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The Problem With Mussolini and His Trains

A closer look at the transportation achievements of an infamous authoritarian.

DAVID DUDLEY | [@dccdudley](#) | Nov 15, 2016 | [5 Comments](#)



Rail enthusiast Benito Mussolini, in 1943. (AP)

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“When you are trying to convince America that its new leader is not a fascist,” [New York Magazine’s Margaret Hartmann](#) and [Chas Danner](#) suggested recently, “it’s best not to make any [Mussolini references](#).”

Too late. That advice was directed at former Cincinnati mayor Ken Blackwell, a member of the Trump transition team. Blackwell just assured the [Wall Street Journal](#) that Reince Preibus, the RNC chair picked as White House chief of staff, would “utilize his personal connections with the speaker [Rep. Paul Ryan] and others, to make the trains run on time.”

Like other Italian Fascist-era coinages (turns out [“drain the swamp”](#) was a Mussolini thing, too), *Il Duce’s* timely trains are getting a workout these days. But, until recently, most Mussolini comparisons were being made by Trump opponents trying to remind American voters about the perils of embracing cartoonish autocrats. During the campaign, *Gawker* baited the GOP candidate into retweeting a Mussolini quote, and many others noted the [parallels between the two characters](#), often packaged with the president-elect’s [admiring comments about modern dictators](#). Now that sci-fi speculation about President Trump has broken into the real world, perhaps it’s time to finally confront the minor-but-enduring falsehood about Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and his punctual trains.

This myth last [got re-aired and re-debunked](#) when neo-Fascists joined Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia alliance and made Italy Great Again in 1994. And it persists despite the efforts of journalists at the time (and since). Here’s an exhaustive [accounting of rail-related references](#) from Mussolini’s many biographers, none of whom made much of trains. Perhaps the best evidence comes from 1950s TV host/proto-mythbuster [Bergen Evans](#), who assailed the “myth of fascist efficiency” in his 1954 book, *The Spoor of Spooks, and Other Nonsense*, based in part on his own first-hand experience.

The author was employed as a courier by the Franco-Belgique Tours Company in the summer of 1930, the height of Mussolini’s heyday,

when a fascist guard rode on every train, and is willing to make an affidavit to the effect that *most* Italian trains on which he travelled were not on schedule—or near it. There must be thousands who can support this attestation. It's a trifle, but it's worth nailing down.

But the full story is a little more complicated. The Italian rail network was indeed in sorry shape after World War I, and the rebuilding process that Mussolini took credit for was underway by the time he seized power in 1922. Some aspects of Italy's state-run railway system did receive massive investments under the Fascists. "They improved the lines that had a political meaning to them," says Ruth Ben-Ghiat, an NYU history professor and author of several books on Mussolini's regime (as well as [a recent *Atlantic* piece on the current president-elect](#)). That mostly meant the lines used by the elites and tourists in Northern Italy, where rolling stock was updated and new stations were built. This, she says, was part of Mussolini's campaign of "soft power," designed to impress foreign leaders and win over a skeptical public with showpiece projects that made good newsreel fodder.

As a former journalist, the Italian dictator understood mass media and propaganda, and admiring profiles of the charismatic strongman in the U.S. and U.K. press during the 1920s and early 1930s often dutifully repeated his boasts about Italy's sweeping modernization. "The story that Mussolini made the trains run on time arose in the late '20s and gained credence abroad mainly because of well-heeled British tourists who considered the hopelessly refractory Italians governable only by dictatorial means," wrote [Victoria de Grazia](#), a Columbia history professor, in *The New York Times* back in 1994. "His regime built magnificent central stations and upgraded the main lines on which businessmen, politicians and comfort-minded tourists sped between Milan and Rome."

These *direttissima* ("most direct") lines, construction of which began before World War I, were engineering marvels; when it opened in 1934, the 11.5-mile double-tracked tunnel through the Apennines between Bologna and Florence was the second-longest in the world. (Nearly 100 workers were killed during its construction.) But Il Duce's state-run railroads remained a mixed bag for most

working men and women. "The railroad workers' union was dissolved and nearly 50,000 employees were fired on political grounds," de Grazia wrote. "The toll for work accidents on heroic projects soared. As the *direttissimi* whizzed by on schedule, aged commuter locals filled with workers were shunted onto sidings."

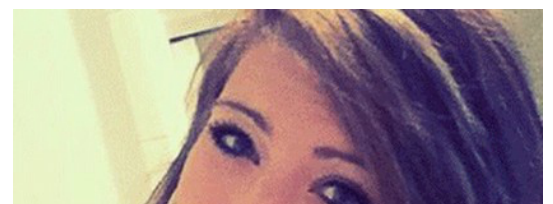
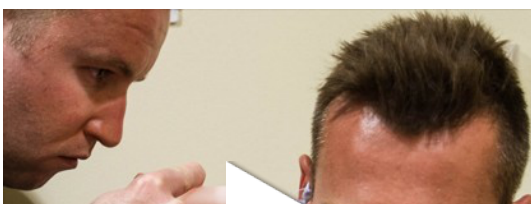
Mussolini's most historically significant transportation infrastructure project didn't involve trains at all: It was the *autostrada* he opened between Milan and Varese in 1924, which turned out to be a milestone of the nascent automobile age—the first real high-speed toll road designed exclusively for cars, and the predecessor to Germany's autobahns and our own interstate highway system.

As NYU's Ben-Ghiat says, transportation and mobility was a kind of fascist obsession in Italy; the regime also went on an airport-building tear and improved and extended a network of low-cost *dopolavoro* excursion trains for weekenders as part of [a national leisure organization](#) that was designed to keep the working class happily distracted (and indoctrinate their children). "People were on the move all the time for state-mandated activities," she says. "But it was controlled mobility. The trains were part of that." This mobility was also part of a strategy that de-emphasized cities, Ben-Ghiat says. Mussolini displaced hundreds of thousands of residents in dense urban areas, moving them to modernist suburbs or outlying shantytowns to make room for massive projects such as Rome's four-lane [Via Dell'Impero](#).

Ben-Ghiat, now an in-demand explainer of what America could be looking at with [its own "homegrown authoritarian,"](#) adds that the parallels between these two strongmen continue to follow a familiar pattern. Current chroniclers of President-elect Trump's rhetoric on [infrastructure](#) and urban issues, take note. "There's a template for authoritarian rule," she says. "So far, he's checking a lot of the boxes."

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