

## REMEMBERING MUSSOLINI

*by Charles F. Delzell*

After meeting Benito Mussolini in Rome in 1927, Winston Churchill, then a Conservative member of Parliament, said that had he been an Italian, he would have "wholeheartedly" supported the Fascist leader's "triumphant struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism." In 1940, however, when he was prime minister of an embattled Britain, Churchill called the *Duce* a "jackal," and blamed this "one man alone" for dragging Italy into World War II and disaster.

There have been few, if any, dictators of the Right or Left in our century whose rise to power owed more to the myopia of democratic statesmen and plain citizens. Mussolini's fall from power was as dramatic as his ascent, and the Fascist era merits our reflections today.

Many younger Americans may think of Mussolini only as actor Jack Oakie portrayed him in Charlie Chaplin's classic 1940 film, *The Great Dictator*: a rotund, strutting clown, who struck pompous poses from his Roman balcony and tried to upstage Adolf Hitler when they first met, in Venice in 1934.

Yet the caricature should not blind us to history. Perhaps the most sobering aspect of Benito Mussolini's career was how much applause he once enjoyed from highly respected intellectuals, journalists, and politicians, abroad and at home. Exasperated by Italy's fragile, fractious parliamentary democracy, worried about increasing popular unrest, and fearful of the Socialists' rising popularity, statesmen such as the Liberal Party leader Giovanni Giolitti and King Victor Emmanuel III welcomed Mussolini's advent to power in 1922. And the King supported him during most of the 21 years that the *Duce* ruled in Rome.

Mussolini's strong-man appeal—and that of the Fascism he espoused—grew out of the postwar disorder and economic hardship which reigned in Italy and much of Europe. It also stemmed in some measure from the fact that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Italy had been governed by squabbling legislators. By 1883, the year Mussolini was born, the various kingdoms and duchies on the Italian peninsula had only recently been unified under Victor Emmanuel II, King of Sardinia-Piedmont. "The patriotism of the Italians," as the 19th-century Neapolitan historian Luigi Blanch has observed, "is the love of a single town, not of a country; it is the feeling of a tribe, not of a nation."

Indeed, Italy was heir to long-embedded regional differences; these were aggravated by poor transportation and great disparities in education, wealth, and class. During the early 20th century, the church was powerful almost everywhere. And every corner of the country had its



*The Duce at work in Palazzo Chigi, c. 1925. Mussolini disliked small talk and expressed a "physical repulsion" to human contact. "A leader can have no equals, no friends," he said, "and must give his confidence to no one."*

own traditions, customs, and dialect. The north-south contrasts were striking: At the turn of the century, for example, there were no primary schools in the south; in fact, nearly 80 percent of all southerners were illiterate. Many peasants lived in a kind of Third World poverty, subject to drought, malaria, and the vagaries of absentee landlords.

The nation was politically fragmented too. In rural Italy, especially in the central "Red" Romagna region where Mussolini was born, anarchist-socialist ideas had spread rapidly. By the 1890s, a Marxist brand of socialism won favor among workers in northern Italy's new "industrial triangle." By 1919 Italy's Socialist Party—"revolutionary" and "revisionist" factions—held more seats than any other single party (though still not a majority) in the Parliament, thanks to the introduction of universal manhood suffrage and proportional representation. The Roman Catholic Church, meanwhile, was at odds not only with the Socialists but also with the kingdom of Italy itself. The kingdom had annexed the papal states of Rome and central Italy between 1861 and 1870, prompting Pope Pius IX to proclaim himself a "prisoner of the Vatican."

In the eyes of his early Fascist supporters, Benito Mussolini was the man who was restoring order and establishing national unity.

His origins were no more auspicious than Hitler's or Stalin's. He

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was born on July 29, 1883, into a poor but politically active household. His father, Alessandro Mussolini, was a blacksmith and an anarchist-socialist who helped organize a local group of the Socialist International, and who read aloud parts of *Das Kapital* to his family. Benito's mother, Rosa, was a pious Catholic schoolteacher who insisted that the family speak high Italian, rather than the Romagna dialect. Benito lived with his parents and a younger brother and sister in two rooms on the second floor of a small, shabby building outside of Predappio, about 50 miles southeast of Bologna. Two pictures hung on a wall in the parents' bedroom: one of the Virgin Mary and one of the Italian nationalist and anticlerical agitator Giuseppe Garibaldi. The parents named their eldest son not after a saint but after Benito Juarez, the Mexican revolutionary who had helped overthrow Santa Anna's dictatorship in 1855.

