

Benito Mussolini

Name

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Introduction

History is comprised of so many figures and personalities who have made their mark, both positively and negatively. Some people have made such a profound impact that their names become immemorial. Such is the case of Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator during the World War II. His domestic and foreign policies at a time of war and turmoil that followed made him a name worthy of history books, even if these paint him in a negative light. His fascist focus and how he utilized this to manipulate Italians and the world, conveying the message that Italy no longer relies on class warfare and everyone is on an equal footing, was both appalling and amazing at the same time. He used this untruth to make people rally around him, and once he got their support, he rose to absolute power. It was too late when people realized that he did not care about their plights and that his laws were mere to benefit the wealthy. Mussolini was eventually arrested, but this took a long time, and people struggled and suffered almost endlessly during this period. People up until now cannot forget two main factors behind Mussolini's political and military activities, within and outside the nation—his alliance with Hitler and the Nazi propaganda and his disregard for the sufferings of his people.

Disregarding His Own People for Foreign Expansion

Among all of Benito Mussolini's political and military activities, one issue is certain, and that has Mussolini advocated a strong foreign policy. In fact, while his early political goals were subject to a significant amount of vacillation, depending on the prevailing political climate, he always believed that Italy should pursue a strong foreign policy. For Mussolini, this meant that Italy should take an expansionist approach towards foreign politics. To make that possible, Mussolini increased the size of the Italian army from 175,000 to 275,000 men (Duggan, 2013). He needed a larger army because he wanted to expand into the rest of Europe. It is impossible to justify why Mussolini wanted to expand Italy, but even a cursory knowledge of Roman history reminds one that the Roman Empire was certainly Italy's golden age. One explanation can be that "Mussolini wanted to have a modern Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, one that can compete against the empire of the ancient Caesars" (Duggan, 2013).

He realized that an expansionist foreign policy was necessary to accomplish that goal because even when Italy entered a war as an ally to the winning side, its weak foreign policy reputation meant that it would not receive its promised reward of winning the war. Additionally, Italy was an

emerging country, and expansionist policies would allow it to acquire more land and access to raw materials to support its people as well as increase industrial activities. Furthermore, Nazi doctrines preached the superiority of the Italian race and its validity of claims to more territory (Duggan, 2013).

Most people were actually in favor of Mussolini's foreign expansion objectives. This can be understood by examining Italian history. Italy, as it is known today, only began to exist in 1870, when it was unified. Italy began with a constitutional monarchy that was patterned after Great Britain's. However, Italy failed in its endeavors to emulate Great Britain as a colonial power (Duggan, 2013). Part of this may have been because, by the late 1800s to early 1900s, the days of imperialism were coming to an end, or it may have been due to a failure of leadership in Italy. Regardless of the reason, Italy was unable to colonize Abyssinia. This situation was exacerbated by Italy's entrance into the First World War. Rather than gaining the large territorial settlement, it expected when entering into the war, Italy only received a portion of the territories it was promised when it decided to engage in the war. As a result, many Italians viewed their country as weak in foreign policy (Duggan, 2013).

Because of people's general dissatisfaction with Italy's foreign and domestic policies, many Italians gave their support to both the Socialist Party and the Catholic Popular Party, which substantially changed the structure of the Italian government. Furthermore, labor strikes in the country helped redistribute labor and wealth (Duggan, 2013). Despite those successes, the Socialists were unable to seize power in Italy. Thus, the Socialist Party split into factions, including the Communist Party. The Fascists, led by Mussolini, used the threat of the communist revolution to take over Italian politics. Mussolini had socialist political origins and had a history as a journalist, editor, and socialist agitator (Duggan, 2013). However, he did not adhere to the structure of socialism. On the contrary; he seemed to advocate the most popular ideas among the Italian workers. This inconsistency also made it difficult to determine Mussolini's foreign policy goals (Duggan, 2013). In fact, when Mussolini founded the Milan facio in March 1919, it had no clear-cut goals, except for a belief in action and a stated goal of strong foreign policy (Duggan, 2013). However, when Italy was driven from Fiume at the end of 1920, many Italians began to believe that Italy would have to develop a strong foreign policy. In 1921, Italian leader formed the National Fascist Party and began to quickly amass power in the Italian government. One of his methods was to tout his ideas about a strong foreign policy, which he was sure could provide national glory to Italy (Duggan, 2013). Soon, the Fascists, Socialists, and Communists were literally at war with laborers in different groups, declaring strikes and plunging the country

