

Benito Mussolini's Rise and Fall to Power

Benito Mussolini had a large impact on World War II. He wasn't always a powerful dictator though. At first he was a school teacher and a socialist journalist. He later married Rachele Guide and had 5 children. He was the editor of the *Avanti*, which was a socialist party newspaper in Milan.

Benito Mussolini founded the *Fasci di Combattimento* on March of 1919. "This was a nationalistic, anti liberal, and anti socialist movement. This movement attracted mainly the lower middle class."¹ Fascism was spreading across Europe.

Mussolini was winning sympathy from King Victor Emmanuel III. Mussolini then threatened to march on Rome. This persuaded King Victor Emmanuel III to invite Mussolini to join a coalition, which strongly helped him gain more power.

Benito Mussolini brought Austria on Germany's side by a formal alliance. "In 1937, he accepted a German alliance. The name of this alliance was the Anti Comntern Pact. On April 13, 1937 Benito Mussolini annexed Albania. He then told the British ambassador that not even the bribe of France and North Africa would keep him neutral."² The British ambassador was appalled and dismayed. On May 28, 1937, Mussolini strongly gave thought to declaring war. He then attacked the Riviera across the Maritime. "On September 13, 1937 he opened an offensive into British-garrisoned Egypt from Libya."³

On October 4, 1937, while the offensive still seemed to promise success, Benito Mussolini met Adolf Hitler at the Brenner Pass, on their joint frontier. "The two of them discussed how the war in the Mediterranean, Britain's principal foothold outside its island base, might be turned to her decisive disadvantage. Hitler suggested to Mussolini that Spain might be coaxed on the axis side, thus giving Germany free use of the British Rock of Gibraltar, by offering Franco part of French North Africa, and that France might be persuaded to accept that concession by compensation with parts of British West Africa".⁴

Mussolini seemed enthusiastic and very understandable why this was the case, since this scheme included the gaining of Tunis, Corsica, and Nice (annexed by Napoleon III in 1860) from France. Hitler then hurried home to his house in Berlin to arrange visits to Franco and Petan. "Back in the capital Hitler created a letter to Stalin inviting Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, to visit early, when Germany and the U.S.S.R. might then agree among themselves how to profit from Britain not having a defense.

A week later, on October 20, he left in his command train, Amerika, to meet Petan and Franco. The meeting with Franco took place on October 23 at Hendaye on the Franco-Spanish frontier."⁵ It had become quite famous in the history of World War Two for Hitlers furious parting shot that he would "rather have three or four teeth extracted from than go through that again." Franco, who was greatly supported by his Prime Minister, Serrano Suner, stonewalled throughout the

hours towards negotiation with Franco. When his train left at two in the morning, Hitler had not advanced an inch towards co-belligerency with Franco.

Petan met Hitler on October 24, and proved to be equally unresponsive. Petan convinced Hitler that they had a meeting of minds. Petan had only agreed to a promise to consult his government, Hitler decided to make a bigger deal out of it and believed that they were united in a productive hostility to Britain.

Hitler now had the outlines, despite Francos struggle, of a larger coalition war to present to Molotov at his next visit.

"When Hitler was waiting for the Soviet Foreign minister to come, he was distracted by the weird behavior of Mussolini, who then chose to mount an attack from Albania (occupied by the Italian army in April 1939) into Greece."⁶ Mussolini said that he was motivated by the fear that the British would establish positions in Greece if he did not. "He had good strategic reasons for wishing to deny them naval and air bases any closer to his own along the Adriatic than those who already possessed in Egypt and Malta. He attacked Greece in October, 1937."⁷

Mussolini's participation in the Battle of France aroused the derision of neutrals and enemies. He was determined to win in Greece his share of the laurels which had fallen in a not proportionate number to the Wehrmacht.

The failure of Mussolini's invasion of Greece greatly upset Hitler as he waited Molotov's arrival. This not only messed up his scheme to change the Balkans into a satellite zone by peaceful diplomacy; it was also upsetting the Soviet Union. "On October 31, Britain occupied Crete and the Aegean Island of Lemnos with troops sent from Egypt. In the next few days they transferred air units to southern Greece, putting Romania's Ploesti oil fields, his main source of supply, in danger of bombing attack."⁸

The Panzer units Mussolini wanted would instead be used for communicating in Greece from positions inside Bulgaria, Germany's First World War ally, which Hitler was now trying to coax into the tripartite Pact, while Mussolini's army was left to manage its desert campaign against British as best it could. On June 24, 1938 Petain signed terms with Mussolini.

Benito Mussolini was Italy's dictator for 21 years. He had gone through a lot with the people of Italy. All in all they did not like Mussolini. During the mid summer of 1943 many many supporters turned on him with a great passion. Sicily was being overrun by Allied armies. Italys' economy went straight downhill from here.

The Grand Council of Fascist party, a rubber-stamp assembly that had not met for 3 and a half years, met to decide Mussolini's fate. With unexpected anger, Dino Grandi, a much respected council member shouted: "In this war, we already have a hundred thousand dead, and we have a hundred thousand mothers who cry: 'Mussolini has assassinated

my son!'...You have imposed a dictatorship on Italy that is historically immoral." After hours of heated debate, the party leaders in the early hours of July 25 voted 19-7 for a motion of no confidence in the aging dictator. On this very same day King Victor Emmanuel III divested Mussolini of his powers and then later arrested him.