In his youth, Benito was moody at home and a bully at the Catholic boarding school he attended in nearby Faenza. Indeed, he was expelled after stabbing a fellow student with a knife and assaulting a priest who tried to discipline him. Benito was, nevertheless, an academic achiever; in 1901 he got his diploma from another school, in Forlimpopoli, and later became a part-time school teacher. At age 19, Mussolini left Italy for Switzerland ("that republic of sausages"), partly to avoid compulsory military service. "I was a bohemian in those days," he later wrote. "I made my own rules and I did not keep even them."

### Changing Tunes

At first, Mussolini lived a vagabond's life in Switzerland—moving from town to town, doing odd jobs to survive, sometimes sleeping in public lavatories and parks. But the young man's interest soon turned to politics. In 1903 Mussolini took up residence in Bern; he began contributing articles to socialist journals, organized a strike of masons, and fought a (harmless) pistol duel with a fellow socialist.

After wandering through Switzerland, France, and Germany, Mussolini returned to Italy to do his military service. In 1909 he decided to move to Italian-speaking Trento in Austria-Hungary. There he edited a weekly socialist newspaper, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore* ("The Workers' Future"). Later, in Forlì, Italy, he edited another socialist weekly, *La Lotta di Classe* ("The Class Struggle"), and translated Pyotr Kropotkin's *Great French Revolution*. By 1910, displaying a natural talent, he was one of Italy's best-known socialist journalist-polemicists. That year he also began to live with Rachele Guidi, the 17-year-old daughter of a widow with whom Benito's father had lived after the death of his wife.

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Their civil marriage would not take place until 1915.

Mussolini's early commitment to socialism, or to any other *ism*, should not be taken too seriously, despite his passionate rhetoric. Mussolini would repeatedly demonstrate his willingness to change his political stance whenever it advanced his prospects. As a young man he read the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Sorel, and others. But he was mostly interested in ideas that he could appropriate for his own use. Like other Italian socialists, Mussolini at first condemned World War I as an "imperialist war." His country's involvement, he said, would constitute an "unpardonable crime." But after France's amazing survival at the Marne in September 1914, he reversed his position. In *Avanti!*, the Socialist Party newspaper that he then edited in Milan, he urged that Italy enter the conflict on the side of Britain and France. The Socialists promptly expelled him as a traitor.

### ***Fasci di Combattimento***

Now a maverick "national" socialist, Mussolini quickly founded his own newspaper in Milan, *Il Popolo d'Italia* ("The People of Italy"). The paper was financed, in part, by local industrialists. Slogans on the paper's masthead read: "Whoever has steel has bread" (from the French revolutionary Auguste Blanqui) and "The Revolution is an idea which has found bayonets!" (from Napoleon). When the government declared war on Austria-Hungary in May 1915, Mussolini hailed the event as "Italy's baptism as a great power" and "a culminating point in world history."

Mussolini's own role in the conflict—he was drafted in August 1915 and served in the Alps—would provide him with a lode of (mostly imaginary) stories about his heroics in combat. Never involved in any major battles, the young sergeant was injured on February 22, 1917, when a mortar accidentally exploded in his trench, spraying his backside with 44 pieces of shrapnel. After recovering, Mussolini returned to *Il Popolo*, where he pounded out fiery editorials in favor of the war effort and against bolshevism. He considered Lenin a "man of straw" and observed that "only a Tartar and Mongolian people could fall for such a program as his."

As time went on, Mussolini became increasingly nationalistic. Insisting upon Italy's "great imperial destiny," he demanded the annexation of the Austro-Hungarian territories where Italian was spoken, such as the port of Trieste, the Italian Tyrol, and most of Dalmatia. With strong business support, Mussolini changed the subtitle of *Il Popolo d'Italia* from "a socialist newspaper" to "the newspaper of combatants and producers." And in a speech in Rome in February 1918, Mussolini declared that Italy needed "a man who is ferocious and energetic enough to make a clean sweep, with the courage to punish without hesitation, particularly when the culprits are in high places."

Although Italy emerged as a victor in World War I, the conflict had

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wreaked havoc on Italian society. Some 650,000 soldiers had perished. Returning veterans swelled the ranks of the unemployed; nearly two million Italians found themselves out of work by the end of 1919. A wave of industrial strikes broke out in the north. Some workers, stirred by the news of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, urged a "dictatorship of the proletariat" for Italy. Meanwhile, in Rome, one feeble Liberal Party coalition government after another tried vainly to restore stability.

With the Great War at an end, and the fear of bolshevism widespread, Mussolini cast about for a new nationalist cause to lead. On March 23, 1919, he founded Italy's Fascist movement in a businessmen's club off Milan's Piazza San Sepolcro. His *Fasci di Combattimento* ("Fighting Fasces") took their name from the bundle of rods with protruding axe-blades that had been the symbol of authority and discipline in ancient Rome. About 120 people were present at the Milan meeting, including veterans of the *arditi*, a group of wartime shock troops. "We, the survivors who have returned," Mussolini wrote, "demand the right of governing Italy." The Fascists chose as their uniform the same black shirt Romagna laborers had favored.

