



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

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# CONTENTS

1	Historical Background of the Italian Social Republic	1
2	Birth of the Regime	15
3	A Convoluted Fascist Revival	31
4	The German “Occupying Ally”	59
5	RSI Armed Forces	83
6	Fascist-Style Law and Order	101
7	Socialization Projects	127
8	Persecution of the Jews	141
9	The RSI and the Italian Catholic World	165
10	Black Brigades	173
11	Italian Diplomacy Adapts to Fascist Radicalism	193
12	In the Grip of the Third Reich	207



13	In the Line of Fire	223
14	Ringed by Enemies	235
15	Muddling through Lawlessness	245
16	Mussolini Woos the Intellectuals	257
17	Frenzied Endgame	269
18	The RSI: Body and Soul	285
19	Legacy of the RSI	301
20	Historical Controversies	319
	Appendix: Casualties of the RSI Period	335
	Select Bibliography	337
	Index	347

## 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 Caprarij 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

tragedy of Italians killing Italians by the thousands—might well have been substantially less. As it was, the Wehrmacht and SS, though committing heinous crimes against Italian citizens, had no comprehensive plan for general slaughter or mass removal of Italians to political ghettos. It is not clear if Hitler was at any time prepared, or if Germany had the resources, to turn Italy into a wasteland for having betrayed him (as had happened in Yugoslavia), particularly while war raged in the peninsula.

Notwithstanding the lightning Wehrmacht territorial occupations in northern Italy, Mussolini's spirits improved when he began to feel a Fascist Renaissance in the making that implied a break with the monarchy and with the treasonable elements within Fascism. Reconstruction and vengeance would proceed in a conscious and publicized cancellation of the catastrophic and immediate past that had besmirched the *patria*. Yet behind the official line depicting a Duce resolutely ready to fight with the Germans until the inevitable final victory, there appeared a man consumed by his own tragedy of having become on 25 July politically defunct in humiliating circumstances. And Mussolini was fully aware of his own impotence in the disagreeable role invested in him by Hitler to serve as a propped-up Duce as head of the Salò Republic.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he was sobered by the reality that only a sturdy Italian military contribution to the Axis cause could win popular support for his regime, credibility in Berlin, and a rollback of German influence in Italy.<sup>8</sup> But there was still promise of victory. German territory was intact. Central and Western Europe remained under the domination of the Third Reich and the Allied offensive in southern Italy remained stalled on the Gustav Line between Naples and Rome. Convinced that miracle weapons were nearing readiness, Hitler seemed confident that his lines would hold against the Russians in the East and the Allies in the West which, as yet, had no toehold on the Continent. Whatever his skepticism regarding German promises of remarkable new weapons, Mussolini hoped for the best.

Of the ragtag and disputatious Fascists who landed in Hitler's camp on or around 8 September, Mussolini favored long-standing and reliable comrades, not over-the-top sorts such as the notorious Jew-baiter Giovanni

<sup>7</sup> Mimmo Franzinelli, *Il prigioniero di Salò* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012), p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Nicola Cospito and Hans Werner Neulen, *Salò-Berlino: L'alleanza difficile* (Milan: Mursia, 1992), p. 37. Filippo Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda (1936–1945)* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1957), pp. 343–44, recorded Mussolini's determination to raise an army.

Preziosi and the scurrilous journalist Roberto Farinacci, both of whom had approached Hitler to be his replacement and talked ill of him to the Germans behind his back.<sup>9</sup> The Duce had no reason to fear, for, as Goebbels noted on 10 September, Hitler “is tremendously disappointed in Farinacci. He expected to see an enthusiastic follower of the Duce and in reality met a broken man who tries to slander the Duce by criticizing him in a tearful voice.”<sup>10</sup>

In making up his new cabinet, Mussolini came under pressure from both the exasperated “old guard” and those who eagerly anticipated “new men,” to say nothing of the meddling Germans. Farinacci offered himself as minister of the interior, but Mussolini chose Guido Buffarini Guidi, a long-standing loyalist. Strongly supported by SS Colonel Eugen Dollmann, who assured Hitler in September that Buffarini was his enduring accomplice,<sup>11</sup> he also enjoyed the confidence of General Kesselring.<sup>12</sup> The SS General Karl Wolff added: “During the formation of the new cabinet, I supported the nomination of Buffarini because I knew that Himmler wanted his inclusion in the new ministry. Buffarini also in the period of Salò was my major support. I could blindly place my trust in him, in spite of Italian politics that, given the nature of the country, was full of intrigue and dangerous traps.”<sup>13</sup> The peripatetic German consul in Rome, Eithel Moellhausen, liked him, too, for having a flexible mind rather than one frozen by fixed ideas. By neutralizing enemies through compromises, Buffarini softened blows and warded off crises.<sup>14</sup> Mussolini’s personal physician Dr. Georg Zachariae, whom Hitler had appointed to care for the Duce’s health, commented that Buffarini always knew how to skirt difficulties, and he was impossible to embarrass. His byword: “Make friends with unjust wealth.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Felice Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini* (Milan: Zagara, 1947), pp. 55–58.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries* (New York: Eagle Books, 1948), p. 476.

<sup>11</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Eugen Dollmann, *Roma nazista* (Milan: Longanesi, 1949), p. 82; Karl Stuhlpfarrer, *Le zone d'operazione Prealpi e Litorale Adriatico 1943–1945* (Gorizia: Edizioni Libreria Adamo, 1979), p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Giorgio Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1977), p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ettore Friedrich Moellhausen, *La carta perdente: Memorie diplomatiche 25 luglio 1943–2 maggio 1945* (Rome: Sestante, 1948), p. 320.

<sup>15</sup> Georg Zachariae, *Mussolini si confessa* (Milan: BUR, 2004), prime edition digital 2013, location 617.



Buffarini's son wrote later: "My father had worked together with Wolff to regulate an important question of the Alto Adige that called for the disposal of goods of those who opted for Germany. Then there was the question of the agricultural farmers of which Germany had such a great need. To understand certain relationships one must remember that my father was in reality the regime's interior minister, and thus, we can say, a powerful and bountiful friend of the SS higher-ups who visited him. So it was natural that they asked him for everything since the SS in Italy ran the Ministry of Interior."<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, "The Grand Duke of Tuscany" stood high on Mussolini's list of the party faithful for having advised him to arrest the dissident members of the Grand Council in July 1945. He was the sole one to warn Mussolini that his forthcoming audience with the king would be extremely dangerous. The diplomat Filippo Anfuso dubbed this man of enormous girth the last Italian of the Renaissance, because of his "diabolical shrewdness."<sup>17</sup> Luigi Bolla, a vice consul in the foreign ministry, commented that Buffarini was "an astute and greasy grocer, inside and out."<sup>18</sup> And Lieutenant Colonel Johann Jandl, the Wehrmacht's liaison officer to Mussolini, wrote: "One group centers round the sly Minister of the Interior, Buffarini, who looks like a Jewish cattle-dealer."<sup>19</sup>

In spite of this support, Buffarini's duty in maintaining law and order throughout the republic was circumscribed and invaded at every turn by rival agencies of the party, the National Guard, and the Duce himself who had the habit of sending circulars over Buffarini's head directly to the prefects (renamed *capo della provincia* [provincial head]). Above all, he was held back by the Germans, who defied any Italian standing in their way.

Responding to pressure by his entourage, Mussolini named another old hand, Alessandro Pavolini, to be secretary of the Fascist Republican Party (*Partito Fascista Repubblicano* [PFR]).<sup>20</sup> Described as "diligent, courageous, and poor," the small, thin, and cultivated Pavolini was one of

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>17</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al lago di Garda*, p. 89.

<sup>18</sup> Luigi Bolla, *Perché a Salò* (Milan: Bompiani, 1982), p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup> The Italian historian Giuseppe Parlato writes in his *Fascisti senza Mussolini: Le origini del neofascismo in Italia, 1943–1948* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006), pp. 13–14, that Pavolini was not nominated by Mussolini to become party secretary but was chosen "in a touch of Jacobinism from the base ... It was the first time that Fascists exercised a kind of autonomous right with respect to the Duce."

the genuine intellectuals of the regime and, according to the Italian writer Marco Innocenti, a widely respected journalist and author of novels.<sup>21</sup> Sporting martial airs and social sophistication, Pavolini earned notoriety as a squad leader in 1925. Riding the crest of Fascist violence, Pavolini cultivated an ideal of the Fascist intellectual handy in the use of both pistol and pen.<sup>22</sup> A man of relentless zealotry, he earned the soubriquet of Saint-Just of Fascism. The Fascist-slanted historian Attilio Tamaro depicted him as “intransigent beyond bounds and violent without scruples.”<sup>23</sup> Anfuso noted that Pavolini, whose intolerance was inspired by a medieval conformism that flourished on vengeance, “was the last Italian who knew how to hate!”<sup>24</sup> For Bolla, Pavolini was an “old maid of notable intellect and bad character.”<sup>25</sup>

Pavolini believed that the Pact of Steel “was for the Italian Republic a pact of honor; this historical equation must permeate every action of our government.”<sup>26</sup> Eventual defeat would not, in his view, mean the death of Fascism; the war was only an episode in a much broader historical panorama. As bearer of a novel social policy, the party would generate vitality and mass consent that would provide protection against impending storms.<sup>27</sup> Exasperated by Italy’s military collapse in 1943, Pavolini anticipated his own supreme sacrifice in a revolution implemented in a torrent of blood. To preserve Fascist purity, he was ready to die a beautiful death.

In his new position of power, Pavolini arranged to have his sidekick Fernando Mezzasoma appointed as minister of popular culture. The Fascist Italian journalist Felice Bellotti describes him as a “mediocre man regarding intelligence, with no political intuition at all.”<sup>28</sup> Mezzasoma, a mediocre figure in the world of journalists and literati, enjoyed the power to deny writers permission to publish.

The headstrong Renato Ricci was appointed on 15 September as commander of the Republican National Guard (*Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana* [GNR]). Having joined D’Annunzio in the Fiume enterprise, undertaken

<sup>21</sup> Marco Innocenti, *Mussolini a Salò: Il tramonto di un uomo* (Milan: Mursia, 1996), p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin G. Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 115–16.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Giampaolo Pansa, *Il Gladio e l'alloro* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), p. 148.

<sup>24</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 405.

<sup>25</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, II: 352.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>28</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 74.

hooligan Fascist raids in August 1922 in Tuscany, and participated in the march on Rome, this former Tuscan *squadrista* held various positions under Mussolini, the last of which was as minister of corporations from 1939 to 1943. Possessed of solid Fascist credentials, Ricci stood tall among the hierarchs. He did well with the Germans too. Through the GNR he cultivated highly placed Nazis, such as Himmler and SS Colonel Eugen Dollmann.<sup>29</sup> At an early period of the RSI, he was thought to have the inner track in gaining investiture of the SS as an Italian Reichsführer.<sup>30</sup>

As commander of the Blackshirts militia, Ricci basked in the myth of “*ragazzi di Bir el Gobi*”—swaggering youths with cocked black berets who sang as they ran into battle.<sup>31</sup> He not only led an important military corps but directed anti-rebel repression. Organized youth groups also fell under his jurisdiction, and he took pleasure in molding young minds. For Ricci, every Fascist was obliged to don the black shirt and bear arms. The Italian writer Bellotti noted: “All agreed that he was an imbecile and said so openly to discredit him in German eyes.”<sup>32</sup> But the apparent simplicity and earnestness of this “integral Fascist” made him stand out against, for example, a born intriguer such as Buffarini. Jandl wrote: “Ricci is an ardent personality and thus contrasts favorably with the other members of the Italian government, except for Graziani.”<sup>33</sup> Would this rather simple man be able to survive the practiced infighting of the Fascist insiders?

Carlo Alberto Biggini, who as a member of the Fascist Grand Council voted against Grandi’s order of the day on 25 July, was invited to be education minister. Although a fervent Mussolini loyalist and firm ally of Nazi Germany, Biggini was one of the few genuinely moderate Fascists in the government. He worked to mitigate some of his colleagues’ more drastic measures, such as their efforts to dismiss school teachers if they refused to sign a loyalty oath to the RSI. He would play a significant role in hiding Italian art treasures from the Germans, and he warded off pressures from Mussolini and the Nazis to fire anti-Fascist professors and barred troops from searching for draft dodgers on university campuses.

<sup>29</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, II: 423–24.

<sup>31</sup> At Bir el Gobi, in North Africa, a unit of young Fascists was annihilated by the English after a heroic resistance. During the war, Fascist propaganda turned this episode into a glorious myth.

<sup>32</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Giuseppe Zanzanaini, *Renato Ricci: Fascista integrale* (Milan: Mursia, 2004), p. 141.

Not so praiseworthy was his policy vis-à-vis Jews. On 1 December 1943 Biggini signed a decree that ordered the sequestration of all works of art that belonged to Jews, a measure that seemed to presage further persecution of the Jewish community. It well might have been that his actions were taken to frustrate Göring's special units from pillaging works of art in Italian territory.<sup>34</sup>

Mussolini agreed to the appointment of Antonio Tringali-Casanova to the Justice Department and the investiture of Domenico Pellegrini Giampietro at the Finance Ministry. Coming from southern Italy, an ex-*federale* (federal party secretary) of Naples and a decorated warrior of the Spanish Civil War, Pellegrini Giampietro was an exemplary Fascist.<sup>35</sup>

The brutal half-blind war hero Francesco Maria Barracu, who became the vice president of the Council (*Sottosegretario alla Presidenza del Consiglio*), had the privilege of consulting Mussolini daily. Having won the *Medaglia d'Oro* for military valor, he theatrically waved around a submachine-gun<sup>36</sup> and enjoyed a certain prestige superior to his merits and quality.<sup>37</sup> An intriguer and hypocrite, quite ill prepared to perform state functions—and remarkably gifted in creating alibis for his failures—he was a specialist in double dealing.<sup>38</sup> Mussolini told Preziosi: “Let Barracu alone. He is an old imbecile who has never understood anything. He intellectually obeys Buffarini Guidi. But he is a brave soldier, and that is all.”<sup>39</sup> Barracu's favorite amusement seemed to have been denouncing Italians who refused to collaborate with the Germans.<sup>40</sup>

On 19 September Buffarini, on behalf of Mussolini, offered General Rodolfo Graziani the portfolio of defense minister. It was a strange choice. Although having proficiently slaughtered defenseless Ethiopians, Graziani suffered disgrace in the desert at the hands of the British when they cut his

<sup>34</sup> Decreto del Ministero dell'Educazione nazionale, Direzione Generale delle Arti, 1 dicembre 1943. According to a long report for Mussolini from the desk for general affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this provision was taken clearly as a result of the appropriation by the Germans of Jewish possessions, particularly in the zones of occupation, the Litorale Adriatico and the Prealpi. ACS, SPD RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 76, f. “Affari esteri.”

<sup>35</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 309.

<sup>36</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, pp. 74, 202. Moellhausen found Barracu's habit of appearing for work with a machine gun slung over his shoulder theatrical and offensive and abhorred the way he threatened to shoot the next person he met.

<sup>37</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, II: 362.

<sup>38</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> Giacomo Perticone, *La repubblica di Salò* (Rome: Edizioni Leonardo, 1947), p. 138.

troops to ribbons in late fall 1941. Utterly disoriented, he pathetically begged Mussolini to remove him from his North African command.<sup>41</sup> For his cowardice Mussolini demanded an inquest not only regarding the defeat in Cyrenaica but also for the negative repercussions that the military rout had on the prestige of the regime and country.

Graziani was determined to repair his reputation. His opening came on the threshold of Mussolini's fall from power in July 1943 when, "for the good of the country," he expressed his readiness to act against Fascist Grand Council dissidents. This, from an intercepted phone conversation with secretary of the party Carlo Scorza: "Duce, as I have already told you, with Graziani we have studied and agreed on an emergency plan to confront the situation, particularly regarding the future." Mussolini: "Very good. I am satisfied by what you have communicated to me, but above all for the decision of Marshal Graziani which, frankly, I had not expected."<sup>42</sup>

Hitler, however, not at all enamored of the Italian general, told Mussolini in mid-September: "Marshal Graziani does not enjoy my trust mainly because he has never enjoyed yours ... Above all he does not have my trust because his intimate sentiments seem to me to be anti-German."<sup>43</sup> But on reflection, Hitler was prepared to tolerate him in the government since among Italy's discredited generals only he benefited from a veneer of prestige and popularity.<sup>44</sup> Unconvinced, Mussolini ruminated on a plethora of other generals for the job of defense minister.

Graziani himself stalled, seeming to prefer a quiet retirement. According to Moellhausen, who met with him in the German embassy, the general was slipping and sliding, and looked "spent."<sup>45</sup> To bring him around, Rahn threatened to impose a Polish occupation if he should refuse to serve.<sup>46</sup> Even if Graziani did not fall for this threat, he longed to avenge

<sup>41</sup> A particularly harsh judgment of Graziani in North Africa can be found in Giorgio Rochat and Gilio Massobrio, *Breve storia dell'esercito italiano dal 1861-1943* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), p. 284 sgg. A recent Anglo-American judgment can be found in Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War. Waging World War II in North Africa, 1941-1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 59-60; Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982), p. 386.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler*, p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> Marco Gasparini and Claudio Razeto, 1943: *Diario dell'anno che sconvolse l'Italia* (Rome: Castelveccchi, 2013), p. 207.

<sup>45</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 94.

<sup>46</sup> Rodolfo Graziani, *Una vita per l'Italia. "Ho difeso l'Italia"* (Milan: Mursia, 1986), p. 376. Rahn later claimed that Hitler severely rebuked him for urging Graziani to accept the portfolio as minister of defense. Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler*, p. 41, n. 81.

himself against Badoglio whom he hated for tarnishing the pride of Italy by his slipshod military leadership and ultimate betrayal in leading the country into the camp of the enemy, thus contributing to the outbreak of fratricidal war. After much agonizing, Graziani finally bowed to pressure from Rahn by making himself available.<sup>47</sup>

Knowing that Graziani had support in Italy, Mussolini acquiesced in his appointment. There simply was no other viable candidate in sight. The newly appointed marshal told the intellectual dandy Eugen Dollmann, who served as a German interpreter, “It’s best that you know this immediately: I have never been a Fascist, but always a soldier who obeyed orders”<sup>48</sup>—a strange comment from a man who had been handsomely rewarded by the regime for committing war crimes in Ethiopia and Libya.

Defenders of Graziani claim that he was persuaded to serve the RSI by a resolve to restore the nation’s dignity besmirched by the “cowardice” of 8 September. But it would not be as chief of the old royalist Italian army, for Graziani envisaged a renovated version with carefully selected new officers and a draft of young recruits untainted by the army’s past shameful conduct. By such reforms, Graziani assumed that he would be able to throw the Allied invaders out of the peninsula. As did French General Charles De Gaulle, Graziani, allegedly an apolitical warrior, would fight from lofty moral purpose to defend the supreme interests of the nation from its enemies. But was the nationalist historian Tamaro accurate in claiming that Graziani’s “betrayal” of the Italian puppet regime in Brindisi was the equivalent of de Gaulle’s “betrayal” of Vichy?<sup>49</sup>

Graziani invited General Gastone Gambara, who had been one of his foremost critics, to assume the post of chief of staff. This was another choice that gave little pleasure to the Germans, for his reputation in the Third Reich did not do him proud. Rommel, in North Africa, irritated by the Italian general’s inexplicable absence in a moment of grave danger, he derisively asked his companions: “Where is Gambara?”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Moellhausen wrote in his *La carta perdente*, p. 25: “Turning to Graziani, Rahn told him that the time had arrived for a decision. He repeated to the General that acceptance would signify his readiness to save what could still be salvaged.”

<sup>48</sup> Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, p. 405.

<sup>49</sup> Attilio Tamaro, *Due anni di storia 1943–1945* (Rome: Tosi, 1949), 3 vols. II: 8.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in H. James Burgwyn, *Mussolini Warlord: Failed Dreams of Empire* (New York: Enigma Books, 2012), p. 109.

Wherever Mussolini went, his son Vittorio loped behind like a loyal sheepdog. Luigi Bolla described him as “one of the biggest louts on the face of the earth,” superior only to his ragtag following of “athletes, boxers and denizens of the gym.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, added Bolla, Vittorio was the cause “of very serious damages and of many sorrows to the country,” being given to “extremism based on presumption, ignorance, boorishness, and a total misunderstanding of present reality.”<sup>52</sup> Bolla later noted that “Vittorio continues to play the fool in Germany and draws to himself the antipathy of all the German authorities.”<sup>53</sup> Contributing to this unsavory reputation in Germany, according to Dollmann, were Vittorio’s insistent requests to SS General Karl Wolff for millions of lire as compensation for losses suffered by the family when it was forced to flee Rome.<sup>54</sup> Even Dr. Georg Zachariae, Mussolini’s physician, wondered: “Why is the son of the Duce so ill-bred?” It seemed that Vittorio had no supporters at all, aside from his father, who remained deaf to all criticism of his son, firing his secretary Giovanni Dolfi on 29 March 1944, supposedly because of his inability to get along with Vittorio and other members of his family.<sup>55</sup>

To many observers, the individuals that Mussolini had appointed to high positions in the cabinet made for a government that was practically a creature of the Third Reich. Without German support, the Italian camarilla, since it did not have widespread popular support and was beset by many internal rivalries, would have quickly fallen apart.

In truth, the government comprised a hodgepodge of shady men who held chaotic and contradictory views. The newspaperman Felice Bellotti summarizes Mussolini’s handiwork in assembling his team: “He holds a profound contempt for men, whom he divides into two categories, the dishonest-capable and the honest-incapable.”<sup>56</sup> The Fascist journalist Ermanno Amicucci noted that Buffarini and Pavolini, as representatives of the “old guard,” were aged and discredited hierarchs.<sup>57</sup> To no one’s surprise, Roberto Farinacci, the paragon of Fascist extremism, bitterly criticized the appointment of so many old deadbeats. Germany, on the other hand,

<sup>51</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 158.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203–04.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>54</sup> Dollmann, *Roma Nazista*, p. 405.

<sup>55</sup> Ray Moseley, *Mussolini: The Last Days of Il Duce* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing: An Imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2004), p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Bellotti, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 201.

<sup>57</sup> Ermanno Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini* (Rome: Editrice “Faro,” 1948), p. 25.

according to Moellhausen, was ready to live with the new RSI set-up. A regime filled with collaborators who had compromised themselves by taking positions in the Nazi satellite government would hardly be likely to undertake an abrupt volte-face.<sup>58</sup>

Mussolini took up his job as head of government unsure of how much power he would actually exercise in the downsized fledgling state. One annoying impediment to his rule had already been removed: the king, who had fled to Brindisi. The Third Reich, however, quickly turned cautious hope into disillusionment. German overlords, coupled with Allies pounding northward, denied the Duce leeway to make independent decisions. Mussolini confessed to Rahn on 26 September: Italy was in a chaotic state, like a “punch-drunk man who has completely lost his bearings.”<sup>59</sup> Given the radically altered circumstances, he changed his motto from “Believe, Obey, Fight,” to “Faith, Hope, and Charity: faith in Divine Providence, hope in victory, charity for the country.”<sup>60</sup>

Where would the Duce launch his new government? Rome, he told Dollmann, was out of the question, for its ungrateful citizens, having done nothing to free him after he had been taken prisoner, deserved only disdain.<sup>61</sup> Neither was the Third Reich in favor of Mussolini’s return to Rome, citing the proximity of Allied bombing and a meddling Vatican. Behind the rhetoric lay the determination of Rahn and Kesselring to pre-empt the city and its environs free of Italian interference.<sup>62</sup>

To forestall a total German absorption of the frontier province of Tyrol by the newly-appointed Gauleiter Franz Hofer, Mussolini suggested Merano or Bolzano as his new seat of government, but obviously, the Germans would not approve the Duce’s despairing gesture. The Italian finger then fell on Milan, Fascism’s “moral capital” as a suitable “natural choice,” but the provincial center of Lombardy was likewise discarded for posing an easy target to Allied air bombardment.<sup>63</sup> The Germans ended all discussion when they required that Mussolini set up shop in the Villa

<sup>58</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 101.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 48, and in Giorgio Bocca, *Storia dell’Italia partigiana* (Rome-Bari: La Terza, 1997), p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> “Credere, Obbedire, Combattere” ... “Fede, Speranza, Carità: fede nella Divina Provvidenza, speranza nella vittoria, carità di patria.”

<sup>61</sup> Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, p. 290.

<sup>62</sup> Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della repubblica sociale italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2012), p. 88.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.



Feltrinelli in the sleepy town of Salò on Lake Garda, far from bracing urban centers such as Milan or Rome. Describing his new quarters as “lugubrious and hostile,” the Duce lamented that “the lake” represented “a compromise between the river and the sea; and I don’t like compromises.”<sup>64</sup>

To underline the renewed ideological solidarity between the two regimes, Hitler strongly urged the Duce to include “Fascism” in the new Italian state’s title, but since the Fascist canon had fallen into disrepute, Mussolini, on 25 November 1943, formally ushered into existence the more neutral-sounding Italian Social Republic. This was to be Mussolini’s final crack at holding power.

The Germans had given Mussolini what he wanted: an endorsement of his Salò government and the status of ally. The regime would jettison the old motto of “toward the people,” and work explicitly “with the people.” On the face of it, for many Italians, this sounded like a better deal than the polite fiction of “co-belligerent status” that the Western Powers conceded the discredited royal Italian government in the South. With three-quarters of Italy—the territory not occupied by the Allies—Mussolini asserted RSI sovereignty and continuation of the alliance with the Third Reich.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 52.



## CHAPTER 3

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# A Convoluted Fascist Revival

What prompted people to throw in their lot with Mussolini? Superficially, many Italians who opted for the fledgling Salò Republic were driven by the same motive that persuaded their fellow citizens to join the Kingdom of the South or the resistance: to forge a “reborn Italy” featuring patriotism and national honor, where fatherland would supersede party and ideology. Indeed, Fascists and partisans competed for the monopoly of the national mythology from the Risorgimento to the Great War, whereby each side claimed to have inherited the heroic feats of men engaged in the battle for unification. By declaring national heroes such as Mazzini and Garibaldi as their own, Fascists and partisans alike claimed to be fighting and sacrificing for the salvation and greatness of their country. But when fanatic, intransigent Fascism seized the upper hand in Mussolini’s regime, the existence of common aims vanished into thin air.

Supporters of the RSI at first seemed roughly to break down into two camps, which created a kind of dual-track Fascism: moderates who from patriotic duty paid highest tribute to the continuity of the state, and radicals who exalted the party as the engine to fascistize the state. Nonetheless, both these Fascist wings were held together by a fierce loyalty to Mussolini, who stood as a living symbol of national redemption. Since the moderates did not doubt that the Nazi wrecking crew was poised to exact revenge, those who took up positions in the new government believed that only Mussolini, thanks to his friendship with Hitler, would be able to stave off

the terrible trials inflicted on the Poles. On the other hand, embattled hard-core Fascist radicals, unconcerned about German occupation, looked forward to infusing a renewed Fascism with its old uncontaminated *squadrista* and syndicalist origins of the early 1920s by inflicting Nazi-style totalitarian principles on the Italian people. Above and beyond the views of the moderates and radicals, the majority of Italians in the RSI found themselves in a grey zone, mainly preoccupied with survival and therefore had little time for reflection on ideology. Among the *gagà*, youth who were indifferent and showed little concern in the fate of their country, fiery Fascists stood out. Said one: "I suffer much seeing the youth of today so weak and without sentiment ... the *patria* has need of us young ones ... I am fed up with the Badoglio crowd and I cannot bear finding myself in the midst of fence-sitters."<sup>1</sup>

Before proceeding, a clarification of terms is in order. Determined anti-Fascist critics are given to labeling supporters of the RSI *repubblichini* (little republicans), a derogatory term denoting supine followers of the RSI and small-minded "servants of Hitler." Although there is more than a grain of truth in that this description of *repubblichini*, this narrative will avoid the term in favor of the more neutral *repubblicani*. One should also be careful to avoid the ploy of RSI followers who equate *repubblicani* with the "boys of Salò" for the purpose of suggesting that the regime enjoyed the support of "heroic combatants" fighting for the "honor, country, and loyalty" of a "noble Fascist regime."

Staffing the new government was anything but easy in those untidy times. The events of 8 September had brought a sudden halt to official business. Telephones rang unanswered; ministers cleared their desks and headed home, some never to return. The bureaucratic citadels of power emptied out.<sup>2</sup> This administrative disorientation caused state authority to crumble overnight. There was left only an ephemeral governor-general in Rome. Against tremendous odds he struggled to find a foothold. He received the assistance of General Count Calvi di Bergolo, who, as the commander of the one Italian division in Rome, was the only person capable of preserving order in the Italian capital around whom civil servants

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, p. 268.

