



# MUSSOLINI AND THE SALÒ REPUBLIC, 1943–1945

The Failure of a Puppet Regime

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H. JAMES BURGWIN  
WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY  
AMEDEO OSTI GUERRAZZI



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H. James Burgwyn

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With contribution by Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi

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H. James Burgwyn  
Department of History  
West Chester University  
Philadelphia, PA, USA

Italian and Italian American Studies

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*For Wife, Diana,  
Son, Ted, and Nephew Tony*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ACS	Archivio centrale dello Stato (Central State Archives)
ADAP	Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945 (German diplomatic documents)
AGRSI	Archivio gabinetto della repubblica sociale italiana (Archives of the Cabinet of the Italian Social Republic)
AOK	Armeeoberkommando Ligurien; Comando d'armata (Ligurian Army Command)
AP	Affari Politici (Political Affairs [Department])
ASMAE	Archivio storico del ministero degli affari esteri (Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
AUSSME	Archivio dell'ufficio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito. Fondo: Repubblica sociale italiana (Archive of the Historical Office of the Army General Staff, Italian Social Republic Collection)
b	busta
BN	Brigate nere (Italian Black Brigades)
CARS	Centro addestramento reparti speciali (Counterinsurgency Force at the Center for Special Training)
CCNN	Camicie nere (Blackshirts)
CLN	Comitato di liberazione nazionale (Committee of National Liberation)
CLNAI	Comitato di liberazione nazionale Alta Italia (Italian National Liberation Committee of Northern Italy)
COGU	Commando contro guariglia (Italian Anti-partisan Command and Units)

DDI	I documenti diplomatici italiani (1861–1965) (Italian diplomatic documents)
DIE	Direzione generale italiani all'estero (Directorate General for Italians Living Overseas)
ENR	Esercito nazionale repubblicano (National Republican Army)
f	fascicolo (file)
GABAP	Gabinetto armistizio-pace ministero degli affari esteri (Armistice and Peace Cabinet, Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
GAP	Gruppi d'azione patriottica (Italian Patriotic Action Groups [urban partisans])
GNR	Guardia nazionale repubblica (Italian National Republican Guard)
MAE	Ministero degli affari esteri (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
MSI	Movimento sociale italiana (Italian social movement)
MVSN	Milizia volontaria sicurezza nazionale (Voluntary Militia for National Security)
NAW	National Archives Washington (cited as microcopy, followed by reel number, and frame(s) only, sender and receiver, and date)
OB	Süd/West Oberbefehlshaber Süd/Südwest (German Commander in Chief South/Southwest; Kesselring's command before/from November 1943)
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces High Command)
OO	<i>Opera Omnia</i> (Benito Mussolini's <i>Collective Works</i> )
OVRA	Fascist Secret Police (the initials have no direct meaning)
PAI	Polizia dell'Africa italiana (Italian Africa Police)
PFR	Partito fascista repubblicano (Fascist Republican Party)
PNF	Partito nazionale fascista (National Fascist Party)
PR	Polizia repubblicana (Republican Police)
PS	Pubblica sicurezza (Public Security)
RAU	Reparto arditi ufficiali (Italian Special Forces Unit)
RSI	Repubblica sociale italiana (Italian Social Republic)
RuK	Rüstung und Kriegsproduktion; Armamento e produzione di guerra ([Reich Ministry for] Armaments and War Production)
SAI	Servizio assistenza internati Italiani in Germania (Service of Assistance Provided Italians Interned in Germany)

SD	Sicherheitsdienst (German Security Service)
SPD	Segreteria particolare del Duce (Private Secretariat of the Duce)
SS	Schutzstaffeln (Hitler's Elite Guard)
v	volume
X MAS	Decima flottiglia mas (10th Light Flotilla)



## CHAPTER 1

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# Historical Background of the Italian Social Republic

When the Fascist Grand Council dismissed Mussolini as Italy's duce and head of government and imprisoned him, it seemed that his public career had come to an inglorious end. But Hitler, in mid-September, arranged to have his old comrade rescued. Once Mussolini had arrived safely in Germany, the Führer, without too much difficulty, was able to prevail on him to become the Italian leader of a Third Reich-sponsored government. The Germans gave the newly risen Italian dictator a home in the little town of Salò on Lake Garda. His regime, which soon was to be called the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*—RSI, or, simply, the Salò Republic), constitutes the focus of this book. In narrating the history of the RSI, the author seeks to answer many questions. What were the character and outlook of the people who gave orders and lived under the regime? Did Mussolini play German puppet, puppeteer of Italians, or Fascist weather vane? Did the RSI boil down to a group of zealous Fascist putchists kept in place by their Nazi overlords, or did the regime enjoy popular support? Did the RSI in the name of Fascism carry out policies beyond universally accepted norms? By breaking down the various institutions of the RSI, and by analyzing the ideological beliefs and action of people inside the government and out, the book will endeavor to capture the essence of the Salò experiment.

\* \* \*

Ten months into the Great War that broke out in August 1914, the Triple Entente Powers—Great Britain, France, and Russia—had already suffered colossal fatalities in fiercely contested trench battles against the Dual Alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary. To turn the tide, they opened a spirited diplomatic offensive to induce neutral Italy to join their side. After hard bargaining they succeeded in prevailing on Rome to sign the Pact of London in May 1915. Italy would obtain vast lands at the expense of the enemy Habsburg and Ottoman empires at the end of the war. After enduring staggering losses in uphill climbs raked by deadly enemy fire, Italy ended on a high note with the victory at Vittoria Veneto in October 1918 against a starving Habsburg foe.