Though Mussolini's Fascist movement was always anti-Marxist, anti-Liberal, and virulently nationalistic, it would endorse (and quickly drop) many causes. At first Mussolini called for a republic and universal suffrage, and criticized the Roman Catholic Church. Later, he would endorse the monarchy, render elections meaningless, and cozy up to the church. The Fascist movement attracted unemployed youths, frightened members of the bourgeoisie, industrialists, landowners, and, especially, war veterans who believed that Italy, at the 1919 Paris peace conference, had not gained all of the territories she was due.

"When I came back from the war," Italo Balbo, a noted Fascist, would later recall, "I, like so many others, hated politics and politicians, who, it seemed to me, had betrayed the hopes of the fighting men and had inflicted on Italy a shameful peace . . . Struggle, fight to return the country to Giolitti who had bartered every ideal? No. Better [to] deny everything, destroy everything in order to build everything up again from the bottom."

### Cudgels and Castor Oil

The Fascist movement's ability to straddle, however awkwardly, Italy's conventional political divisions between Right and Left proved to be one of its greatest initial strengths. During the "Fascism of the First Hour," Mussolini's program did not differ much from that of the Socialists, except that the Fascists had favored Italy's wartime role and still praised it. But when the Fascist movement failed to elect even one of its candidates to Parliament in the November 1919 election, Mussolini decided to shift to the Right.

To win more support from Catholics, he muted his anticlerical rhet-

oric and said that Rome should subsidize churches and religious schools. The Liberal government's decision to withdraw troops from Albania, which they had occupied since 1914, Mussolini said, represented a "disgusting exhibition of national cowardice." Above all, Mussolini intensified his anti-Socialist rhetoric and berated the Liberal government for "doing nothing" when, in September 1920, metal workers in the north forcibly occupied the factories and set up Soviet-style workers' councils. The Fascists, Mussolini promised, would restore "law and order."

Mussolini's message won over many employers, who believed that the Fascists could keep militant labor at bay. Bands of Fascist thugs, known as *squadristi*, launched "punitive expeditions" against Socialist and Catholic leagues of laborers and farmworkers. They beat some members with cudgels and forced castor oil down their throats. By official count, the Fascists destroyed 120 labor union offices and murdered 243 persons between January and May of 1921.

The ruling Liberals were happy to look the other way. Local police officers even supplied the Blackshirt militias with weapons. And when Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti called for new elections, to take place on May 15, 1921, he proposed to the Fascists that, following the election, they should join his constitutional bloc in Parliament. This time,



*Italian troops march through Rome, bound for Ethiopia, in October 1935. The British, Mussolini assured his countrymen, would not go to war to defend "an African country... without a trace of civilization."*

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Mussolini's Fascist Party would win 35 seats.

By 1922, Mussolini was impatient to seize power in what seemed more and more like a political vacuum. In October of that year, the Fascist Party held a congress in Naples, where Mussolini and his colleagues drew up plans for a "March on Rome." Under the plan, Fascist militias would lead the march while Mussolini prudently remained close to the Swiss border in case the attempted coup d'état failed. "Either we are allowed to govern," Mussolini warned in a speech to the Fascist militiamen, "or we will seize power by marching on Rome" to "take by the throat the miserable political class that governs us."

### Taking Power

The weak coalition government led by Luigi Facta knew that Mussolini was planning a coup, but at first the prime minister did not take the Fascists' intentions seriously. "I believe that the prospect of a March on Rome has faded away," Facta told the King. Nor were all of the Socialists eager to confront the Fascist threat. Indeed, some radical Marxists hoped that Mussolini's "reactionary buffoonery" would destroy both the Socialists and the Liberals, thus preparing the way for a genuine Communist revolution. For their part, the Liberals worried most about the Socialists, because of their anticapitalist ideology. Indeed, Liberals and Socialists were "as anxious to scuttle each other," as historian Denis Mack Smith has observed, "as to prevent a Fascist revolution."

The Fascists initiated the "March on Rome" on the night of October 27–28, 1922. The militias began taking over telephone exchanges and government offices. Luigi Facta wanted the King to declare a state of siege, but in the end no showdown occurred. Unconvinced that the army could or would defend Rome from the Fascists, or that the Liberals could provide effective leadership, Victor Emmanuel refused to sign a formal decree declaring a state of emergency. Instead, he telegraphed Mussolini, asking him to come to Rome to form a new government.

Boarding a train in Milan, Mussolini informed the stationmaster that he wanted to depart "exactly on time [because] from now on everything must function perfectly"—thereby giving rise to the myth that he made Italy's trains run on time. Upon his arrival in Rome, the *Duce* proceeded at once to the Palazzo del Quirinale. Still wearing a black shirt, he told the 53-year-old monarch (who had expected him to appear in formal dress): "I have come from the battlefield."