into domestic chaos. Mussolini seized that opportunity to march upon Rome and virtually forced the Italian King to name him the Prime Minister (Duggan, 2013).

While Mussolini focused on his expansion goals, he failed to create an efficient and popular domestic policy. His programs, aimed at improving financial conditions for average Italians resulted in a decrease in the Italian standard of living (Duggan, 2013). However, by the time his programs were revealed as failures, he had already accomplished a totalitarian takeover of the government. Dissent was not permitted. The secret police and other governmental organizations suppressed dissent among adults, and a government-controlled media strictly monitored what news Italians received (Duggan, 2013).

In 1934, Mussolini engaged in more direct attempts at expansionism. Abyssinia was next to the Italian colony of Somalia, in the African desert. In 1934, Italian soldiers attacked British and Abyssinian troops at Wal-Wal, in the preparation of an Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Duggan, 2013). The Abyssinian emperor appealed to the League of Nations for assistance. In July of 1935, the League of Nations banned arms sales to both Abyssinia and Italy, which harmed Abyssinia but not Italy, because Mussolini had supplied his army before beginning his attack on Abyssinia. In September of 1935, the League attempted to arbitrate the dispute between the countries; the arbitration would have awarded Italy some Abyssinian territory, once again capitulating to unprovoked aggression by Mussolini (Duggan, 2013). However, he refused the League's suggestions and, in October 1935, Italy attacked Abyssinia again; 100,000 Italian troops invaded the poor desert country with tanks, flamethrowers, and poison gas, and they also attacked civilians; the outmatched Abyssinians attempted to repel the troops with camels, war drums, and 12 planes (Goeschel, 2015). The League of Nations imposed nominal sanctions on Italy; however, Britain and France entered into a secret pact—the Hoare-Laval Pact—which would have given two-thirds of Abyssinia to Italy. By May of 1936, Mussolini had achieved his first real expansion of Italy; he had conquered Abyssinia (Duggan, 2013).

He continued his foreign policy success by supporting Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939. The Spanish Civil War began with a coup d'état attempt, which was supported by several far-right factions, including a fascist group. The rebel groups won and managed to overthrow Spain's previous government. Most significantly, Franco became the dictator of Spain at the beginning of the war. This meant that Spain was controlled by one of Mussolini's allies during World War II. This alliance was something that Spain respected for much of World War II. Spain was officially nonbelligerent during World War II,

which meant that it did not take an active role in the war. However, Spain provided significant material support, including military assistance, to the Axis powers. This alliance seems to have been strongly dependent upon the relationship between Franco and Mussolini, because Germany attempted to occupy the Iberian Peninsula, and Spain used its troops to prevent that occupation. Furthermore, Franco was one of the only European leaders to actively attempt to save Jewish lives once he became aware of the Holocaust, offering asylum for many Jews who fled from Germany and German-controlled countries (Diggins, 2015). Obviously, Franco and Mussolini had significant ideological differences, which kept Franco from allying himself with Hitler, yet he did not join the Allies in World War II. This can almost certainly be attributed to Mussolini's support of Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

Alliance with Hitler

In the late 1930s, Mussolini made the decision that Italy and Germany should rule Europe and that France and Britain were essentially finished as world powers (Farrell, 2003). That made Mussolini seek out an alliance with Germany, but he held back on a full alliance because he was concerned about the weaknesses in the Italian economy and military (Farrell, 2003). He knew that these had to be adjusted, to make sure he would not end up in a weak position and risk being taken over by the very country with which he was attempting to form an alliance. When World War II officially began, there were some negotiations to address. The French government was interested in attacking Italian forces in Libya, and Britain wanted Italy on its side against Germany (Farrell, 2003). That had been the case in World War I; however, Mussolini did not see it as being practical anymore. In June of 1940, Italy declared war on Britain and France (Farrell, 2003).