Since the Italian Peninsula emerged from the titanic struggle severely bloodied and economically destitute, the Italian delegation arrived at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 determined to exact full payment of all treaty rights, with Fiume tacked on, expecting the Western Powers to applaud the bravery of their victorious returning soldiers as they did their own.

But the Western Powers were primed to honor their treaty obligations to Italy just partially, and they offered only derision for their former ally's military performance. Taking cover under the moralizing American president Woodrow Wilson, who introduced the principle of national self-determination of peoples into diplomatic parley, Britain and France denied Italy much of what had been promised. Instead of providing Italy unchallenged mastery of the Adriatic secured by fulfillment of *Italia irredenta*, the Great Powers agreed to annex the lion's share of large areas in the Julian Alps and Dalmatia to the slapped-together polyglot Yugoslav state. And, for the most part, Italy was shut out from imperial gain at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, thanks mainly to the appearance of Mustafa Kemal in a revitalized Turkey.

Having emerged from the Paris Peace Conference sensing that the Allies had unjustly mangled the "sacred" London Pact of 1915, the poet Laureate Gabriele D'Annunzio coined the phrase "mutilated victory," which immediately caught fire on the Italian street. Ungrateful allies had poured scorn on Italy instead of acknowledging the country's magnificent sacrifices by a summons to join Europe's privileged circle of imperialist powers as an equal. The "mutilated victory" was a powerful myth, the equal of the notorious German postwar *Dolchstoß* (stab in the back), which propelled the rise of the ultra-nationalist movements in both Italy and Germany in the 1920s.

Mussolini exploited this fury by ginning up the call for revenge. In propagating the term mutilated victory, he prepared to switch his allegiance from the winners to the losers in World War I. There were, however, two major problems: Italy had come out of the war prostrate, and “revisionism” (revision of boundaries that had been delineated at the Paris Peace Conference) was a two-edged sword. Applied across the board, Germany would have been able to claim the South Tyrol, the southern part of the fallen Habsburg Empire that contained large numbers of German-speaking people. Since this territory had been handed to Italy, it represented a violation of the nationality principle, which provided Germany a tailor-made bone to pick with its southern Alpine neighbor. Mussolini knew that he did not have the military wherewithal to conduct a selective revisionist policy straight away.

Since Mussolini was unable alone to challenge the Western powers that were upholding the provisions of the Paris Peace Conference, he hoped to gather in allies by winning over the defeated nations—Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria—under the banner of revisionism. Since they, too, chafed at the punitive treatment the Allies had dealt them at the Paris Peace Conference, they were ripe for taking up the Duce’s overtures. France and their Little Entente partners moved quickly to thwart Mussolini’s aim of stirring up instability to enable Italian penetration in the Danubian areas and the Balkans.

But carving out spheres of influence in Eastern Europe did not stand alone for, since coming into power, Mussolini had contemplated an overseas empire. Italy would replace Britain as master of the Mediterranean and undertake a new wave of conquests in Africa. Once again, however, the Western Powers stood in his way. Since Mussolini had despaired of cajoling or intimidating them into sharing imperialist real estate, he would take what he wanted by guile or by force. Ethiopia already lay in his sights.

During the mid twenties, when the Duce saw fit to tone down his warlike rants, his favorable ratings rose in Britain. Winston Churchill praised him for having brought Communism to heel. Better yet, he was celebrated in London as a “good European.”

But exchanging toasts at formal dinners with stiff-necked diplomats had its limits. If Mussolini had momentarily to eschew the use of force in aggressively supporting the dissatisfied powers, he would provide underhanded delivery of weaponry and finances to terrorist organizations located in the resentful defeated countries of Eastern Europe that shared his revisionist impulses. The Austrian Heimwehr, terrorist groups in Yugoslavia, and the

Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization in Bulgaria benefited from Italy's largess in their efforts to overthrow their own hated governments that were, not coincidentally, hostile to Fascist Italy.

When Hitler rose to power in January 1933, it appeared that the Duce would be able to progress from subversion to visible deeds through alignment with the kindred regime of the Third Reich against Italy's erstwhile and "decadent" allies of World War I, France and England. Although Mussolini recognized the peril to Italy of a runaway Nazi German *Drang nach Osten*, the expansionist impulse caused him to throw caution to the winds, given that his "apprentice," Hitler, ruled the Third Reich as the powerful leader of a kindred regime. Throughout the thirties the idea of the Axis grew from cooperative, if separate, intervention in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the dictator Francisco Franco to the actual signing of the Pact of Steel in May 1939.