Thus, on October 31, 1922, at age 39, Mussolini became the youngest prime minister in Italy's short parliamentary history. With the Fascists holding only 35 seats in the 510-member Chamber of Deputies, he headed a cabinet of "national concentration" composed mostly of Liberals, socialist Democrats, and Catholic *Popolari*. In his first speech to the deputies, who gave him an overwhelming vote of confidence, he boasted: "I could have transformed this drab hall into a bivouac for my

squads . . . I could have formed a government exclusively of Fascists, but I chose not to, at least not for the present."

Despite the *Duce's* threats, many veteran politicians in Rome thought that, in time, they could co-opt Mussolini. Even Giovanni Giolitti and Antonio Salandra, the two senior members of the Liberal Party establishment, favored Mussolini's ascension to power. Luigi Albertini, the editor of Milan's *Corriere della Sera* voiced his delight that Fascism had, above all, "saved Italy from the danger of Socialism."

Others were pleased that, finally, Italy enjoyed strong leadership, of whatever kind. "The heart of Fascism is the love of Italy," observed the Liberal senator and philosopher Benedetto Croce in January 1924. "Fascism is overcoming the traditional indifference of Italians to politics . . . and I value so highly the cure which Italy is undergoing from it that I rather hope the patient will not get up too soon from his bed and risk some grave relapse."

In Britain, France, and the United States, many conservatives also gave their blessings. The *New York Tribune* remarked that "the Fascisti movement is—in essentials—a reaction against degeneration through socialistic internationalism. It is rough in its methods, but the aims which it professes are tonic." Even the *New York Times* suggested that Mussolini's coup was of a "peculiar and relatively harmless type."

### The Matteotti Crisis

Now at the center of power, Mussolini increasingly became a solitary figure. During his first five years in office, the *Duce* lived alone in a small rented apartment; his wife Rachele remained in Milan, where she cared for their five children. He lived austere, dined on vegetarian meals, and, partly to avoid irritating a gastric ulcer, eschewed alcohol and tobacco. (He once bragged of his "utter contempt for the lure of money.") An inveterate womanizer, Mussolini evinced little genuine affection for the opposite sex, or for people in general. "I have no friends," he once admitted to the German publicist Emil Ludwig, "first of all because of my temperament; secondly because of my views of human beings. That is why I avoid both intimacy and discussion."

Mussolini managed to project a more congenial image to the outside world. He contrived frequent "photo opportunities," posing at the controls of an airplane, grinning behind the wheel of a sports car, or taming a lion cub in its cage at the zoo. Many Americans saw him as an Italian Teddy Roosevelt—a stout-hearted advocate of the strenuous life.

But "image" was not enough. Eager to put more Fascists in Parliament, Mussolini called for an election, to take place on April 6, 1924. During the campaign and voting, the *squadristi* engaged in widespread intimidation. "When it is a matter of the Fatherland or of Fascism," Mussolini said on January 28, 1924, "we are ready to kill and die."

In the election, the Fascists claimed to have won 64.9 percent of



the votes. But on May 30, Giacomo Matteotti, the widely respected leader of the Unitary Socialist Party, courageously stood up in Parliament to read a list of incidents in which Blackshirts had threatened voters and tampered with the ballot boxes. Fascist deputies, now in the majority, taunted him, yelling "Hireling!", "Traitor!", "Demagogue!" Ten days later, Fascist toughs who were closely linked to Mussolini's press office kidnapped Matteotti near his home in Rome, stabbed him, and then half buried his corpse in a grove outside the capital.

The assassination precipitated the most serious crisis of Mussolini's early days in power. Many Italians, after all, believed that Mussolini had at least incited, if not ordered, the murder. The anti-Fascist opposition—Socialists, Catholic *Popolari*, Republicans, and Constitutional Democrats—boycotted the Parliament, forming the "Aventine Secession." It was time for the King, they believed, to dismiss Mussolini and call for new elections.

But the ever-timid King, who was weary of the governments of the past, refused to intervene. Nor did the Vatican support the oppositionists. Pope Pius XI himself warned Italians against "cooperation with evil" (i.e. the Socialists) for "whatever reason of public welfare."

In a fit of wishful thinking, many foreign commentators did not blame Mussolini for the murder. They preferred to cite certain "gang-



*The Duce and the Führer meet for the first time in Venice, June 1934. Afterward, Mussolini described Hitler as "a gramophone with just seven tunes and once he had finished playing them he started all over again."*

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ster elements" among the Fascists. "The Matteotti incident," lamented the *New York Times* "is of a kind that may kill a movement by depriving it at one stroke of its moral content."