<sup>2</sup> General Taylor had direct experience dealing with this kind of power void. Sent by his military command to Rome on the night of 7 September to prepare for a parachute drop to chase the German and Italian troops out of the city, he discovered that Badoglio had gone to bed, while the commander of the armed forces, General Ambrosio, was in Turin with his family. Aga Rossi, *Una nazione allo sbando*, p. 125.

could rally. What next? Left high and dry, the state workforce felt deprived of official guidance, a guaranteed salary, pride of place as authority figures, and an orderly life defined by official regulations and perquisites.

It did not help Mussolini that a great number of the civil servants living in Rome immediately retired or started to make their way south to link up with Badoglio's government rather than packing their bags for a nerve-racking trek into the wilderness of Salò's rule. Aware of the need to fill yawning holes in the administrative machinery, Mussolini hoped to induce the state employees to eschew premature retirement by shifting their allegiance from the discredited king to the RSI. Otherwise, he would not have a stable governmental apparatus for mastering the general chaos, restoring confidence, and preventing German inroads. Monetary bounties, inflated salaries, and large house-moving coverage were handed out to lure civil servants back to their jobs.<sup>3</sup> Mussolini did not refrain from employing coercion—loss of office, arrest, and the stigma of deserter—against those who ignored his call.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the blandishments and intimidation, Mussolini's efforts to buttonhole the old employees produced a stack of false medical excuses submitted by men who preferred to sit out the RSI. Unwilling to lose their social standing in Rome based on family and neighborly ties, many were not prepared for a "jump in the dark" by moving north.

Still, some former "servants of the state" ended up seeking security in the RSI. Moved by patriotic feeling, scores of prefects and bureaucrats, who considered capitulation a national disgrace and a sell-out of their country, joined too. The state must endure. Others were of a more opportunistic bent. Employment in the RSI would guarantee them a livelihood. While working in the bureaucratic cocoon, they could maintain a watch-and-wait attitude. By avoiding the stigma of collaborator, they hoped to get around the opprobrium of the Allied victors in order to keep their jobs in the postwar Italian government. As the fortunes of war stacked up against the RSI, they could gain points with the conquerors by fashioning a record of passive resistance to the state.

But these traditional "classical" functionaries were to encounter a new kind of "servant of the state," the political party zealots who accused them of anti-Fascism. The radical newcomers alleged that the old "white-collar

<sup>3</sup> Marco Borghi, *Tra Fascio Littorio e senso dello stato: funzionari, apparati, ministeri nella Repubblica Sociale Italiana, 1943–1945* (Padua: CLUEP, 2002), p. 87,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

shirts” belonged to secret Masonic lodges and were Anglophiles embracing defeatism, being two-faced (*doppiogiochismo*), and ideological agnostics.<sup>5</sup> Regime-appointed provincial heads (formerly called prefects) selected for their loyalty to the party were poised to challenge and replace the traditional “apolitical” functionaries. Still, of the first seventy nominated by the RSI, 70 percent were non-career Fascists. Regarding the *questori* (heads of local police), who originated mostly from the Militia, or were former military commanders still loyal to the regime, the proportion was more favorable to Fascist politicians.<sup>6</sup>

Pavolini confirmed this at the congress held in Verona on 14 November 1943 by stating: “As we go gradually, the *questori* will start to be chosen mostly among *federale* comrades and the *podestà* (a magistrate in an Italian municipality or an administrative head of an Italian commune appointed by Fascists) from among the *squadristi*” (squads).<sup>7</sup> But fissures did appear within broader Fascist circles between the new provincial heads and the *federale* of the PFR who, operating everywhere, formed epicenters of *squadre* anarchy. These evolving rivalries among Fascists at all levels of government hampered any internal effort to repair and restore a workable administrative apparatus in the country.

Many old comrades discouraged Mussolini from speaking either of Fascism or of a government parented by Fascism. Instead, they wanted him to lead a movement of national regeneration that transcended ideology by forging a strong government composed of men of diverse origins and beliefs. The clarion call “Long live the nation, death to factionalism” (*Viva la nazione, a morte la fazione*) resonated loud and clear to Fascist moderates bent on fighting for “unity, honor, and country.” They wanted to avoid a fraternal bloodbath by proposing a program that consisted of a constitutional assembly, end of the one-party system, social reforms, and certain press freedoms—a program tantamount to a radical renovation of Fascism that would progressively abandon dictatorship and the embarrassing alliance with Nazi Germany. Totally disabused of Badoglio and the king, the moderates counted on the Duce to refrain from asking them to choose between loyalty to Fascist values and devotion to the

<sup>5</sup> Marco Borghi, “Personale civile e burocrazia,” in Sergio Bugiardini, ed., *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), pp. 340–41.

<sup>6</sup> Massimo Legnani, “Potere, società, ed. economia della RSI,” in Pier Piaggio Poggio, ed., *La Repubblica sociale italiana 1943–45 (Atti del Convegno, Brescia 4–5 ottobre 1965)* (Brescia: Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 1986), pp. 229–61.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La Repubblica*, p. 93.

national cause. They considered Germans as allies but foreigners; the partisans, of course, were enemies, but Italians.

An old Fascist war hawk, the futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti warned of civil war caused by ideological strife: "We must find new subjects of national unity; otherwise the Italian instinct for partisanship will prepare other and greater sources of grief."<sup>8</sup> Many agreed. The "honest and worthy" Carlo Alberto Biggini, who left the post of rector of the University of Padova to assume the portfolio of Education Minister,<sup>9</sup> wrote Pavolini that he was opposed to any Fascist "resurrection."<sup>10</sup> A leading apostle of unity, Giorgio Pini, the editor of the newspaper *Resto del Carlino*, and later undersecretary of the interior in October 1944, suggested that the Fascist authorities conduct a campaign in every province aiming at national concord.<sup>11</sup> Concetto Pettinato, the influential editor of *La Stampa*, wrote that the war would not be lost if unity prevailed.<sup>12</sup> The *federale* of Venice, Eugenio Montesi, published a manifesto affirming the need for fraternity among all Italians without distinction of party. The *federali* of Pisa and Verona shared his views.<sup>13</sup>

Other well-known voices spoke out for reconciliation. Giovanni Gentile, the greatest Italian philosopher of the time (together with Benedetto Croce), was among them. On 28 December 1943 the daily *Corriere della Sera*, which had the largest circulation of any newspaper in Italy, published Gentile's appeal under the title "Rebuild" ("*Ricostruire*"), in which he urged Fascists to avoid revenge and factionalism by going toward the masses.<sup>14</sup>

The concepts of honor, faith, and betrayal became the lodestar of various monarchists of secure Fascist faith who had rejected King Victor Emmanuel. They included Gentile, Rolando Ricci, Pettinato, Mazzolini, and Anfuso, all of whom were moderate Fascists not drawn to Mussolini's so-called "republicanism."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 5.

<sup>9</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 214–15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, pp. 123–24.

<sup>12</sup> Perticone, *La repubblica di Salò*, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini: A Study in Power* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1964), p. 577.

<sup>14</sup> Giovanni Gentile, "Ricostruire," *Il Corriere della sera*, 28 December 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Parlato, *Fascisti senza Mussolini*, p. 15.

All the above were united around the principle that the people should unite in lifting Italians from the ashes of national humiliation. High governmental functionaries and military officers refused to abandon their German brothers-in-arms by joining up with the “traitors” king and Badoglio, who, they firmly believed, had unscrupulously broken with an ally in a manner unequaled anywhere else in World War II. Although flocking to the RSI for different reasons, most people holding a high position were captivated by the cult of the nation and the myth of war. As the avant-garde of the new Italy, an Italian revolution meant not social subversion and the overthrow of the pillars of bourgeois society but a reconstruction of the nation by means of a regeneration of the Italian people. But inherent in these appeals for reconciliation rested a demand: Fascists of all stripes should cooperate with the dictatorship to “save Italy” first. Afterward, they could put forward proposals containing a carefully limited political liberty that included a degree of press freedom and a lack of severe restrictions on speech. Having pursued anti-Fascists over the past twenty years, the moderate Fascists had no trouble joining the zealots in insisting that everyone should strive to keep both Mussolini and his regime in power. Speaking for the moderate Fascists and jingoistic conservatives who threw in their lot with Mussolini’s new government, the diplomat Luigi Bolla viewed the Duce as the unique person to spare Italy worse pain by shielding the homeland from the “*furor teutonicus*.”<sup>16</sup>

Once again Mussolini would be called on to conquer indiscipline, cupidity, and martial spinelessness set off by the events of 8 September in heading a government consisting of aroused Italians committed to a unifying Salò regime. For them, preservation of the nation’s territorial integrity and recovery of the lost empire overrode ideological conviction. They sought to safeguard the public finances, the industrial patrimony, the independence of the magistracy, and the country against Nazi spoliation. Unlike the bloody dictators Stalin and Hitler, the Duce, the Salò conservatives believed, was neither fixated on vengeance nor galvanized by relentless political ambition. Shamed by Italy’s humiliating defeats, Mussolini was expected to redeem honor for himself and country by superintending a military resurgence that would earn German respect, thus overcoming the deadly moral inferiority caused by the recent history of betrayals. If destiny should bring a German victory, Mussolini, as Hitler’s faithful second, would share the fruits of conquest. Many Salò

<sup>16</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 100; De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, II: 66.

Italians did not see Germans as Nazis, but as difficult and imperious allies.<sup>17</sup> Minimize the errors, emphasize the successes, treat aspiration as accomplished reality, and saddle faults on others—this was the train of thought of the Duce’s many apologists and supporters.

History seemed to provide the moderates a persuasive lesson, for there was some evidence from the past to suggest that Mussolini, when backed into a corner, would widen his support by reaching out beyond intransigent Fascist circles. During the July crisis of 1943, Biggini was charged with the task of sounding out the old nationalist politician Vittorio Emanuele Orlando to participate in a government of national unity, of which he would be the leader. The prominent businessman Alberto Pirelli wrote: “Mussolini went to the king (after the Grand Council vote) believing that he would receive a mandate to form a new national government!”<sup>18</sup> Would this expediency become a rule or be an exception?

In contrast to the conservative nationalists and conventional bureaucratic sorts, who perceived Mussolini as a shock-absorber between the Italian people and vengeful German marauders, the RSI Fascist diehards whom he appointed to high positions in the government were an activist troupe that anticipated a return to the party’s revolutionary origins. Such a Fascist facelift would incite the squads to exact vengeance against those responsible for a catastrophic past. The true enemy of Fascism, in their view, had turned out to have been opportunistic supporters (*fiancheggiatori*): the monarchy, military, the old ruling classes and capitalists who had deceived and betrayed Mussolini.

Youths in waves hastened to join the new Fascist movement. In their rebellion against tradition and the straight-laced bourgeois life, they yearned for adventure and violence. Sensing imminent doom in a twilight zone, these youthful combatants were fascinated by symbols of death. As Umberto Eco observed, no political or ideological movement had been so resolutely enamored of dying nobly.<sup>19</sup> “The new men” of the RSI demanded a social revolution from below that would purge the time servers and social climbers in the elephantine state bureaucracy, who had corrupted the original revolutionary spirit of the Fascist movement.

The intransigent Fernando Mezzasoma, Mussolini’s minister of popular culture, issued press orders to ignore appeals of the “pietistic and pusillanimous” that were urging reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> His aim was to weed out

<sup>17</sup> Vivarelli, *La fine di una stagione*, pp. 23–24.

<sup>18</sup> Alberto Pirelli, *Taccuini: 1922–1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), p. 437.

<sup>19</sup> Umberto Eco, *Sette anni di desideri* (Milan: Bombiani, 1983), p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 122.



the moderates and their followers from the government and press, expecting that, in a full-blown authoritarian regime, staunch Fascists would sweep away bureaucratic deadwood, emasculate the bourgeois *classe dirigente*, revamp the social order, revitalize the Militia, and intensify the anti-Communist crusade. For the radicals, Fascism was not just ideology but a comprehensive spiritual way of life. Only through mystical sacrifice could Fascism thrive. Its failure would represent not the end of a political era but the end of the world. The young intransigents and old *squadristi*, such as the followers of Pavolini, Mezzasoma, and Farinacci, were guardians of the flame of ideological purity until the “*bella morte*.”

Animated by the cry “Long live death,” clusters of rogue Fascist squads from the founding of the regime launched indiscriminate violence throughout the country against wavering souls and suspected enemies, especially Communists and Jews.<sup>21</sup> Maddened by the tepid moderate and conservative pompous hierarchs of an older generation, the born-again Fascists aimed to purify the body politic by bringing to trial for treason “traitors” such as Dino Grandi, Galeazzo Ciano, Emilio De Bono, Luigi Federzoni, and the king. Kangaroo courts would be set up to rig the hearings and assure the death penalty. In November 1943 Pavolini published an order for the federations to found extraordinary tribunals that would send opponents of the regime to the firing squad for every Fascist killed.<sup>22</sup>

Thus a hodgepodge of disharmonious factions jostled each other in this RSI politically chaotic polyarchy: zealous Fascists raging against those whom they perceived to have deserted Mussolini through hypocrisy, lies, and cowardice; traditional nationalists who could not shed the glory of empire; reconcilers who searched for shared ground and national unity; patriots who aimed to restore the nation’s honor tarnished by the king and Badoglio; social innovators and syndicalists who wanted to initiate essential structural reform of the economy by rebuilding from the ground up; opportunists who thought only of saving their skins and their positions; and criminal psychopaths who saw in the restoration of Fascism a heaven-sent opportunity to unleash their bestial instincts against those who had infuriated them for whatever reason. Finally, there were natural

<sup>21</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della Repubblica sociale italiana*, pp. 70–79.

<sup>22</sup> Numerous articles were published in the Salò press against the old hierarchs, who, after 25 July, had dropped out of sight or, worse, had actually written Badoglio asking for employment in his new government. Thus did these articles brand this breed of Fascist with the headline “*Gerarcone, dove sei?*” (“Gerarcone, Where Are You?”) For example, in *Brigata Nera Aldo Resega*, 27 January 1945.

delinquents who mouthed Fascist slogans as they looted, raped, and dined in the criminal underworld that flourished in a lawless RSI environment. Often there was no rhyme or reason behind individual choices. Surprisingly, some old Fascists who had originally welcomed Germans disappeared from public view, while other Italians, for whom Fascism was a stunt and who were decidedly anti-German, hastened to serve Salò: “For Italy, yes; for Fascism, no: My country right or wrong.”

Was the RSI that inherited power in northern Italy simply a Babel of braying voices in a setting of conflicting histories and mystical experiences? There were a lot of criss-crossing and overlapping currents among various factions that created confusion, for instance, in the use of the terms “moderate” as opposed to “intransigent” Fascist (or Fascist *à outrance*). Farinacci was an intransigent who was a redoubtable foe of Socialization, Giorgio Pini a moderate who likewise opposed “leftism” in all its forms. Neither does neo-Fascism, new Fascism, or renovated Fascism clearly define lines among RSI supporters.<sup>23</sup>

The existence of these various currents has defied the efforts of many memorialists to describe well-defined categories within the Fascist movement. Writers on the economic left, who aligned themselves with Socialization, could be entirely unyielding in their attitude toward anti-Fascists. And it was not unusual to find people who were favorably disposed toward the Nazis to be adamantly opposed to the deportation of Jews. Although allegiance to certain political currents was important in defining where one stood in the Fascist galaxy, more salient were the out-and-out power struggles that took place among competing factions striving to gain the ear of the Duce.

But there were common denominators. Salò represented fidelity to a system of values extraneous from prosaic politics. All Fascists were agreed that the new RSI, a virtuous nation filled with idealistic warriors, if living under the German ally's umbrella, was a more honorable path to take as compared to the “faint-hearted” and “servile” Italians whose “government” at Brindisi held only shadowy power under Allied dictation. All RSI followers were united in perceiving Italy to be a unique civilization deserving of empire. And almost without exception they were tightly bonded to the Duce as the only one capable of forging a resurrected Italy that could exercise a *peso determinante* among plutocratic Anglo-Americans, a terrifying Soviet

<sup>23</sup> Daniella Gagliani, “Biografie di ‘repubblicchini,’” in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, pp. 205–13.

Union, and the overbearing Third Reich. Moreover, RSI devotees shared a deep resentment of the Allies for unleashing carpet bombings that took place with particular savagery between 6 August and the armistice of 8 September.<sup>24</sup> They looked on with horror as their major cities collapsed into rubble, forcing residents to scramble for safety in the surrounding countryside.<sup>25</sup> Why, they asked, would the Allies terrorize a country that was pondering a change of sides? And were they not simply hypocritical by smugly pointing out the superiority of democracy while backing the disreputable former Fascist general Pietro Badoglio, who had come to power not by popular or parliamentary vote but by a thoroughly discredited king's machinations? Revenge was in the air: a recharged party would whip up the country for a fight to the finish against cold-blooded Allies and Badoglio turncoats who answered Allied bombing raids with grounded planes and hushed anti-aircraft batteries.

Indeed, one can find unanimity behind the Fascist religious idolatry of *patria*, as opposed to *politica*, a Western European concept denoting parties that, in the view of the Fascists, divided and weakened the organic unity of the state by its appeal to individual selfishness and materialism. Most Fascists and their fellow travelers believed in an authoritarian country

<sup>24</sup>Just after Badoglio had sent representatives to Lisbon to negotiate with the Allies an Italian departure from the war "with honor," they answered with a new bombardment of Rome on 13 August that inflicted serious damage on San Lorenzo. Between 7 and 17 August, the Allies hit Naples, Genoa, Milan, and Turin in powerful raids directed against heavy concentrations of civilians rather than industrial targets in the belief that the Italian longing for peace, intensified by waves of bombs falling from the air, would leave Badoglio no choice but to ask for an armistice. Claudia Baldoli and Andrew Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy under Allied Air Attack, 1940–1945* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 22, 39. During the same period Allied planes destroyed or seriously damaged 80 percent of Milan's historical center, which indicated a message to convince Badoglio that the alternative to unconditional surrender would be total war. Anthony Majanlahti and Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Roma occupata 1943–1944* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2010), p. 59.

<sup>25</sup>At first, uncertain how to react to the news of Mussolini's fall, the Allies briefly suspended the air raids. But in the belief that the Badoglio regime could be forced to seek peace terms by a resumption of the bombing campaign against Rome and Naples, they broke the four-day respite on 31 July. Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 527. There was to be no let-up. On 10 March 1944, the police chief of Arezzo reported to the Fascist head that Allied bombings had "disintegrated" civil life in the city. Cited in Vitoria C. Belco, *War, Massacre, and Recovery in Central Italy 1943–1948* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 7.

founded on hierarchy, militarism, and racism<sup>26</sup>; hence their hatred of democracy and the Enlightenment. Mesmerized by fear of fragmentation, RSI Fascists looked to a supreme charismatic figure such as the Duce, once more the man of the hour, to prevent a relapse into the old regionalism and distrust of centralized authority that preceded Italian unification and threatened to disrupt unity down to the end of World War I. As a strong enforcer of the public order founded on *combattentismo*, no Fascist government would allow Italy to be a powerless and small neutral state such as Switzerland or reduced to yet another Balkan fragment. Mussolini came into power originally to invigorate the fragile unity of the state by hyper-nationalist appeals and implementation of a hierarchical social order founded on the warrior ideal while vowing to stem Communism. If he had failed during his first round in power, this time he would succeed, supposedly by learning from his mistakes.

In keeping with his customary aloofness—beholden to no faction or power group among Fascists—Mussolini wanted to be thought of as the italics of the republic, the man on hand to resolve crises. On 15 September 1943 he took a step in the radical direction by issuing a directive that vouchsafed in the PFR responsibility for undertaking exemplary punishment of party card holders who were guilty of “vile behavior” and had conducted themselves as traitors following the collapse of the regime. This measure pleased the non-compromisers among the Duce’s followers bent on punishing the do-nothings, the fence sitters, and covert opponents. There was, for the Fascists, an insufferably strong current of *attesismo* (a careful wait-and-see attitude) in the population among those who, feeling at the mercy of events, felt powerless to do anything but wait for the Allies to arrive. These people took the Salò regime to be simply a disagreeable caretaker. To dodge the roving squads searching for them, many people observed a studied silence or hid behind the curtains, aloof attitudes that maddened zealous Fascists no end. By use of the old and raw language of the piazza, and by resorting to the public hanging of victims in crude demonstrations of their funereal pedagogy, the RSI aimed at smothering skepticism and building a freshly minted Fascist character.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Gagliani, “Biografie di ‘repubblicchini,” in *Violenza, tragedia, e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Mario Isnenghi, “L’esposizione della morte,” in Gabrielle Ranzato, ed., *Guerre fratricide. Le guerre civili in età contemporanea* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1994), pp. 336–37.

In a first radio broadcast on 18 September 1943, Mussolini declared: “Blackshirts! Italian men and women! Our postulates are the following: we must take up arms again alongside Germany, Japan, and the other allies. Only blood can wash away such a shameful page of the history of our country. We must prepare the reorganization of our armed forces around the Militia formations without delay ... We must eliminate the traitors ... from the Party and those who have sold themselves to the enemy. We must annihilate the parasitic plutocracies and make labor the theme of our economy and the indestructible basis of the State.”<sup>28</sup> Exemplary punishment was in store for the “vile traitors” who had brought his regime down.<sup>29</sup> No less was Mussolini’s determination to revamp the Axis. Obsessed by military defeat, he would not rest until his country’s fighting spirit had been restored.<sup>30</sup>

Mussolini was deeply shamed by Badoglio’s about-face against the German ally: “For foreigners, it was Italy that had betrayed, Italy as a historical, geographical, political, and moral expression. The climate where betrayal could flourish was Italian. Everyone had to a greater or lesser extent contributed to this climate, including millions and millions of assiduous listeners of Radio London who had taken on and imparted in others the current condition of willful laziness.”<sup>31</sup> The Duce bluntly admitted to Dolfin that the Germans had reason to be angry: “We have to admit that their anger has an incontrovertible basis that justifies and explains their fury. 8 September reveals a treacherous knife, the base treason, the vile betrayal that disqualify us as individuals and as a people. And the Germans certainly are not the only ones who despise us at this moment.”<sup>32</sup>

As did the Germans, therefore, Mussolini attributed 8 September to Italian cowardice and duplicity.<sup>33</sup> But the politician in him knew that no gain in political maneuverability at home or independence from the Third Reich would be possible without broad and popular support. A certain General Luna affirmed to Dolfin that a coalition government was needed—a *comitato di salute pubblica*—that would draw together patriots of all

<sup>28</sup> OO, XXXII: 4.

<sup>29</sup> Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 14, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler*, p. 55; Giovanni Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1949), pp. 26–27.

<sup>31</sup> Benito Mussolini, *Storia di un anno. Il tempo del bastone e della carota* (Milan: Mondadori, 1944), pp. 60–61.

<sup>32</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> OO, XXXII: 260.

political faiths to save the country.<sup>34</sup> To capitalize on the wide-ranging disillusionment with the Italian monarchy,<sup>35</sup> in a ploy to attract support from the proletarian class, Mussolini aired a plan to give workers a measure of control and profit in the factories.

Meanwhile, Pavolini headed to Rome to plan the formation of a new government. It was he, in the absence of Mussolini, who presided over the first Council of Ministers, which took place at the German embassy on 23 September. Losing no time in resurrecting party organizations throughout northern Italy, based on *squadristi* and the old intransigent extremists, Pavolini, from the beginning of the RSI regime, relentlessly aimed at heading a streamlined and hardcore Fascist Party, an aim that not infrequently clashed with Mussolini's occasionally more accommodating efforts of broadening party support by reaching out to moderate Fascists.<sup>36</sup>

Having piloted a German warplane from Munich to his home at Rocca delle Caminate in the company of SS watchdogs, Mussolini, at his first meeting of the nascent Fascist cabinet on the 27th, put aside Pavolini's inflexibility by expounding on unifying themes, promising "in grand style" to lay the foundation for a Constituent Assembly. By thus grounding the character of his rule in law, he would terminate the provisional status of the current government. Assuming the functions of head of state, the Duce aimed to promulgate socialization measures and worker self-government. Furthermore, he would safeguard territorial integrity, political independence, and a prominent position for his nation in the world. By casting a wide net, the Duce expected to earn the collaboration of the RSI's administrative machinery, which was suffering from growing pains caused by the many discordant and uncoordinated voices. Not infrequently, he was inclined to give a hearing to those advocating a range of Fascist interpretations.

In this compromising spirit Mussolini charged the journalist Bruno Spampanato, editor of the Roman paper *Il Messaggero*, to write up a program that would outline a refurbished and updated version of Fascism. To make this credible, Mussolini showed a readiness to water down Fascism's original revolutionary ideas. Furthermore, he would avoid a resumption of

<sup>34</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Goebbels, however, records: "The Duce is still somewhat hesitant about taking this action as he is of course aware of the strong ties between the Italian people and the royal house, and knows that these ties cannot be severed lightly." *The Goebbels Diaries*, p. 519.

<sup>36</sup> Roberto D'Angeli, *Storia Del Partito Fascista Repubblicano* (Rome: Castelvich, 2016), pp. 29–34.

the old system of Fascism/regime that had ended up a clamorous failure caused by a lack of involvement of people in the regime.<sup>37</sup> Carlo Alberto Biggini and the octogenarian sage Vittorio Olandi Ricci, Mussolini's "Socrates," were likewise drafted to be major craftsmen of the document.<sup>38</sup>

Continuing in a conciliatory mode, Mussolini suddenly announced an amnesty that ran counter to Pavolini's determination to institute immediately a purge of all "traitors" within and enemies outside the Fascist Party. While the constitutional nature of his regime was being worked out, Mussolini promised to refrain from punishing those who, "in their 'unconscionably infantile aberration,'" had originally put their hopes in Badoglio's government, or those who felt the pressure to pose as anti-Fascists. The general rule of the RSI tribunals was for all practical purposes not rigid, particularly with respect to the hierarchs who had "betrayed the Fascist idea," or those who had placed themselves at the disposal of Badoglio immediately after 25 July. The last secretary of the party, Carlo Scorza, and the head of the Militia Enzo Galbiati, as well as other minor figures were absolved or given lenient sentences. Only for the "conspirators" of the Grand Council, and Admirals Campioni and Mascherpa, the military commanders of the Dodecanese, did Mussolini show no mercy by rejecting every petition for pardon.

On more than one occasion the Duce gave a hearing to those advocating a range of Fascist interpretations. Hence Bruno Spampanato, counting on Mussolini's "reformist" impulses, did not speak alone in suggesting that the hatchet be buried with anti-Fascists who abhorred the bourgeoisie in the common cause of Socialization, the true and authentic core of the Fascist revolution. Although a stalwart ally of Nazi Germany, Spampanato urged that parties be allowed to form and be given a limited freedom of expression. At the end of September 1943, a Communist spoke at a Fascist Party meeting in Venice. In Bologna, Giorgio Pini, editor of the revived *Il Resto del Carlino*, came out in favor of a national front.

The writer Carlo Silvestri, a long-standing interlocutor of Mussolini, joined in. Rise above the bayonets of fratricidal strife by opening a dialogue with moderate socialists, he suggested. Appalled by the Communist threat, Silvestri knew that a splintered RSI would render the country vulnerable. But Fascism should still be the ideological bedrock of government. To wean

<sup>37</sup> Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, "Fascisti repubblicani a Roma," in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, pp. 172–73.

<sup>38</sup> For particulars, see De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, II: 388–423.

like-minded Socialists from the anti-Fascist adversary, Silvestri aimed to exacerbate the differences between the Committee of National Liberation (*Comitato di liberazione nazionale*-CLN) leading the resistance, the Badoglio government, and the Allies by harping on the Red Scare.

Such animated conversations and exchange of letters with intellectuals titillated Mussolini's imagination. But while enjoying the challenge, he rarely took their advice. More powerful than the spirit of reconciliation, in the end, was the impulse of revenge, particularly retribution against those "false Fascists" who, having amassed medals and honors, had betrayed him at the moment of truth on 25 July.<sup>39</sup> The RSI's obsession over the events of that black day was highlighted by Mussolini's call for the establishment of a *Tribunale Speciale Straordinario* in October 1943, which, in a spirit of vendetta, would purge from the administration Fascist political and military profiteers who contributed to the downfall of the regime and condemn to death traitors of Fascism, which included a pool of moderates he had once sought to appease. This renewed hard line was consistent with the thinking of his cabinet, led by Pavolini, eager to be done with discussion and to get on with Fascism *à outrance*.

Pavolini on 5 October put a damper on open discussion by instructing the party federations to clamp down on "pacification." "In the field of internal politics and relations between opponents and ex-opponents, it is, at least, useless to go on echoing here and there the positions taken up by Fascism in some provinces in the early days of reconstruction."<sup>40</sup>

Sensing a party rent by squabbling, Mussolini aimed to pull factions together by having them share lofty goals. First, Fascism must put to rights the "*rivoluzione mancata*" by calling up dormant themes from the past. Hence, he prepared a manifesto that anticipated profit sharing, land reform, public housing, and wage and price controls. Cornerstones of this incipient *socializzazione* theme included full-scale nationalization of public services and joint management of enterprises by employers and workers. The capitalist grandees, he promised, would be held on a tight leash. In a tenuous balancing act, Mussolini hoped that his proposals would undercut proletarian support of the partisans without alienating the industrial leaders of northern Italy who had in the past been Fascist supporters.<sup>41</sup> In

<sup>39</sup> OO, XXXII: 6.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 215.