When Germany launched aggression against Poland the following September, Mussolini held back, aware that Italy was nowhere near ready for war and that the country's coastline was acutely vulnerable to attacks by the Royal Navy. Hardly needing Italian military assistance, the Panzers knifed through Allied defenses in northern France, which caused members of the government in Paris either to leave town or raise the white flag, while the besieged and pummeled British force hastened away from the Dunkirk beachheads to fight another day. With France on her knees, Mussolini deemed the time ripe for fulfilling Fascist Italy's imperialist destiny by joining the Third Reich in a predicted imminent and easy victory. That was not to be. Poorly prepared, Italy was in no position to initiate military operations anywhere, and the Duce's fumbling leadership did not address the obstacles he faced. In spite of his country's woeful military state, Mussolini sallied forth to attack France on 10 June 1940. Britain's turn came next in North Africa and Greece. Participation in Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union loomed on the horizon. But Italy suffered humiliating setbacks and losses everywhere on land and on the high seas. Still, the Duce persevered. After having been battered on one front, he would hurl troops into another, and then another, until bogged down or in retreat everywhere, which reduced the country from a supposed equal partner in the Axis fighting a "parallel" war to Germany's military subaltern. Incapable of learning from his mistakes, Mussolini threw away the lives of his soldiers and his country's resources in wars that had little to do with Realpolitik or national interests.



Whatever the obstacles, Mussolini was adamant in pursuing a “New Mediterranean World,” a euphemism for imperial penal colonies of oppression and economic plunder.<sup>1</sup> This was, however, a job that could only be completed under cover of Hitler. In Mussolini’s incomplete empire, the indigenous peoples whom the Italians had conquered were reduced to servitude. There was only one escape hatch for them: a willingness to become exemplary Italians through assimilation, but that was no sure bet for equal citizenship. The vast majority refused to give up their own culture and way of life and endured grueling hardships for their intransigence.

At the beginning of 1943 Italy began to slip into a tailspin and veered close to collapse. When Tunisia fell to the Allies on 13 May 1943, Mussolini’s game was up. Conspirators who before had lurked in the shadows began to hatch plots openly against the regime. A worse military disaster soon befell Italy: the massive and relatively unopposed Allied invasion of Sicily on 10 July. The military elites, along with the House of Savoy, joined together in searching for a way out of a situation that was clearly carrying them into a disaster.<sup>2</sup> On the hot seat, Mussolini acted as if paralyzed. Fearing German reprisal, he recoiled from broaching the idea of an Italian departure from the war with the Führer. To head off mounting discontent in his own party, Mussolini summoned the Fascist Grand Council on the night of 24 July 1943 to reimpose discipline. The Duce was in for a surprise, for the Council, after many stormy hours of debate, passed a motion of no-confidence in his leadership by a vote of nineteen to eight with one abstention. King Victor Emmanuel III was called upon to resume his full constitutional powers. Shortly thereafter, the king, in his royal suites, informed a startled Mussolini that he was no longer head of state. As the former duce departed, he was arrested by the Carabinieri and whisked off to confinement in an escorted ambulance. The government was handed over to Marshal Pietro Badoglio, a prominent leader in the king’s court circles, who set up a military junta to run the country. The Fascist monopoly on patriotism and Mussolini’s primacy in the regime were broken, his reputation as empire builder in ruins.

To uphold public order, Army Chief of Staff General Mario Roatta declared that any popular demonstration organized against the Fascist

<sup>1</sup> Davide Rodogno has most effectively made his point in his *Fascism’s European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> On the Italian efforts to reach an accord with the Allies, see Elena Aga Rossi, *A Nation Collapses. The Italian Surrender of September 1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

regime would be broken up: “Whatever pity is shown during a repression is a crime ... A little bloodshed initially will save rivers of blood later ... [one must] aggressively shoot and strike as in combat.”<sup>3</sup> But nothing could stop euphoric Italians from spilling into the streets, celebrating the demise of the regime by toppling busts of the Duce, slashing billboards, and mocking Fascist platitudes. This outburst of frenzy discouraged Mussolini’s supporters, even the Blackshirts, from lifting a finger.<sup>4</sup> Frightened by the chaos, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, the Duce’s successor, immediately declared a state of siege, leaving many of the former Fascist laws on the books. Drawn mainly from the Fascist regime, Italy’s new military and political leaders, hounded by fears of revolution, aimed to uphold the existing conservative and monarchical political order. Under no circumstances would such a government and administration ever call on the people to take up arms to drive the Germans from Italian soil. And no populist tribune would be permitted to declare “*Patrie en danger*” against the Teutonic menace. Instead, Badoglio, from the moment he took office, placated the Germans by telling the Italian people: “The war continues. Italy will remain faithful to its word.”

In hanging on to the Third Reich, Badoglio, caustically described as the “*marchese di Caporetto*” for stealing away from the battlefield during the great Habsburg offensive of October 1917, behaved no better than Marshal Pétain in France, for both acted like textbook collaborators. The public felt rudderless while the Allies got angrier by the minute over Italy’s botched maneuvers. But no one in Berlin was fooled.

The earthshaking events that followed dashed Italian hopes. Behind the scenes Badoglio and his new team engaged in a flurry of badly coordinated negotiations with the Allies aimed at cutting a deal for a change of sides. But in unabated fear of the Germans, Badoglio publicly left the impression that Italy was still partnered with the Axis in war against the Allies by participating in a series of high-level talks with cheerless Wehrmacht generals. Believing not one Italian word, a vindictive Hitler and the resourceful Wehrmacht hastened plans to sweep over the Alps to occupy the country as a hedge against any possible Allied landing. Having disappeared into the vortex of war as the Fascist regime collapsed, Italy was an exposed prey.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Davide Conti, *Gli uomini di Mussolini: Prefetti, questori e criminali di guerra dal fascismo alla Repubblica italiana* (Bologna: Einaudi, 2017), p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> After the war, the commanding general of the Militia published a book in which he explained that the decision to refrain from any reaction to arrest Mussolini was to avoid unleashing a civil war. Enzo Galbiati, *Il 25 luglio e la M.V.S.N.* (Milan: Bernabò, 1950).