In Rome, Mussolini taunted his hapless, divided opponents during a speech to Parliament:

But after all, gentlemen, what butterflies are we looking for under the arch of Titus? Well, I declare here before this assembly, before the Italian people, that I assume, I alone, the political, moral, historical responsibility for everything that has happened . . . .

By failing to oust Mussolini during the Matteotti crisis, his foes effectively entrenched the *Duce* as Italy's all-powerful leader.

On January 3, 1925, Mussolini launched a counter-offensive, announcing in an impassioned half-hour speech to Parliament that "force" was the "only solution" to the threat of disorder. Under a series of "exceptional decrees," Mussolini censored the press and outlawed all opposition parties, including the Socialists and Liberals. He replaced labor unions with Fascist syndicates. His Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State sentenced thousands of opposition activists (especially Communists and anarchists) either to long prison terms or to internal exile in the south. Youngsters were recruited by Fascist youth organizations—a future model for Germany's Hitler Youth—which stressed indoctrination and discipline, and exhorted them to "Believe! Obey! Fight!"

All the while, Mussolini continued to garner praise abroad. "Mussolini's dictatorship," observed the *Washington Post* in August 1926, "evidently appeals to the Italian people. They needed a leader, and having found him they gladly confer power upon him."

### Giving Italy Back to God

Mussolini called his regime the Totalitarian State: "Everything in the State, Nothing outside the State, Nothing Against the State!" But his "totalitarianism," harsh and noisy as it often was, was far less brutal than that of Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany—partly because the King retained control of the Italian Army and the right to dismiss the prime minister. Not until 1938 did the regime begin to discriminate against the nation's roughly 40,000 Jews; many would lose their jobs in government and academia. But Mussolini did not seek a "final solution" to Italy's "Jewish problem"—as the Germans did after they occupied northern Italy in September 1943.

On the economic front, Mussolini's "Corporative State" tried to foster "class conciliation." The regime set up parallel Fascist syndicates of employers and workers in various sectors of the economy. Labor courts settled disputes under a system of compulsory arbitration.

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In 1933, the regime established the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (IRI) as a holding company to shore up failing industries. State-subsidized (or "parastate") industrial organizations would soon furnish about 17 percent of all goods and services. To stimulate the economy, Mussolini built roads, sports stadiums, and government buildings. The government launched numerous programs for mothers and children and developed a land reclamation scheme, which was responsible for draining the Pontine Marshes near Rome. Mussolini initiated a much-publicized "battle for grain"; newsreel cameramen filmed him pitching straw, bare from the waist up. Perhaps most significantly, the *Duce* began an ill-fated effort to rebuild the nation's army, navy, and air force.

Despite Mussolini's promise to restore "the Augustan Empire," he generally failed to push Italy's backward economy forward. The regime's cartels sometimes hindered economic advance by discouraging innovation and modernization. The *Duce* demoralized workers by cutting wages, raising taxes, and banning strikes and other forms of protest. Even as the government took over industries and prepared for war, unemployment remained high. Fully half of those who did work were employed in agriculture. Italian families, meanwhile, were spending 50 percent of their incomes on food.

Mussolini, however, sought (and gained) amicable relations with the Catholic church by signing the Lateran Pacts with the Vatican in February 1929. The pacts created the State of Vatican City, within which the Pope would be sovereign. They established Roman Catholicism as Italy's state religion, bestowing on it extensive privileges and immunities. The *Duce's* star soared throughout the Catholic world; devout Italian peasants flocked to church to pray for the man who had "given back God to Italy and Italy to God." Ignoring the suppression of civil liberties, Pope Pius XI referred to Mussolini as "a man whom Providence has caused to meet us" and sprinkled him with holy water.

### Grabbing Ethiopia

By the late 1920s, the *Duce* had solidified support for his regime, both in Rome and abroad. Soon after entering the White House in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote that he was "deeply impressed" by this "admirable Italian gentleman," who seemed intent upon "restoring Italy and seeking to prevent general European trouble."

Indeed, until the mid-1930s, Mussolini stayed (for the most part) out of foreign ventures. But great nations, Mussolini believed, could not be content with achievements at home. "For Fascism," as he wrote in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932, "the growth of empire . . . is an essential manifestation of vitality, and its opposite a sign of decadence. Peoples which are rising, or rising again after a period of decadence, are always imperialist: any renunciation is a sign of decay and death."

Mussolini would become increasingly obsessed with foreign con-



*U.S. G.I.'s in Rome on June 5, 1944, the day after they liberated the Eternal City. Mussolini had begged Hitler to defend the capital—to no avail.*

quests after January 1933, when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany and soon won dictatorial powers. Although Mussolini and Hitler, as fellow Fascists, admired each other, their alliance would be marked by periodic fits of jealousy on the *Duce's* part. Hitler, as biographer Joachim C. Fest has written, "aroused in Mussolini an inferiority complex for which he thereafter tried to compensate more and more by posturings, imperial actions, or the invoking of a vanished past."