In 1941, Italy also declared war on the Soviet Union (Bosworth, 2002). A battalion of troops was sent there to fight. In negotiations with Hitler, Mussolini offered further troops, and Hitler accepted them so that they could continue fighting in the Soviet Union. The alliance between Germany and Italy was a vigorous and valuable one (Bosworth, 2002). There were many heavy losses for Italy in the war, and every time another loss would occur, Mussolini's strength would be more damaged in the eyes of the Italian people. The Eastern front was where the biggest losses were seen, putting Mussolini's power in jeopardy. (Bosworth, 2002). To improve things, he declared war on the United States in December 1941, just after the attack on Pearl Harbor

(Bosworth, 2002). By 1942, Italy had an untenable military position and too many defeats to keep going (Bosworth, 2002). Still, Mussolini persisted in remaining strong.

In 1943, Mussolini begged Hitler for help, because he feared an Allied invasion, and his military had been severely weakened (Moseley, 2004). Coalition forces attacked Sicily that same year, and it was not long before it was easy to see that the Italian military was about to collapse (Moseley, 2004). Mussolini was deeply shaken by distress already when his side was bombed by the Allies (Moseley, 2004). By that point, increasingly more members of Mussolini's government began turning against him. This included some of the most prominent members, as well (Moseley, 2004). A vote of 'No Confidence' was made against Mussolini; however, he continued to show up for work the next day, as if nothing had happened (Moseley, 2004). He did not see the Grand Council as an institute having enough power to remove him, so he did not take the No Confidence vote seriously (Moseley, 2004).

Later that same afternoon, King Victor Emmanuel III summoned Mussolini to his palace, where he removed him from power and replaced him with Pietro Badoglio (Moseley, 2004). When Mussolini left the palace, the King had him arrested (Moseley, 2004). There was no further resistance from Mussolini or his supporters when his downfall was announced on the radio (Moseley, 2004). Everyone knew it was over by that point, and there was nothing else that could be done. In April of 1945, when they were attempting to escape to Spain, Mussolini and his mistress were stopped by the Garibaldi Brigade (Moseley, 2004). They were taken into custody, and the next day they were shot, along with most those with whom they had been traveling (Moseley, 2004). Mussolini's body was dumped in Milan, and people were allowed to kick it and spit on it (Moseley, 2004). Then the body was hung upside down from the roof of a gas station, and civilians threw stones at it (Moseley, 2004). The country wanted to send a clear message to any remaining fascists.

Conclusion

Mussolini was a prominent and unforgettable dictator. He occupied a large part of Italian history, even though much of his influence on the world's events was very negative. His alliance with Hitler during World War II, and the efforts made to attack other countries during that time, eventually started turning his people against him. There were others who were already turning away from him because of the laws he passed that protected the rich and caused the poor to struggle. By the end of his political career, when even his strongest supporters were turning

their backs on him, he knew his reign was ending. The time he spent hiding after his removal from power, and before his capture and execution, were most likely the most peaceful times in his life. A deeply troubled man, he took those troubles out on the country he was pledged to care for, and it eventually resulted in his demise.

Mussolini's defeat in World War II and his subsequent death at the hands of Italian executioners seem to suggest that his foreign policy goals were unsuccessful. However, it is important to examine his entire political career to judge the success or failure of his foreign policy. Mussolini managed to expand Italy beyond the territorial boundaries that it had when he took office. Furthermore, he managed to negotiate several key alliances, which protected him from German aggression during World War II, enabled Germany to gear up for a war in Western Europe, and probably kept Spain from joining the Allies in World War II. These were not insignificant accomplishments and, thus, one must conclude that Mussolini was successful in accomplishing some of his foreign policy goals, even if those successes were short-lived and at the expense of the Italian citizens.

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