Bending over backwards to avoid provoking the Third Reich, the General Staff between 2 and 4 September issued a bewildering order, “*Memoria 44*” (an expansion of the document “111 CT”) to Italy’s forces in the field. This order, which forbade the Italian military from taking any initiative in hostilities against the Germans, effectively bound its hands in the days to come.

On 8 September 1943, representatives from Italy in secrecy signed an armistice with the Anglo-Americans at the Allied headquarters in Cassibile. Much to the consternation of the Italian negotiators, the Allied Commander, Dwight D. Eisenhower, with time running out before the Allied invasion at Salerno, broadcast on that day the news that Italy had surrendered to the Allied forces.<sup>5</sup> Announcing the armistice in a brief radio broadcast, Badoglio concluded: “Italians must cease hostilities everywhere against Anglo-American forces.”<sup>6</sup> As planned, the Allied landing at Salerno followed the next day.

The Italian military situation in Rome looked solid. Six Italian divisions, including the famed *Piave*, *Ariete*, and *Granatieri*, provided 70,000 soldiers and 400 armored vehicles, pitted against two German divisions, 30,000 troops, and around 100 tanks.<sup>7</sup> So much for appearances, for the six divisions suffered from serious deficiencies: a shortage of tanks, armored cars, and petrol, which cut down mobility.

In spite of the Italian military’s numerical superiority, General Giacomo Carboni, who was entrusted with the defense of Rome, told General Roatta that the Eternal City could not be defended. Roatta, who likewise had no confidence in the ability of the *Regio Esercito* to stand its ground against the Wehrmacht, narrowed his vision to a search for a safe escape route out of the city for himself and the royal family. In the absence of leadership, whatever orders were issued got lost or misdirected through a blurry and clogged chain of command.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>F. W. Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup>E. Aga Rossi and M.T. Giusti, *Una Guerra a parte: I militari italiani nei Balcani 1940–1945* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2011), p. 101.

<sup>7</sup>Gianni Oliva, *L’Italia del silenzio 8 settembre 1943: storia del paese che non ha fatto i conti con il proprio passato* (Bologna: Mondadori, 2013), p. 33; Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, Vol. II: *La guerra civile (1943–1945)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), p. 80; Nicola Gallerano, “La mancata difesa di Roma,” in Claudio Dellavalle, ed., *8 settembre 1943. Storia e memoria* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup>Pier Luigi Villari, *Il tragico settembre: 8 settembre 1943. La reazione italiana contro l’aggressione tedesca* (Rome: IBN Editore, 2007), pp. 42–43.

In keeping with this despondency, the Italian Supreme Command during the night of 8 September broadcast Order #24202/Op, which concluded: "In no case are you to take the initiative in hostilities against German troops."<sup>9</sup> This instruction, in addition to "Memoria 44," rendered impossible the army's facing any showdown with the Wehrmacht. In addition, the *Regio Esercito's* initiative was sapped by a misguided hope that the Wehrmacht would simply take leave of Rome without further ado.

Faced by Germans streaming southward in hot pursuit under the code word *Achse* (Axis), General Antonio Sorice, the war minister, readied himself for a quick departure from Rome but stayed put. Chief of the General Staff General Vittorio Ambrosio, who was initially opposed to any precipitous flight, allowed Badoglio to have the last word. After King Victor Emmanuel departed the city with the alibi of preserving the continuity of the state, the generals, in his absence, washed their hands of responsibility.

Badoglio joined the king and his entourage when they set off on the 9th in a green Fiat along the poplar-lined Via Tiburtina, heading for Pescara on the Adriatic coast across the Apennines. Ambrosio, Roatta, and other military officers joined them in flight. Having ruled out military initiatives against the Germans to prevent them from swarming into Rome, the king and Badoglio thought only to save their own skins, thereby shedding any semblance of dignity. (Kesselring refrained from arresting the Italian sovereign and his following to avoid infuriating an Italian army fiercely loyal to the principle of monarchy.<sup>10</sup>)

In sporadic fighting at the gates and on the outskirts of Rome, isolated Italian units put up a fight against the entering Germans. But the army, left without orders, on the whole floundered in disarray, discarding weapons, donning civilian clothes, and roaming the countryside as gypsies.

For the Third Reich, the Italian signing of the armistice constituted a "betrayal." The German diplomat Rudolf Rahn spoke for his countrymen when he commented: "This is treachery."<sup>11</sup> To a man the Germans were bent on punishing their wayward ally.

Taking advantage of a spineless Italian military—save a few brisk skirmishes on the fringes—Kesselring, on the tenth, calmly led his troops into the Eternal City. Outraged by Italy's "treachery," the no longer "smiling Albert" demanded the surrender of all *Regio Esercito* units in and around

<sup>9</sup> Aga Rossi, *A Nation Collapses*, p. 97.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 17.