Mussolini's first major "imperial action" would occur in Africa. The *Duce* had long coveted Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, which an Italian army had failed to conquer in 1896. On the morning of October 2, 1935, as 100,000 troops began moving across the Eritrea-Ethiopia border, Mussolini announced that "A great hour in the history of our country has struck... forty million Italians, a sworn community, will not let themselves be robbed of their place in the sun!"

Paralyzed by economic depression and public antiwar sentiment, Britain's Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin refused to intervene, despite the inherent threat to British colonies in Africa. The League of Nations denounced the Fascist aggression. However, lacking any coherent leadership or U.S. support, the League stopped short of closing the Suez Canal or imposing an oil embargo on Italy. Either action, Mussolini said later, would have inflicted "an inconceivable disaster."

The barefooted Ethiopian levies were no match for Italy's Savoia

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bombers and mustard gas. The *Duce's* pilot son, Vittorio, told journalists in Africa that the Ethiopian soldiers, when hit from the air, "exploded like red roses." Addis Ababa fell in May 1936. With this victory, Mussolini reached the pinnacle of his popularity at home. Speaking to an enormous crowd from his Palazzo Venezia balcony, the *Duce* declared that his "triumph over 50 nations" meant the "reappearance of the Empire upon the fated hills of Rome." Signs everywhere proclaimed *Il Duce ha sempre ragione* ("The leader is always right").

Emboldened by his Ethiopian success, Mussolini began to intervene elsewhere. He dispatched aircraft and some 70,000 "volunteers" to help Generalissimo Francisco Franco's Falangist insurgents in the Spanish Civil War. He pulled Italy out of the League of Nations and decided to line up with Hitler's Germany, which had already quit the League. Thus, in June 1936, Mussolini's 33-year-old foreign minister and son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, negotiated the Rome-Berlin Axis, which was expanded into a full-fledged military alliance, the "Pact of Steel," in May 1939. Both countries also established links with Japan through the Anti-Comintern Pact. The *Duce* now belonged to what he called the "most formidable political and military combination that has ever existed."

### Humiliations in the Desert

Mussolini's military forces, however, could not be described as formidable. Lacking coal, iron, oil, and sufficient heavy industry, Italy's economy could not support a major war effort. The *Duce*, who spoke of "eight million bayonets," proved a better propagandist than military planner. On the eve of World War II, the Italian Army owned 1.3 million outdated rifles and even fewer bayonets; its tanks and artillery were obsolete. By June 1940, the Italian Navy boasted fast battleships and Western Europe's largest fleet of submarines. But it sadly lacked radar, echo-sounding equipment, and other new technologies. And Mussolini's admirals and generals were better known for their political loyalty than for professional competence.

When Hitler quickly annexed Austria in March 1938, and Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Mussolini complained to Count Ciano: "The Italians will laugh at me. Every time Hitler occupies a country, he sends me a message." The *Duce*, ignoring Catholic sensibilities, ordered the invasion of Albania on Good Friday, April 7, 1939, bringing that backward Adriatic country into his empire.

When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, thereby launching World War II, Mussolini knew that Italy was not ready to fight. He initially adopted a position of "non-belligerency." The list of needed war supplies that the *Duce* requested from Berlin, noted Count Ciano, "is long enough to kill a bull." But as Hitler's Blitzkrieg brought Denmark, Norway, the Low Countries, and France to their knees in 1940, Mussolini decided he had little to lose, and perhaps some spoils to gain.

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On June 10, 1940, without consulting either his cabinet or the Fascist Grand Council, Mussolini declared war on both France and Britain. In joining the conflict, Mussolini inadvertently let Hitler become the master of Italy's fate.

The Italian people soon felt the pain. The battlefield performance of Mussolini's armed forces reflected the homefront's lack of zeal. One debacle after another ensued. Under Field Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, Italy's much-touted armored brigades in Libya attacked the British in Egypt, hoping to capture the Suez Canal. But in the seesaw battles across the desert, as well as in naval engagements in the Mediterranean, the outnumbered British inflicted repeated humiliations on the Italians, who had to beg the Germans for help. By the end of 1941, the British had also shorn Mussolini of Italian Eritrea and Somalia, as well as Ethiopia, reinstating Haile Selassie as emperor.

### The King Says Good-bye

Italy's invasion of Greece, launched from Albania on October 28, 1940, did not fare much better. Saying he was "tired of acting as Hitler's tail-light," Mussolini launched the attack without notifying Berlin. The war against the Greeks, the *Duce* predicted, would be little more than a "military promenade." But the Italians were bogged down in the mountains for months, until Hitler's spring 1941 invasion of the Balkans rescued Mussolini's lackluster legions. And Italy's participation in Germany's 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union yielded few triumphs. Mussolini dispatched three infantry divisions and one cavalry division. At least half of the 240,000 Italian soldiers sent to the Eastern front never returned.