<sup>41</sup> Rahn claims that he had succeeded in watering down the socialist tendencies in the declaration in order to relieve the anxieties of Italian business producing war materials. Cospito and Neulen, *Salò-Berlin: L'alleanza difficile*, p. 62.



this program, there was much verbosity and little clarity. Mussolini promised the paradise of *socializzazione* and of Fascist justice, but in what amounted to a rhetorical exercise he gave only a sketchy view of the corporatism that had formed an essential touchstone of Fascist ideology during the years of the regime. Do we have here once again mixed signals emitted by a “conciliatory” Mussolini unpredictably making U-turns by supporting the unyielding Pavolini?

At the Verona party conference on 14 November 1943, held in a magnificent room of the Castelvechio, Mussolini, choosing to sit out the event, charged Pavolini to read the opening speech that he had composed.<sup>42</sup> Luckily for all, Farinacci did not show up either.

Pavolini mooted a question of utmost importance: the election of a new constituent assembly that the Duce had first promised the cabinet on 27 September to broaden his popular support.<sup>43</sup> As an expression of the national will, such a constituent assembly held out the unique possibility of legitimizing the new regime instead of having it rest on sheer force and propped up by Germans.

Instead of allowing discussion, however, Pavolini, in the Duce’s absence, shelved a constituent assembly in favor of a party congress. The diplomat Filippo Anfuso gave the reasons why: “The project of the Constituent Assembly delineated in the Verona manifesto was unrealizable, particularly from the technical point of view, because, in an invaded nation that is at war the wish to convene a permanent assembly, even as a prologue to a laudable Valmy, encountered the contempt of the Germans.”<sup>44</sup> In these stormy days filled with armed conflict and civil war, let alone the German occupation of the Alto Adige and Venezia Giulia, how could a constituent assembly be convoked?<sup>45</sup> The urgent tasks immediately facing Italians were clear: “Less talk of a Constituent Assembly and more devotion to fighting”—on the side of the Germans.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup>The original record of the debate can be found in the ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 70. The text has been published by Marino Viganò, *Il Congresso di Verona (14 novembre 1943): Una antologia di documenti e testimonianze* (Rome: Settimo Sigillo, 1994).

<sup>43</sup>Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>44</sup>Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al lago di Garda*, p. 418.

<sup>45</sup>At the Council of Ministers of 18 December, a constituent assembly was once again considered, but, for the same reasons, unceremoniously dropped. Maria Romana Scardaccione, ed., *Verballi del Consiglio dei Ministri della Repubblica Sociale Italiana. Settembre 1943-aprile 1945* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali. Direzione generale degli archivi, 2002), p. 162.

<sup>46</sup>This was the interpretation offered by journalist Giuseppe Morelli in the *Corriere della Sera*, cited in Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, pp. 56–57.

The walls of the Verona assembly reverberated with passion. “*Evviva il manganello e la camicia nera*,” shouted the activists. A strange mélange of the discontented dominated the conference: moderates wanting to resolve problems unhampered by ideological constraints; Blackshirt hooligans preying on the defenseless; angry firebrands moved by revenge; *puri e duri* deaf to ideological compromise; and, finally, the well-intentioned, who, as the war continued, ended up in absenteeism and silence, appalled by the continuing disasters.

In preparing for his “finest hour,” Pavolini, “his face marked by a badly shaved beard, donned a black bush jacket and wore a black beret modeled on the type worn by the German SS.”<sup>47</sup> By passionately letting fly fighting words, he seemed to have fought off both a cluster of extremist rivals—Farinacci, Preziosi, and Ricci—and moderates clamoring to be heard. When Pavolini declared that the Militia, consisting of action squads, “the spring of our life,” must take over the political and armed national police,<sup>48</sup> the radicals cheered lustily. Pavolini had invited them to undertake vendettas against enemies and flout the state apparatus stifling revolutionary vitality. Since he had tightened the reins on newspaper editors after so much “serenading” of anti-Fascists, gone was any suggestion to allow the press leeway to explore “reconciliation.”<sup>49</sup> Pavolini’s message was clear: the only legitimate Italy was one composed of *squadristi*. And he or she who was against Fascism was against Italy. There would be no mercy, only punishment of traitors and vengeance against those not considered as patriots. The party congress dissolved in shouting matches and few ideas, save revenge against the “criminals” of 25 July. As the meeting closed down, Pavolini proclaimed “enduring devotion to the Führer and to Germany.”<sup>50</sup>

Disgruntled by Mussolini’s constant dillydallying, the in-your-face radicals led by Pavolini had knocked him off his perch as the omnipotent Duce speaking ex cathedra. Instead, he had become more the arbitrator of conflicting forces within the party.<sup>51</sup> A breach had opened between Pavolini, the party leader in charge of a narrow radical Fascist base, and the head of state, Mussolini, who was pondering an opening of the ranks to create a

<sup>47</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Innocenti, *Mussolini a Salò*, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Osti Guerrazzi, “Fascisti repubblicani a Roma,” p. 172.

<sup>50</sup> Rahn’s report to Berlin, in Cospito and Neulen, *Salò-Berlino*, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Mario Cuzzi, “Presupposti sociali ed. organizzativi della R.S.I.,” in Romain H. Rainero, ed., *L’Italia in Guerra: Il quarto anno-1943* (Rome: Commissione italiana di storia militare, 1994), p. 496.

mass party presiding over a broadened base of support. Sadly, Mussolini compared himself with Napoleon on the island of Elba, where the emperor held court and received the honors due to his rank but wielded no power.<sup>52</sup>

For most Italians, the conference might well have taken place on a remote planet. They did not respond to the event out of indifference or confusion over the uncontrollable rage that overshadowed any agreed-upon program or clarified ideological message. The Germans, on the other hand, were pleased. Even though not directly involved, they concluded that the Verona conference was “a kind of touchstone of the revolutionary possibilities of the Italian Social Republic,” which “revealed how the Italian Republic had burned bridges with the past and how it intended to be close to Germany in every way until the end.”<sup>53</sup>

During the closing stages of the conference, partisans cut down the *federale* of Ferrara, Igino Ghisellini. To wild cheers Pavolini launched squads on a punitive expedition that seized and assassinated eleven anti-Fascists and Jews. It was time to finish with conciliation. Pavolini happily passed on to Mussolini the news that justice had been done Fascist-style: “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” In a remark to Dolfin, the Duce had a different take: “When I speak of a ‘jungle,’ I mean that today the law of the forest, of the wild beasts, is in force in Italy.”<sup>54</sup> These contrasting viewpoints set up a controversy between Pavolini and Buffarini. The indignant provincial head Berti, who had sought to thwart the squads, demanded the support of Mussolini, who promised him that “justice will be done.” Pavolini, however, nominated the commander of the expedition as *federale commissario*, a move that appeared to challenge Buffarini, who, having joined Mussolini in openly criticizing the raid, reaffirmed his determination to abolish the *federale* police. But in the next breath he conceded that the party had every right to act with an “iron fist” because enough Fascists had already been assassinated.<sup>55</sup> Was this an RSI endorsement of revenge, a joke, or typical shadow-boxing on the part of Pavolini and Buffarini? Mussolini studiously avoided taking a position between them.

<sup>52</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, p. 578.

<sup>53</sup> Cited in Borghi, *Tra Fascio Littorio e senso dello stato*, p. 42.

<sup>54</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Unhappy over the aimless chatter and rowdy behavior displayed at the Verona congress,<sup>56</sup> Mussolini continued to waver between extreme repression and national reconciliation. Although clearly rejecting democratic “carnivals,” he was not averse to the involvement of former adversaries if they shared his desire to defend and reconstruct the nation. “No, we can’t ask people to be Fascist; but we demand that everyone be Italian.” At the same time, harried by the nature of insipid Fascism, the Duce was loath to allow the era of past rule—the theoretical or practical “flabby” variety—to replace the more extreme original catechism.<sup>57</sup> But if Mussolini was prepared to revise the old ideological admixture of nationalism, populism, and Socialism by burnishing some and discarding others, he bristled at any thought of compromise with the *classe dirigente* consisting of traditional local magnets, business moguls, and reactionary large landowners. Still, the Duce seemed unable to make a decisive choice between intransigent Fascism’s radical program and *trasformismo* to widen his power base.

On 1 December Mussolini seemed to opt for a tightening of the authoritarian screws by ordering the Council of Ministers to remand the convocation of a Constituent Assembly *sine die*. Italy must first resume its deserved high rank as a military power and Berlin must fully restore the RSI’s sovereign rights over the two German-seized provinces in the north: the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico.<sup>58</sup>

On 6 December 1943, in instructions sent to the provincial heads, Mussolini disparaged the “fetish” of free elections and freedom of the press; he would no longer tolerate ideological debate or any overture to anti-Fascism: “Newspapers range from colorless and dithering titles to pages filled with the most confused ideas or the most passionate literary content, alternating in a sort of Jacobean effort but that in reality is only frivolity. The ill-fated Badoglio period has left behind some kind of distortions and evasions, which flower in the name of press freedom conceived not as a constructive and Fascist critic but as an unrestrained gossip ... the eighteen points of the party and the discussion of the Constituent Assembly constitute material of undoubted interest, but only on the condition that one does not sound the tocsin for the fetish of electorism of which the people

<sup>56</sup> Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 95–96; Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 97.

<sup>57</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 55, on 25 October 1943.

<sup>58</sup> Since these prerequisites never materialized, the Duce finally buried the idea of a constituent assembly for good in Milan at the Lyric Theater in December 1944. The full text of Mussolini’s discourse can be found in *OO*, XXXII: 126–38.

has already experienced the noxious influx in the historical cycle that has ended around twenty years ago. Those who wear the apolitical mask must not be trusted. For these are people who, waxing nostalgia for political parties, declare themselves free of prejudice in favor of any one party—the very ones who in the Fascist republican biennium prefer only and primarily the second (republican) term, devoted themselves exclusively and primarily to the next period.”

Mussolini went on to add: “Those who, today, hasten to hide the word Fascist with the word republican tomorrow will be ready to hide the word republican with the word monarchy. They are opportunistic and vile.”<sup>59</sup> To make sure that the RSI remained firmly Fascist, Mussolini invited his newspaper editors to understand “the dual necessity for discipline in war-time and for the absolute importance of supporting the war.”<sup>60</sup>

Mussolini’s constant reference to the Soviet model did not mirror the illiberal nature of RSI Fascism. As he wrote on December 8 1943: “For twenty-seven years the hundred and ninety million Russians have read only one paper and have listened to only one radio. It seems that this severe radio and journalistic diet has not badly harmed the public and moral health of the people of Moscow.”<sup>61</sup> This line of thought was originated by the Italian Fascist writer Ugo Spirito, whose “leftist” views on integral corporatism embraced the notion that Fascism and Communism had much in common, which made them natural allies against the United States.<sup>62</sup> This “marriage” was not new, for both Ugo Spirito and Giuseppe Bottai had encouraged publication in 1934 of Stalin’s *Bolshevism and Capitalism*. The Socialist journalist Carlo Silvestri, with Mussolini’s approval, attempted to reach agreement with Salò leaders in the name of leftist ideals supposedly embodied in the Italian Social Republic.

In the absence of the defunct *Il popolo d’Italia*, Mussolini wanted to found a new republican and Fascist journal that spoke his language. In January 1944 he entrusted Carlo Borsani, president of the Association of the Crippled and Disabled of War (presidente dell’ *Associazione dei Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra*), with the task of launching the *Repubblica Fascista*. Borsani, who had been blinded in combat, was a decorated war

<sup>59</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, busta 22, telegramma di Mussolini a tutti i capi delle provincie del 6 dicembre 1943.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 111.

<sup>61</sup> OO, XXXII: 234–35.

<sup>62</sup> My thanks to Spencer Di Scala for bringing this point, which is not well known in English-language historiography, to my attention.

veteran pinned with a *Medaglia d'Oro*. Although a firm follower of Mussolini and a Fascist at heart, Borsani did not share the policies of Pavolini, whom he thought stubbornly resistant to offers of collaboration by anyone who loved the *patria* above all else. The breach widened. Major Fulvio Balisti, a famous war hero, attacked Pavolini in party assemblies for his extremist policies and dictatorial methods.

From that point on, a *fronde* materialized between Balisti and Borsani aimed at demonstrating “first Italy then Fascism.” Pavolini ordered Mezzasoma to put Borsani *hors de combat*. Consistent with Mussolini’s orders, Mezzasoma decreed a few days later: “I want immediately to inform you (Borsani), and particularly our colleagues who are deluded by certain expectations and still cultivate a strange weakness for the most utopian ideas of liberty and the freedom of discussion, that it is my intention to pursue an increasingly tight control over all information organs. Today there still exist some journalists and especially some editors who think that their mission consists, above all, to make themselves the spokesmen of the malcontent. Instead, their true task is to inspire trust. Journalists who favor the existence of a multitude of parties are nothing but Fascists who feel uncomfortable with the idea of a single party.”<sup>63</sup>

In spite of the severe government crackdown on disgruntled party moderates and the recently decreed press censorship, Mussolini pondered the removal from his cabinet of Pavolini and Buffarini.<sup>64</sup> Pavolini turned out to be something of a departure from the Duce’s usual habit of appointing as party head nonentities such as Muti and Vidussoni, or a buffoon such as Starace, loyalists who would never overshadow or defy him.

The name Balisti, the *federale* of Brescia, returned to the forefront because he, supposedly, was cut in this mold, and had plenty of support from influential figures such as Silvestri, Bombacci, and Dinale, who wanted a “cleaner” figure prepared to reach out to moderates. Nonetheless, Mussolini on 14 January told Pino Romualdi, who was to be nominated vice secretary: “Balisti is not a man who is expert in handling party matters or political life. Balisti is rather a mere symbol.”<sup>65</sup>

Although Pavolini seemed ready to step down, Buffarini, according to Giorgio Pini, intervened to save his colleague’s position by telling Mussolini that Italian public opinion would interpret Pavolini’s removal as

<sup>63</sup> ACS, RSI, SPD, b.59, f. 147.

<sup>64</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 179.

<sup>65</sup> Cited in De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, II: 543.

being primarily due to German pressure. To avoid the impression that the Duce was simply a German plaything, he should make no change in his cabinet.<sup>66</sup> Ermanno Amicucci, a Fascist journalist in the know, corroborates the view that the Duce drew back from juggling his cabinet to avoid the impression that he was acting on German orders.<sup>67</sup> Offering a different slant, Romualdi writes that Mussolini, deeply irritated by Germany's dictatorial ways, hoped to gain greater maneuverability with the help of new men who were less in thrall of the Third Reich but yielded to the pressure of Rahn and the Wehrmacht to drop any idea of a cabinet change.<sup>68</sup> Dolfín notes that Mussolini had already put off the question *sine die* on 30 December to avoid giving the impression that the government was undergoing an open crisis.<sup>69</sup>

The intransigents, pulling an acquiescent Mussolini along, were determined to send a clear message of "death to traitors," and found the perfect scapegoat in the hated Galeazzo Ciano, the Duce's son-in-law and former foreign minister. Having voted against Mussolini in the Fascist Grand Council on 25 July 1943, Ciano was brought before the bar for betraying his country and Fascism. Failing to try Ciano and his cohort of traitors would mean that no other enemy could be subjected to Fascist justice. In holding that his treason be answered by the death penalty, stalwart Fascists could prove that the break with equivocal "bourgeois" Fascism centered on family, *raccomandazioni*, corruption, and high living, was total and uncompromising. What better way was there for the Duce to touch up his Fascist credentials than by putting aside personal qualms and hanging tough against his son-in-law?

The accused, including former Fascist Grand Council members who voted against Mussolini on 25 July—Emilio De Bono, Giovanni Marinelli, Carlo Pareschi, and Luciano Gottardi—were found guilty for betraying an idea, a crime not generally found in the penal codes the world over. This was certainly in line with German thinking. The Italian newspaper editorialist Amicucci writes: "For reasons of both internal politics and for the need of delivering an admonishment to the governments of the other countries occupied by German troops, Hitler wanted to bring home that

<sup>66</sup> Giorgio Pini, *Itinerario tragico (1943–1945)* (Milan: Edizioni Giachini, 1950), pp. 85–86.

<sup>67</sup> Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 124.

<sup>68</sup> Pino Romualdi, *Fascismo repubblicano* (Carnago Varese: SugarCo, 1992), p. 56.

<sup>69</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 179.

no betrayal would escape a terrible punishment, and that every traitor would pay for his crime with death.”<sup>70</sup> Radical Fascists, however, needed no encouragement by the Führer to put Ciano on the dock quickly.

Not everyone in the Salò government agreed. Amicucci writes: “There are those who did not accept the revolutionary point of view of the reason of state but rather supported constitutional and juridical orthodoxy, which enabled them to declare that the ‘betrayal of an idea’ was not a crime foreseen by the penal code. Moreover, they held that on 25 July the members of the Grand Council had exercised a right that was thought to have been legal, which, therefore, could not now be considered criminal. But those people showed an inability to take into consideration the current state of affairs that was anything but normal from the point of view of pure orthodoxy.”<sup>71</sup>

Actually, many Italians were either indifferent to the trial or dismissed the case as a typical gangland vendetta. Only the few who sported Fascist “justice” hankered after the death penalty for Ciano. Mussolini himself was deeply conflicted. After all, Ciano was his son-in-law and for long had served him, albeit ambivalently. Although Mussolini’s tough-minded wife Donna Rachele hated Ciano, the Duce’s much beloved daughter, Edda, applied relentless pressure on him to let her husband off. His mistress, Claretta Petacci, on the other hand, who constantly implored her lover to assume positions consonant with the thinking of Hitler and Buffarini Guidi, cold-heartedly pressured him to send Ciano to the gallows for his betrayal of 25 July.<sup>72</sup> Mussolini admitted to Dolfin: “Ciano is no guiltier than anyone else ... They aim at Ciano to strike me down.”<sup>73</sup> And again: “He is the catalyst of the hates directed against me.”<sup>74</sup> In truth, Mussolini would have preferred to string up Dino Grandi, who in his mind was the real culprit. As he confided to Dollmann: “The Count (Ciano), notwithstanding everything, is not truly bad or a born traitor. The traitor is Grandi. He, much more than Ciano, was my creature whom I lifted from nothing to fame and fortune. The history of Fascism will have its Judah: Dino Grandi.”<sup>75</sup> But since Grandi was safely out of reach, Mussolini

<sup>70</sup> Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 88.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>72</sup> R.J.B. Bosworth, *Claretta: Mussolini’s Last Lover* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 190.

<sup>73</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 115.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>75</sup> Dollmann, *Roma Nazista*, pp. 407–08.



was left with Ciano, whose head was demanded by Pavolini and the radicals bent on tracking down every Italian “traitor.”

The Duce knew that if no action were taken against Ciano, Fascism would be charged with voluntary abdication. The RSI would be swept from power and he, Mussolini, would be derisively portrayed as a weak-kneed Fascist derelict in duty. Dolfin noted: “Not to hold a trial, as is said by many, would signify approval of 25 July and provide proof of our congenital weakness. To cut down the ‘traitors,’ therefore, beginning with Ciano, is for Mussolini, above everything else, an absolute necessity. Only his trial can restore his prestige as a leader and renew faith in him on the part of his followers. If Ciano is not taken down, it won’t be possible to bash anyone else. The ‘Ciano case’ provides the opportunity to clear the air caused by the collapse of the regime.”<sup>76</sup>

Just as unsettling, Mussolini feared that the Germans would judge him pitilessly for any display of weakness. “The Germans hate him (Ciano) because they know that he was never their friend. They watch over him. They don’t even trust me.”<sup>77</sup> Much later, in 1973, General Wolff recalled telling Mussolini that Hitler considered the question of Ciano’s trial to be an exclusively Italian question.<sup>78</sup> Regardless of these comments, true or not, Mussolini knew that men such as Himmler and other tough-minded Nazis would judge him a coward if he let Ciano off the hook.<sup>79</sup> In the RSI environment the son-in-law was the Duce’s acid test: would he act as a Fascist Mensch or, by granting a pardon, lose German respect?

By the end of the year Mussolini had made a decision. He told Minister of Justice Piero Pisenti: “You look at the trial only from the juridical angle. In other words, you judge the matter as a jurist. I must see it from a political perspective. Reason of state submerges every other contrary consideration. Now I have to go to the bottom of it.”<sup>80</sup> “As of now,” he told Dolfin, “Ciano is already dead ... Whoever voted for the Grandi resolution will be condemned.”<sup>81</sup> The Duce’s judgment was harsh: Betrayal!

<sup>76</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 114.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> Ricciotti Lazzeri, *Il sacco d’Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), p. 22. Mimmo Franzinelli, in his *L’arma segreta del Duce: La vera storia del carteggio Churchill Mussolini* (Kindle Edition, 2010), locations 5245 and 5509, n. 20, suspects that Lazzeri reproduced apocryphal material provided him by Wolff.

<sup>79</sup> Lazzeri, *Il sacco d’Italia*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>80</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 181.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

Death penalty! Ciano, however, had one important card to play: his diary. Throughout his term as foreign minister, Ciano had recorded practically daily notations that, if published, would expose German duplicity toward his country, Mussolini's private outbursts against the Germans, and his own disenchantment with the Axis alliance. More embarrassing still, his diary was spotted with cutting epigrams at the expense of both leading Nazis and Fascists. Ciano had some reason to suppose that his life might be spared if he handed over the diary. An SS agent, the attractive Hildegard Burkhardt Beetz, was assigned to monitor Ciano, who was confined in the Scalzi prison in Verona. She was there, ostensibly, as interpreter, but in reality her mission was to track down his diary and private papers hidden in an unknown place. Ciano's wife, Edda, urged Beetz to barter Ciano's diary for his life. Edda, Beetz, and others engaged in one machination after another but reached only dead ends.

The accusers set about the task of assembling proof of treason against Ciano that would stand up in court. But the kangaroo court in charge of the case was unable to find evidence of prior collusion between the members of the Grand Council, Badoglio, and the monarchy, because there was none.<sup>82</sup>

Ciano and his codefendants were brought to trial in the Castelveccchio fortress on 8 January 1944. In the Fascist hand-picked court, the verdict was, as expected, unanimous in what can only be described as a premeditated assassination. Ciano joined the others in petitioning Mussolini for a pardon. Notwithstanding the pleadings of Edda Ciano—and twinges of his own conscience—Mussolini would make no move to save his son-in-law, who died bravely before a firing squad on 11 January 1944.

In the immediate aftermath, Mussolini was unhappy and depressed over the loss. He told Ramón Serrano Súñer, former Spanish foreign minister under Franco: "In my long agitated life, what took place in Verona has formed the most dramatic chapter: sentiment and reason have harshly clashed in my spirit."<sup>83</sup> Whatever his personal feelings, Mussolini had bought off an impending party crisis by preventing the RSI from falling into disrepute among the Fascist true believers. Moreover, the Duce had

<sup>82</sup> Renzo Montagna, in *Mussolini e il processo di Verona* (Milan: Omnia, 1946), claimed, as one of the judges, that he was opposed to the death penalty but was constrained by his colleagues on the judicial bench to vote in favor of Ciano's death by firing squad as well as the deaths of the other "plotters" of 25 July.

<sup>83</sup> Cited in Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 128.

salvaged his prestige toward Hitler. Anfuso reported that, for the Germans, the Verona trial's outcome was foreordained to be a death sentence for Fascist waverers who had contributed to Italy's defeat. Mussolini's approval was a touchstone of their faith in him and the Republican regime.<sup>84</sup> Yet, despite Mussolini's enhanced credit rating in Berlin for standing tough, he was doomed to be an impotent duce dictated to by Rahn and swayed by his radical cabinet.

Back firmly in the saddle, Pavolini cut short moderate Fascism's call for a more liberal press. On 8 February, when an article appeared in the journal *Fronte unico* attacking the party leader as "the most unpopular man of the government," the journal was sequestered and closed. The author of the article, Mirko Giobbe, was forced to leave the *Nazione*; eighty or so in the RSI accompanied him into journalistic press exile. That did not stop Giorgio Pini from continuing to take on Pavolini, while Borsani and Balisti, delegates of the PFR, pecked away at *gerarchismo* embodied in the rule of Pavolini and Buffarini. This was too much for the party stalwarts. Mezzasoma, certainly inspired by Mussolini, asserted in a circular to the provincial heads on 7 April that some people demand "the right to criticize without reserve and without restraint. Moreover, such people evoke their right to hold public debates, even in the piazza, with the participation of a vast number of people holding a wide range of political beliefs."<sup>85</sup> Borsani was "a false Fascist," and Balisti "a spurious Fascist," concluded the Duce.<sup>86</sup>

Thanks to the fierce opposition led by Farinacci, Mezzasoma removed Balisti, who had served as *federale* of Brescia until 1 March 1944, from the directorship of the Repubblica Fascista. Following a violent polemic between Borsani and Farinacci, Mezzasoma, denouncing the "piteous spectacle of indifference, a lack of balance, and irresponsibility" by the Fascist press, tightened up on preventive censorship.<sup>87</sup> A man of "profound ideals, a strong will, a poet's sweetness, and a fatalistic sadness,"<sup>88</sup> Fulvio Balisti was cut down by partisans in Milan on 29 April 1945. Carlo Borsani met the same fate in Milan right after the war.

<sup>84</sup> Anfuso's report dated 17 January 1944 cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 133.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 120.

<sup>86</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 274.

<sup>87</sup> Guglielmo Salotti, *Nicola Bombacci da Mosca a Salò* (Rome: Bonacci, 1986), p. 191.

<sup>88</sup> Innocenti, *Mussolini a Salò*, p. 102.

This brings us to this question: what kind of Fascist was Mussolini? Throughout the first few months of the RSI, he seemed torn by two contradictory impulses: to rule through a hard-line Fascist Party elite headed by Pavolini, or to calibrate affairs of state in a spirit of demagogic populism. There was an unofficial Mussolini who wrote political tracts and chatted with intimates in conversations that pointed to a ceasefire among Italians grounded in social reform, and a Mussolini, who, within reach of German ears and intrusive extremist party militants, talked up a radical line that would guarantee him leadership of only a small minority of people. As time passed, the deep-seated instinct to dominate overcame compromise or shared power; he would be the ultimate duce come what may. Nor could Mussolini ever purge his base feelings of vendetta, which ruled out reconciliation. And since the Duce feared terrible vengeance should he ever break with the Third Reich—or to appear estranged from Hitler—he would not stray from the Axis ideological straight and narrow. In early April 1944, well before the *svolta* of the following June, when RSI Fascism took a decisive turn toward activist radical solutions, Mussolini, in spite of many twists and turns, had shown his true colors by acquiescing in Ciano's death and Pavolini's muzzling of the press.



## The German “Occupying Ally”

All these foreign office musings amounted to fantasy, for the Germans, at the expense of the “occupied ally,”<sup>1</sup> had already fashioned an ascendancy over Italian territory still free of Allied troops. It did not matter whether Berlin called the RSI regime an ally or collaborator; the Germans would not tolerate any Italian veto or effort to restrict their movements.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with their condescending attitude toward Italy, they utilized the Italian “betrayal” to justify the exploitation of the country for their own purposes.

If Italy’s “betrayal” did not surprise the Germans, it certainly was inconvenient. While already over-extended in fighting off the Allies in the West and the Soviets from the East, the Wehrmacht suddenly had to deal with a third front. On 9 September Goebbels described the national mood: “The Italians are deserting us in our most critical hour.”<sup>3</sup> A day later: “The present crisis would never have arisen if the divisions that we had to send to Italy after the Duce’s fall could have been assigned to the Eastern Front.”<sup>4</sup> Were it not for Italian treachery, Hitler mused, Germany would have conquered Egypt and the Suez Canal. Neither Africa nor Sicily would have been lost. Damaging to the overall war effort, Germany had

<sup>1</sup> Klinkhammer’s term, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 420.

<sup>2</sup> Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 92–101.

<sup>3</sup> *The Goebbels Diaries*, p. 487.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 495.

to withdraw divisions from Russia: "If we had fifteen or twenty first-class divisions to throw into the East intact, we would undoubtedly be in a position to repulse the Russians. Unfortunately we must put these fifteen or twenty divisions into combat in the Italian theater of war."<sup>5</sup>

When Hitler gave the order to seek common ground with the newly styled Fascist regime based on ideological kinship, the Nazi party squirmed. Goebbels was most unhappy in having to deal with Italians again: "As long as the Duce wasn't there we had a chance to wipe the slate clean in Italy," he said. Furthermore, "The Duce will enter history as the last Roman, but behind his massive figure a gypsy people has gone to rot."<sup>6</sup> The German high command was unhappier still, since the newly formed RSI stood to infringe on the Wehrmacht's freedom of movement. Everyone in Germany and nobody in Italy (except for a clutch of swastika-moonstruck Fascists) counted on Mussolini to be a compliant Quisling.