Rome; as a sop, to spare the Italian capital air attacks, he agreed to respect it as an “open city” (no military installations and no armed troops).<sup>12</sup>

Who on the Italian side would take on the opprobrium of officially acknowledging capitulation? War Minister General Antonio Sorice refused to put his signature on the surrender of Rome, claiming that he lacked the authority to do so. General Carboni followed suit, asserting that anyone subscribing to the fall of the Eternal City would prejudice his future career.<sup>13</sup> As the German pincers tightened around Rome, the Italian command wavered between “order, counter-order, disorder.” On 10 September at 15:30 hours General Carboni finally overcame his scruples by ordering the troops under his command to lay down their arms.<sup>14</sup>

The unpleasant business of officially conceding defeat to the Germans was left to one Lieutenant Colonel Leandro Giaccone, the chief of staff of the *Centauro* Division (which was equipped by the Wehrmacht). Giaccone handed over the Italian baton to General Siegfried Westphal, Kesselring’s chief of staff, at 16:00 hours on 10 September.<sup>15</sup>

After these shattering events, General Count Georgio Carlo Calvi di Bergolo emerged as the main Italian interlocutor with the Wehrmacht command. Italian resistance having crumbled, and a military command structure no longer in one piece, he had no cards to play. He thus found himself in the painful position of having to associate himself with Italy’s collapse in the city, which caused him no end of grief for having thereby stained the reputation of his father-in-law, King Victor Emmanuel III. All escape routes having been closed, Calvi di Bergolo bowed to the inevitable by abiding by Germany’s harsh terms. As a reward, Kesselring named him to a powerless post: commander of Rome.<sup>16</sup> On the eleventh, in full violation of the “open city” he had promised, Kesselring declared all Italian territory, including Rome, to be a theater of war under German military authority.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. On 14 August Badoglio had unilaterally proclaimed Rome to be an “open city,” a declaration to which neither the Allies nor the Germans paid the slightest attention.

<sup>13</sup> Marco Patricelli, *Settembre 1943: I giorni della vergogna* (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 2010), p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> Oliva, *L’Italia del silenzio 8 settembre*, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Patricelli, *Settembre 1943*, pp. 127–29.

<sup>16</sup> Villari, *Il tragico settembre*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Katz, *The Battle for Rome: The Germans, The Allies, The Partisans, and The Pope, September 1943–1944* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 42.

The Italian navy suffered a similar fate. On the cessation of hostilities, naval headquarters ordered the fleet first to La Maddalena off Sardinia, but when the island was found to be occupied by the Germans, it was redirected to Bone, Algeria. While the ships were changing course, the Luftwaffe swooped in and sank the battleship *Roma* with the loss of 1350 soldiers. After this disaster, most of the fleet safely dropped anchor in Malta.

Under the senseless order “*Memoria 44*,” to take no initiative against the Wehrmacht, the approximately thirty-two Italian divisions in the Balkans and on the islands in the Aegean were cut off from the mainland and left at loose ends. In having to fend for themselves, they, with a few notable exceptions—such as the resistors on the island of Cefalonia—became easy pickings for both the Wehrmacht and emboldened partisans. The Germans butchered thousands in an appalling display of vengeance, and rounded up around 600,000, sending them to concentration camps in the Reich, which deepened national despair and humiliation.

Although the population initially greeted with relief the Badoglio government’s decision to surrender at the end of the war, it soon became painfully clear that the Germans were there to stay. The Italians were now forced to deal with tough questions: was it legitimate for Italy to change sides and fight against the former German ally? Should they resist or acquiesce in the German occupation?

In an Italy reduced to military impotence—soldiers captured without fighting and packed like sardines in trucks and cattle cars bound for internment camps in Germany—a heavy silence prevailed. Badoglio’s summer of 1943 had been a farce of cowardice and foolish improvisation, which left the nation washed out.

Appalled over the 8 September “day of shame,” a number of patriotic Italians were convinced that Badoglio and the king, by their cowardly flight from Rome, had become the nation’s gravediggers. In hearing the cry, “*Tutti a casa*” (Every man for himself), Italians believed that they were experiencing the “death of the nation.”<sup>18</sup> Various Italians were scandalized by the little shame or remorse many of their compatriots felt over the squalid outcome of an armistice concluded in secret.<sup>19</sup> Corrado Alvaro,

<sup>18</sup> A phrase coined by Ernesto Galli della Loggia in the title of his book, *La morte della patria* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> The theme “Death of the Country” was introduced by a Fascist magistrate, Salvatore Satta, who between autumn 1943 and spring 1944 wrote a book of reflections that has

addressing “the nation’s sickness,” wrote in 1945: “Italians believed in Radio London, working ever more ardently for defeat by disseminating negativity. And yet they had sons in Africa, the Balkans, and Russia. To look at their own sons as if they had enlisted under a foreign flag, to welcome the combatant on leave, to pick up British voices on Radio London urging desertion and rebellion—all this amounted to a foretelling of defeat.”<sup>20</sup> The brutal turn of events caused deep alienation and an urge to disappear into the cocoon of family and private life. Having lost their nation, the Italians lapsed into a do-nothing frame of mind: “Be a friend of everyone without helping anyone.”

