

# Benito Mussolini

In full BENITO AMILCARE ANDREA MUSSOLINI, byname IL DUCE (Italian:"The Leader") (b. July 29, 1883,Predappio, Italy--d. April 28, 1945, near Dongo), Italian prime minister (1922-43) and the first of 20th-century Europe's fascist dictators.

## Early life

Mussolini was the first child of the local blacksmith. In later years he expressed pride in his humble origins and often spoke of himself as a "man of the people." The Mussolini family was, in fact, less humble than he alleged--his father, a part-time socialist journalist as well as a blacksmith, was the son of a lieutenant in the National Guard, and his mother was a schoolteacher--but the Mussolinis were certainly poor. They lived in two crowded rooms on the second floor of a small, decrepit palazzo; and, because the blacksmith spent much of his time discussing politics in taverns and most of his money on his mistress, the meals that were eaten by his three children were often meagre.

Benito was a restless child who was disobedient, unruly, and aggressive. He was a bully at school and moody at home. Because the teachers at the village school could not control him, he was sent to board with the strict Salesian order at Faenza, where he proved himself more troublesome than ever, stabbing a fellow pupil with a penknife and attacking one of the Salesians who had attempted to beat him. He was expelled and sent to the Giosu? Carducci school at Forlimpopoli, from which he was also expelled after assaulting another pupil with his penknife.

He was also intelligent, and he passed his final examinations without difficulty. He obtained a teaching diploma and for a time worked as a schoolmaster but soon realized that he was totally unsuited for such work. At the age of 19, a short, pale young man with a powerful jaw and enormous, dark, piercing eyes, he left Italy for Switzerland with a nickel medallion of Karl Marx in his otherwise empty pockets. For the next few months, according to his own account, he lived from day to day, jumping from job to job.

At the same time, however, he was gaining a reputation as a young man of strange magnetism and remarkable rhetorical talents. He read widely and voraciously, if not deeply, plunging into the philosophers and theorists Immanuel Kant and Benedict de Spinoza, Peter Kropotkin and Friedrich Nietzsche, G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Kautsky, and Georges Sorel, picking out what appealed to him and discarding the rest, forming no coherent political philosophy of his own yet impressing his companions as a potential revolutionary of uncommon personality and striking presence. While earning a reputation as a political journalist and public speaker, he undertook propaganda for a trade union, proposing a strike and advocating violence as a means of enforcing demands. Repeatedly, he called for a day of vengeance; more than once he was arrested and imprisoned. When he returned to Italy in 1904, even the Roman newspapers had started to mention his name.

For some time after his return little was heard of him. He once more became a schoolmaster, this time in the Venetian Alps, north of Udine, where he lived, so he confessed, a life of "moral deterioration." But soon tiring of so wasteful a life, he returned to trade-union work, to journalism, and to extreme politics, which led yet again to arrest and imprisonment.

During a period of freedom in 1909 he fell in love with 16-year-old Rachele Guidi, the younger of the two daughters of his father's widowed mistress; she went to live with him in a damp, cramped apartment in Forl? and later married him. Soon after the marriage, Mussolini was imprisoned for the fifth time; but by then Comrade Mussolini had become recognised as one of the most gifted, and dangerous, of Italy's younger Socialists. After writing in a wide variety of Socialist papers, he founded a newspaper of his own, La Lotta di Classe ("The Class Struggle"). So successful was this paper that in 1912 he was appointed editor of the official Socialist newspaper, Avanti!, whose circulation he soon doubled; and as its anti-militarist, anti-nationalist, and anti-imperialist editor, he thunderously opposed Italy's intervention in World War I.

Soon, however, he changed his mind about intervention. Swayed by Karl Marx's aphorism that social revolution usually follows war, and persuaded that "the defeat of France would be a death-blow to liberty in Europe," he began writing articles and making speeches as violently in favour of war as previously he had condemned it. He resigned from *Avanti!* and was expelled from the Socialist Party. Financed by a publisher who favoured war against Austria, he assumed the editorship of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, in which he unequivocally stated his new philosophy: "From today onwards we are all Italians and nothing but Italians. Now that steel has met steel, one single cry comes from our hearts--Viva l'Italia!" It was the birth cry of Fascism. Mussolini went to fight in the war.