As soon as Mussolini arrived in Salò to take up the reins of government, he was immediately hemmed in by a crowd of supercilious Nazis who carefully monitored his every move. The doorways to his home and office were each guarded by an SS man and one Fascist Blackshirt, and the SS swarmed over the grounds of Villa Feltrinelli. A young German officer who lived in the Duce's house, the striking blond Lieutenant Hans Heinrich Dieckeroff, did his best to get along with Mussolini while submitting to Colonel Johann Jandl and Captain Helmut Hoppe a summary of every visitor's conversation with the Duce. Each morning Jandl, Hoppe, or Dieckeroff briefed Mussolini on the news from the various fronts with a German slant, reports the Duce diffidently glided over. Since the telephone system in the Villa Feltrinelli was manned by the Germans, they were further able to encroach on the Duce's privacy. Hitler made sure that Mussolini, who had for long been burdened by nagging health problems, be tended to by a noted German physician, Professor Georg Zachariae, who sent daily reports to Berlin on the Duce's health.

As a past master of propaganda, Mussolini had always relied on press statements as his main tool of government. But since, from the beginning, the Germans had hampered his getting messages out, the Duce was denied his old favorite method of control. Watched over like a prisoner, he bitterly commented: "I am tired of acting like an administrative head of

<sup>5</sup> *The Goebbels Diaries*, pp. 495–96.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 498, 512.

Gargnano.”<sup>7</sup> General of the Waffen-SS Karl Wolff explained in 1973 that Mussolini, who was essentially under his tutelage, could in no way escape his control.<sup>8</sup> From now on Berlin proposed, Salò disposed.

No less a blow to Italian authority was the German decision to make a backwater, the little town of Salò on Lake Garda, the new capital, which robbed the government of a historical identity. Moreover, by scattering the RSI institutions in the surrounding countryside, the Germans pretty well undermined Mussolini’s efforts to build up an efficient chain of command. The scarcity of petrol and cars added to the problem, making it difficult for the Duce to convene regular meetings of his Council of Ministers.

Acting as if the Wehrmacht were moving in to occupy a hostile people, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, the commander of Army Group South, proclaimed on 12 September that the Italian territory placed under his command was to be considered a war zone where the German laws of war would be applied.<sup>9</sup> He followed this up on the 25th with a proclamation that concluded: “Every action that is punishable according to German law, which is submitted to the justice of the German military tribunals, will be judged according to German laws.”<sup>10</sup> In the same spirit, the Wehrmacht commander of the 14th Army Corps ordered that his troops would be provisioned exclusively by plundering the countryside: “Act without scruples!”<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the Wehrmacht made desultory gestures toward the population by acquainting German soldiers with the culture and style of Italian life. Two intellectuals, the art historian Wilhelm Waetzoldt and the archeologist Ludwig Curtius, were charged with the mission to overcome the typically German low esteem toward Italians, a sentiment widespread in the Wehrmacht, by teaching German soldiers to display a comradely attitude toward their Italian fellow soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Bocca, *Storia dell’Italia partigiana*, p. 119.

<sup>8</sup> Lazzero, *Il sacco d’Italia*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>9</sup> Enzo Collotti, *L’amministrazione tedesca nell’Italia occupata 1943–1945* (Milan: Lerici, 1963), p. 95. The Italian historian Mauro Conciatori asserts that Kesselring proclaimed on 11 September 1943 that all of Italy’s “territorio di guerra” be placed under German command. Two days later, he obliged the political ministries to suspend their activities. Conciatori, “1943: “La diplomazia italiana dopo l’8 settembre,” pp. 199–233.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 13.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Marco Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa: Storia dell’Italia occupata 1943–1945* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2014), p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Rapporto della Commissione storica Italo-Tedesca insediata dai Ministri degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Federale di Germania il 28 marzo 2009. Inserito allegato al No 1 January 2013.

German domination extended just as quickly to the economic sphere. With Mussolini barely in office, Hitler on 13 September 1943 authorized Albert Speer, head of the Todt organization and Reich Minister of Armaments, to take every necessary measure to guarantee the security of the war economy in Italy.<sup>13</sup> The Wehrmacht on 16 September imposed military regulation on Italian factory operations and extraction of primary materials. The Germans forbade political activity in the factories, threatened punishment of offenders, and ordered industrial plant owners to compile lists for their use of raw materials, combustible resources, and finished products.<sup>14</sup>

The businesses considered indispensable for the production of German war materials were defined as “protected firms,” which Mussolini rightly took to be businesses at the disposal of the Third Reich. This nomenclature amounted to an imperious act that subjugated Italy to Germany’s direct and exclusive utilization of their productive activity.<sup>15</sup> Protected firms were thus provided with guaranteed supplies of raw materials to manufacture the industrial production that the Germans most needed, which brought handsome profits for many Italian entrepreneurs.<sup>16</sup>

Although the RSI Ministry of the Economy under Angelo Tarchi had founded a New Industrial Organization to check the power of the German Office of Armaments and War Production (*Rüstung und Kriegsproduktion* [RuK]), the organization delegated to supervise Italian production, the Germans enjoyed the cooperation of many of Italy’s top industrial magnates. Almost immediately, Italy’s economic powerhouses set up a committee to take charge of the important branches of industry, commerce, and the banking system. Included in this group were the engineer Gobbato, director general of Alfa Romeo; engineer Giulio Sessa, advisor delegate to linen and hemp mills, and many others. Maneuvering behind the scenes, the industrial tycoons Donegani, Pirelli, and Agnelli threw their weight behind this economic committee that was formed to do the bidding of the Germans.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Lidia Vaini, “La strategia del mondo economico e finanziario italiano,” in *La Repubblica sociale Italiana*, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Collotti, *L’amministrazione tedesca nell’Italia occupata*, p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> ASMAE, RSI, b. 151, “Appunto al Duce” del Ministro per la produzione industriale del 22 marzo 1945.

<sup>16</sup> Vaini, “La strategia del mondo economico e finanziario italiano,” in *La Repubblica sociale Italiana*, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> Umberto Massola & Giulio Li Causi, *Gli scioperi del 1943–1944. La classe operaia in lotta contro il fascismo e l’occupante* (Rome: l’Unità, 1945), pp. 12–13.



The Italian captains of industry were constrained to participate in an extremely dangerous game with three groups that competed with one another for control over Italian production—German, Fascist, and the resistance. In the search for profits, they hoped to gain a dominant position with Germans, who guaranteed them orders and payment but without neglecting a *modus vivendi* with the partisans as a hedge against the future by occasionally providing them with generous subsidies.<sup>18</sup> As the Italian historian Giorgio Bocca emphasizes: “Ideological and national prejudices were absent from the game played by the industrialists. They ignored, if necessary, existing military alliances: they swing between Italians and Germans, anti-Fascists and Fascists, German occupiers and Anglo-Americans.”<sup>19</sup>

The large companies worked cleverly to appease the suspicions and rancor of the more outspoken anti-Germans in the RSI government by feigning good will toward the “ally.” With cooperation from Tarchi, they were able to ward off any comprehensive German removal of their plants to the Third Reich or serious purloining of their skilled workers. Fiat stands out in establishing close relations with Germans considered to be the principal interlocutors of the occupation forces.<sup>20</sup> But in spite of their efforts to maintain a certain independence, and although the existence of the RSI was supposed to eliminate Italian industry as a source of “war booty,” no one in Italy was able effectively to thwart Hitler’s effort to include the RSI in the *Grossraumgedanke*, the great geographical space placed under the economic and political control of the Third Reich.

On 10 October the German Army General Staff, on Hitler’s personal orders, issued detailed instructions and assignments of Wehrmacht operations, which, by requiring commanders in the field to establish liaison with the Italian provincial heads, were at variance with Rahn’s instructions from Ribbentrop’s office. Rahn would subsequently have an uphill fight to gain authority over German civil agencies and to firm up links with the Italian

<sup>18</sup> Mario Giovana, *La Resistenza in Piemonte. Storia del C.L.N. regionale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965), p. 36.

<sup>19</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> The *federale* of Turin, Giuseppe Solaro, reported in November 1943: “The force that rules in Turin is the Fiat group. All which is not in harmony with feelings of sympathy of this group is destined to fail. The said group has succeeded in entering into excellent rapport with German commanders, particularly the old console Von Langen, who can be considered a man of the Fiat group.” Cited in Nicola Adduci, *Gli altri. Fascismo repubblicano e comunità torinese (1943–1945)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2014), p. 107.

government. Mussolini was none too happy either to watch the Wehrmacht bulldoze its way to military government in northern Italy.<sup>21</sup>

The SS needed no persuasion to claim its own turf. General Karl Wolff, SS commander in Italy, quickly established control over most of the German repressive instruments—the regular police, the Gestapo, and the intelligence forces of the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst* [SD]). Under his leadership, the SS moved in to supervise the security of the German forces and undertake manhunts for Jews and partisans. Wolff attempted to achieve “minimum consent” on the part of the Italians—that is, a tolerance of the Axis war that fell short of a demand for ideological adhesion to Nazism. He was heard to say: “I don’t give orders to Mussolini, but he can’t do anything against my will.”<sup>22</sup> On 12 November 1944—perhaps too late—Wolff moved to limit fallout from unrestrained *rastrellamenti* (search and destroy missions).

In a *policrazia* consisting of Ribbentrop, who controlled the diplomatic/political sphere, Himmler, the SS in Italy, and Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, the Wehrmacht chief of staff, the Germans blanketed the country with economic predators that often competed fiercely with one another. On 13 September Albert Speer, Hitler’s admired architect turned economic czar, who served as Reich minister of armaments and war production, was granted full powers to exploit northern Italian industry and to steer factory output to fulfill the needs of the German war machine. Hitler informed him that he need not worry about Mussolini’s protests.<sup>23</sup>

Speer sent General Hans Leyers to Italy as his personal agent. Taking charge of the *Rüstung und Kriegsproduktion* office, Leyers had a free hand to control industrial production—both war output and consumer goods—in the country for the benefit of Germany. Able to bypass Rahn, Leyers had few obstacles to prevent a blatant depredation of Italian industry.<sup>24</sup> Moellhausen summarized his directive: “Leyers claims to follow to the letter the orders of Speer, who aims to dismantle Italian industries and transport them to Germany. Shortly afterward, all specialized workers would follow.”<sup>25</sup> Fortunately for the Italians, this drastic mandate fell far short of execution.

<sup>21</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Innocenti, *Mussolini a Salò*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>23</sup> Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, p. 161.

<sup>25</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 377.

The far-flung Todt labor organization, active everywhere in German-occupied territories, had the go-ahead to employ Italian workers on military roads, bridges, and fortifications in Italy earmarked by the Wehrmacht. The men who volunteered thereby dodged Italian military service, were paid relatively well, and received less than onerous discipline. After Fritz Todt's death in 1942, his operations fell to Speer.

The labor boss of German-occupied Europe, Fritz Sauckel, had the mission of rounding up Italian workers to man factories and farms in the Third Reich; no less important was his task of finding Italians to fill out Göring's undermanned anti-aircraft artillery units. But the program boomeranged. To escape Sauckel's dragnet for posting in Germany, many drafted Italians headed for the nearest partisan hideaway. Rahn received the support of Leyers and Harster to restrain Sauckel from further excesses.<sup>26</sup>

The German undersecretary of agriculture, Herbert Backe, zeroed in on Italian farmers by carrying away what the Germans could lay their hands on to replace foodstuffs lost to the Allied blockade and by military retreats from the Ukrainian Bread Basket. In rounding up Italian farm production, he attempted to enlist the Italian minister Edoardo Moroni in his work of plunder. German military officials swept into the countryside to expropriate farm animals and horses, and, more often than not, got away with large hauls. Owing to Moroni's obstruction, however, German control of the entire Italian agricultural production was sharply contested but not really hampered, which provided yet further proof of an unabashed exploitation of the Italian economy. But neither were RSI officials altogether devoted to the welfare of the Italian farmers, for Fascists in the field engaged in a spirited competition with their German counterparts in extorting produce from hapless farmers.<sup>27</sup>

When Göring told one of his functionaries to abscond with the *Banca d'Italia's* gold in early September, Rahn succeeded in blocking the marshal's maneuver. The diplomat, in fact, was able to convince Göring that the gold ought to remain at "the disposal of Mussolini," even if he could have it transferred to Fortezza. But in February 1944 Pellegrini Giampietro and Mazzolini were required to deliver the Italian gold "voluntarily" to the Germans as a "contribution to the war," in order to defray occupation costs.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 398.

<sup>27</sup> Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, p. 173.

<sup>28</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, pp. 125–26.

The Italian historian Enzo Collotti, who has done pioneering archival work on the German occupation of Italy, points out that his findings are too fragmentary for any accurate assessment of the total German damage inflicted on the Italian economy. Nor have the archives yet yielded beyond rough estimates the amount of foodstuffs and industrial equipment the Germans were able to expropriate for the benefit of the Wehrmacht troops in Italy, or for shipment back home.<sup>29</sup>

To end this plunder, Mussolini wrote to the Führer on 27 September 1943, insisting that he respect the RSI's sovereignty: "The Republican government, which I have the honor to lead, has only one desire and aim—to see that Italy resumes her place in the war as soon as possible. But to reach this supreme result, it is essential for the German military authorities to confine their activity to the military sphere only and, for all the rest, to allow the Italian civil authorities to function. If this is not accomplished, both Italian and world opinion will judge this government incapable of functioning, and the government itself will fall into disorder and suffer from ridicule."<sup>30</sup>

Rudolf Rahn seemed to go along with the Duce's dogged insistence: "It would be better for everyone," he reported to Berlin at the beginning of October, "if he [Mussolini] were the one to make the tough and unpopular decisions rather than the German Wehrmacht."<sup>31</sup>

Rahn arrived in the RSI determined to woo Mussolini into accepting the German version of the Axis war by giving the newly formed Salò government certain but limited authority ("by putting Mussolini to sleep, if possible," according to Anfuso).<sup>32</sup> The Duce would be encouraged to entrust responsible posts to thoroughbred Fascists, who, ideologically compromised as they were, would never think of a political volte-face. Since Rahn deemed Italian ideological loyalty to Nazism superfluous, he hoped to ease Mussolini's task in enlisting Italians to his banner.<sup>33</sup> But in lending support to Mussolini, he would skip regular diplomatic channels because of his contempt for the likes of Mazzolini. Buffarini Guidi was his preferred contact man with the Duce.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, pp. 175, 177.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 54; Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 147.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Enzo Collotti, "'Salò' nel Nuovo Ordine Europeo," in *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana 1943–1945*, p. 356, n. 10.

<sup>32</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 330.

<sup>33</sup> Collotti, "'Salò' nel nuovo ordine europeo," p. 358; ADAP, E, VII, 32, 35, 50, 62, 218, 350.

<sup>34</sup> Rossi, *Mussolini e il diplomatico*, p. 139.

Rahn noticed that the RSI in the early months was able to mobilize support from an eclectic collection of die-hard Fascists, sympathetic clerics, key industrialists, upper-class conservatives, and barefaced opportunists. This public support would enable him to utilize Italian authority to prevent any breakdown of administration in the sphere of law and order and the economic realm, essential for Germany's efforts to exploit the country for the Wehrmacht's war machine. In Rahn's tolerance of various shades of collaborators, critics, and opponents of the Salò regime, he, according to Moellhausen, wanted to make a favorable impression on a population yearning for respite from violence and war.

When the Salò regime's authority began to founder from mismanagement and a failure to control rogue Fascists running wild in the provinces, the inventive Rahn came up with a plan to broaden support for the central authority by combing Italy for more suitable collaborators. As a sop to a war-weary people, Rahn was sure that the Salò government, if filled with a following prepared to abide benign German supervision, would rule with a light hand. Italians needed only to turn their backs on the partisans, refrain from open defiance, and play games in the park.

When, after his visit with Hitler in July 1944, the Duce turned to a more extreme Fascist policy in line with Nazi thinking, Rahn's task was paradoxically eased. As a good *Jedermann* Nazi of the moment, he followed Mussolini down his radical path barely concealing his lack of interest. Moellhausen testified: "This tendency of not taking the RSI government into serious consideration seems to me quite incomprehensible."<sup>35</sup> Dolfin wrote of Rahn: "He knows ... how to mask with well-suited courtesy his obviously hard character."<sup>36</sup> Behind Rahn's veil of courtesy lay a cunning operative.

Owing to Rahn's nimble maneuvers, Hitler's odd arrangement of a towering National Socialist moloch married to a dwarf Fascist regime did provide Italy a formal autonomy, which prevented the Wehrmacht and SS from reducing Mussolini and his government to total puppetry and his country to unrestrained German spoliation.

While acting as a conciliator in Italy, Rahn had to keep his master, Ribbentrop, from meddling in his give-and-take dealings. Before handing Rahn the job, Ribbentrop had already none too gently reminded him to avoid the peril of "*die weiche Tour*," one who is guided by heart, reason, or

<sup>35</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 282.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 36.

fear, and one who renounces radical and energetic solutions. Above all, he exhorted, if need be, he should not abstain from rigorous brutality in bringing home Nazism's guiding principles.<sup>37</sup>

Although aware of Ribbentrop's prickly nature,<sup>38</sup> Rahn was not to be stopped from pursuing his own political approach to gain advantages from the "sovereign" Salò government that could not be expected from an outright military occupation favored by the Wehrmacht. The Balkans had provided the hard lesson that uninhibited brutal repression had driven local peoples into the resistance, which complicated rather than facilitated German exploitation. Moellhausen captures the essence of Rahn's elaborate and clever strategy: "An Italian government that is strong and respected appeared necessary to the German ambassador, among other things, in order to arrest the spreading illegality of the German troops, who, infuriated by being caught up in a disastrous outcome of the war and by the propaganda threatened to escape the control of their officers by pillaging Italy at will."<sup>39</sup>

Rahn meant to save German blood and money as well. Having Italians run the government would reduce German responsibility for the administration of the country, relieve Berlin's treasury from financing a full-scale military occupation, and curb the spreading disorder caused by the Wehrmacht's indiscriminate *rastrellamenti* and deportation of Italian workers to Germany. With occupation duties reduced in Italy, the soldiers could devote more attention to the Allied offensive in the South and shore up crumbling defenses on the Eastern Front.<sup>40</sup> Behind the lines, let the Italians do the German dirty work—Rahn's "velvet glove." In a flattering comparison with Otto Abetz in France, Günther Altenburg in Greece, and Werner Best in Denmark, Moellhausen praised Rahn for striving to contain outright German pillage of the country.<sup>41</sup>

Above all, Rahn claimed to be the exclusive spokesman of all civilian Germans vis-a-vis the RSI. No less vigorously, Kesselring made a similar

<sup>37</sup> Rudolf Rahn, *Ambasciatore di Hitler a Vichy e a Salò* (Milan: Garzanti, 1950), p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, pp. 35–38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 101; Rahn, *Ambasciatore di Hitler a Vichy e a Salò*, p. 234.

<sup>40</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 279. Moellhausen was an atypical representative of the Third Reich. Born in Turkey and raised in Trieste, he was multilingual, and more Italian than German in background and education. Not a member of the Nazi party, he had an Italian mistress who hid Jews in her house. Majanlahti and Osti Guerrazzi, *Roma occupata*, p. 88.

claim on 28 November 1943: "The General plenipotentiary transmits to the Italian Fascist government the demands of the German military and civilian bureaus and intervenes to make sure that these requests are carried out,"<sup>42</sup> which gave rise to serious clashes between the two. Rahn was helped, and at times hindered, in the rear military areas by his rival, General Rudolf Toussaint, the German plenipotentiary general of German Armed Forces in Italy for Wehrmacht armaments (*Bevollmächtigter General der deutschen Wehrmacht in Italien*), who, as Albert Speer's creature, supervised the German advisors stationed in every prefecture. Although the two frequently tangled over the delineation of authority between the political and military spheres, General Toussaint frequently stepped in to assure Rahn of his authority in the strictly civil realm while reserving everything that had military importance to the Wehrmacht, as if these two spheres could ever be conceptually separated by the willful generals. Moellhausen believed that Rahn's authority was, as a last resort, paramount: "Beyond the title of ambassador, Rahn was also the Reich's Minister Plenipotentiary for Italy. When the authority of ambassador was shown to be insufficient for resolving a question, and when he was caught in the middle of discordant opinions voiced by various German agencies in Italy, he intervened as Reich Plenipotentiary. In such a way, not only was he the representative of the Minister of Foreign Affairs [of Ribbentrop], but the direct envoy of Hitler himself."<sup>43</sup>

Rahn had the guile and persuasive personality needed to play both ends against the middle. His Nazi ideology permeated by pragmatism,<sup>44</sup> Rahn ingeniously cajoled SS Commander Karl Wolff, whom Mussolini sarcastically described as his "minister of the interior," into playing his game.<sup>45</sup> Rahn set up his own wife to buttonhole Wolff, who, falling for her charms, listened to advice she tendered him on her husband's behalf, advice that no male would ever have dared suggest to a hard-headed SS man. Moellhausen claims that Rahn and Wolff agreed to work on their head-strong comrades to treat the RSI with greater respect.

Behind all his trickery and deceptions, Rahn's main purpose was to be the German listened to in Salò. In line with his ambition to be in control

<sup>42</sup> Cited in Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, p. 127.

<sup>43</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 279.

<sup>44</sup> Moellhausen credited Rahn for having a superior intellect and a dialectical ability to win over intransigent Nazis to his more moderate line. *La carta perdente*, p. 279.

<sup>45</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 50.

of the Reich's plundering agencies spread throughout the country, Rahn strove to keep Nazi-style repression under a semblance of control. If chaos prevailed, the partisans would be handed large breeding-grounds for recruitment and added room for maneuver to hack away at Wehrmacht supply lines. Rahn, however, had his hands full dealing with determined predators such as Sauckel, Todt, and Speer, who did their utmost to exploit the Italian economy, let alone the Wehrmacht, which would conduct *rastrellamenti* at the drop of a hat.

By winter 1944 Rahn seemed to have achieved the upper hand when he apparently received major responsibility in Italy—from exploitation of the country's resources to outlining the ultimate purposes of the war in Italy.<sup>46</sup> But in the exclusively military sphere, which included matters of great political importance to the RSI, Rahn did not have enough punch to prevail over General Kesselring, for nothing would stop "Smiling Albert" from issuing the hair-raising anti-partisan measures of reprisals and massacres, which turned certain areas into killing fields. After the fall of Rome on 4 June 1944, when the partisans became ever more aggressive, which Kesselring later called the "birthday" of the all-out guerrilla war,<sup>47</sup> the Wehrmacht generals, having fought Rahn tooth and nail over his idea of collaboration, now had an excellent pretext in downgrading Rahn. The iron fist had replaced the velvet glove. As the war ground on to the final stages, these internecine rivalries practically lost all importance. While the Wehrmacht struggled desperately to hold off the Allied offensives, the military generals, who were secretly negotiating their way out of war on the Italian front, saw less need to pay attention to Rudolf Rahn.<sup>48</sup>

Clear to all was Rahn's emotional detachment from the Salò regime.<sup>49</sup> In a rare moment of candor, he revealed his true intentions to Kesselring: "I consider my task to squeeze the neofascist lemon, and therefore the Italian one, as much as possible. What is solely important is finding the right means of doing so."<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, p. 126.

<sup>47</sup> Belco, *War, Massacre, and Recovery in Central Italy 1943–1948*, p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> Rahn, in *Ambasciatore di Hitler a Vichy e a Salò*, pp. 328–29, claims that he had attempted to find a way to an armistice since November 1944: "Since November 1944, I charged a man in the know who lived in Switzerland to begin through some intermediaries conversations on the possibility of an armistice."

<sup>49</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 749.

<sup>50</sup> Dollmann, *Roma Nazista*, p. 342.



The men in the Italian foreign ministry were inadvertent foils for Rahn's machinations. Although none of them particularly liked the wily German, they were more than willing to engage in his "elastic tactic" of broadening Italian popular support for the Salò regime, the "occupied ally," as a hedge against radical Fascism. But at the end of the day neither they, nor he, was able to modify Germany's terroristic behavior. They also could not hold back deportation of Italians suspected of insurgency, or check the SS and Wehrmacht's flagrant war crimes against Italian civilians, let alone the Nazi roundup of Jews, victims to whom hardly any of the diplomats at Salò gave a second thought. Germany's inexplicable violence—the grossly disproportionate massacres of civilians that were frequently unrelated to any specific partisan action—was reminiscent of the "Eastern model of occupation" transferred to Italy, meaning that the entire population had become potential hostages in the hands of the occupiers in a Nazi war against Italian civilians.<sup>51</sup>

By these harsh German occupation policies and intentions in Italy, Hitler wanted to give warning to the other satellites. Should they not collaborate, or try to leave the Third Reich's coalition, there would be a fearful price to pay. As for the Italians, it behooved them to contrive a muscular Fascism, a regime aligned with Hitler's ideology, obedient to Berlin's dictates, and fully accepting Mussolini as unquestioned leader. In the bargain, the RSI soon learned that the former "equality" in the Pact of Steel during its halcyon days Pact of Steel had given way to subjugation. No Italian protest would prevent the Germans from leaving the country parched and famished from unrestrained exploitation.

Anfuso aptly described the differing aims of the several Germans with whom Mussolini had to conduct business. "Rahn represents one approach: he wished to pastoralize Italy and camouflage the German iron fist with a velvet glove. Wolff represented another way of doing things in his efforts to create permanent German interests in Italy by either reducing Italians to nothing or by taking advantage of them as negotiating partners. This, in fact, he did, hoping that as a result he would be able to lessen or consign his own responsibility to oblivion. General Leyers had in mind the weaving

<sup>51</sup>The literature on German massacres of Italian civilians is vast. See Paolo Pezzino, "The German Military Occupation of Italy and the War against Civilians," *Modern Italy* 12: 2 (2007): 173–88; Michele Battini and Paolo Pezzino, *Guerra ai civili. Occupazione tedesca e politica del massacro. Toscana 1944* (Venice: Marsilio, 1997); Gerhard Schreiber, *La vendetta tedesca. 1943–1945* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000); and the books by Lutz Klinkhammer already cited.

together of a network of local agreements between German and Italian industrialists and of finding ways to transfer assets to German industry. One way or the other he hoped to salvage something from the imminent end. Sauckel's men, for better or worse, have simply chosen to go down their own path. The German armed forces, which are animated by other attitudes ... were of a different nature."<sup>52</sup>

By far the greatest wound Germany inflicted on Mussolini was Hitler's amputation of the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico from Italian territory. In the newly occupied Litorale Adriatico, the Germans instituted the Supreme Commissariat, whose head was Friedrich Rainer, Gauleiter of Carinthia, and a native of Klagenfurt. Rainer was assisted by *Höherer SS und Polizei Führer* SS General Odilo Globočnik. In the Prealpi the Austrian Hans Hofer, an ex-Habsburg functionary with a visceral hatred of Italy, was appointed Gauleiter. As Goebbels noted, "Our Austrian Gauleiters certainly are tops at making territorial claims. There can naturally be no talk of that at present. But one can understand why the Austrian Gauleiters are now feeling their oats. As everywhere else in life, appetite comes with eating."<sup>53</sup>

What was in Hitler's mind? Goebbels on 11 September offered this opinion: "I don't believe the Fuehrer would have the courage to take, say, South Tyrol away from a Fascist Italy led by the Duce and behaving itself for the rest of the war. However, we must not only get back South Tyrol, but I envisage the boundary line as drawn south of Venetia. Whatever was once in Austrian possession we must get back into our hands. The Italians by their infidelity and treachery have lost every claim to a national state of the modern type. They must be punished most severely, as the laws of history demand."<sup>54</sup> Moellhausen summarizes the Nazi attitude: "Hitler had conceded full powers and carte blanche to the two Gauleiters, Hofer and Rainer, with the sole condition that they save appearances a tad. Of the two, it is difficult to say with any accuracy which one was the most fanatic. From the moment when they derived the impression that they had only to carry out a little comedy, but knowing exactly Hitler's will that the two provinces had to be part of Germany, they did not care of anything else but executing this as rapidly as possible, imperturbable and insensitive to everything else."<sup>55</sup> After the war was over, SS Dollmann

<sup>52</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 426.

<sup>53</sup> *The Goebbels Diaries*, p. 493.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>55</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, pp. 390–91.

summarized: "If the Third Reich had won the war, the Italian frontier, after the weakening of Mussolini's position, would without fail have returned to what it was in 1914; and although the events of 8 September spurred Mussolini to put up a resistance, his opposition was quite useless since Hofer, Kaltenbrunner, and Rainer were at the apex of their power."<sup>56</sup>

In the Litorale Adriatico Rainer divided his area into three zones: the first, corresponding to the province of Ljubljana, was prevalently Slovene; the second, the old centers of Gradisca, Udine, and Gorizia, had 300,000 inhabitants, of which 100,000 were Slovene and 50,000 Furlander; the third, including Istria and Trieste, contained 500,000 people, of which 150,000 were Slovene, 100,000 Italian, and the rest Serbo-Croatian.