For Italy, the beginning of the end came on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into the war against the Axis powers. Although Mussolini seemed delighted to be fighting "a country of Negroes and Jews," he knew that his regime was now in deep trouble.

Across the Mediterranean, in November 1942, General Dwight Eisenhower put Allied forces ashore in Morocco and Algeria. He began a push to meet Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's British Eighth Army, which had already broken through Axis defenses at el-Alamein. The German *Afrika Korps* fought a tough delaying action. But when the North Africa campaign ended in May 1943, some 200,000 Italians had been taken prisoner; few had fought the Allies with much enthusiasm.

New bases in North Africa enabled Allied airmen to step up the bombing of Italian cities and rail centers, which left the nation's already hard-pressed economy in tatters. Tardily, the regime rationed food supplies and restricted the consumption of gas and coal. Despite wage and price controls, inflation soared, and a black market flourished. Ordinary Italians began to demonstrate their disaffection. In early 1943, public employees in Turin and Fiat workers in Milan went on strike. "In Italy,"

Mussolini would later write, “the moral repercussions of the American landing in Algiers were immediate and profound. Every enemy of Fascism promptly reared his ugly head . . . .”

By the time the Allies invaded Sicily on July 10, 1943, even those Italian politicians who had long enjoyed privileges and perquisites were fed up; plots were being hatched in Rome to oust Mussolini and turn over political power to King Victor Emmanuel. All this came to a head on the night of July 24–25, when the Fascist Grand Council met at the Palazzo Venezia to decide Mussolini’s fate. Some Fascist councillors criticized the shaken dictator to his face for being too indecisive; others berated him for not ridding the government of incompetents. Nothing was working, they said, and the Germans in Italy, coping with Anglo-American advances, regarded their sagging ally with contempt.

In a two-hour monologue, the *Duce* tried to defend himself, saying that “this is the moment to tighten the reins and to assume the necessary responsibility. I shall have no difficulty in replacing men, in turning the screw, in bringing forces to bear not yet engaged.” But the Council adopted a resolution, which had been supported by Count Ciano, calling upon the King to take over the leadership of the nation.

The next afternoon, Mussolini went to the King’s villa, hoping to bluff his way through the crisis. But the King had decided, at last, to



*Voting in Italy's first postwar parliamentary elections, in Rome on April 18, 1948: Italian-Americans wrote to their friends and relatives in Italy, urging them to reject the Communists in favor of Christian Democrats.*

separate himself from the Fascist regime. He quickly informed Mussolini that he had decided to set up a royal military government under the 71-year-old Army Marshal, Pietro Badoglio. "Then everything is finished," the *Duce* murmured. As the ex-dictator left the Villa Savoia, a *Carabiniere* officer motioned him into an ambulance, pretending this was necessary to avoid "a hostile crowd."

Mussolini was taken to a police barracks, unaware that he was under arrest. At 10:45 a government spokesman announced over the radio the formation of the new regime by the King and Badoglio. Jubilant crowds rushed into the streets to celebrate. But they were dismayed by Badoglio's statement that "the war continues"—a statement made to ward off German retaliation.

### Rescuing the Duce

Marshal Badoglio placed the former *Duce* under guard. Later, he was transferred to a ski resort atop Gran Sasso, the tallest peak in central Italy. He remained there for almost a fortnight, while the new regime secretly negotiated an armistice with the Allies. The armistice was announced on September 8—even as American and British troops landed against stiff German resistance at Salerno, near Naples.

Thereafter, events moved swiftly.

Anticipating Italy's about-face, Hitler had dispatched strong *Wehrmacht* reinforcements across the Alps; the Germans were able quickly to disarm and intern the badly confused Italian troops. Fearing capture, the King and Badoglio fled Rome before dawn on September 9 to join the Allied forces in the south. Six weeks later the Badoglio government, now installed in Brindisi, declared war on Germany.

On September 12, 1943, Captain Otto Skorzeny, leading 90 German commandos in eight gliders and a small plane, landed outside the mountaintop hotel on Gran Sasso where the sickly *Duce* was still being kept. Skorzeny's men brushed aside the Italian guards, and took Mussolini to Munich, where Hitler met him. Henceforth, the *Duce* would be one of Hitler's lackeys, a "brutal friendship" as Mussolini put it.

The *Führer* ordered Mussolini to head up the new pro-Nazi Italian Social Republic (RSI) at Salò, in German-occupied northern Italy. The Italian Fascists would help the Nazis deport, and later exterminate, over 8,000 Jews. From Munich, Mussolini appealed by radio to his "faithful Blackshirts" to renew Axis solidarity, and purge the "royalist betrayers" of the regime.

