festival in fall 2024, the series has won wide praise and been watched by millions in Italy and elsewhere in Europe since it aired streaming early last year. The series is an ambitious, technically accomplished production, though not without shortcomings. Luca Marinelli's performance as Mussolini is its centerpiece.

Mussolini: Son of the Century begins on March 23, 1919, when Mussolini gathers war veterans, demobilized *arditi* (Italian special forces) and nationalists in Milan to found the *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento*. This marks the birth of *fascismo*, an ideology that has carried its Italian name all over the world.

The series ends with his January 3, 1925 parliamentary speech, in which Mussolini assumed "moral, political and historical responsibility" for the killing of socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti and buried what remained of parliamentary democracy. Wright charts the transformation of a marginal movement into a state apparatus: from the electoral disaster of 1919, when the Fascists won virtually no votes while the Socialist Party swept the polls, through Mussolini's alliance with the liberal politician Giovanni Giolitti, to the fraudulent elections of 1924 and the collapse of ruling-class opposition.

What the series does well it does quite well. Viewers feel the ferociously anti-working-class, anti-socialist and anti-communist nature of fascism. They encounter the human scum Mussolini mobilized. They see the impotence of official Italian socialism's feckless,

reformist leaders in the face of a gathering nightmare. They witness Italian capitalism—its owners, its monarch, its church and its military—ensure that a weak and politically isolated force would come to rule.

The similarities between Mussolini and Donald Trump—corpulent bodies and juttied-out chins spewing the same vomit—are intentional. At one point in the drama, Mussolini turns directly to the viewer and declares, "Make Italy great again."

Son of the Century arrives amid the far right's rapid growth. Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia, a party that descends directly from Mussolini, govern Italy. Nazism's heirs are winning elections in Germany. In the US, Trump wages war against the international working class, deporting immigrants, destroying democratic institutions and promising to annihilate entire civilizations. He aspires to be the 21st century Mussolini.

Artistic efforts that help people grasp, even if only partially—and feel—what fascism is and what it did are a contribution.

Wright's work has particular value for an American audience, where fascism is generally presented as "totalitarianism" no different than communism. The miseducated will at least walk away from *Mussolini: Son of the Century* with a new, and unsettling, impression. They will have questions and look for serious answers.

The series is particularly effective in demolishing the mythology surrounding the October 1922 March on Rome. Mussolini was not leading a triumphant revolutionary army. He remained in Milan having a near-breakdown, cowering in a room, anticipating his imminent demise and preparing to flee to Switzerland if King Victor Emmanuel III authorized the army to disperse the Blackshirts. The Fascist columns outside

Rome were—as the film depicts well—a few thousand poorly equipped, hungry men struggling through rain and mud. The Italian army could easily have swept aside the fascist bands. It stood down.

Power, we see, was not “seized” by Mussolini. It was handed to him. The Italian king—so short his feet did not reach the floor when seated on the throne—made him head of government. The liberal politicians facilitated his rise. Industrial interests provided enormous sums to his movement, with money passing directly from businessmen to the fascist squads. The Catholic Church played an instrumental role.

Italy’s reformist Socialists, to whom the working class turned for leadership, refused to call for Italy’s oppressed masses to defend themselves, much less take power and crush fascism. In *Mussolini: Son of the Century*, we see them sitting in parliament with drawn faces and red roses pinned to their lapels while workers are beaten and their homes torched. Socialist leader Matteotti, soon to be murdered, gives ferocious speeches that conclude with a lot of yelling about the defense of parliament—the institution in the process of handing the state to Mussolini. After exhausting himself with exhortations, Matteotti sits down, satisfied that he said what he wanted to.



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