The Nazi take on the history of the Litorale Adriatico and the disorderly conditions the Germans faced there is summarized in a *Bandenkampf in der Operationszone Adriatisches Küstendland*, published under the signature of *SS-Kriegsbericht* Dr. Hans Schneider-Bosgard dal Deutscher Adria-Verlag. In explaining the spread of the Slovene partisan movement, the *Bandenkampf* singled out the harsh and suffocating Italian rule, which shortsightedly aimed to oppress the entire native population by stringent denationalization programs. For this, one can blame the former Italian commissioner of *la provincia di Lubiana*, Emilio Grazioli, who displayed a woeful ignorance of local conditions, presided over a corrupt administration, and lacked the moral and ideological rigor to safeguard Italian interests. Germany, claimed the *Bandenkampf*, would succeed where Italy had failed by applying coherent policies that took into account the ethnic diversity of the population. In defending Slovenes against Italian discrimination, the Germans would grant them linguistic rights, newspapers, and their own schools.

A Slovene civil administration would be allowed, but closely supervised by overlords sent out by Berlin. Even-handed treatment among the ethnic groups was not the major aim, however. German domination was. The main wire pullers of government, the German overlords, would pose as disinterested arbiters of a fragmented society of their own making, which featured the suppression of the Italian legacy.<sup>57</sup>

Rainer suspended Italian sovereignty by enacting laws in complete contrast with existing legislation and by replacing Italian provincial heads with

<sup>56</sup> Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> Enzo Collotti, *L'Europa Nazista: Il progetto di un nuovo ordine europeo (1939-1945)* (Florence: Giunti, 2002), pp. 198-209.

his own nominees throughout the area, though keeping many RSI officials in their administrative posts. All Italian military commands and tribunals were suppressed, and the Court of Cassation deprived of power. In a typical divide-and-rule maneuver, Rainer split up RSI authority further by founding a Friulani community (where many Cossack warriors and their families were settled) to popularize the traditional localism of the population. German control in the Litorale was completed when the Wehrmacht imposed military control over Zara, Fiume, Spalato, and Cattaro, all former bastions of *Italianità*.

Taking advantage of their unchallengeable position, the Germans, by humiliating the former Italian oppressors, thereby gained the applause of Slovenes who had suffered years of Fascist denationalization. Utilizing the Habsburg technique of playing Slovenes off against Italians, Rainer organized anti-Communist militias among the Slovenes and treated Italian Fascists no better than enemy partisans operating in the region. Highlighting Fascist disgrace, the German authorities refused to allow Pavolini to enter the zone without their permission.

To protect his territory from galloping inflation that was spreading throughout the rest of Italy, Rainer created high barriers to block trade with the RSI and adopted his own currency, which facilitated the movement of trade away from Italy and toward the Third Reich.<sup>58</sup>

The Germans also denied the RSI authority to recruit soldiers for Graziani's army. With the exception of Zara and Spalato, which were celebrated as models of Italo-German military cooperation, Italians ready to fight either ended up in SS units, lost interest, or joined the partisans.<sup>59</sup> When the fiercely Fascist General Giovanni Esposito (who garnered praise in Fascist circles for his ruthless occupation policies in Montenegro, later considered war crimes) attempted to recruit soldiers, he encountered Rainer's order that abolished obligatory military service in the Litorale.<sup>60</sup> Though permitted to participate in a few of the Wehrmacht's *rastrellamenti*, he had to downgrade his *Italianità* by posing as a fearless Teutonic warrior—not a convincing way of carrying out Mussolini's clarion call for a doughty defense of the nation's soil and Italian self-respect. But he had no trouble in doing this, for he had the habit of denouncing to the SS

<sup>58</sup> Enzo Collotti, *Il Litorale Adriatico nel Nuovo Ordine europeo 1943–1945* (Milan: Vagelista, 1974), p. 35.

<sup>59</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, pp. 330–31,

<sup>60</sup> Collotti, *Il Litorale Adriatico*, p. 34.

those Italian soldiers who did not share National Socialist policies or disrespected the orders of the German armed forces. Some of the Italian military exposed by Esposito ended up deported and shot in extermination camps. But this did not end Esposito's army career, for in May 1956 he was reinstated as a division commander.<sup>61</sup>

Besides General Esposito, Rainer received plenty of help from other prominent Italian Fascists. The inspector general of the Venezia Giulia, Giuseppe Gueli, known as the "*Torquemada Giuliano*" for his supervision of torture during interrogations,<sup>62</sup> clamped down on partisan resistance and did his part in suppressing factory workers sympathetic with the partisan cause. Gaetano Collotti served as Gueli's right-hand man by forming a squad under his command that engaged in systematic terrorism of partisan suspects. Both men were fierce loyalists of Mussolini and exemplary collaborators of the Nazis.<sup>63</sup>

The Germans inflicted even worse wounds on Italian pride in the former Fascist Croatian satrapy. In November the regime's leader Ante Pavelić, who had enjoyed Mussolini's patronage before he came to power, took advantage of the Italian surrender by annexing parts of the Venezia Giulia, Istria, and Dalmatia with German consent. The former Italian high commissioner in Ljubljana, Emilio Grazioli, to the dismay of the RSI authorities, was excluded from the scene, thanks to German intervention.<sup>64</sup> As time passed, as the Josip Broz Tito-led partisans intensified their attacks, the German authorities became more amenable to the enlistment of approximately 8000 Italians in the local Militia, the navy, and air force to oppose them.<sup>65</sup>

The Germans devised a shrewd strategy to counter the mounting partisan threat by encouraging the formation of provincial and local self-defense units. Only in small measure were these efforts expressed as part of the Nazi ideological struggle against Bolshevism. To make the local plea more alluring, the Germans instead appealed for local people to seize the

<sup>61</sup> Gianmarco Bresadola Banchelli, "Politiche amministrative, strutture della repressione e propaganda," in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, pp. 258–65.

<sup>62</sup> Tomàs de Torquemada was a Spanish Dominican friar who participated in the Spanish Inquisition. Under his authority thousands of people were tortured and executed for apostasy and heresy.

<sup>63</sup> Vittorio Coco, *Polizie speciali. Dal fascismo alla repubblica* (Rome: Laterza, 2017), pp. 158–64.

<sup>64</sup> Cospito-Neulen, *Salò-Berlino*, p. 143.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133–34.

initiative for protecting their way of life and parochial interests. In an apolitical call for defense of local traditions and values, they usually left out ideological slogans espousing the virtues of National Socialism.<sup>66</sup>

But that was calculated propaganda aimed at captive audiences in good enough standing to warrant survival in the Nazi New Order. Such was not the case for Jews, “Communists,” “bandits,” and dissenters. Most gruesome of all, special units of the *SS-Einsatzkommandos* swarmed at will over the Litorale. The notorious SS commander Globočnik set up a concentration camp at Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste to serve as a transit station for partisans and Jews destined for deportation and as a place of detention for opponents of Nazism. Eventually, the camp featured torture chambers and a crematorium where well over 2000 partisans, political opponents, Jews, and hostages swept up in roundups were killed.<sup>67</sup>

Trieste was a special case. The former “lung of the Austrian Empire,” which contained a multitude of ethnic groups, was earmarked to be the major German port in the northern Adriatic. Here Rainer sought to found a movement espousing “a politically apathetic imperialism.” (“*imperialismo di tipo qualunque*.”) Having rediscovered their local habits and sentiments, and given a taste of the “small country” experience, he expected that residents would eschew the false cosmopolitanism of the large outside world.<sup>68</sup> Trieste would be “Europe’s window on the Mediterranean,” ennobled by the title of “queen of the Adriatic,”<sup>69</sup> an entrepôt made up of local economic and social classes that transcended ethnicity nestled in a prosperous borderland of the future Pan-Germany.

Denying any RSI candidate the opportunity to serve as provincial head of Trieste, the Germans imposed the Italian Bruno Coceani as their own choice on 22 October 1943. This was a surprise, since Coceani was an old irredentist, described by Dolfín as “an Italian, the purest of the pure, who is defending the province with an admirable courage.”<sup>70</sup> In spite of German supervision, he represented “the first voice that reaches me from within the country.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Banchelli, “Politiche amministrative, strutture della repressione e propaganda,” p. 274, n. 31.

<sup>67</sup> Cinzia Villani, “The Persecution of Jews in Two Regions of German-Occupied Northern Italy, 1943–1945: Operationszone Alpenvorland and Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland,” in Joshua D. Zimmerman ed., *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule 1922–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 249–51. On Globočnik in Italy, see Siegfried J. Pucher, ed. *Il nazista di Trieste: Vita e crimini di Odilo Globočnik, l'uomo che inventò Treblinka* (Trieste: Beit, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Collotti, *Il litorale Adriatico*, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 86.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

A patriot in sheep's clothing, Coceani knew that the Germans were headed to defeat, and expected that he could, through guile, defend Italian interests against the Slovenes and Croats. But this holding action was not easy. The dynamic Nazi duo of Friedrich Rainer and his violent Jew-hating partner SS Odilo Globočnik busily founded Slovenian schools and cultural institutions, and handed Slovenes top administrative posts in the port city. Still, in a remarkable balancing act, Coceani, by sidling up to key Fascists friendly with the Germans, managed to keep them off his back while holding the RSI diehards in check.

However, Coceani's conciliation, which, after all, was aimed at the defense of the city's *Italianità*, did not wash in Salò. Unwilling to shed the aim of one-party rule in Trieste, the RSI mandarins eschewed Italian "national blocs" as a betrayal of everything Mussolini stood for. Moreover, when Coceani swung strongly behind freedom of enterprise (he was a strong supporter of the industrial and financial interests of the city), he flouted Mussolini's favorite socialization projects. Fascists in Trieste were able to modify the city's coat of arms by adding a *fascio littorio* on top of the sacred halberd (a weapon of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries consisting of a long handle ending in a combined spearhead and battle-ax), which vexed citizens proud of their own unique city history.<sup>72</sup>

The Italian historian Anna Vinci notes that the protests and declarations emanating from Salò, which seemed to signify irreducible conflict, actually hid a deeper reality, "a subtle 'role play' between the collaborationist bourgeoisie and the men of Salò. The former were extraordinarily careful to make loyal gestures that abounded with strong symbolic value, while the latter were engaged in direct action. Both, therefore, suited perfectly the Nazi strategy of total war against all opponents."<sup>73</sup>

The German "zone of operation" in the Prealpi administered by Franz Hofer plagued the Italians no end, too, particularly since the new Gauleiter's set-up brought to reality his former irritating adventures in irredentism during Mussolini's heyday. Hofer enjoyed the advantage of having the strong support of many German and South Tyrolean organiza-

<sup>72</sup>Vittorio Coco, in his *Polizie speciali*, p. 168, holds the view that Coceani throughout his rule as provincial head of Trieste pursued full collaboration with the occupying Nazis and offered unswerving support of the RSI and its primary instrument of repression, the Special Inspectorate for Public Security of the Venezia Giulia under the command of Giuseppe Gueli.

<sup>73</sup>Anna Vinci, "Trieste 1943–1945: il problema del collaborazionismo," *Qualestoria* (April 1988), pp. 91–108.

tions, which provided him with trustworthy men who made the need of occupying German troops much less than in the Litorale Adriatico, where Titoist insurgents were active.<sup>74</sup> With Nazis everywhere in charge, Hofer emulated Hitler's world outlook and pursued German political domination. As a start, he expelled the Fascist provincial head Italo Foschi from Trento in September 1943, a city which, for Italians, carried a strong symbolic value coined by the pre-World War I irredentist slogan "*Trento e Trieste*." By working to eradicate Italian memory, and by forcing the PFR underground, Hofer and his crew delivered a punishing blow to the most loyal and fanatical Fascists at Salò supporting the Axis, the zealots who were most determined to apply Nazi norms to RSI government.<sup>75</sup>

But Hofer was not given carte blanche. Martin Bormann, showing an unwonted readiness to mollify Italians, remonstrated against him for devising excessively drastic occupation plans, which, in addition, would have negative repercussions on world opinion.<sup>76</sup> Hofer responded by implementing a more nuanced policy of German domination. To marginalize RSI-style Fascism, the Gauleiter impeded Salò's recruitment for the RSI army by pursuing an *afascistica* policy: formation of an autonomous militia, the *Corpo di sicurezza trentino*, to supervise maintenance of law and order.

In keeping with this more light-handed approach—designed to preserve a semblance of the Axis spirit—Hofer stopped short of denationalization. Although forbidding Pavolini from reconstituting Fascist centers, he "chloroformed" local anti-Semitic Fascists willing to cooperate with the Nazis by informing them of Pavolini's persecution of Jews.<sup>77</sup> By eschewing open hatred of Italians, Hofer was able to rely on Carabinieri units in preventing knots of radical Fascists from putting down a footprint on the Nazi principality. Hofer's overlords knew that the mainstream Tirolese Italian was not enamored of the aggressive party hotheads in the local federations, who were straining to track down suspected partisans. As long as the "moderates" did not try to form radical republican Fascist cells and refrained from challenging German rulers, they would be allowed to pursue artistic activities, run newspapers, and administer schools. The Italians had to walk a dangerous tightrope in pursuing cultural autonomy while conforming to German dictates.

<sup>74</sup> Steinacher, *Spione, Räuber und Möder*, "Südtiroler im Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführer SS in Italien 1943–1945," *Storia e Regione* 21 (2013).

<sup>75</sup> Cospito and Neulen, *Salò-Berlino*, p. 132.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Stuhlpfarrer, *Le zone d'operazione: Prealpi e Litorale Adriatico 1943–1945* (Gorizia: Edizioni Libreria Adamo, 1979), p. 98.

<sup>77</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, pp. 348–49.



To further placate the Italians, the Germans coyly suggested that occupation of the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico did not mean annexation but was merely a security measure for the duration of the war. Rahn told Mussolini on 26 October that he must understand that "in central and southern Italy it behooved Fascists to promote ferment, but in the northern zones they should cultivate a different approach by comporting themselves in an orderly, cold way, which means that these zones should be as if sterilized."<sup>78</sup>

Mussolini was hardly convinced. Exhibiting "frequent outbursts of anger," he showered Rahn with complaints over the veiled German annexations. While the Duce vented his discontent, Rahn let him have his say without comment.<sup>79</sup> Pavolini was more hopeful—or deluded—by expressing optimism to Mussolini on 10 October 1943: "If you succeed in saving the Alto Adige, Trentino, Zara, and Lubiana for Italy, the government, which draws on your authority for its staying power, Duce, will already be provided with historical justifications for its existence no matter how things develop in the future."<sup>80</sup> In the hope that formal annexation would be indefinitely put off and Mussolini held at bay, the German man-of-all-seasons declared on 19 October 1943: "In my opinion, the question will have to be postponed until the war is won."<sup>81</sup> Rahn was quite unsettled by the Wehrmacht intention to expand "operational zones" even further.<sup>82</sup>

In March 1944 Mussolini pressed hard to establish RSI sovereignty in those two regions. As a start, he demanded that Italians have the authority to nominate and remove officers, and that Fascists not be denied the right to organize.<sup>83</sup> Rahn put off the Duce with the standard military argument that only Germans could guarantee the Wehrmacht's supply lines,<sup>84</sup> exactly the point Hitler would bring home to the Duce during their meeting at Klessheim a few weeks later on 22 April. In August 1944 Mussolini, Anfuso, and Mazzolini reproached the Germans for reintroducing the "Habsburg system."

The RSI Foreign Ministry sent Mussolini a report in summer 1944 enumerating the ongoing unjustified and excessive interventions emanating from German authority in the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico that

<sup>78</sup> Cited in *Stuhlpfarrer, Le zone d'operazione*, p. 148.

<sup>79</sup> ADAP, E, VI, 305, pp. 523–24.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 54.

<sup>81</sup> ADAP, E, VII, 50, pp. 86–87.

<sup>82</sup> Cospito-Neulen, *Salò-Berlino*, p. 149.

<sup>83</sup> *Stuhlpfarrer, Le zone d'operazione*, p. 149.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

weighed heavily on Italian administration, thereby severely damaging the Italo-German alliance.<sup>85</sup> The Foreign Ministry followed up by drafting another list of questions relative to the RSI's quashed sovereignty in the two "zones of operations," but with no better luck in eliciting a German reply.<sup>86</sup>

To cool down the "political and psychological aggravation of the Duce and the Fascist government over the two provinces,"<sup>87</sup> Rahn urged the German high commissioners to refrain from erasing Italian city names, streets, and shop signs in favor of German ones. Moreover, he urged them to clamp down on German toughs carrying out petty vendettas against Italian communities. To keep local business humming, Rahn advised placating the compliant bourgeois conservative Italian community leaders by allowing their schools, banks, and institutions to function without interference. Such concessions would not tie German hands in the future.

The Austrian historian Karl Stuhlpfarrer concludes that Hofer's true aim was not limited to sponsoring solely German separatist currents in the Prealpi in preparation for annexation to the Third Reich. His game was the more complicated one of fostering the development of an autonomist Tyrolese movement under the Third Reich's umbrella, made up of both Germans and non-Fascist Italians that would be able to ward off both Mussolini's RSI and the annexationists in Berlin.<sup>88</sup> Italian illusions and miscast faith in Rahn had long impinged on the truth, better understood by the Duce, that the Germans would relinquish neither the Prealpi nor the Litorale Adriatico.

Throughout their occupation, Germans massacred hundreds of civilians. They destroyed villages, farms, and businesses; they closed schools and hospitals, or damaged them beyond use; they burned churches and violated family unity. Survivors took shelter in caves, basements of burned-out houses, or under trees in the countryside. The Germans perpetrated inexplicable violence against innocent civilians as revenge against partisan raids, the Eastern European model of occupation, where they rounded up entire civilian populations to become hostages and reprisal victims. Perhaps

<sup>85</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 76.

<sup>86</sup> ASMAE, RSI, b. 151, "Appunto per il sottosegretario," del 10 gennaio 1945.

<sup>87</sup> Cospito-Neulen, *Salò-Berlino*, pp. 151–53.

<sup>88</sup> Stuhlpfarrer, *Le zone d'operazione*, p. 152.

the worst example of Nazi reprisals occurred between 28 and 30 September in the village of Marzabotto, where they slaughtered at least 1830 civilians and continued the butchery in the countryside. Either from weakness or indifference, the Fascists in charge at Salò were unable or unwilling to stop this German violence ravaging their country.



## CHAPTER 5

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# RSI Armed Forces

On 15 September 1943 Mussolini propounded on the need of a reinvigorated Blackshirt militia army: “Only the one who is animated by a faith and fights for an idea does not discount the importance of sacrifice.”<sup>1</sup> He felt only scorn for the hide-bound military generals of the old *regio esercito*. Paralyzed by red tape and old training methods, the traditional army had seen its day. A short time later, Mussolini told Rahn that the new militia, in practice, would be reorganized under German guidance.<sup>2</sup> There would be no repeat of 25 July and no more betrayal of the Duce.

As head of a newly minted, overtly Fascist army, the redoubtable Fascist Renato Ricci seemed destined to be the RSI’s warrior in chief. Still, tormented by the fate of the 600,000 or so Italian soldiers moldering away in German camps, Mussolini did not want to place full reliance on Ricci. To tap that source of imprisoned soldiers, he asked Berlin’s permission on 24 September to form an Italian unit of Waffen SS volunteers drawn from the internment camps. These proposals did not square with the thinking of Mussolini’s new commander in chief, Rodolfo Graziani, who became head of the Defense Ministry on 23 September.

When Graziani first took up his duties, he seemed disposed to a strongly politicized Fascist army. In an address on 1 October to 4000 officers,

<sup>1</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> ADAP, E, VI, p. 593, sgg.

speaking “soldier to soldier,” he featured the slogan “*Fascismo-Repubblica*,” under whose banner soldiers would take up their calling as revolutionary warriors to restore the honor of the nation, whose “sacred body” had been trampled and bloodied. In a radio broadcast on the 25th, he told listeners that “he was called by destiny to seize the sword to cancel the shame of infidelity and betrayal that had defiled the Italian flag.” He wound up by adding: “Honor demands that we continue the war to the end on the side of the German ally.”<sup>3</sup> The Duce was quite pleased with the tenor of those remarks.

The general next moved to take out his chief rival, the Militia chief, Ricci. As a first step in a campaign to monopolize the Salò Republic’s military forces, Graziani hired a former intelligence officer and well-known military commentator, General Emilio Canevari, whom he had met for the first time on 2 October, to compose a memorandum for submission to the Duce proposing a new army, but one based on traditional principles rather than on Militia revolutionary principles. Canevari wrote: “The Militia is hated and must be dissolved immediately: the army must be national and political and under absolutely united command. Even the police forces of every kind must be subordinate to the Ministry of the Armed Forces”<sup>4</sup> Canevari favored a small volunteer army numbering 500,000 men, in part recruited from the internees in Germany, in part draftees equipped and trained by Wehrmacht instructors.<sup>5</sup>

In his aim to reconstruct an army from old fragments, Graziani was living in a dream world. The Germans had already broken up most military units during the first week of September, and the roughly 600,000 captured troops sitting around in concentration camps in the Third Reich seemed to be locked away. Since the Wehrmacht had requisitioned every usable piece of military equipment they could find in Italy, only cobwebs were left in the Italian warehouses. This meant that Graziani would have to raise an army from scratch and re-equip it from pistol to tank in a war-damaged industrial system whose disillusioned population had lost its military spirit following the monarchy’s abrupt flight to Brindisi.

When, on 3 October, Graziani pressed Mussolini to dissolve the hated Militia in favor of his proposed new army, the Duce, having been swayed

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Perticone, *La repubblica di Salò*, p. 140.

<sup>4</sup> Emilio Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto* (Rome: Magi Spinetti, 1947), pp. 285–88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287. Canevari cites the phrase “*Approvo incondizionatamente*” that appears in a Promemoria “L’esercito Repubblicano,” signed by Emilio Canevari, in ACS, SPD/71.

by the prospect of bringing about a restored Fascist pride by means of Ricci's troupe, began to have second thoughts. Only through a reconstruction of an Italian army could he avoid becoming a Nazi toy, instill credibility in his regime, and shed the derisory image of *repubblichino*.<sup>6</sup> In a looming marathon, Graziani had won the first round.

Times had changed. In the government that had ended on 25 July 1943, the army swore an oath of allegiance to the king. In the middle of October, Dolfin noted that Mussolini was bent on assembling a broadly based armed force.<sup>7</sup> The army would be republican, swearing allegiance to the Duce, which involved a commitment to Fascism. With this in mind, Mussolini informed Hitler that Graziani would be sent to Berlin to explain the Italian situation and the nature and importance of the new republican army.

Mussolini had a bone to pick with the Germans over the question of manpower. Through Anfuso he asked Hitler to release the Reich's interned prisoners to form the backbone of a new army. This was asking a lot, for an unforgiving Hitler had decreed on 20 September 1943 that the captured Italians were to be labeled military internees instead of prisoners of war in order to deprive them of international rights and succor by the Red Cross.

Shortly thereafter the Duce went public by writing in the *Corrispondenza Repubblicana* under the title "*Risalire l'abisso*": "Only the proclamation of a renovated Fascist state and its reassurance regarding the reasons and duties of the alliance would give Germany the motive to expunge the Wehrmacht's resentment toward Italy. Only in this way will the German High Command be disposed to assume the attitude of an ally ready to collaborate with the Government in an increasingly satisfactory way, day by day, little by little. I therefore ask for the constitution of a new Italian military force that will prove its ability to resume the war on the side of the ally to rout the invader."<sup>8</sup> But Mussolini was not prepared to send Italian conscripts to Germany for training since they might view this as deportation.

Hitler, initially, was supportive of an independent Italian army. To shore up Mussolini's wobbly political position, he proposed on 18 September the creation of four Italian infantry divisions to be formed in France by reliable Italians. In a letter never sent, dated 4 October, the Führer elaborated on his initial promise by making room for the creation of new air and

<sup>6</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> OO, XXXII: 254–55.

sea arms to be added to approximately 85,000 men divided into four infantry divisions. But from the outset, haunted by the defections of 8 September, Hitler was, at the same time, wary of any new Italian armed force, which, he claimed, would be “uncontrollable.” Soon Hitler forgot his initial promises. Since Italian troops were, in his mind, no better than captured Russian soldiers, he would not ease up on treating them harshly. Goebbels writes: “The Fuehrer now realizes that ... Italy has abdicated as a people and as a nation.”<sup>9</sup>

On 9 October Graziani and Canevari flew to Hitler’s headquarters at Rastenburg (The Wolf’s Lair) accompanied by Dollmann with instructions from Mussolini to ask that the Third Reich treat Italy not as an enemy-occupied country but as an ally.<sup>10</sup> To give loyal collaboration meaning, they envisaged large-scale rearmament. “For the army that must be reconstituted from scratch, it is estimated for the moment that 500,000 men should be recruited, of which 100,000 would be earmarked for regular service and 100,000 held as reserves. It is a question, therefore, of forming twenty-five divisions, of which five would be armored, ten motorized, and ten would consist of infantry (and among these, three to four of the infantry would be *Alpini*).”<sup>11</sup> The Wehrmacht would be asked to furnish them with equipment. For the Italians this was an acid test: would the Third Reich be ready to give the Salò regime a meaningful political sovereignty by agreeing to the formation of a credible Italian army?

Hitler did not hesitate in letting the Italians down by defiantly opposing their grandiose plan. Since Italian soldiers and officers from a treasonable monarchy had changed sides, refused to take the Fascist oath, and had been unreliable and disloyal to Germany, the Führer pointed out, he would not allow Graziani to visit the internment camps, let alone seek out volunteers for his army. According to Graziani, Hitler insisted that the Italian army recruit soldiers in Italy, send draftees to Germany for training, and abide by an upper limit of four divisions.<sup>12</sup> But Graziani either misunderstood Hitler or was the victim of delusion, believing that he had received the Führer’s permission to recruit the new divisions from the interned military in the camps.

<sup>9</sup> *The Goebbels Diaries*, p. 533.

<sup>10</sup> Stuhlpfarrer, *Le zone d’operazione*, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Kinkhamer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 269.

<sup>12</sup> Deakin’s description, in *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 68–69, is based on Graziani’s account in his book.

Unaware of the mix-up, the Italian generals persisted. On 16 October Mussolini and Graziani sent General Canevari to Germany armed with the task of straightening out the confusion over the formation of the four Italian divisions; that is, to obtain a protocol summarizing what they thought Graziani had obtained from the Führer.<sup>13</sup> Canevari no doubt expected to receive an endorsement of the agreement whose outlines he thought Graziani had already firmed up but not signed during his trip to Berlin.<sup>14</sup> “It is true,” he wrote later, “that he [Graziani] told me that they [Italian soldiers] would be drawn from the internees, but he gave me no relevant details: I had no written directive, no piece of paper on which firm points were set down.”<sup>15</sup>

Having only been loosely briefed, Canevari and General Buhle, Keitel’s chief of staff, signed protocols for the reconstruction of an Italian army. From the camps would be drawn four divisions—fifty-two thousand men. Mixed Italo-German units were to be constituted from the internees and by voluntary recruitment. Conscripts drawn from the classes of ’24, ’25, ’26, and ’27 would eventually be called up in Italy. The Germans naturally assumed that the Wehrmacht would train and equip them in the Reich.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, 19 October, the influential Italian ambassador in Berlin, Filippo Anfuso, invited faithful Fascists together with a delegation of SS men under the guidance of *Obergruppenführer* Gottlob Berger to thrash out their differences. Berger came down strongly on the side of a militia: “It is not necessary to set up a lot of men in a big army; better have many single battalions formed by particularly loyal and trustworthy men who are blemish-free and who can form a core to add on more battalions,”<sup>17</sup> which showed that he leaned toward Ricci’s Fascist elite ideas. Anfuso agreed. Military enrollment among the internees would be confined to ideologically reliable soldiers who declared loyalty to the RSI regime. From that point onward Anfuso aimed to quarantine the “enemies” from the true believers in the German camps. Halfway through the meeting Canevari joined the conversation by arguing in favor of a national army based on professionalism.<sup>18</sup> This grated the nerves of the others, who wrote him off as an ideologically untutored reactionary.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 288.

<sup>14</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 69.

<sup>16</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, pp. 289–90.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 270.

<sup>18</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 291.

<sup>19</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, pp. 269–71.