## **Rise to power**

Wounded while serving with the Bersaglieri (a corps of sharpshooters), he returned home a convinced anti-Socialist and a man with a sense of destiny. As early as February 1918, he was advocating the emergence of a dictator--"a man who is ruthless and energetic enough to make a clean sweep." Three months later, in a widely reported speech at Bologna, he hinted that he himself might prove to be such a man. The following year the nucleus of a party prepared to support his ambitious idea was formed in Milan. In an office in Piazza San Sepolcro about 200 assorted republicans and anarchists, syndicalists and discontented Socialists, restless revolutionaries and discharged soldiers met to discuss the establishment of a new force in Italian politics. Mussolini called this force a *Fasci di Combattimento*, a group of fighters bound together by ties as close as those that secured the fascinae of the lictors--the symbols of ancient Roman authority. So Fascism was created and its symbol devised.

At rallies--surrounded by supporters wearing black shirts, which the labourers of the Romagna had adopted as the uniform of the anarchists--Mussolini caught the imagination of the crowds. His physique was impressive, and his style of oratory, staccato and tautophonic, was superb. His attitudes were highly theatrical, his opinions were contradictory, his facts were often wrong, and his attacks were frequently malicious and misdirected; but his words were so dramatic, his metaphors so apt and striking, his vigorous, repetitive gestures so extraordinarily effective, that he rarely failed to impose his mood. (see also Index: Blackshirt)

In the summer of 1922 Mussolini's opportunity presented itself. To the dismay of the Italian people as a whole, a general strike was called. Mussolini declared that unless the government prevented the strike, the Fascists would. "Either the government will be given to us," he threatened at a gathering of 40,000 Fascists in Naples, "or we will seize it by marching on Rome." Responding to his oratory the assembled Fascists excitedly took up the cry, shouting in unison "Roma! Roma! Roma!" All appeared eager to march.

Later that day, Mussolini and other leading Fascists decided that in four days' time the Fascist militia would advance upon Rome in converging columns led by four leading party members later to be known as the *Quadrumviri*. Mussolini himself was not one of the four.

He was still hoping for a political compromise, and he refused to move before King Victor Emmanuel III summoned him in writing. Meanwhile, all over Italy the Fascists prepared for action, and the March on Rome began. Although it was a far less orderly affair than Fascist propaganda later suggested, it was sufficiently threatening to bring down the government. And the King, prepared to accept the Fascist alternative, dispatched the telegram for which Mussolini had been waiting.

## **Dictatorship**

Mussolini's obvious pride in his achievement at becoming (Oct. 31, 1922) the youngest prime minister in Italian history was not misplaced. He had certainly been aided by a favourable combination of circumstances, both political and economic; but his remarkable and sudden success owed quite as much to his own personality, to native instinct and shrewd calculation, to astute opportunism, and to his unique gifts as an agitator. Anxious to demonstrate that he was not merely the leader of Fascism but also the head of a united Italy, he presented to the King a list of ministers, a majority of whom

were not members of his party. He made it clear, however, that he intended to govern authoritatively. He obtained full dictatorial powers for a year; and in that year he pushed through a law that enabled the Fascists to secure a majority in the Chamber. The elections in 1924, though undoubtedly fraudulent, secured his personal power.

The Italian people welcomed his authority. They were tired of strikes and riots, responsive to the flamboyant techniques and medieval trappings of Fascism, and ready to submit to dictatorship, provided the national economy was stabilized and their country restored to its dignity. Mussolini seemed to them the one man capable of bringing order out of chaos. Soon order had been restored, the conditions of the workers had begun to improve, and ambitious programs of public works had been inaugurated; and he was accepted throughout Italy at his own evaluation as Italy's man of destiny.

Mussolini was hailed as a genius and a superman by public figures all over Europe and in the United States. His achievements were considered scarcely less than miraculous. He had transformed and reinvigorated his divided and demoralised country; he had carried out his social reforms and public works without losing the support of the industrialists and landowners; he had even succeeded in coming to terms with the papacy.

Mussolini might have remained a hero until his death had not his callous xenophobia and arrogance, his misapprehension of Italy's fundamental necessities, and his dreams of empire led him to look about for foreign conquest. His eye rested first upon Abyssinia, which, after 10 months of preparations, rumours, threats, and hesitations, Italy invaded in October 1935. Europe expressed its horror; but, having done so, did no more. Sanctions were imposed by the League of Nations; yet care was taken to ensure that the list of prohibited exports should not include any, such as oil, that might provoke a European war. Had he been faced with oil sanctions, Mussolini said, he would have had to withdraw from Abyssinia within a week. But he was faced with no such problem, and on the night of May 9, 1936, he was able to announce to an enormous, expectant crowd of about 400,000 people standing shoulder to shoulder around Piazza Venezia, in Rome, that "in the 14th year of the Fascist era" a great event had been accomplished: Italy had its empire.