A fuming RSI official recorded that the traitors had won, the cowards had won, the military officers slinking south with “slime-ball” Badoglio had won: Satan had triumphed!<sup>21</sup> The novelist Curzio Malaparte jotted down this note: “All of us, soldiers and officers, competed to see who could throw arms and flags into the mud in the most ‘heroic’ way.”<sup>22</sup> For the popular ultra-nationalist Junio Valerio Borghese, national honor had been besmirched by the betrayal of 8 September. The historian Rosario Romeo claimed that the “ethical-political” values of the nation had been undermined by agnostic and unadventurous bourgeois thinkers. Carlo Trabucco, a Roman anti-Fascist, recounts in his diary that on 9 September he heard a person saying: “Nothing is left for us but to go home, take a mirror, look at ourselves, and spit in our own faces.”<sup>23</sup> The Italian essayist Vittorio De Caprariis added disgustedly: “Between 1943 and 1944, there was certainly not nostalgia for the defunct regime, but something much more serious had taken place: dismay, bewilderment, and a confounding stupor over the defeat. People experienced a deadly fatigue in this dreadful conflict and suf-

remained one of the most persuasive testimonies explaining the *stato d’animo* of Italians during these days. Salvatore Satta, *De profundis* (Milan: Adelphi, 1947).

<sup>20</sup> Corrado Alvaro, *L’Italia rinunzia? 1944: il Meridione e il Paese di fronte alla grande catastrofe* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1986), pp. 34–36. The first edition was published in 1945.

<sup>21</sup> Vincenzo Costa, *L’ultimo federale, Memorie della guerra civile 1943–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, II: 97. Malaparte wrote this jingle: “8 September is a memorable day: / face turned towards the nefarious invader, Italy sporting its old valor / to victory she guided the conqueror. / 8 September is a memorable fact, / shoulder turned away from ill-omened ally / already with knee on the ground, / we rushed to win with our enemies, / ardently that same war / that we had already lost with our friends.” Cited in Aurelio Lepre, *La storia della repubblica di Mussolini: Salò: Il tempo dell’odio e della violenza* (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Carlo Trabucco, *La prigionia di Roma* (Rome: Seli, s.d.), p. 14.

fered from psychological surrender to the terrible and ruinous outcome. Like those who have fought against overwhelming odds, many lost heart and crawled away from the battle to let themselves die.”<sup>24</sup>

These critics agreed that the *fuga di Pescara* and the *mancata difesa* of Rome symbolized the crumbling of the nation’s civic morality and the emergence of the national vice of looking to foreigners for salvation. Would there be a Phoenix to rise from the ashes? Had not Winston Churchill warned the British people on 28 May 1940: “Nations which went down fighting rose again, but those which surrendered tamely were finished?”<sup>25</sup>

Still, it should not be forgotten that scattered and desperate citizens and soldiers tried unsuccessfully to block the entry of the German Wehrmacht into Rome. General Kurt Student conducted a parachute assault at Monterotondo, northeast of Rome, in the hope of capturing the Supreme Command Headquarters located in Orsini Castle. His troops encountered an unexpectedly fierce resistance, but eventually, the Italians gave way to superior force.<sup>26</sup> A spirited battle at Porta San Paolo erupted on 9 September, where a brave few civilians and soldiers engaged in fierce combat against Wehrmacht troops before they were put out of action at the end of the day.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, many Italian military commanders, fearing the Communists were poised to seize power, often stopped and disarmed troops and civilians who were putting up resistance and arrested them.<sup>28</sup> Among them, General Enrico Adami Rossi, who commanded the Italian garrison in Turin, refused to distribute arms to anti-Fascists and took a clear position in favor of cooperation with the Germans.<sup>29</sup> The historian Carlo Gentile, who can hardly be accused of treating lightly German atrocities across the land, states that in this early stage of occupation the Wehrmacht, recognizing the sense of impotence that had seized most Italians after the military collapse, allowed the

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Renzo De Felice, *Rosso e Nero* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995), p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Roy Jenkins, *Churchill: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 607.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Forczyk, *Raid: Rescuing Mussolini Gran Sasso 1943* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Midland House, 2010), p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> A telling illustration of this occurred in Emilia Romagna, where General Ettore De Blasio asked the Germans to maintain order. Carlo Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia, 1943–1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.



population life's necessities and brought a degree of peace and quiet by firmly restoring public order.<sup>30</sup> A German report concluded that the Wehrmacht had the situation firmly in hand: the Italian resistance had no future. On the whole, therefore, the battered Italians, having lost their moorings, were not prepared to answer any call for the same kind of widespread national uprising that had swept through the land following the Caporetto disaster in World War I.<sup>31</sup>

The events of 8 September had split the country in two. In the lower regions, Badoglio, who headed the "Kingdom of the South," served at the whim of the Allied Command. In the North, Hitler eventually managed to restore Mussolini and his clique of Fascists to power. Since the Führer held the whip hand, Italians feared a draconian occupation for breaking away from the Axis. Would Mussolini be able to cushion his country against German vengeance?

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Worse was to come. On 13 October, when Badoglio declared war on Germany, his army had been reduced to a pair of divisions located in Puglia, a nether region in southern Italy that was occupied neither by Germans nor by Allies. His gesture, therefore, which hardly affected military events other than worsening the conditions of the soldiers who had fallen into the hands of the Wehrmacht, was nothing more than a holding action until he was able, with strong Allied assistance, to build up a small new army to join the fight against RSI troops and the invading Germans. But that day seemed long off.