On 25 October Canevari's protocols were approved in a meeting that included Mussolini, Graziani, and himself at Gargnano.<sup>20</sup> Mussolini remarked: "I have always said that the army must be above politics."<sup>21</sup> On the 27th the RSI passed a Fundamental Law on the Armed Forces that called for a new army to consist of both volunteers and recruits.<sup>22</sup> Graziani moved in for the kill, but Ricci would not be silenced. Dolfin summarizes the Council of Ministers meeting that took place on the 28th: "Mussolini had to intervene several times to calm down the heated contending parties, mainly about the provision of articles 18 and 19 of the law that established the absolute 'non-political' character of the Armed Forces, which implied the virtual dissolution of the Militia as such, since it was destined to become just one specialist branch of the army. The question has been discussed over and over again during the last few days. It seems to have been definitely settled in the statement that the Duce dictated to me. He and Graziani were perfectly agreed on this. But Pavolini and Ricci have put up an improvised and stubborn fight, citing all the old and new political arguments in favor of their case. Graziani has not yielded, making it an issue of principle from which he says he will not be deflected, as he claims that his project coincides with the higher interests of the country." Pavolini and Ricci were totally dissatisfied and "continued to repeat that in this way they are destroying Fascism."<sup>23</sup> The two refused to accept any orders from the military or to dissolve the Militia. Ricci defiantly told the Duce that he would not stoop before Minister of the Interior Buffarini Guidi.<sup>24</sup> Ricci and Pavolini could take some comfort in having received no sign from Berlin that the German high command would implement the protocols of 16 October.<sup>25</sup>

Growing uneasy, Canevari on 7 November confided to Dolfin: "The conflict with the party and Ricci is in full swing. Those substantial differences regarding the right direction to take can only increase the already existing difficulties as well as German distrust ... According to him, if the Duce does not decide once and for all to stand by the directives that he agreed to with Graziani, we shall accomplish nothing."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 93.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> Mimmo Franzinelli, *Disertori: Una storia mai raccontata della seconda guerra mondiale* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), p. 224.

<sup>23</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 78–79.

The next day the generals were confident of victory. After Graziani telephoned Canevari regarding Ricci's formal refusal to dissolve the Militia—news that Canevari passed on to Mussolini—the Duce said: "The matter has already been decided. And now it is time to finish with Ricci. In essence it is a question of personal ambition. Tell the Marshal that matters remain as has been decided."<sup>27</sup>

But after meeting with Ricci that evening, Mussolini backtracked. Dolfin noted: "The Duce, irritable and nervous, has postponed any decision on what he himself calls 'The Ricci Case' until after the Party Congress."<sup>28</sup>

On 10 November Graziani and Mussolini sent Canevari back to Berlin to calm the nerves of the overwrought Germans—and to obtain a modification in the protocols of 16 October. Reaching the Führer's quarters on the 13th, Canevari told General Buhle that Rome had come around to the belief that it would be most politically inopportune for troops to be sent to Germany. Instead, Italian soldiers should be selected entirely from the internees. He discussed with General Buhle the question of how many Italian soldiers should be involved. They arrived at the number of 22,000 internees to be admitted into the new army, which abruptly cut off the previous four-division idea and placed excessive dependence on a draft in Italy to make up the numerical differences.<sup>29</sup> Canevari was ordered by Mussolini on 10 November to warn the Germans regarding the issue of troop recruitment in Italy instead of exclusively from camps in the Reich. "If the recruits knew that they were to go to Germany, there would be a revolution, because they would know that such a move northward would not be for temporary instruction but for the purpose of interning them."<sup>30</sup> The Germans, to Canevari's surprise, had already taken firm action by having stopped voluntary recruitment in the camps. The Todt organization had pressed a successful claim to use this dormant manpower for labor units.

The Germans would not relent on their determination to have the Italians introduce conscription in Italy. With Keitel having reacted sourly to Canevari's alteration of the 16 October Protocols, the Italian general rang up Mussolini and passed the receiver to his German interlocutor: "I would feel dishonored," the Duce told him, "if among so many internees 50,000 volunteers could not be found to form these four divisions. I cannot send

<sup>27</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 294.

<sup>28</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 273.

<sup>30</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 297.

conscripts for political reasons.”<sup>31</sup> After Buhle lectured Canevari that “a young and fresh Fascist army is needed,” the Italian general replied: “We are not assembling a Fascist army; only a national one, for in Italy Fascism no longer exists. We fight for Italy, not for Fascism.”<sup>32</sup>

At the Verona Conference of 14 November, Mussolini gave a hint of things to come in the military sphere: “People who are newly under arms must undergo a baptism in our social republic, one that is Fascist as Fascism existed in the original revolution.”<sup>33</sup> The next day, in a meeting chaired by Mussolini, tempers flared. General Gambara complained that the Duce allowed Ricci to display an “irritating and offensive attitude.” Mussolini seemed to back him up: “The ‘Blackshirts must first and foremost feel pride in defending the new republican regime in harmony with the other forces of order!’”<sup>34</sup> Unbowed, Ricci retorted that he would brush aside the minister of the interior. As a man of Pavolini, he had swung out in the open against Buffarini. Caught in the crossfire, Mussolini side-stepped the issue.<sup>35</sup>

Thinking himself on the cusp of victory, Ricci informed Buffarini that henceforth all police operations against anti-Fascist partisans would be carried out by the Militia at the express request of the German command.<sup>36</sup> Angered by Ricci’s effrontery, Buffarini implored Mussolini on 16 November to issue a decree that would not only set up two police forces—a gendarmerie and a police guard—but also would place the Carabinieri and Public Security forces under the Ministry of the Interior. Ricci and Pavolini, however, took exception to placing so much power in Buffarini’s hands. They countered by insisting that the PFR and the Militia (Voluntary Militia for National Security—*Milizia volontaria sicurezza nazionale*—MVSN should be incorporated in their own auxiliary police corps.

Finally, on 19 November, Ricci wore the Duce down. According to Rahn, after Graziani had pleaded with Mussolini for the nth time to place the Militia under the Ministry of Defense, the Duce gave “a judgment of Solomon.” He would form a Republican National Guard (*Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana*, GNR) consisting of reliable remnants of the Militia, the Carabinieri, and what remained of the Italian African police,

<sup>31</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 129–33.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 217.

<sup>34</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93–95.

<sup>36</sup> Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 97.

which would be answerable directly to him.<sup>37</sup> Mussolini would thereby free himself from dependency on the army save in cases of war duty. Having seen his “apolitical” army sidetracked, Graziani bitterly noted: “The marriage between the Carabinieri and the Militia was a hybrid and unsuccessful union.”<sup>38</sup> He was right. Having been tied to the monarchy, the Carabinieri showed little kinship toward the ill-trained and ill-outfitted Militia. A rebellious crew thirsting for adventure, the Militia distrusted the Carabinieri for their studied respect for tradition and disinterest in the Fascist creed.

On 23 November Mussolini wrote Hitler a tart note wondering why the 16 October protocols had been rendered invalid and why the first four divisions promised would not be conceded the honor of fighting the enemy. Should the “traitors” of southern Italy be able to form a new army while Fascists were denied that privilege?<sup>39</sup>

The Duce had failed to read the German mind. Berlin was determined to avoid the formation of a strong Italian army that would strengthen the leverage of the RSI against the Third Reich. Moreover, the Germans were happy in having been spared a serious drain on resources that the Graziani/Canevari plan would have entailed. They preferred a “fresh” army, a militia headed by Ricci, which had a strong ideological commitment to Fascist principles and willingness to accept Nazi leadership, not *Badogliotruppen* “contaminated” by “betrayal” on 8 September.<sup>40</sup> For the Wehrmacht, General Kesselring brusquely remarked that the German soldier fights, and the Italian works for him. Keitel chimed in: “The only Italian army that will not be treacherous is one that does not exist.”<sup>41</sup>

In Italy decisions were finally made on 29 November that could not have displeased the Germans. Dolfin records: “The vexing question of the Militia has been resolved after a series of new discussions in a way that one foresaw, namely a complete triumph for the autonomist thesis of Ricci backed by the party. The Militia passes en bloc to the Republican Guard, which will have its own statutes and budget, and whose commander will be directly responsible to the Duce. This means the setting up of another

<sup>37</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Giampaolo Pansa, *L'esercito di Salò: La storia segreta dell'ultima battaglia di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1970), pp. 23–24.

<sup>39</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 273.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Richard Lamb, *War in Italy 1943–1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 87.

army. There is ironical talk of the ‘non-political’ army of Graziani, and the ‘political’ one of Ricci. But since the latter will also have the duties of the Carabinieri, there will be new reasons for conflict with the police ... Buffarini is making every effort to swell the ranks of the auxiliary police: the party is doing the same for its squads.”<sup>42</sup>

Mussolini had acted on his long-standing fear that Graziani’s future army, after 8 September, would hold out no hope for a metamorphosis from the backward-looking military burdened with Badoglioites, monarchists, and anti-Fascists to an army imbued with a spiritual Fascist outlook. The new political and Fascist army would be based on voluntary enlistment, whereas Graziani would have had to fall back on conscription and recruitment in the internment camps of Germany. Still aspiring for a place in the sun through war, Mussolini had come around to the view that only convinced Fascists who burned for combat could do what Italians en masse were unable to do: “to live one day as a lion rather than a 100 years as a sheep.”

Whether or not Graziani wanted to face up to solemn truths, he must have recognized that the 600,000 or so Italian soldiers in the camps wanted only to come home, not to fight. Anfuso informed Rome that the interned soldiers had suffered from the most profound moral shock of their lives. Disillusioned and bitter over their army’s collapse, they looked only to saving their own skins.<sup>43</sup>

On 8–12 December Mussolini granted Ricci authority to organize the GNR as a gendarmerie to secure public security and the defense of Fascism as well as to undertake military functions under the orders of the Armed Forces. Ricci eagerly looked forward to assembling his “aristocracy of believers” to demonstrate the ascendancy of Fascist radicalism. By decree of the Duce, Ricci was appointed as a member of the Council of Ministers, a move quite unpopular with both his rival at the Defense Ministry, Graziani, and to Buffarini, who now had to accept him as an equal.

The Germans predictably belittled the GNR. Hardly enamored of Ricci, whom he deemed to be “false, inactive, and stupid,” General Wolff would not extend a helping hand to his new GNR. A distrusting Rommel believed that officers in the Carabinieri and the Militia spent most of their time on illegal commercial transactions. Although Jandl and Toussaint agreed to assist Ricci’s force, they yielded only outdated and worn military equipment.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>43</sup> NAW, T-821, 006905–18, Anfuso to Mussolini, 10 December 1943.

<sup>44</sup> Pier Paolo Battistelli and Andrea Molinari, *Le forze armate della RSI: Uomini e imprese dell'ultimo esercito di Mussolini* (Milan: Hobby & Work, 2007), pp. 110–11.

On 11 January 1944, to placate Buffarini, a decree was issued that created a union of administrative services and agents of the Public Security placed under the Interior Ministry. This body, organized as part of the republican armed forces, differed markedly from the GNR, and thereby constituted a further fragmentation of military and security institutions that was destined to give Buffarini an edge in his rivalry with Ricci, who, however, would stop at nothing in concentrating the whole range of police operations under the mantle of the GNR.

In addition to his partial victory over Buffarini in the power struggle over control of the state's police powers, Ricci ended up with a collection of police branches having quite differing political traditions and persuasions, which denied him a coherent force. Would not the members of this troika composed of Blackshirts, former political police from Africa, and the supposedly monarchial Carabinieri pull in different directions? In early January Ricci made a beginning when he dissolved the MVSN general command, thinned out the Carabinieri, and ended the autonomy of the Italian Africa Police (*Polizia dell'Africa italiana*, PAI).

On paper, the hybrid GNR in January 1944 numbered 125,000 men, 50,000 of whom were Carabinieri manning 3000 forts. Although most were short of adequate training and equipment, the GNR did not lack efficient units. Among these was the "Assault Legion *Tagliamento*," highly regarded by the Germans, its strong nucleus consisting of battle-hardened Blackshirts, veterans from the Russian front, who had the mission to repress partisans in the provinces of Pesaro, Vicenza, Brescia, and Vercelli.<sup>45</sup> But the situation had dramatically changed. In 1921 the Blackshirt militias acted under the protection of the royal guard and the army, but now they worked under cover of the Wehrmacht. For the Blackshirts, the war against the Allies had mainly a rhetorical interest: they talked but did not act. What drove them was revenge against anti-Fascist political adversaries. Mussolini knew this well, confiding to Dolfi: "No one, and I repeat no one, of those who draw on a baggage of ideas to agitate comes to me to say they want to fight. It is at the front that the fate of the republic will be decided."<sup>46</sup>

The tug-of-war among the contending parties continued without letup. Graziani still aimed to have a large army based on a general draft and recruitment of the military internees in Germany. Ricci, Pavolini, and

<sup>45</sup> Antonio Pietra, *Guerriglia e contro guerriglia: Un bilancio militare della resistenza* (Vicenza: Gino Rossato Editore, 2001), p. 68.

<sup>46</sup> Dolfi, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 97.

Buffarini had put up a powerful resistance to Graziani's plans by opposing any notion of obligatory conscription because manpower reserves had already been ransacked by German roundups of Italian labor. For them, it was preferable to rely on volunteers because they would be more dependable Fascists. Ricci wanted no part of Graziani's "apolitical" army, while Buffarini was bent on swelling the ranks of the auxiliary police. Pavolini, in turn, was on the hunt for potential legionaries.<sup>47</sup> The X Mas (a semi-autonomous unit of the navy, of which more will be said in the following pages) joined the competition for recruits too. The internecine struggle in the RSI for control of the armed forces ended up as a collection of private armies and police forces owing only tenuous allegiance to any central authority.

With the rise of the GNR, Pavolini felt emboldened to denounce Canevari before Mussolini for expounding to his German colleagues in Berlin on the "death" of Fascism and his primary loyalty to Graziani over the Duce. Mussolini had had enough. He told Canevari: "Above all you have said that Fascism no longer exists in Italy. This is an error because as long as I am around there will be Fascism." Canevari retorted that he "wished to create a republic along American lines and therefore anything but Fascist and, finally, an army that would be national and apolitical."<sup>48</sup> On 1 December Graziani informed Canevari that Mussolini had told him: "It is necessary to get rid of Canevari because he has spoken badly of me and of Fascism to the Germans."<sup>49</sup>

The Italian generals fell to squabbling among themselves. At an Italo-German meeting on 4 December, Canevari was excused after a violent altercation with Graziani. Graziani was outraged that Canevari would arbitrarily have signed protocols on 16 October with the Germans in Berlin obliging Italy to send drafted recruits to complete the initial four divisions drawn from the internment camps for training in Germany.<sup>50</sup> Both Mussolini and Graziani feared that Italians, if drafted, would immediately run off. But had Graziani actually read the protocols that Canevari had brought home from Berlin?

<sup>47</sup> Pansa, *Il Gladio e l'alloro*, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 301.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 131–32.

With Canevari having been accused in Berlin as an enemy, Rahn received an order to demand his head.<sup>51</sup> And so it was done. Sporting the *bella figura*, Graziani swung the ax.<sup>52</sup> He offered no protest when a German tribunal arrested Canevari and sent him to a “sanatorium” in Munich on the supposition that he was anti-German. But since Canevari’s criticisms were mainly regarding the twists and turns of his regime’s Fascism, such a charge was inaccurate. By telling those Germans and Italians present in Berlin that “the Fascist Party was dead,” he was expressing his irritation over the downgrading of the army in favor of the Militia, with the consequent defeat of his important mission to secure the RSI as an equal and stalwart German ally. Since Canevari had once been a contributor to Farinacci’s *Regime fascista*, no one should have doubted that he was a true Fascist. Unable to overcome German suspicion, Canevari ended up jailed in Verona, where, after six months, thanks to the intervention of Wilhelm Harster, who knew that behind the political maneuvering in Berlin lay a Nazi sympathizer, he landed in more comfortable quarters in the Torri del Benaco on Lake Garda. His political disgrace owed more to his enemies in the RSI—Ricci and the influential journalist Felice Bellotti—than to his German colleagues.

The 16 October protocols had permanently lapsed, which ended the only hope for an effective military force in northern Italy at the disposal of the new regime. Italian military internees enjoyed no improvement in status over captured Poles and Belgians. In fighting a two-front battle against Hitler and Ricci, Graziani showed a hard-headed persistence he singularly failed to demonstrate on the battlefields in Libya. Although he was able to cling to office, his understudy Gambara, in March 1944, thanks to his strong advocacy of an “apolitical” army, was, as Canevari had been, shoved out of the way.<sup>53</sup>

In a meeting held on 16–18 January 1944 between Graziani, Kesselring, and Rahn, the latter ruled firmly against any further discussion on recruiting Italian soldiers interned in Germany for the new divisions. A discouraged Graziani admitted to Mussolini that it “was highly uncertain and problematic” whether the four divisions could ever be formed, that Kesselring was most reluctant to allow large Italian units to go into the lines, and that he wanted to use Italian troops only in small groups mixed with German units.

<sup>51</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 132.

<sup>53</sup> Gambara had had health problems in January 1944, and Mussolini had profited from his disabilities by removing him for being insufficiently Fascist. ACS, SPD, b. 86.



In response to the RSI troop call-ups of men in the 1924–25 classes living in the RSI (which first took place on 4 November 1943 by governmental decree), Italians, with the threat of severe punishment hanging over their heads, trickled into the recruitment centers a few at a time. Their alternatives were stark: answer the draft summons, take flight into a clandestine world that bore the risk of capture and death before a firing squad, or be deported to Germany for forced labor. Those recruits who did show up arrived in low morale and sour mood. They took oaths passively and did not hide their abhorrence of life in the barracks. The draftees hated the Wehrmacht, feared deportation to work camps in Germany, and dreaded having to fight for the Third Reich on the Eastern Front. Quite obviously, they were tired of war. Indeed, many in the classes of 1924–25 who were called to arms turned out to be long-lost absentees. Draft dodging and desertion spun out of control, further besmirching the military's reputation. The GNR considered forced roundups of recruits who did not want to don the uniform of the RSI.<sup>54</sup> Those who did eventually surface—the total amounted to a paltry 51,162<sup>55</sup>—found a scarcity of motor vehicles and little fuel to run them. There were hardly any kitchens or food supplies. Many arrived singing “*Bandiera Rossa*” and whistled at the Fascist M Battalion. Feeling like rounded-up war prisoners, Graziani's recruits made a sorry lot.<sup>56</sup> The RSI armed forces consisted of a military without decent arms, a navy with few ships, and an air force composed of what looked like wooden model planes. The staunch Fascist Pino Romualdi renders the judgment that the reconstruction of the regular army was “a grave error, perhaps the most serious.” Aware that the Italian people were no longer willing to fight, he suspected that an obligatory draft would encounter hostility. A higher payoff, according to Romualdi, would have accrued from a new Italian military based on a voluntary army, a party militia of solely confirmed Fascists.<sup>57</sup>

Infuriated by the draft dodging, Graziani, on 18 February 1944, issued the following decree: “death penalty for deserters and draft-dodgers,”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Pansa, *Il gladio e l'alloro*, p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 68.

<sup>56</sup> Pansa's biting observation. *Il gladio e l'alloro*, p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Romualdi, *Fascismo repubblicano*, p. 101.

<sup>58</sup> Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, p. 114; Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 151; ACS, RSI, SPD, c. 16, f. 91, stf. 4. The decree was approved by the government on February 12, 1944. *Verbalì del Consiglio dei Ministri della Repubblica Sociale Italiana settembre 1943-aprile 1945*, p. 293.

followed by reprisals against family members of deserters, which further alienated the sullen population and deepened estrangement from the regime.<sup>59</sup> There was, however, logic to Graziani's punitive measures, for if they had not been put on the books, the RSI would have appeared to be a papier-mâché statelet capable of threats but having no teeth. German designs on Italian manpower additionally drained the pool available for Graziani's troop recruitment. In mid-December Kesselring requested 15,000 men for work battalions behind the lines, while the German XIV Army asked for a first contingent of 18,000 for coastal defense. The Luftwaffe claimed 44,000 men to form flak auxiliaries in Germany for anti-aircraft duty and general airport maintenance. Not to be left out, the German navy wanted 28,000 Italians for maritime duty.<sup>60</sup> The worst predator was Sauckel, who requested the dispatch of 1.5 million Italian laborers to feed Göring's factories. Unable to refuse the German demands outright, and lacking a strong hold over its own population to garner troops for their own armed forces, the RSI resorted to a passive resistance. But this did not go nearly far enough to overcome the competing claims on Italian labor. Graziani's yawning manpower shortages highlighted the political fragmentation of the republic.

Did Graziani and Mussolini really intend to create a large army that was truly "apolitical"? The concept was a misnomer that Graziani and Canevari employed to make a clear distinction between their "national" army and the considerably more narrowly based Militia. In their minds, an "apolitical" army did not signify an emasculated, or neutralized Fascism. Rather, they employed the term against rival hierarchs who ruled the PFR. Graziani and Ricci were fierce competitors who simply did not like each other. But they were both convinced Fascists, as was Canevari, who worked closely with Wolff in organizing the Italian legion of the SS.

In truth, Graziani was never an apolitical soldier. In 1929, at Benghazi in Libya, he addressed his troops: "My action will be imprinted faithfully with the principles of the Fascist state because I, as a general of divisions in active service in the army, declare my principles to be clearly Fascist."<sup>61</sup> After the conquest of the empire, he spoke to Mussolini on 28 May 1938 in these terms: "Duce! In this moment when the Eternal City covers

<sup>59</sup> For examples of reprisals against the families of the draft dodgers, see Giulio Guderzo, *L'altra guerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p. 165.

<sup>60</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 280.

<sup>61</sup> Rodolfo Graziani, *Pace romana in Libia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1937), p. 235.

me with honor, my thoughts turn to you in full recognition that you are the author and founder of the Empire. Be assured that I will serve you always and everywhere in the future for the glory of our Imperial and Fascist country.”<sup>62</sup>

Graziani expressed the same views on 9 February 1944: “Comrades! To confront plutocratic conservatism, democratic capitalism and a Bolshevism that destroys everything in its path, the purist leveler in the last three decades or so has arrived: the Fascist idea, which has come up with solutions of social problems that have wearied millenniums of humanity ... [the Fascist idea] today glows with a new, pure, and bright light. Embodied in the resurgent Italian Social Republic, Fascism applies and realizes its fundamental postulates. Tomorrow, this idea will bestow on the country its definite national and social structure. Comrades! Faced by plutocratic conservatism, capitalist democracy, and the destructive force of Bolshevism, we emerge. Moved by the purest ideas, we religiously swear to achieve a secure and correct consciousness that will guarantee an absolute faith for life and in death.”<sup>63</sup> Could Pavolini, Buffarini, or Ricci have put it any better?

If the army was not explicitly political, neither was it ideologically agnostic, for the mainspring of Fascism was obviously spiritual, based on loyalty to the creed. The differences between Graziani and Ricci amounted simply to a power struggle between two hard-headed and ambitious personalities. In late June Graziani nominated as undersecretary of the army a man particularly sympathetic to the party, General Carlo Emanuele Basile.

As for Mussolini, he imposed the Roman salute on the armed forces in latter December 1943, following up on 28 January with this declaration: “The army of the Italian Social Republic cannot be a copy of the old royal army. The cadre must be up to their tasks in both peace and war. The obligation to abstain from political activity does not signify indifference or agnosticism. The pledge of faith to the republic signifies not only adhesion to the new political form of the state, but adhesion to the entirety of the Fascist doctrine, which gives value, character, and historical substance to the republic ... The salute, a manifestation of discipline and respect for hierarchy, will always, bareheaded or not, be Roman. The stars will be replaced by the *gladio romano* (knife of ancient Rome) surrounded by an ornament of oak and laurel.”<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> “Rodolfo Graziani proclamato cittadino dell’Urbe,” *Il Messaggero*, 27 May 1938.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Pansa, *Il gladio e l’alloro*, p. 57.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

It was apparent that Mussolini was caught on the horns of a dilemma. To restore credibility in his leadership and honor to his country, Italy, he knew, had to have an imposing national army based on a broad national consensus. The Germans, however, constantly rebuffed him in phrases deprecating Italian military prowess. Instead of strenuously arguing Graziani's case in Berlin, or confronting Hitler directly over the matter of recruiting Italian soldiers for the RSI army in German camps, Mussolini did little more than wring his hands. This left him with Ricci's Militia to provide the RSI with a military arm, a choice based on the knowledge that Fascists constituted only a minority of the population. In theory, Mussolini favored a militia over the more sensible "apolitical" army, since reliance on a purely Fascist institution would not have involved a watering down of his favored ideological preferences. Therefore, although haunted by the knowledge that formation of a regular army represented the only hope of reaching beyond Fascist loyalists for support, Mussolini, after much vacillation, came down in favor of Ricci, which predestined both his end as duce and of his government.



## CHAPTER 6

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# Fascist-Style Law and Order

Everywhere Mussolini turned inside the Salò administration there was disarray. In the fledgling RSI, before the Duce's cabinet members could find their seats, power had already slipped through his fingers to a hodge-podge of municipalities, regional authorities, and rogue gangs. Fragmented institutions splintered provincial government, and the great distances between them hampered communication. Provincial heads, *federali*, *questori*, and *podestà* competed with each other instead of working in lock-step. Coherent government was further upset by the arrival of overbearing German military and civil representatives, who, in their search for plunder and influence, pushed aside local Italian officials or co-opted them.

The conflicts and rivalries among the competing Fascist groups at the seat of government in Salò reflected the chaos in the cities, villages, and farms of rural Italy. In the general disruption created by the shock of defeat and surrender, let alone the harsh German occupation, Fascist radicals and rogue squads hurried to fill the gaping political and administrative voids. *Federali* flaunted the *squadre* spirit, while local *ras* in the style of Fascism's early days emerged to stake out claims to old turf. In a struggle for control over local politics, Fascist radicals combated those whom they contemptuously described as "*gerarconi*." Representing the "old" Fascism, these tired-out party hacks, in the eyes of the radicals, needed to be replaced by crisp fiery types.

But these “moderate” Fascists had allies in the existing bureaucracy—provincial heads, Carabinieri, and the Financial Guard (*Guardia di Finanza*), who, though many were convinced collaborators,<sup>1</sup> felt obliged to safeguard the civil life of the country and provide protection to defenseless people fearing Fascist intimidation and social chaos. They were joined by loyal patriots defending Italy’s good name plus craftsmen and entrepreneurs who saw in Mussolini’s republic the restoration of law and order that would guarantee business as usual.

The Duce had his work cut out in imposing order over the competing local precincts and fractious party sects sundering the regional social fabric. The only available remedy was to fashion a reliable corps of “servants of the state.” Although Mussolini in his earlier period had scorned the bureaucrat’s rigid *piccolo borghese* mentality, he allowed Italy’s state functionaries to live comfortably and unchallenged. But in the current era, beset by public despondency that undermined the RSI’s credibility, he could scarcely permit his lackadaisical attention to detail simply to continue. Hence, the Duce bestirred himself, if only intermittently, by promulgating reform that would inspire hope in a strong government resistant to the wholesale uprooting advanced by the Fascist radicals.

The Republican Police (*Polizia Repubblicana* [PR]) was created on 20 November 1943 to uphold public order and put into place the following January.<sup>2</sup> Merging together constabulary and local police forces, it reported a total of 23,000 men, plus 20,000 “auxiliaries.”<sup>3</sup> Headed by Tullio Tamburini, the police chief who worked under Buffarini, the PR’s authority extended only to major cities and encountered competition with the GNR, which had successfully usurped many police functions while pursuing those guilty of political crimes. Such behavior seriously demoralized the general public that yearned for a unified and predictable system of law and order.

Worse still was the behavior of the new truncheon bearers, the *manganellatori*—local “autonomous” militias mushrooming everywhere at the grassroots level. This radical “new wave” looked on PR members and the “servants of the state” as traitors and faithless Fascists, despising their smug self-image as a lofty and disinterested corps of the state and as authority

<sup>1</sup> For example, a commander of the Guardia di Finanza, accused of being anti-Fascist, sent a report to his superiors claiming that he had supervised the arrest of Jews and anti-Fascists who were looking to be expatriated to Switzerland. ACS, RSI, SPD, Carteggio riservato, b. 77.

<sup>2</sup> “Guardia Nazionale e Polizia Repubblicana,” *La Stampa*, 20 November 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Pier Paolo Battistelli & Piero Crociani, *World War II Partisan Warfare in Italy* (Oxford & New York: Osprey, 2015), p. 15.

figures who pronounced the last word from the “sacred” bureaucratic handbook. Most unacceptably, the trained civil servants in their received wisdom snubbed ideological precepts. Much to the disgust of both Fascists and local peoples, many of these bearers of the official seal utilized their inside contacts to corner the black market while doling out special privileges to each other.<sup>4</sup>

When in early November 1943 partisan cyclists carried out a string of Fascist killings and shook off pursuit by the legal authorities, Pavolini asked for Mussolini’s approval to deploy *squadre federali* to round up and arrest “these enemies of country and Fascism.” The Duce approved but added a cautionary note: the *federali* were not to proceed without a previous accord with the more prudent and experienced provincial heads. The Duce’s watered-down instructions did not placate “the legal forces of public order,” who were looking for unambiguous edicts that forbade the *federale* squads from acting on their own.<sup>5</sup> Many provincial heads, according to Pavolini, were unabashed traitors who sought stature by having the famous circular of 1927 that established their primacy over local party chiefs resubmitted. In general the provincial heads wanted the government either to quash the “illegal” *federali* party police forces or order them to obey their authority.<sup>6</sup> Would the Salò regime answer their call?

