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The Dream of Power

BOOKS about the second world war are now so numerous, and public interest in them has become so faint, that it may seem a bad time to draw attention to a volume which takes us back to the years of violence. But history does not wait upon the moods of the contemporary reader, and there comes an occasional book which must break in upon our lighter interests. Elizabeth Wiskemann has written a study of the relations between Hitler and Mussolini* which should be read by everybody who wants to understand the events of our own time. Her task has been to obtain the facts and to assemble them in a narrative which both describes and explains. The facts stand out so clearly, against a murky background of diplomacy, that their meanings for the world grow upon us as we read. It is not a new thing for a madman to win control of a nation and to impose his monstrous fantasy upon the millions who live under his rule. Nor is it strange that a second and smaller dictator, not mad himself, but inordinately vain and greedy for power, should be drawn as a satellite within the political orbit of the Leader. These things have happened before. When we come upon them in history books we are inclined to see them as events which can occur only while human societies are weakly organised. They are so remote from us in time that we feel them to be remote from us in possibility. It is hard to believe that in the midst of our scientific knowledge we should still be children in politics. Stories of tyranny and barbarism seem to belong to an age when the civilised world lay within the frontiers of a single empire, or to the centuries of disturbance which came when the frontiers had been broken. Yet there may be nothing stranger than the story of Hitler and Mussolini in the pages of Gibbon. The remarkable fact is that they were permitted to do so much evil in a blundering and uneasy alliance. These two men were not fellow conspirators in a vast plot for the subjugation of mankind. It is true that both of them had dreams of glory; but the wildest dreams were Hitler's, and he moved from "intuition" to action in a flood of words which concealed the logic of a madman. German-Italian diplomacy was a strange mixture of bullying, servility, suspicion and opportunism: there was no careful or co-ordinated planning. Mussolini was fascinated by Hitler's ruthless and successful methods, and he wanted to be on the winning side. But the danger frightened him, so that even while he was being drawn closer to campaigns for which Italy had neither the will nor the resources he tried convulsively to be a peace-maker. The two dictators were never on equal terms, never in each other's confidence. Hitler repeatedly told Mussolini of his plans only when decisive action had already been taken. "It was by stimulating his lust for power and the fear of isolation," writes Miss Wiskemann, "that Hitler had subjugated Mussolini." There was no friendship or understanding. "While Mussolini was perplexed by Hitler, for Hitler Mussolini was simply a symbolic figure in Hitler's world of fantasy. . . ." The source of evil was in the disordered mind of the German leader. "With the madman's knowledge of how to excite, Hitler combined the madman's—or superman's—inability to communicate normally with others as individuals; he either mesmerised or frightened them or perhaps did both these things." This was the man who, in so far as any single man can use the circumstances of his time, pushed the world into war. The obvious lesson is that the world cannot be safe while it has political systems in which power is taken too far from the people. In the age of science we still have to learn how to be free.

*The Rome-Berlin Axis, by Elizabeth Wiskemann: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press. English price, 21/-.



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