## CHAPTER 2

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# Birth of the Regime

On 10 September 1943 the top German leaders assembled to hammer out a policy of occupation for Italy. The head of Hitler's Elite Guard (*Schutzstaffel-SS*), Heinrich Himmler, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, and Hitler's aide Martin Bormann, convinced that the Wehrmacht did not possess a large enough force to impose a regime based on coercion alone, argued in favor of a collaborating government—but one whose composition they would define.

Many high-level Germans, disgusted with Mussolini's fall from power, were not drawn to a resumption of "Fascist totalitarianism." In the search for a more practical solution that would best serve their country, they preferred a puppet Italian government consisting of "technicians." As a reliable collaborator of the Third Reich, and one who favored reconciliation over the divisive intransigence of militant Fascism, Massimo Rocca, an economist who served Mussolini in the twenties, filled the bill nicely. German eyes also fell on Giuseppe Tassinari, once Mussolini's minister of agriculture, as a possible candidate to lead a newly fashioned Italian government. In downgrading the importance of radical Fascism, as well as a discredited Duce, Tassinari favored a style of collaboration that made a favorable impression on Hitler, Joachim von Ribbentrop, the head of the Nazified Foreign Ministry, and General Karl Wolff during meetings held in Berlin on 14 September 1943.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dianella Gagliani, "Il ruolo di Mussolini nella Reubblica sociale italiana e nella crisi del 1943–1945," *Storia e problemi contemporanei* 37 (2004), pp. 164–65.

The military chiefs, the supreme commander of the armed forces Wilhelm Keitel, the army chief of staff Alfred Jodl, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, and commander of the Luftwaffe Hermann Göring had no use for “collaboration”; they cared only to preside over a graveyard peace. But when Hitler issued an order appointing the diplomat Rudolf Rahn, a suave and worldly man favoring conciliation and “indirect” rule, as German plenipotentiary to the “national Fascist Italian government,” the generals would learn that they could not exercise uncontested control over the country.<sup>2</sup> Still, make no mistake: To avert Italian flare-ups, Rahn proved that he, too, was capable of applying brute force. No doubt, the subtle and intelligent Rahn, who was answerable to von Ribbentrop, never veered from the mission of accomplishing the far-reaching aims of Hitler’s Third Reich at the least possible cost.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, notwithstanding his anger at Italy, Hitler decided to spare his old ally Poland’s fate by forming a collaborationist government using Vichy France as a model. Rahn had already spelled out this idea in a memorandum dated 19 August 1943, which more or less roughly formed the basis of German occupation policy. The aim should be to line up “every Norwegian, Croat, French, Pole, or Greek whom we can persuade to picture us as representatives of a better and more just future. Above all, they would not fire at our men and would refrain from committing acts of sabotage (which would be a real plus). In truth, they would frequently work for us with conviction and spread such conviction among their co-nationals.”<sup>4</sup>

Expecting German vengeance, the stunned Italians braced for the worst. So did Mussolini. After his arrest on 25 July, he passed through a couple of detention stops on the island of Ponza, near Naples, and the La Maddalena naval base off the north coast of Sardinia, before landing in prison in the Hotel Campo Imperatore atop the Gran Sasso mountain range, Italy’s “Little Tibet,” a plateau in the remote Abruzzi region southeast of Rome,

<sup>2</sup> Monica Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler: La Repubblica sociale sotto il Terzo Reich* (Rome: Donzelli, 2009), p. 13. Dissatisfied with the reports of von Bismarck and von Rintelen for their playing down the crisis in Italy, Hitler replaced them with Rahn, who became the new ambassador on 30 August, while General Rudolf Toussaint replaced General Rintelen.

<sup>3</sup> Rahn is not bashful, in his memoirs, in exposing relentless ambition and in advancing the interests of the Third Reich.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Lutz Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia, 1943–1945* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1993), p. 104.

where he ruminated on Allied capture and consignment to the Tower of London. His security detachment was composed of Carabinieri and civil police. Inspector General Giuseppe Gueli was in charge of the thirty-man police unit at Gran Sasso.

The nightmarish thought of Allied captivity dissipated on 12 September when an SS Stork glider team, piloted by the corpulent Austrian Captain Otto Skorzeny, escorted by ninety Nazi paratroopers, plucked him from his mountain fastness for a flight to Munich. Their rescue mission was considerably eased by the lack of Italian resistance. Police Chief Carmine Senise in Rome told Gueli to use his own judgment in the event of a German attack. When Gueli saw Germans swooping down on the hotel where Mussolini was housed to rescue him, he yelled “Don’t shoot” to his men (Gueli later followed Mussolini to Salò). Mussolini’s memorable comment: “I would have preferred to be freed by Italians.”<sup>5</sup> After a brief get-together with his family, Mussolini boarded a train two days later for a reunion with Hitler in his wooded redoubt.

Feeling more like a trophy than the Italian duce, Mussolini arrived at the Führer’s headquarters haggard, exhausted, and sick. Having lost the spring in his step, and irritated by the energy displayed by bustling Nazis around him, the disconsolate ex-dictator yearned to be provided a comfortable and isolated retirement. Hitler was in for a hard sell, but since he viewed the Duce as the right person to breathe life into a dispirited Fascist movement, he turned on his old mesmerizing charm, which plucked up his fellow dictator’s spirits for making a political comeback. The Führer wanted to install a renewed Fascist government under Mussolini to suppress resistance fighters and control Italian citizens. Since wielding power dominated his outlook, Mussolini finally agreed to preside over a revived Fascist enterprise. In these changed circumstances, however, Hitler did not have in mind the return of an equal, only a junior partner ruling at his beck and call. Would Mussolini willingly relinquish his former eminence as an all-powerful duce? The situation he faced was hardly promising. Most likely he would be reduced to groveling as a miniature Caesar. But with luck, and against all odds, he might be able to stoke old fires to bring about a Fascist renaissance.