Buffarini on 10 December confessed to Dolfín: “The war is marked by setbacks on all fronts and infinitely perennial interferences by the party ... Just as damaging is the Duce’s ongoing indecisiveness.”<sup>7</sup> Buffarini had more to say: “It seems impossible ... that a man of his [Mussolini’s] intuition and cleverness always favors compromise.”<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of his complaints during the first weeks of his rule, the changeable Duce generally came down on Buffarini’s side in the effort to encourage Italians to collaborate in the administration of the country. Tapping into the public mood, he was aware that an important core of his supporters held out hope for a new phase of Fascism, one liberated from rancor and capable of assembling dyed-in-the-wool patriots who had been offended by the behavior of the *federali* in the provinces. One newspaper editor, in expressing a widely-held view, urged that exacerbated ideological passion and private vendettas be replaced by ardor for national fraternity.

<sup>4</sup> Borghi, *Tra Fascio littorio e senso dello stato*, pp. 119–21.

<sup>5</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 76–77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121–22.

<sup>7</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

“For the fallen, for the brothers sleeping forever in the cemeteries of the war ... are Fascists who today speak to you, Italians of all ideas. Italian brothers! Banish every rancor! ... We must save Italy!”<sup>9</sup> He and many moderates desired a fresh start, a vigorous affirmation of a state that guaranteed rights and laws, social justice, and national unity in which there would be no place for politicized forces of public order and factious cliques.

In the 12 December issue of the *Corrispondenza Repubblicana*, Mussolini again supported Buffarini by strongly favoring a single police carrying out its duties in strict accordance with the law.<sup>10</sup> Under this pressure, Pavolini, as party secretary, ordered that the squads be dissolved and the best elements included in the GNR.<sup>11</sup>

On 23 December 1943 Mussolini spelled out the seriousness of this problem in a circular to his provincial chiefs: “For far too long the custom of arrests, searches, and shakedowns without flagrant offense or provable motive has prevailed. Action has often been taken without any reference to official orders. That behavior is simply not republican, or Fascist. It can only be described as confusion, arbitrariness, and anarchy and produces uncertainty and panic, which ends up promoting growth of the ‘rebels.’ These deleterious deeds undercut the national resurrection that is a must for the supreme goal of making Italians worthy of their name. Episodes of this nature must absolutely end.”<sup>12</sup> On 29 January 1944 Mussolini wrote a stinging circular reprimanding department heads for allowing laziness and corruption to flourish.<sup>13</sup>

In carrying out Mussolini’s mandate, Buffarini authorized the provincial heads and *questori* to discipline the roving Fascist bands which, acting as independent police forces, were demanding “exemplary” punishment for the “political” crimes of their enemies. As opposed to the supposed neutrality of the former provincial heads, Buffarini appointed to these posts adherents of the Fascist Republican Party who were not exactly exemplary apolitical civil servants.<sup>14</sup>

To assist him in the work of consolidating public security, Buffarini instructed Police Chief Tamburini, who had the reputation as a collector of experts in the arts of violence and torture, to extend the state police to

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La Repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 179.

<sup>10</sup> OO, XXXII: 275–76.

<sup>11</sup> Decreto Legislativo del Duce del 18 Dicembre 1943, n. 921, in ACS, Ministero dell’Interno RSI, Segreteria del Capo della Polizia, b. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, pp. 116–17.

<sup>13</sup> Borghi, *Tra Fascio littorio e senso dello stato*, p. 125.

<sup>14</sup> Ganapini, *La Repubblica delle camicie nere*, pp. 275–95.



reach every nook and cranny of RSI territory. All matters of law and order and acts of repression would fall directly under the state's mandate. If Buffarini could implement these wide-ranging reforms, he would get the best of his old rival, the head of the party, Pavolini.

In December 1943, having been granted the upper hand, Buffarini ordered the dissolution of the *federale* police (the action squads) over the vigorous protests of the Fascist radicals, who concluded that such a step squelched the second wave of the revolution.<sup>15</sup> On 15 January 1944 he sent out an order to redeploy the dissolved party formations as auxiliary units in Ricci's Militia, Graziani's army, and Buffarini's police. This redeployment effort coincided with attempts to unify and militarize the police organs.<sup>16</sup>

So much for paper orders. There were simply too many messy and complex developments bearing down on the RSI for Buffarini to resolve by a stroke of the pen. Confronted by regional areas isolated from one another, and by communication breakdowns that resulted from pulverizing Allied bombing and partisan raids, the Salò authorities were hampered in imposing order over such spread-out government entities. This allowed the improvised and disorderly local power centers to defy central authority without fear of truly punitive and hostile responses. If the RSI ministers accused the provincial heads of acting selfishly in caring only about their local clientele, the provincial heads, in turn, frequently called out the RSI authorities for their inability to overcome chronic slowness and send clear directives. This produced a strange paradox: the provincial head, whose customary function as prefect was to transmit the edicts of the central government to people in his locale, had become a regional political kingpin, a jealous champion of his arrogated initiatives.

Therefore, practically nothing was done to stop the disparate irregular Fascist formations from engaging in a systematic usurpation of state authority by taking on the functions of special police at the expense of the local civil authorities. In the absence of state authority, Mussolini and the Fascist-dominated official chieftains had to avert their gaze while Pavolini and his following, pursuing "private justice," ruthlessly carried out acts of vengeance. Uninhibited by constraints and relishing the *squadrista* lifestyle,<sup>17</sup> they eased into large vacuums that the Salò government, paralyzed by a lack of centralized institutions, was unable to fill.

<sup>15</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 303.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 296–98, 303, 313–15; Toni Rovatti, *Leoni vegetariani: la violenza fascista durante la RSI* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2011), p. 27.

Mussolini himself added to the confusion by expressing inconsistent views. On 7 March 1944 he informed Dolfin that those inscribed into the party must be highly qualified, exemplifying “competence and honesty, adhesion to the general policies of the government, and naturally to the Republic.”<sup>18</sup> But three days later, he impulsively assured two *federali* that the party directorate, which, perhaps, behaved “violently and inopportunistly,” nonetheless acted according to views that “were basically his own.”<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the Germans lurked everywhere in the background. In March the head of the gabinetto of the Ministry of Interior, Coriolano Pagnozzi, received an order from Graziani based on propositions advanced by General Kesselring that demanded the civil population be supervised by the German military command in Rome on all matters touching on the interests of the Wehrmacht.<sup>20</sup> The Germans were soon to flank the RSI provincial heads with their own advisors who were to make sure that their Italian front men issued orders consonant with Wehrmacht interests. Not to be left out, the SS demanded the right to place Italian administrators at their beck and call.<sup>21</sup> Like termites, the Germans ate away at RSI sovereignty slowly but surely.

The Duce’s ambivalence left the conflict between the provincial heads and the *federali* to proceed unabated. Since the radicals, whose hostility toward the provincial heads was constant, ruthless, and virulent,<sup>22</sup> already held the upper hand on the local level, they were able to snuff out many “apolitical” and “national” circles.<sup>23</sup> In the lawless areas, therefore, the armed radicals suffered little opposition in setting up regional power bases from which to extend their arbitrary rule, much to the discomfort of citizens everywhere.

In the absence of an effective central police, the RSI turned to the GNR as the most reliable instrument to curb both social disorder and the partisan threat. But here, too, problems abounded. Consisting of the MVSN, Carabinieri, and the African Police, each of which had quite different

<sup>18</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>20</sup> Marco De Nicolò, “I prefetti capi di provincia,” in Luca Alessandrini, ed., 1943: *Guerra e società* (Rome: Viella, 2015), Kindle Loc, 3178.

<sup>21</sup> Enzo Collotti, “Documenti sull’attività della Sicherheitsdienst nell’Italia occupata,” *Il Movimento di Liberazione in Italia* 83 (1966), p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 190.

<sup>23</sup> Osti Guerrazzi gives a comprehensive picture of radical takeover in the rural areas of the country in his *Storia della repubblica sociale italiana*, pp. 79–85.

backgrounds and political makeup, the GNR was rent by contradictions. Suspecting that the regime would soon collapse, the African Police and Carabinieri fulfilled halfheartedly, or not at all, orders to arrest “suspects.” And instead of a disciplined force, the old MVSN was split over how to combat the mounting partisan threat. Ermanno Amicucci, the editor of the *Corriere della Sera*, predicted that “*lo spozalizio*” (the wedding) between the incompatible Militia and Carabinieri would hastily break up.<sup>24</sup> In the eyes of the militiamen, the Carabinieri were besmirched with royalist sentiments and sought only to stay alive until the Allies arrived. The former members of the African Police, numbering from 1500 to 2000 men who passed time squabbling with the Militia, were more unreliable still.

Having rounded up around 10,000 Carabinieri on 8 September in the Balkans, the Germans did not show much trust in them either. Between October 6 and 8, targeting the Carabinieri in Rome as a security risk, SS Herbert Kappler, the Gestapo chief in that city, put up a squad of Fascist-led police to disarm and deport around 1500 to Germany as workers.<sup>25</sup> In June 1944 the Germans planned utilizing another 10,000 Carabinieri to man anti-aircraft batteries and guard Luftwaffe camps.<sup>26</sup>

On 5 August 1944 the Germans moved to disarm yet more Carabinieri wherever they could be found, an action followed up by the Italians, who on the 25th put scores of them unceremoniously out to pasture. Some Carabinieri, who were ticketed to do duty on Luftwaffe anti-aircraft units, fled deportation to Germany or went over to the partisans, to whom they provided much-needed arms and military know-how. Carabinieri purges and defections shrank the GNR to around 70,000 in August 1944.<sup>27</sup> This turned out to be a catastrophe for Ricci, for the 35,000 Carabinieri in his ranks in May had plummeted to 11,340. With this sudden reduction, Ricci was compelled to close down a great number of his guard posts. Carabinieri utilized elsewhere in Italy not infrequently closed an eye to partisan activity, especially in areas where the Allies were on the move.

In conducting police duties, the GNR constantly challenged and interfered with the provincial heads straining to uphold law and order. Their

<sup>24</sup> Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Robert Katz, “The New CIA-OSS Documents, 2000–2002,” [Decode document 7184], Kappler to Berlin, October 5, 1943, in *Jews in Italy under Fascist and Nazi Rule: 1922–1945*, p. 235; Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 120.

<sup>26</sup> Rovatti, *Leoni vegetariani*, p. 59; Pansa, *Il gladio e l'alloro*, pp. 93–106.

<sup>27</sup> Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della RSI*, p. 121.

brutally conducted roundups, fierce interrogations, and beatings further harassed a population already under siege from Allied air bombardments and German counterinsurgency.

How many men joined the GNR colors? Graziani spoke of 140,000, a figure confirmed by British historian F. W. Deakin, whereas Giovanni Dolfi on 21 December noted that “Ricci speaks of 100,000 men in the guard.”<sup>28</sup> Neither estimate amounted to an overwhelming force. Even those small numbers were engaged in a frantic hunt for arms, munitions, fuel, uniforms, and shoes. Many lacked discipline and military training. Desertion set in, which lowered the morale of those who stayed in the ranks.<sup>29</sup> Operating with such thinned numbers, the RSI was in no position to control large swaths of territory.

The Italian SS provided no good answer either. Soon after Mussolini took up the reins of government, he discussed with Hitler and Himmler the formation of a corps of SS *italiane*. On 16–18 September 1943 Graziani was able to persuade Wehrmacht General Kesselring to agree that Italians trained in the camp of Münsingen in Germany, 13,000 strong, should be released from German control and become part of the new SS Italian divisions.<sup>30</sup> That recruits were obliged to pay allegiance to Hitler rather than Mussolini did not seem to concern him.<sup>31</sup> But instead of deployment against the Allied armies, they were destined to be engaged primarily against “bandits” and Communists in northern Italy.<sup>32</sup>

After a talk with Mussolini on 24 September 1943, Himmler, having joined the Italian SS fan club, charged General Wolff on 2 October with recruiting Italian SS battalions. Drawn on volunteers from the camps in Germany, to which were added units that had remained intact after 8 September, they would take an oath of loyalty to Hitler, pledge faith to Nazism and Germany, be under the command of German officers, and integrated in the Waffen SS. Numbering some 90,000 men, they would

<sup>28</sup> Dolfi, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> Pansa, *Il Gladio e l'alloro*, pp. 15–19.

<sup>30</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 91; NAW, T-821, Italian Documents 045804–045813.

<sup>31</sup> Primo de Lazzari, *Le SS Italiane* (Milan: Teti Editore, 2002), p. 35. “Before God, I make this sacred oath: In the struggle for my Italian country against all enemies I will be in an absolute and obedient manner at one with Adolf Hitler, the supreme commander of the German army, and as a valorous soldier I will be ready in every moment to give my life in obedience to this oath.”

<sup>32</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 268.

wear Italian uniforms but with German shoulder straps and collar badges.<sup>33</sup> The Italian SS was to be independent of the Salò government.

Two Fascist representatives, Drs. Scampicchio and Pietruccio, met together with SS *Obergruppenführer* and general of the Waffen SS, Hans Jütter, to work out details. The two Italians presented a plan. Soldiers from reliable units and militias from the M battalions would be sent to the SS after being provided adequate equipment. The Italian formations in the German SS would be led by their own men, but under the ultimate command of Nazi officers. Although it was agreed that these troops would be used for the liberation of Italy, Mussolini would defer to Hitler on their ultimate disposition.<sup>34</sup> Himmler replied on 2 October that the Italian SS should be content with rearguard *rastrellamenti* of the partisans, round-ups of downed Allied parachutists, and searches for Communists. They were not to take part in operations on the front lines—which did not please the Duce.

At the initiative of General Canevari, a division of Italian SS was launched on 19 October, to which were added another 3000 for police operations under the coordination of the German SS.<sup>35</sup> These arrangements were apparently made behind the back of Renato Ricci, the GNR chieftain, who later was surprised to discover that more recruits volunteered for the Italian SS than for his Militia brigades, thanks to German higher pay and better rations. Among the recruits were Fascist idealists, visionaries, soldiers of fortune, volunteers from the camps in Germany, sadists, and ideological missionaries proud to bear the swastika, which for them represented a symbol of a new European order. In an SS-dominated European order, Italian members would find comrades among French, Walloons, Belgians, Dutch, Norwegians, Danes, Spanish, Ukrainians, Lets, and Estonians, all of whom were supposedly united in the common purpose of fighting Communism. But the Germans were in no hurry. Formation of the Italian SS would take place step by step, and battlefield performance would be evaluated carefully before opening the gates further for additional recruits.

Wolff sent the Italian SS Battalion *Vendetta* (later named *Nettuno*) to the Anzio front in support of the Italian *Nembo*, *Folgore*, and the *Barbarigo* unit of the X Mas. Since the units performed well, Himmler decided to

<sup>33</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> Ricciotti Lazzero, *Le SS italiane: Storia dei 20,000 che giurarono fedeltà a Hitler* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1982), pp. 18–19.

<sup>35</sup> Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, p. 88.

acknowledge the Italian SS as part of the Waffen SS.<sup>36</sup> In August 1944 one of Wolff's representatives asked Mussolini for more men to expand the Italian SS ranks. The Duce replied that he had already scraped the bottom of the barrel for manpower and proposed that soldiers be chosen among the mass of internees still in German camps.<sup>37</sup> But nothing came of this. On 13 February 1945 German SS authorities reported that Mussolini counted 15,000–20,000 men under SS arms. Actually, there were only about five to six thousand. (The German historian Lutz Klinkhammer estimates that at the end of the war the Italian SS numbered 4500.<sup>38</sup>) But inadequately outfitted and provided poor rations, many of this paltry number simply deserted.<sup>39</sup> (Their comrades in the X Mas were treated far better.) Truth to tell, the Germans never overcame their deep suspicion of Italians no matter where they were engaged, even in the SS. Himmler neither inspected Italian SS troops nor talked with their officers as he did SS commanders of other countries. He was stingy in allocating arms to the Italian SS out of fear that the men trained in German technical skills would stage a *colpo di mano*, revolt, or give their German equipment to the partisans.<sup>40</sup>

On 30 December 1944, Graziani, as if living in a dream world, addressed units of the Italian SS: "You are the most faithful among all the faithful, I repeat, because it is not vain to clarify what you represent in the configuration of this miraculous redemption of our country after the infamous betrayal. You did not hesitate, nor did you have a more or less laborious crisis of conscience. Immediately, without hesitation, you have felt that there was no other way to follow but the path of honor by closing ranks with the German comrades, totally accepting without any reserve to fight with them for the common cause of this Europe that is not only a geographic expression but on its way to becoming a magnificent reality."<sup>41</sup> "*Morire in bellezza*" was a clarion call that resonated to the end.

The Italian writer Nicola Guerra provides another side of the story. He asks: were the Waffen Italian volunteers super-Fascist fanatics readied for any sacrifice by a passionate Nazi-Fascist ideological rallying call? In recapturing the spirit of Fascism's revolutionary origins, he suggests, they focused on social justice achieved by an overthrow of capitalism and

<sup>36</sup> Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 555, n. 90.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 555, n. 91.

<sup>40</sup> Lazzero, *Le SS italiane*, p. 259.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Ibid., p. 31.

repudiation of imperialism. Guerra also offers the novel idea that the Italian SS was galvanized by an economic anti-Semitism, not by biological racism. If, in their view, Jews did not comprise an ethno-religious group, their acquisitive spirit could be found among all well-heeled capitalists. Ergo, people who selfishly pursue wealth at the expense of the collective will become Hebraized.

Italian SS radical Fascism glorified the pagan's cult of nature. Mesmerized by modernity and deifying futurism, their universe had no space for Christianity. Casting off the notion of homeland, they favored a transnational world view forged by the spirit of "a community of the trenches" among volunteers from around Europe, bonded together in a crusade against Communism. Having found a common purpose in proletarian solidarity, they aimed to realize a utopian vision of social justice.

According to Guerra, invincible heroism marked the Italian SS warrior's creed. Their image drew on Nordic mythology and the ideologically motivated German soldier rather than on the rituals of the Italian Fascist regime and its rhetorical flourishes. Neither was the cult of the Duce pertinent, thanks to his compromises with conservatives, industrialists, and the Catholic Church. For Guerra, the SS volunteer was a virtuous true-grit soldier, not a stone-cold executioner or merciless adventurer inspired by an evil ideology.<sup>42</sup>

Guerra's rendition amounts to a whitewash that ignores the brutal fact that the real Italian SS was involved in some of the most ferocious war crimes committed in the Italian theater. For example, at the end of March 1944 a unit of the SS was attacked in the area of Cumiana, north of Pinerolo. After some sharp fighting, the SS men were forced to surrender, which enabled the partisans to round up thirty-two legionnaires and two German non-commissioned officers. On 1 April another Italian SS unit arrived at Cumiana, which torched everything in sight and collected 200 hostages among the civil population. Notwithstanding efforts to work out an exchange of prisoners and hostages, the Italian SS slaughtered fifty-one of their captives. Their path of wanton destruction reached neighboring Balangero on 1 April and Caluso six days later.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Nicola Guerra, *I volontari italiani nelle Waffen-SS: Pensiero politico, formazione culturale e motivazioni al volontariato* (Chieti: Solfanelli, 2014), *passim*.

<sup>43</sup>Lazzero documents these outrages in his *Le SS italiane*, pp. 89–92. See also Sergio Corbatti & Marco Nava, *Sentire-pensare-volere. Storia della Legione SS italiana* (Milan: Ritter, 2001), pp. 165–67.

Contrary to the Italian SS, the X Mas sported hyper-nationalist and popular poses. Whenever the proud X Mas legions marched by, the hearts of Italian patriots fluttered with pride. Their leader, the dashing Prince Valerio Borghese, was, for them, an updated version of a medieval knight errant, an apolitical warrior who called his fellow Italians to arms in defense of the motherland, which had been assailed by enemies from all sides. The X Mas resembled the volunteer German Freikorps, which, after World War I, refused to accept defeat and formed units among war veterans to combat the Slav enemy in the East. For Borghese, Salò did not constitute a political choice; his decision to serve the regime was rather dictated by loyalty to patriotic values that overrode prosaic politics, or so he said. The core of the original X Mas consisted of a picaresque volunteer phalanx of *Medaglia d'Oro* winners and heroes who had won their spurs by sinking British capital ships in 1941.

The X Mas adopted military training that broke from the stiff bureaucratic formality of the regular Italian army. Instead of favoritism and seniority, promotion was to be earned by heroism and battlefield performance. To overcome the vast social distances prevailing between privileged officers and common soldiers, camaraderie was fostered by their taking meals together. Instead of rigid orders issued to be robotically carried out, battlefield initiative was encouraged. Making a fresh start, the X Mas consigned to the shadows the old military institutions and habits they held responsible for the abrupt military breakdown of 8 September.

Borghese, the Renaissance *condottiere*, posturing as the custodian of anti-politics, however, actually accepted the ideological assumptions of the Axis war. He chastised Badoglio for having betrayed a fundamental belief that had once driven the Fascist regime: Italian blood against English gold. In the aftermath of war, he wrote: "I thought that the war ought to have been won and this not only for military reasons but also ideological. The war that we fought saw Europe as a victim of America allied with the Soviet Union. Italy and Germany represented Europe, its civilization, traditions, and history. America represented the domination of money, while the Soviet Union incarnated brute force. We pitted our idealism against materialism. The alignment of the king and Badoglio with the Anglo-Americans denoted a vile deception of the Italian people with regard to Europe and a betrayal of the profound motives and ideological main-springs behind the cosmic struggle against Communism."<sup>44</sup> This view was

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Francesco Germinario, *L'altra memoria: L'Estrema destra. Salò e la Resistenza* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), p. 80; Mario Bordogna, *Junio Valerio Borghese e la X flottiglia MAS. Dall'8 settembre al 26 aprile 1945* (Milan: Mursia, 1995), p. 39.



no different from the one propounded by the Fascist philosopher Ugo Spirito. On another occasion Borghese wrote: "From my political opinions and activity, from my admiration of Mussolini, I could be identified as a Fascist. However, for my independence with respect to the obligations of the Party, for my avoidance to the exterior forms of the Party, its frills and its rhetoric, I was considered to be non-aligned ... It was my opinion that the Italian Social Republic responded to a precise moral and political necessity. It was born, in my view, also without Mussolini."<sup>45</sup> The so-called apolitical Borghese, therefore, was not solely a neutral defender of the nation as he so frequently proclaimed but an adherent of the Axis ideology, which described the war as a conflict between the spiritual and civilized Europe against the materialistic American plutocracy aiming to subvert European values. Borghese's ability to project himself as an exciting *condottiere* placed him in rivalry with Mussolini, who saw himself as the savior of a warrior nation.

Following Italy's armistice on 8 September 1943, the X Mas troops were disbanded. Many marines remained in their barracks at the naval base at La Spezia and volunteered to serve Borghese, who refused to accept the armistice or yield his weapons to the German *Kriegsmarine* coming to intern them. By refuting the notion of an eternally cowardly and traitorous Italy, he intended to keep Italy's promise to the German comrades that they would fight common enemies to the last breath. And since the X Mas men had an estimable reputation as fighters, the Germans thought it best not to demand surrender. After a brief standoff, the two sides worked out an agreement by which they would fight together against the Allies under the Italian flag but at the orders of the German navy. The bond between Borghese and the Germans was based on their mutual hatred of Communism and their leaders Stalin and Tito. But if Borghese aimed to protect the territorial integrity of Italy, he managed to overlook the German takeover of the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico.

The men of the X Mas openly proclaimed that they would fight for the honor of Italy, but not for Fascism. In insisting on full freedom of movement, they refused to recognize Graziani's military authority. Thanks to his reputation as a hardened daredevil, Borghese pulled in thousands of youth to his ranks that were not disposed to suffer RSI orders.

Borghese had much more cordial relationships with German seamen than with the heads of the RSI navy, particularly after Ferruccio Ferrini, undersecretary of the navy, sent him before a military tribunal for insubordination.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 48, 56.

Meanwhile, Ferrini dispatched an officer to take command of some units of the X Mas. Once the officer arrived, he was assailed by Borghese's men, who tied him to a bedpost for the night. Graziani intervened by suspending the Tribunale. Ferrini was dismissed after a stormy conversation with Graziani.<sup>46</sup>

On 5 October 1943 Borghese met Mussolini for the first time. Though friction between them bubbled beneath the surface, the Duce welcomed the Italian warrior cordially in the hope of co-opting him, but Borghese insisted on "autonomy" and the right to deal with the Germans on his own.

Exhibiting the same stubborn independence, Borghese's following resisted every restraint and discipline imposed by the RSI government. The *marò*, as the men of the Decima Mas were called, did not have to take an oath of allegiance to the Salò Republic.<sup>47</sup> As an openly proclaimed non-Fascist, Borghese incurred hatred in the party by acting like an aristocratic potentate.

When, in January 1944, Mussolini feared that Borghese was planning a coup d'état against him, he ordered his arrest. Ricci had no problem in carrying out this edict since bad blood ran deep between his GNR and the *marò*. But the arrest raised a hue and cry throughout the RSI. German naval authorities at La Spezia, local Italian provincial heads, and Borghese's own officers threatened to force his release. Without opposition on the Duce's part, Borghese was set free on the 25th.

This quixotic affair did not stop the rebellious Borghese from contemplating a "march on Lake Garda" during the following June in cahoots with Buffarini. One day Borghese asked him: "What would you do in case of a hypothetical split in the Italian/Mussolini duo?" Buffarini replied cuttingly: "I am a faithful servant of Mussolini."<sup>48</sup> This conversation reached Mussolini's ear, who confided to Dollmann: "Borghese would like the Duce without Fascism, but who could ever disengage me from Fascism?"<sup>49</sup>

Even if Borghese was merely a wobbly Fascist, nothing would stop him from conducting his own campaigns independent of Salò. In early August he undertook a campaign against the partisans in the Aosta region along

<sup>46</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, pp. 412–13, n. 98.

<sup>47</sup> Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *The Black Prince and the Sea Devils: The Story of Valerio Borghese and the Elite Units of the Decima Mas* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), p. 149.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 282, who cites Franz Turchi, *Prefetto con Mussolini* (Rome: Latinità, 1950), p. 161.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 282.

the Swiss border that created a series of difficulties for the Italo-Germans, which gave them more reason to doubt his trustworthiness.<sup>50</sup>

While the X Mas plied its trade mainly in naval special operations, Borghese became increasingly worried about Yugoslav partisan inroads in northeastern Italy. Regardless of the Fascists, the X Mas, as patriots, would tenaciously defend Italian territorial integrity against Tito's claims to Istria and the Venezia Giulia. Borghese would cooperate with any leader or country that would support his defense of the motherland.

Hence Borghese would intrigue against Mussolini, seek his cooperation, or approach the Allies, depending on the shifting tides of the war against the Yugoslav Partisans. When many core units of his X Mas were posted to Venezia Giulia from Liguria in December 1944, he explored an accord with the Allies by offering to defend the Italo-Yugoslav frontier until their arrival. Allied commanders listened to his message that he was neither Fascist nor pro-German but a patriot prepared for a fight *à outrance* against the mounting Yugoslav Communist threat in the Italian northeast. If an Italian partisan outfit like Osoppo, which opposed Tito, needed arms, he would send them. Though interested, the Allies broke off negotiations.<sup>51</sup> General Wilson is reported to have said: "The Decima is too infamous. Don't negotiate."<sup>52</sup>

In April 1945, when the American command discovered that the British had granted Tito permission to occupy northeastern Italy from Venezia to the east, Borghese's troops built a defense line at the Tagliamento River where they resisted until the arrival of the Allied troops.

The X Mas, while lauded for patriotism, not only fought a ferocious war against the partisans but frequently engaged in thievery, black market transactions, and brawling with other autonomous rogue outfits.<sup>53</sup> Some units undertook unauthorized raids that featured extortion, torture of prisoners, and assassinations.<sup>54</sup> For example, an undated anonymous report (probably from the end of 1944) sent to the Ministry of Interior regarding men of the X detachment stationed in Belluno expounded on the comportment of the soldiers: "The situation ... in such areas is particularly

<sup>50</sup> Marco Gasparini and Claudio Razeto, 1944: *Diario dell'anno che divise l'Italia* (Rome: Castelvechi, 2014), p. 329.

<sup>51</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, pp. 250–51.

<sup>52</sup> Zara Algardi, *Processo ai fascisti Anfuso, Caruso, Graziani e Borghese di fronte alla giustizia. Esame storico-giuridico* (Florence: Parenti, 1988), p. 197.

<sup>53</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 282.