Italy had also found a new ally. Intent upon his own ambitions in Austria, Adolf Hitler had actively encouraged Mussolini's African adventure, and, under Hitler's guidance, Germany had been the one powerful country in western Europe that had not turned against Mussolini. The way was now open for the Pact of Steel--a Rome-Berlin Axis and a brutal friendship between Hitler and Mussolini that was to ruin them both.

## **Role in World War II.**

While Mussolini understood that peace was essential to Italy's well-being, that a long war might prove disastrous, and that he must not "march blindly with the Germans," he was beset by fears that the Germans "might do good business cheaply" and that by not intervening he would lose his "part of the booty." His foreign secretary and son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, recorded that during a long, inconclusive discussion at the Palazzo Venezia, Mussolini at first agreed that Italy must not go to war, "then he said that honour compelled him to march with Germany."

Mussolini watched the progress of Hitler's war with bitterness and alarm, becoming more and more bellicose with each fresh German victory, while frequently expressing hope that the Germans would be slowed down, would meet with some reverse that would satisfy his personal envy and give Italy a breathing space. When Germany marched westward, however, and France seemed on the verge of collapse, Mussolini felt he could delay no longer. So, on June 10, 1940, the fateful declaration of war was made.

From the beginning the war went badly for Italy. France surrendered before there had been the opportunity for even a token victory, and Mussolini left for a meeting with Hitler, sadly aware, as Ciano put it, that his opinion had "only a consultative value." Indeed, from then on Mussolini was obliged to face the fact that he was the junior partner in the Axis alliance. Thenceforth, every time he

met Hitler throughout the war, the failure of Italian arms was uppermost in his mind and, he was forced to listen while Hitler talked at interminable length about past German victories and future German plans. To make his meetings with Hitler more intolerable, the Germans kept the details of their plans concealed, presenting their allies with a fait accompli for fear that prior discussion would destroy surprise. And thus such moves as the occupation of Romania and the later invasion of the Soviet Union were undertaken by Germany without any prior warning being given to Mussolini.

It was to "pay back Hitler in his own coin," as Mussolini openly admitted, that he decided to attack Greece through Albania without advising the Germans of his plans. The result was an extensive and ignominious defeat, and the Germans were forced unwillingly to extricate him from its consequences. Hitler also had to come to his ally's help in North Africa; and the Germans began to take precautions against the likelihood of an Italian collapse. When the Allies successfully invaded Sicily in July 1943, it was obvious that collapse was imminent.

For some time Italian Fascists and non-Fascists alike had been preparing Mussolini's downfall. On July 24, at a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council--the supreme constitutional authority of the state, which had not met once since the war began--a resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority in effect dismissing Mussolini from office. Disregarding the vote as a matter of little concern and refusing to admit that his minions could harm him, Mussolini appeared at his office the next morning as though nothing had happened. That afternoon, however, he was arrested by royal command on the steps of the Villa Savoia after an audience with the king.

Imprisoned first on the Island of Ponza, then on a remoter island off the coast of Sardinia, he was eventually transported to a hotel high on the Gran Sasso d'Italia in the Abruzzi Mountains, from which his rescue by the Germans was deemed impossible. Nevertheless, by crash-landing gliders on the slopes behind the hotel, German commandos on Sept. 12, 1943, effected his escape by air to Munich.

Rather than allow the Germans to occupy and govern Italy entirely in their own interests, Mussolini agreed to Hitler's suggestion that he establish a new republican Fascist government in the north and execute those members of the Grand Council, including his son-in-law, Ciano, who had dared to vote against him. But the Repubblica Sociale Italiana thus established at Salò was, as Mussolini himself grimly admitted to visitors, no more than a puppet government at the mercy of the German command. And there, living in dreams and "thinking only of history and how he would appear in it," as one of his ministers said, Mussolini awaited the inevitable end.

As German defenses in Italy collapsed and the Allies advanced rapidly northward, the Italian Communists of the partisan leadership determined upon Mussolini's execution. Rejecting the advice of various advisers, including the elder of his two surviving sons--his second son had been killed in the war--Mussolini refused to consider flying out of the country, and he made for the Valtellina, intending to make a final stand in the mountains; but only a handful of men could be found to follow him. He tried to cross the frontier disguised as a German soldier in a convoy of trucks retreating toward Innsbruck (in Austria). But he was recognized and, together with his mistress Claretta Petacci, who had insisted on remaining with him to the end, he was shot and killed. Their bodies were hung, head downward, in the Piazza Loreto in Milan.

Mussolini's death was greeted by the great mass of the Italian people without regret. He had lived beyond his time and had dragged his country into a disastrous war, which it was unwilling and unready to fight.