Buoyed by his Fascist devotees, Mussolini, piloting a German warplane, landed at Forlì on 23 September and was driven to Rocca delle Caminate, his summer residence, where he convened a newly assembled Fascist team

<sup>5</sup> Forczyk, *Raid*, p. 50.

of subordinates to forge a new government. The immediate task was to eliminate any thought in Berlin and elsewhere that the new regime was a German lackey rather than an equal partner in a refurbished Axis. At the same time the fledgling regime, which exercised only a tenuous sovereignty over the upper two-thirds of the country, faced a relentless Allied advance against dogged Wehrmacht resistance up the peninsula from their toehold in southern Italy. Notwithstanding these perils, Mussolini's regime, obsessively worried about "traitors" and "bandits," seemed most determined to utilize its limited resources and energy mainly for tracking down anti-Fascist enemies of the state.

Although the majority of Italians living through this violent whirlpool of events felt like powerless spectators, a brave few, outraged that the country should be taken over by Fascists and Nazis, spawned a resistance movement. A deadly civil war, destined to spread destruction in its wake, was in the offing. It was a civil war, however, that never fully engaged the entire population. Sluggish but gritty Allied offenses, assisted by the budding partisan movement, prompted the embattled RSI to fight back by every means in the book.

Fearing an Allied landing on the Adriatic coast, the Wehrmacht was forced to move quickly to provide military security on the southern frontiers of the Reich by controlling the Alpine passes running through the Alto Adige and the port of Trieste, which dominated the routes to the Balkans. Diverted by this top priority, the Germans, however, on the whole refrained at first from undertaking punitive action and massive troop roundups in Italy against their "traitorous" allies.<sup>6</sup>

Most disconcerting to the Duce was Hitler's creation of a German military "zone of occupation" that embraced the border regions in the North—the Prealpi (Voralpenland): the Alto Adige, the Trentino, and part of the Venezia Giulia—that is, the provinces of Bolzano, Trento, and Belluno. In a stroke Hitler had removed the 1915 London Pact provision that carried the Italian frontier to the Brenner Pass. In an equally wounding move, the Wehrmacht, by ramming into the Istrian Peninsula and Dalmatian coast to meet the Yugoslav partisan threat, created the "zone of operation Litorale Adriatico" (*Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland*), which included the northeastern provinces of Udine, Gorizia, Trieste, Pola, Fiume, and the province of Ljubljana that Italy annexed after Mussolini's invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941. The German military occupation of these regions

<sup>6</sup>Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, p. 85.

decisively undid the Duce's success in avenging Italy's "mutilated victory." If that were not enough, the Italian leader was left to mull over the disappearance of his empire on the Adriatic created between 1941 and 1943. Frontier Fascists, who took pleasure in suppressing native Slavs in the Venezia Giulia, were likewise appalled by Germany's commandeering of Italian territory. Unless the Duce were to use his personal prestige at Hitler's headquarters to modify German measures in these areas, his chances of bringing about a political revival of Italian Fascism would be severely compromised.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, no friend to Mussolini, was deployed north of Florence as Wehrmacht commander of Army Group B (*Heeresgruppe B*). Ignoring Italian sensibilities, the former "Desert Fox," convinced that Rome could not be held, pondered a withdrawal from central and southern Italy in favor of a stand at the foothills of the Alps. Such a retreat would back the RSI into the Po valley along the Spezia-Rimini line. Appalled at the damage to the prestige of his government and the fate of Italy if this strategy were carried out, Mussolini appealed to Hitler. The Führer and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Wehrmacht supreme commander in the South (*Oberbefehlshaber Süd*), who was resisting the Allied forces, overruled Rommel and ordered the defense of Italian territory inch by inch from their dug-in positions along the lines at Volturmo. On 6 November Kesselring was given overall operational command in Italy while Rommel was kicked upstairs to another posting in Germany; he ended up masterminding the fortification of the Atlantic Wall. There would therefore be no scorched-earth retreat. Italian industry would continue to churn out war production for the Wehrmacht and farm produce in the Po valley would be diverted northward to feed hungry Germans.

Thanks to Rahn and his louche Fascist partners—and perhaps as Hitler's last courtesy to Mussolini—Italy was spared the extermination and mass killing that took place in Poland, the Soviet Union, and the Balkans, which were textbook examples of Nazi specificity in Hitler's style of warfare. De facto territorial amputation there included the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico, where the Gauleiter rulers discriminated against the Italian inhabitants, or, in the case of the Slovenes, strove to replace them with people of Germanic stock. As harsh as these occupation policies were, the Gauleiter rulers did not pursue systematic ethnic cleansing. Still, German destruction wrought in the two provinces, let alone the rest of the country, was enormous. Had the Salò regime never come into existence, the overall damage to Italy, in the absence of such a bloody civil war—the unspeakable