"After his arrest, Mussolini was taken to a ski lodge on Gran Sasso d'Italia in the Apennine mountains about 75 miles north-west of Rome. The lodge was accessible only by a railroad and had been built so recently that it was not marked on military maps or on mountain climbers charts. But German intelligence agents under the direction of SS Captain Otto Skorzeny had learned of Mussolini's whereabouts, and at Hitler's direction a rescue mission was organized.

To determine how safe the landing will be, Skorzeny flew over the Gran Sasso at 15,000 feet in a Heinkel-111. Leaning out the window in a numbing 200-mile-an-hour wind, he took pictures while his friend held tightly to his legs. These pictures showed a spot where they could land their planes. When Skorzeny and his 90 men swept silently down on the lodge in 12 gliders, they discovered to their great dismay that the meadow had a rapid drop-off at its end. "It was much like the platform for a ski jump," Skorzeny later said. He ordered his pilot to make a "vertical landing" which tore open his flimsy glider but brought it to a halt in less than 30 yards.

Jumping from the plane, Skorzeny and his men swept past shocked guards and without firing a shot made their way to Mussolini. "I knew that my friend Adolf Hitler would not desert me," the old dictator said. Soon a small plane came into the meadow. When Skorzeny and Mussolini climbed in it, the pilot was shocked. With both men in it the plane would probably crash. Yet Skorzeny insisted that they go ahead. The plane bounced along the meadow, brushed off a rock and staggered over the edge of the plateau. It dropped through the thin air, but made it's way to Rome."9

From Rome, Mussolini was flown to Vienna and finally to Wolf's lair, Hitler's headquarters at Rastenburg in East Prussia. Hitler very much wanted to restore Mussolini's power. Yet Duce thought they should retire from the public life so as to avoid having Italy in the Civil War. Hitler was quite upset. He argued that only a strong fascist government in northern Italy could save the Italian people, and that Mussolini could lead such a regiment. Hitler was really upset because Mussolini showed no enthusiasm to wreak retaliation on the members of the Grand Council who had betrayed him-presumably because one of the traitors was his son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano.

After the meeting Hitler told his Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, of his frustration with Mussolini saying that the Duce, whom he had once greatly admired, seemed a far smaller man than before. Hitler and Mussolini discussed for three days, and the Fuhrer finally had his way. On September 15, Mussolini approached him and said, "I have come for my

instructions." The instructions were very harsh: A new Fascist republic would be established in Northern Italy under Mussolini, but the Germans would assume control of its foreign policy and many of its economic resources and would govern part of the country.

Also, all the members of the Grand Council that had voted against Mussolini would be tried and executed. On September 27, the Duce flew to Gargnano, north of Salo, to establish the headquarters of his new republic in German-occupied northern Italy.

As Hitler's puppet, Mussolini came to be called "the prisoner of Gargnano." German guards tapped his phone lines and watched his every move. "They are always there, like the spots of the leopard," Mussolini once said. His key appointments had to be approved by the Germans, and each Italian official was assigned a German adviser.

Mussolini tried to revitalize the army and to swell the ranks of his new social fascist party by promising better working and living conditions. But his time was running out: the people had deserted him, the Allies were penetrating deeper into Italy, and he was growing physically and mentally weaker.

"The people turning on him, and the king arresting him and taking away his powers destroyed Mussolini leading him to a morphine addiction." 10 This caused him to become too weak to work long hours, although he kept a light on at night in his empty office for show. His moods changed daily between outbursts of anger and periods of deep despair. He compared himself to Jesus and Napoleon, and blamed his failure on others-especially the Italian people. He proclaimed that the people of Italy were a "mediocre race of good-for-nothings only capable of singing and eating ice cream," and he expressed sickly happiness when Naples was bombed by the Allies.

He lived for almost two years after his arrest. He participated in a series of bizarre and humiliating experiences before finally coming to a gruesome end.

Mussolini died on a clear spring day in April 1945. Allies had moved into the northern part of Italy during the same month. Mussolini attempted to flee to Austria. Near the town of Dongo his truck convoy was ambushed by partisans. The Duce was dressed as a German soldier, in a greatcoat and steel helmet, but his expensive leather boots gave him away.

The partisans took him to a farmhouse. He was then joined by his mistress, Claretta Petacci. Claretta had begged to be reunited with Mussolini.

The next day the communist partisan drove both Claretta Petacci and Benito Mussolini to a nearby villa. He ordered the both of them out of the car and stuck a machine gun in their guilty as sin faces. This gun jammed but he got another one and quickly shot at Claretta Petacci and killed her instantly. Mussolini holding back the lapels of his jacket, said "Shoot me in the chest." The partisan shot him twice in the chest and

Mussolini was dead.

The morning after Mussolini and his mistress were slain, the partisans dumped their bodies in front of a garage in Milan's

Puzzle Laureate. A crowd gathered around; some people shouted foul language, others just stood there and laughed. One

woman fired a pistol at Mussolini five times to "avenge her five dead sons." Eventually, the two mutilated bodies were

strung upside down for everyone to see. For hours the crowd laughed and spit at Mussolini's body. On the following day

he was buried in the family tomb in Predappo.