But few Italians willingly backed the "Salò Republic." Instead, most hoped for a swift Allied victory. A determined minority even joined the partisans—the armed anti-German and anti-Fascist resistance—in northern Italy. But Mussolini did manage to punish the "traitors of July 25." In Verona, a special Fascist tribunal put on trial Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Ciano, and others in his party who had voted for "the elimina-



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tion of its *Duce*." Rejecting the pleas of his daughter Edda, Mussolini decreed that Ciano and his co-conspirators be shot to death, and so they were, on January 11, 1944.

At last, in April 1945, the grinding Allied offensive, having reached northern Italy, overwhelmed the Germans, whose homeland was already collapsing under attack from East and West. At this point, Mussolini tried to save himself by negotiating with anti-Fascist resistance leaders in Milan. But when he learned that they insisted on an "unconditional surrender," he fled with several dozen companions to Lake Como, where he was joined by his mistress, Clara Petacci. From there, they planned an escape to Switzerland.

### *Per Necessità Familiare*

Unable to cross the border, Mussolini and his band decided to join a German truck convoy that was retreating toward Switzerland through the Italian Alps. But Italian partisans halted the convoy near Dongo. Ever the actor, Mussolini donned a German corporal's overcoat, a swastika-marked helmet, and dark glasses, and climbed into one of the trucks. But the partisans identified Mussolini, arrested him and his companions, and let the Germans proceed unmolested.

The next day, Walter Audisio, a Communist resistance chief from Milan, arrived, claiming he had orders to execute the *Duce* and 15 other Fascist fugitives. He summarily shot Mussolini and his mistress at the village of Giulino di Mezzegra on April 28. Their corpses were taken to Milan and strung up by the heels in Piazzale Loreto, where an infuriated mob repeatedly kicked and spat on the swinging cadavers.

Looking back on Mussolini's career, it might be said that he changed Italy more than he changed the Italians. Indeed, the *Duce* left behind a network of paved roads, reclamation projects, and a vast centralized bureaucracy. The IRI holding company and other para-state corporations that Mussolini founded still exist today; they account for the most inefficient 20 percent of the nation's economy.

But Mussolini convinced few Italians for long that Fascism was the wave of the future. To be sure, many had supported the *Duce* enthusiastically, especially from the time his regime signed the concordat with the Pope (1929) through the easy conquest of Ethiopia (1936). And a small neo-Fascist party, the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI), still wins roughly five percent of the popular vote in national elections today.

Most Italians quietly turned their backs on Mussolini once it became clear that he had engaged the nation in costly ventures that could not succeed. (More than 400,000 Italians lost their lives in World War II.) During the *Duce's* foolish expeditions against the Greeks, the British, and the Soviets, many Italians considered themselves to be "half-Fascists," who had taken out their Fascist Party membership cards only *per necessità familiare* (for the good of the family).

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On June 2, 1946, the first time that Italians got a chance to vote in a postwar election, they chose to oust the monarchy. They could not forgive King Victor Emmanuel for inviting Mussolini to take power, and for supporting the *Duce's* imperial ambitions—even if they forgave themselves. The voters elected a constituent assembly, which drafted a new constitution for the republic, providing for a prime minister, a bicameral parliament, and a system of 20 regional governments.

Mussolini and his ideology proved influential beyond Italy's borders. As the world's first and perhaps most popular Fascist leader, he provided the model for other aspiring authoritarian rulers in Europe and Latin America, who, for a time, would make fascism seem an attractive alternative to socialism, communism, or anarchy.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler called Mussolini's 1922 March on Rome "one of the turning points of history." The mere idea that such a march could be attempted, he said, "gave [Germany's National Socialists] an impetus." When Nazis did their outstretched arm salutes, or when Spanish Falangists cried "Franco! Franco! Franco!", they were mimicking their counterparts in Italy. Juan Perón, Argentina's president (1946–1955), echoed the sentiments of many another ambitious Latin strongman when he called Mussolini "the greatest man of our century."

Just before Mussolini came to power, Italians, like citizens of several troubled European societies after World War I, faced a choice—either muddling through disorder and economic disarray under often inept, yet essentially benevolent democratic regimes, or falling in line behind a decisive but brutal dictatorship. Italians chose the latter. They embraced the strong man's notions of a grand New Age. But Mussolini's intoxicating vision of Italy as a great power, they eventually discovered, was a disastrous delusion.

The Fascist era serves to remind Italians and others of something important: that national well-being may not come from charismatic leadership, revolutionary zeal, or military might. Indeed, Italy's peculiar greatness today may lie in its citizens' tolerance of regional and economic differences, in their ability to cope with the inefficiencies of democratic government, in their pragmatic acceptance of human foibles—and, most of all, in their appreciation of the rich texture of everyday life.