<sup>54</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della Repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 98.

difficult. Among other things the local population is at this point exhausted and greatly vexed by violent actions indiscriminately and illegally carried out by battalions of the X Mas deployed here. The local people have fallen prey to a dangerous *stato d'animo* that can easily be exploited for the benefit of the partisans. The soldiers of the X Mas, who should be providing security for the population, instead indulge in criminal actions of every kind. They arbitrarily search houses in both city and country; they requisition and steal huge quantities of foodstuffs, clothes, and various other goods; they extort money and precious objects; they illegitimately confiscate means of transportation such as hospital ambulances; and they seize people, shoot hostages, and violate women.”<sup>55</sup> Like other paramilitary forces, the X Mas was hardly a cohesive unit, particularly after 1 May 1944 when it began to recruit en masse men who sneered at their commanders and authority in general.

Throughout the RSI period the X Mas had kept an independent line open with the Germans, negotiated on the sly with the Allies, and ruthlessly engaged in vicious turf wars with rival militia bands. In this brutal dog-eat-dog setting, their cocky assumption of superiority provoked Mussolini and the RSI.

Other autonomous militia outfits of a different character emerged. The Muti Legion, named after the prominent Fascist Ettore Muti, who was killed on 24 August 1943 in a scuffle with Badoglio's Carabinieri after Mussolini's fall in 1943, was the prototype of autonomous militias springing up in the RSI. It surfaced on 14 September 1943 as an action squad in Pavolini's *federale* police. Thanks to the ties between *ex-squadrista* Franco Colombo, the commander of the Muti, and the provincial head of Milan, Tamburini placed the organization in the PR as a police battalion in March 1944.

The membership of the Muti Legion was originally made up of young men who had escaped from a reformatory. They were joined by intransigent Fascists and former *squadristi* of the early twenties, and eventually by opportunists, sadists, ex-convicts, adventurers, and adolescents.<sup>56</sup> Under the Ministry of the Interior, the legion, allegedly tied to Roberto Farinacci and financed by his personal coterie of industrialists,<sup>57</sup> was tasked with counter-guerrilla warfare, tracking down subversives, and protecting railroad and RSI institutions. In disciplining Fascists not deemed ideologically pure, the legion distinguished itself by vendettas, torture, and robbery.

<sup>55</sup> ACS, Ministero dell Interno RSI, Gabinetto, b. 46.

<sup>56</sup> Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 192–95.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 191–92.

Theodor Saevecke, head of the German security police, provided the organization of around 2300 men unstinting support in undertaking reprisals.

Beyond repressing the resistance, the legion was renowned for indiscipline and for the daily violence visited upon average citizens. A report of the chief of police of Milan in June 1944 details the following: "An officer of the local Muti Legion stopped in front of the command center and scuffled with diverse passers-by who failed to doff their hats, among whom was an agent of the police, De Lillo Vincenzo."<sup>58</sup> Episodes like these, repeated over and over in many Italian cities, reveal not only a lack of discipline among the Fascist militias but also their general contempt of the ordinary citizen. Such hate and scorn merely fomented hostility on the part of average people that further alienated them from the Fascist cause.

In November 1943 the *federale* of Milan, Aldo Resega, wanted to cashier the foul-mouthed Colombo as a danger to the city's public order. But when Resega was cut down by a member of the Patriotic Action Groups (*Gruppi di Azione Patriottica*) [GAP] in December 1943, Colombo was able to keep his post and take part in raids hand in hand with *SS-Brigadenführer* Wilhelm Tensfeld.<sup>59</sup>

Since Buffarini wanted to include Colombo's action squads as part of the police, he transformed the Muti Legion into the *Battaglione di forze armate di polizia Ettore Muti*. Its men were given barracks in both Piedmont and Milan. A creature of the Internal Ministry, which paid him handsomely, Colombo was able to act independently of the local police and the GNR, and in concert with German-led *rastrellamenti* in Lombardy and Piedmont.<sup>60</sup>

The Milanese provincial head, Oscar Uccelli, wrote on 7 January 1944 that although the Muti Legion had done good work, "*the squads must be purged of their anarchistic elements.*"<sup>61</sup> The chief of the *squadro politico* of the *questore*, Giuseppe Mendia, chronicled a long list of the legion's wrongdoings, which arrived on Mussolini's desk at the end of March and was passed on to Buffarini for action. Mussolini had come to the view that autonomy should not mean license to conduct unrestrained violence: Colombo must be bridled. Buffarini therefore had no choice but to undertake an internal investigation.<sup>62</sup> The new *questore*, Camillo Santamaria

<sup>58</sup> ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, RSI, Segreteria del Capo della Polizia, b. 75.

<sup>59</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 54.

<sup>60</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 211–12.

<sup>61</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 53.

<sup>62</sup> Massimiliano Griner, *La "pupilla" del Duce: La Legione autonoma mobile Ettore Muti* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004), p. 138.

Niccolini, agreed, writing in May 1944 on the lack of professionalism and the boastfulness of the Muti. The autonomous squads, he concluded, must act legally and exhibit rectitude and appropriate morality.<sup>63</sup>

It was not until 18 May 1944 that a reluctant Buffarini finally charged the *squadrista* and provincial head of Milan, Gino Gallarini, with undertaking an inquiry of the Muti Legion. After consulting a wide variety of *federali* and provincial heads, Gallarini filed a report entitled *At the Grassroots*. According to the report, unruly Fascists had infiltrated various action squads of the party where they behaved like thieves, were guilty of rapine, abuse of authority, personal vendettas, and engaged in shady business operations. Short of men, the report continued, the legion had enlisted partisan misfits, deserters, draft dodgers, criminals, and politically questionable idlers, who committed savage crimes and squabbled over the distribution of spoils requisitioned or stolen. The very name Legione Muti, whose military capacity was pitiful, had “created a depressing and nauseating feeling among the population.” The legion’s trail of violence nicely fed partisan propaganda. Only German SS-Brigadenführer Wilhelm Tensfeld, the report concluded, emphasized the utility of Colombo’s men in carrying out their missions. Gallarini recommended that Colombo be replaced by Apelio Apadoni.<sup>64</sup>

Yet Buffarini allowed Colombo to keep his post by calling off the investigation, which left the Muti at will to activate a “mobile unit.”<sup>65</sup> Vincenzo Costa, the sympathetic *federale* in Milano, exhorted party members to collaborate with Colombo’s men and the GNR.<sup>66</sup> The following July the various Muti units assumed the denomination of *Legione Autonoma di Polizia Ettore Muti*, which supposedly would operate under the authority of the provincial head. In October the Muti Legion consisted of about 3000 men,<sup>67</sup> many of whom joined forces with German police authorities.<sup>68</sup>

The effrontery of the Muti Legion knew no bounds. In May 1944, when Carabinieri units did not move to investigate shots heard in the distance, Muti warriors, furious over such indifference, pointed rifles and demanded: “Wake up: we are Muti guys and will shoot you all. You miserable creatures have killed Muti men. Tell your superiors to sleep less as

<sup>63</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>64</sup> Griner, *La “pupilla” del duce*, p. 139.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 138–41.

<sup>66</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 288.

<sup>67</sup> Battistelli and Molinari, *Le Forze Armate della RSI*, p. 204.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

their behavior is disgusting.” To the head of the patrol, they shouted: “Get out of here, you aged royal Carabinieri. Watch your mouths or we will shut you up permanently!”<sup>69</sup>

General Renzo Montagna on 18 October 1944 was not stingy in his “warm words of praise for the perfect organization of the (Muti) units.”<sup>70</sup> Mussolini on 15 February 1945 characterized the legion as “the apple of my eye” (*la mia pupilla*).<sup>71</sup>

Unbridled Fascism found a home in Rome too. Gino Bardi, who immediately after the German occupation nominated himself *federale* of Rome, was a strong figure, and Guglielmo Pollastrini served as the *guardia armata della Federazione fascista repubblicana*. Bardi compiled a list of people belonging to the RSI government to be rounded up—including Buffarini Guidi! The Interior minister promptly urged Mussolini to scotch such impudence. Pollastrini, an angry drifter determined to take revenge against Fascist “traitors”—mainly Communists and Jews—embarrassed the Salò regime by turning the Palazzo Braschi into a warehouse for stolen goods and torture that predictably shocked and alienated the denizens of Rome.<sup>72</sup> The besotted German commandant there, Kurt Mälzer, tolerated these abuses, but Dollmann and Moellhausen, who could not stomach the two sadists, prevailed on the Salò police chief, Tamburini, to disarm, arrest, and chase Bardi, Pollastrini, and their ilk out of Rome by the end of November 1943.<sup>73</sup>

In Florence flourished the Carità band, whose leader Mario Carità was appointed on 17 September 1943 by Pavolini as head of the 92nd Legion of the MVSN.<sup>74</sup> Carità, who had been a Blackshirt of the First Hour, was able to lead his men into the local GNR,<sup>75</sup> which enabled him to run riot throughout the city by hunting down at will anti-Fascists and Jews. Knowing he had Pavolini’s back, he could brazenly thrive as a “headmaster” of torture while they enriched themselves at the expense of the anti-Fascists and Jews.

<sup>69</sup> Cited in Griner, *La “pupilla” del Duce*, pp. 121–22.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>72</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, “Fascisti repubblicani a Roma,” in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, pp. 166–67.

<sup>73</sup> Lepre, *La storia della repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 110–11; Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, pp. 166–69.

<sup>74</sup> Gasparini and Razeto, 1943, p. 209.

<sup>75</sup> Dollmann, *Roma Nazista*, p. 309.

Cardinal Elio Dalla Costa suggested to SS Colonel Dollmann that Carità should be muffled. Dollmann went to Carità's office to investigate. "Suddenly," he later wrote, "I heard a frightening shout, a window above shattered and a bloody body fell to the street ... Answering the cries of the women, our guys knocked down the door. We encountered an odor of blood and sweat ... it was a torture chamber. Carità and his half-naked mistress were on one side of the room. From the walls hung bloody spikes, and blood stained the floor and the walls. In the center of the room was a table with leather straps. We trained guns on Carità and his lover and told them to explain what had happened. 'In Florence, I'm the one in command,' Carità shouted. Referring to the man who jumped from the window and died, he said: 'This cowardly pig escaped too soon from the treatment he deserved ... Can I offer you something to drink?'"<sup>76</sup>

As Dollmann noted, Carità "had effectively obfuscated the fame of the Guelfs, Ghibellines and the Medici by considering as a pure joke the orgies of beatings he carried out, the same kind that Austrian corporals in their time happily indulged in. The torture and torments that they excogitated had to be the most perfected of the times and outstripped the systems introduced by Kappler in the Via Tasso."<sup>77</sup> Dollmann's demonic portrait reveals Carità as a man of the Inquisition who relished torture and victims bathed in blood. Perhaps he was trying to outpace what was happening on the floor above, the local German SS command post. The Italian historian Claudio Pavone describes him as representative of the "*summa di nequizie*" (the height of nastiness). Freightened with particular intensity, Pavone writes, "the word 'Fascist' bore a significance that, having proceeded beyond its concrete and specific historical experience, ended up standing for a negative human type that found expression in all public and private profiles."<sup>78</sup> Carità's unit represented "*elementi morbosi* (morbid elements)," the portion of RSI supporters who took pleasure in violent and bestial deeds.

The German consul Gerhardt Wolf in Florence, who together with Rahn was attempting to institute a "legalization of violence," was irate over Carità's striking out at the entire society of aristocrats, upper middle classes, and professionals for having betrayed the Fascist cause. Rahn, however, had

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 310–11.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>78</sup> Cited in Dianella Gagliani's preface to Riccardo Caporale, *La "Banda Carità," Storia del Reparto Servizi Speciali (1943–45)* (Lucca: Edizioni S. Marco Litotipo, 2005), p. 13.



trouble persuading the German military to abide his “coddling” of “establishment” Italians. More on Carità’s page, the Wehrmacht provided him cover. That did not stop Rahn from urging Mussolini to remove Carità from Florence in order to restore calm in the city.

Mussolini complied. In November 1944 Carità and his legion repaired to Padua, where he secured the support of the provincial head, Federigo Menna, in undertaking violent action to break the resistance in the Veneto region.<sup>79</sup> Although he stopped short of killing off the intellectual and bourgeois elite of Padova adhering to the resistance, Carità took out faculty in the university that directly provided assistance to insurgents in the region.

Carità worked closely with the SS Italian and the German SD. He had a firm ally in recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Kappler, who supervised the Fosse Ardeatine massacre of 335 people in Rome on 24 March 1944 in reprisal for thirty-three German soldiers killed by partisan bomb throwers in the Via Rasella in Rome.<sup>80</sup> Expert in secret police enterprises, Carità organized a network of *doppiogiochisti* (double dealers) and *agents provocateurs*. He had no peer in infiltrating informants in partisan circles.<sup>81</sup> Much to the satisfaction of his Fascist masters and the Germans, his legion dealt the resistance heavy blows in January 1945.<sup>82</sup> While Carità passed from the GNR to dependency on the German SS, the GNR, in turn, refused subordination to the provincial heads and the *questori*, which jumbled lines of authority even further.<sup>83</sup>

Pietro Koch founded an autonomous band of followers in Rome in December 1943. Originally a second lieutenant of the Sardinia Grenadiers, he won the aversion of his fellow soldiers for his arrogance and was dismissed from the army in 1939 for insulting a superior officer. Recalled on the eve of the war, he served until the September armistice. Having long dealt in hard drugs and a variety of protection rackets, the tall and handsome Koch, turned out in impeccably pressed uniforms, partied to the wee hours, reveling in orgies.

In January 1944 Tullio Tamburini, the head of the RSI police, prevailed on Koch for a good sum of money to join the Special Service of the Republican Police in Rome, where he was to help hunt down partisans,

<sup>79</sup> Caporale, *La “Banda Carità.”* Una ‘leggenda’ nera,” in Gianfranco Porta, ed., *La RSI: La Repubblica voluta da Hitler* (Rome: Ediesse, 2005), pp. 170–71.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 353–57.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 174–75.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

Jews, and deportees hand in hand with the Gestapo led by Herbert Kappler.<sup>84</sup> At about the same time, this collector of the “professionals of violence” placed Pietro Caruso, a Fascist veteran of Mussolini’s March on Rome, as the director of the questura of Rome with the task of restoring public order, which had slipped out of the hands of the Salò government.<sup>85</sup> Having at his disposal undisputed police power, Caruso was prepared to undertake a major crackdown on the resistance on 1 February; he also encouraged Koch’s Special Police unit to destroy the partisan Action Party, which represented the moderate wing of the resistance.

Not even Catholic holy places and seminaries escaped Koch’s attention in his incessant search for opponents of the regime. But not all of the police joined in this horrible business; many went out of their way to warn hiding fugitives that Koch was on their trail.

Under the protection of Kappler, the SS point man in Rome, Koch took cruelty to new heights. Hand in hand with Caruso, he had a field day killing enemies in a prison inside the “*Villa Triste*,” in Via Romagna. This house of torture rivaled that of the German SS on the Via Tasso as the most infamous house of pain in the Holy City. Koch left nothing to be desired in his anti-Semitism when his cohort sacked the possessions of Jews who had fled from the raid of 16 October 1943, a notorious day marked by the German arrest of more than 1015 Roman Jews and shipped them to Auschwitz. This epitome of wickedness proved that sadism and unrestrained violence could work, for by May 1944, together with the Gestapo chieftain Herbert Kappler, he had succeeded in dispersing GAP networks, the most vigorous part of the Roman underground.<sup>86</sup>

When the Allies reached the outskirts of Rome, Koch, leaving his lackeys in the lurch,<sup>87</sup> took off for Florence, where he enjoyed the protection of the local SS, to which he sent reports of his operations, including arrests of anti-Fascists taking refuge in Catholic institutions. Koch operated in cahoots with Carità’s *reparto speciale* (special unit) of the police on the banks of the Arno.

As the Allies moved northward, Koch eventually landed in Milan, where he found another protector in Captain Theodor Saewecke of the *Sicherheitsdiens*t, who answered to General Wilhelm Harster.<sup>88</sup> In high

<sup>84</sup> Coco, *Polizie speciali*, pp. 164–65.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, p. 297.

<sup>87</sup> Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 240.

<sup>88</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 209. Saewecke worked for the CIA from 1949 until 1951 and then for the German federal police. In 1998, he was tried in absentia for having fifteen Italian partisans shot in 1944.

spirits over utilizing sadistic Gestapo methods, Koch and his men applied electric current to genitals, drove lighted cigarette butts into vulnerable flesh, and deprived helpless prisoners of food and water for days on end. After a round of unrelieved torture, Koch and his minions would wash down scrumptious food with choice champagne, which they would offer to share with barely breathing prisoners. But when a half-dead victim extended a trembling hand, he would feel a whip knocking the proffered meal to the floor amid raucous laughter.<sup>89</sup> When some Milanese hierarchs reported on these horrors, Koch was arrested on 24 September by a squad of the Muti on orders of the *questura* of Milan. This incited the ire of the Gestapo, which considered Koch a superb collaborator. After escaping the prison of San Vittore during the liberation, Koch reached Florence, where he was recognized and immediately placed in custody.

Ferrara boasted its own band of thugs, the De Sanctis, which, together with the *questura*'s police, upheld "law and order." But beyond the usual police functions, the De Sanctis men engaged in spying activity and round-ups of anti-Fascists. Presiding over a terrorized citizenry, they could proceed with criminal actions and vendettas unhindered. That an intimidated population was also an alienated population, which worked against Salò's occasional efforts to reintegrate people into the Fascist body politic, was of no concern to them.

When *squadristi* undertook a punitive expedition on 15 November 1943 following the assassination of the *federale* of Ferrara, they arrested eleven noted citizens and industrialists, shot them, and abandoned their bodies in the streets of the city.<sup>90</sup> Such an act, in keeping with the spirit of *squadristo*, was gaining a sure foothold in the practices of the regime. Confronted by the discouraging results obtained by the traditional police in the effort to marginalize Fascism's disaffected, and with war weariness spreading throughout the country, Pavolini looked ever more favorably on the autonomous armed units that had arrogated the right to initiate action on their own. Impotent toward the spreading anarchy caused by these irregular formations, Buffarini's Internal Ministry oscillated between disciplining them, arresting them, and making them dependent on the official police.

<sup>89</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 209–10.

<sup>90</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 298; Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, p. 294.

In this power vacuum, the intransigent Fascists had leeway to purge “political profiteers” and the “untrustworthy.” Because the autonomous bands proved useful to the RSI security police, the attempts of the Salò regime to dissolve them were half-hearted. No government impediment existed to prevent the bands from employing unrelieved violence. The Italian historian Mario Isnenghi has aptly coined the phrase “funereal pedagogy” (*pedagogia funeraria*) to describe the RSI regime.<sup>91</sup>

The Germans looked askance at the fighting and feuding among the Italian “forces of law and order,” which stood in marked contrast to their clear directives and exemplary execution of orders. They expected their Italian partners carefully to emulate the brutal methods of interrogation that the Gestapo had popularized. On 28 November 1943 the “army of occupation” was ordered to kill civilians including women and children if suspected of partisan support or sympathy. Captured partisans were to be shot immediately.<sup>92</sup> To aid them in this task, the Germans took under their wing the Italian *reparti speciali* (special units): Koch in Rome, the Muti in Milan, and Carità in Florence, as well as other private police forces flouting legality. To gain blanket control, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (German Armed Forces [OKW]) at the beginning of 1944 began not for the first time to insist on oversight of prefectural appointments. Since Mussolini and Buffarini had already agreed with Rahn that every nomination had to be passed on to Wolff and Toussaint for approval, this demand was hardly novel.

As events spun out of his control, Mussolini lacked the willpower to quell disorder and stop malfeasance by firming up a unified police force under the unchallenged sway of the Interior Ministry. Dispensing with his original intention of bridling the lawless militias, he relaxed the pressure on Pavolini to bring the ultra-Fascist squads to heel, for, more and more, their support of his evolving radical aims had become indispensable. Lacking every bureaucratic skill—save infighting—Mussolini resorted to political jugglery that pushed him toward the radical camp. Still, in latter 1944 he backtracked, having been suddenly seized by a spurt of energy to

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Toni Rovatti, “La violenza dei fascisti repubblicani. Fra collaborazionismo e guerra civile,” in Gianluca Fulveti e Paolo Pezzino, eds., *Zone di guerra, geografie di sangue: L'Atlante delle stragi naziste e fasciste in Italia (1943–1945)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2016), p. 160.

<sup>92</sup> Lutz Klinkhammer, *Stragi naziste in Italia 1943–1944* (Rome: Donzelli, 2006), p. 51.

put more backbone in the Interior Ministry to check disorder across the country. But no matter what action he pondered, the increasingly emasculated Duce had perforce to hang on to the Nazi juggernaut in order to ride out the Italian storms as best he could. What else would one have expected Mussolini to do in a landscape speckled with regional troupes that still accepted him as duce and who pooled resources with the omnipresent Germans? Resign?



## Socialization Projects

On the economic front, the RSI government was under siege from the start. Allied bombing, partisan raids, German requisitions, and Italian tax dodging brought state finances to the edge of collapse. Further damage was done immediately after 8 September 1943, when the Germans put into circulation their own printed currency, which cheapened the price of goods for themselves while reducing the purchasing power of the average Italian consumer. After vigorous Italian protests, the Germans withdrew their occupation currency.

In their continuing efforts to stifle the Italian economy, the Germans had their eyes on Italian gold. On 16 October 1943, the day when Kappler masterminded the deportation of Jews from the ghetto in Rome, a SS detachment arrived at the *Banca d'Italia* to sequester the entire RSI gold reserve. Governor of the bank Vincenzo Azzolini informed Kappler's men, who were pointing machine guns in his face, that they would get the gold over his dead body.<sup>1</sup> Nazi insolence prevailed and Fascist nerve faltered: the bullion was seized and Azzolini walked away alive. Finance Minister Pellegrini Giampietro prevailed on the Germans to refrain from transferring the Italian mint to Vienna, where they could have flooded the market with lire. The gold was then recognized as Italian property and, instead of being transported to Vienna, or elsewhere in Germany, was sent

<sup>1</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 309.

to the Alto Adige. (At the end of the war, in May 1945, the gold was shipped back to Rome.)<sup>2</sup> By thus gaining more control over their own currency, the Italians avoided an excessive depreciation of the lira, which, Renzo De Felice argues, allowed Italy's economic managers more latitude than their counterparts in other German-occupied territories: Belgium, Holland, Norway, and certain zones of France.<sup>3</sup>

The German plenipotentiary, Rudolf Rahn, and the Italian finance minister, Pellegrini Giampietro, came to an agreement on 25 October 1943 regarding occupation costs, which inflicted not a little pain on the RSI and brought about some German concessions. The RSI would reimburse the Third Reich to the tune of seven billion lire a month, increased to ten billion the next year, a sum that was earmarked to cover all military and civilian German expenses including war orders to Italian industry. One Italian dryly observed that the Salò Republic was "a cow that must guarantee [Germany's] daily milk."<sup>4</sup>

The diplomat Anfuso had some choice words about Pellegrini Giampietro, referring to him as "a small Neapolitan ... a true bundle of nerves, who defended our finances. He ran between Rahn and Mussolini, just like those prickly and lean players who during a soccer game yearn to be recognized as great athletes thanks solely to the miracle of their will power ... Rahn saw Pellegrini Giampietro as a scourge ... Rahn paled when he heard the Neapolitan Pellegrini Giampietro defending the little money of the Republic, speaking in every dialect of the Mezzogiorno."<sup>5</sup>

Pellegrini Giampietro sang his own praises about defending the state above and beyond Fascist ideology. At the same time, serving as a BN commander, he sent subordinates in the provinces a telling communiqué that rebuked apathetic and indifferent attitudes: "It is neither conceivable nor tolerable for an official who has spontaneously sworn faith to the RSI to assume an agnostic attitude regarding the goals that the Italian government intends to accomplish for the salvation of the homeland."<sup>6</sup> Consistent with this attitude, he fleeced Jews for the benefit of the RSI coffers.

<sup>2</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, II: 434, n. 3; Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*. Azzolini was brought to trial after the war and condemned for collaboration but was soon after legally rehabilitated.

<sup>3</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, II: 435.

<sup>4</sup> Innocenti, *Mussolini a Salò*, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 406.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 271.

On the whole, Pellegrini Giampietro made more forceful moves to obstruct German exploitation of his country's patrimony than either the Duce or Buffarini. Likewise, he had the nerve to fight off criticisms leveled at him by the Guardia di Finanza, provincial heads, and the GNR.

But while the Italians and Germans were able to achieve a rough understanding on occupation costs, they were on a decidedly collision course regarding Mussolini's socialization projects, which lay at the heart of his domestic policy during the RSI era. This was not the first time that Mussolini had flaunted a radical economic restructuring of society. Having been caught up in the maelstrom of extremist politics on the left during the Great War era, he sifted through ideas of radical Socialism, revolutionary syndicalism, and Marxist revolution. Spawned by futurist ideas, the cult of violence that came of age during the mass slaughter of World War I was instrumental in explaining Mussolini's activist politics, penchant for street fighting, and ultimate shift to Fascism.

In the years immediately after the war, Mussolini, flanked by violent *squadristi*, posed as a quintessential revolutionary ready to turn the social order upside down. But once ensconced in office as head of the Italian government in 1922, he began to temper his views. Eschewing any far-reaching societal transformations, the Duce conjured up corporatism to be the organizing principle of the economy. His version of corporatism would provide the state with an instrument to resolve conflicts between labor and capital and set production goals in the overarching aim of maximizing national industrial output. His was to be a novel system of institutional arrangements by which capital and labor would be integrated into a decision-making structure consisting of Fascist syndicates and industrial enterprises that were expected to find agreement on common principles and objectives under the supervision, or dictation, of the regime.

In a corporatist system, Mussolini expected to find middle ground between liberal capitalism and Stalinist Communism. Capital and labor would be persuaded, and, if necessary, coerced, to act according to common rather than class interests as defined by the Duce as *capo dello stato*. But in depriving the syndicates of independent authority in negotiating labor contracts and disputes, he skewed labor relations in favor of employers to the detriment of the workers. Since the Fascist syndicates were legal agents of the state, and therefore forbidden to go out on strike, the industrial bosses needed no persuasion to recognize them as the sole representatives of labor. In a stroke they had been released from any obligation to undertake collective bargaining agreements directly with labor, and they



would be rid of workers' elective factory councils that had Socialist and Communist majorities as late as 1925. Under the banner of classical liberalism, business remained in an unchallenged ascendancy over a dispirited and comatose proletariat down to Mussolini's removal from power in July 1943. Although repeatedly declaring that Fascism was neither anti-proletarian nor "a running dog" of capitalism, Mussolini had sold out to the industrial magnates. The cards in his corporatist setup were unmistakably stacked in favor of Confindustria (Italian Manufacturers' Association).<sup>7</sup>

What caused Mussolini to trash his own much-vaunted corporatist state? It became increasingly apparent that such a radical-sounding and rather muddled piece of social engineering did not square with his overarching determination to prepare the country for imperialist expansion. Since gearing up for war could not be done without the full cooperation of the captains of industry, Mussolini lost interest in corporatism, whose aim was to reconcile differences between capital and labor. By submitting class-based and interest-group organizations to the will of the state, Mussolini set the stage for featuring certain "champion" war-producing industrial combines. The idea of wealth distribution and "integral syndicalism" was simply forgotten.

For having emasculated Fascist corporatism by his cave-in to the hated capitalist big wheels, Mussolini emerged in Salò an angry and frustrated man. Bearing a deep animus against the bourgeois way of life, Mussolini's Salò republic would be dedicated to a revolutionary overhaul of Italian society. The era when he had allowed capitalists to exploit the hapless lower orders at will was over; they would have to sacrifice unrestrained money making and learn to collaborate and share profits with their workers.

Mussolini took pleasure in conjuring up his nostalgic Socialism in the current cathartic atmosphere by resuscitating the "true" Fascism untrammelled by transformist compromises. By implementing socialization (*socializzazione*), his updated version of corporatism, Mussolini would make the industrialists pay for their past and current sins: sabotage during the war, aversion to Fascism's resurgence, barely concealed hope for an Allied victory, and treacherous understandings with the Germans.<sup>8</sup>

Responding to the urgings of Nicola Bombacci, an old ardent Communist who, after long years in political purgatory, bobbed up in Salò

<sup>7</sup> On the failure of Fascist syndicalism, see Ferdinando Cordova, *Verso lo stato totalitario. Sindacati, società e fascismo* (Rome: Rubbettino, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 468.

as a leading adviser of the Duce, as well as the writers Carlo Silvestri and Sergio Pannunzio, Mussolini moved forward to create a state of workers, peasants, and small business entrepreneurs into syndicates integrated into a corporatist structure alongside the captains of industry. In the renewed endeavor to resolve class conflict, Mussolini strove once again to find a third way between capitalism and Communism in a social collaboration brought about by a synthesis between capital and labor, whose production aims would be set by the competent organs of the state.

In conformity with the Duce's thinking, Angelo Tarchi, appointed head of the newly established Ministry of Corporate Economy on 10 December 1943, had the duty of impeding German robbery of Italian industry, accelerating production, and realizing socialization. Inspired by the Vatican's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, he handed down a government decree of 11 January 1944 entitled "A Basic Premise for the New Structure of Italian Economy"—a charter of social collaboration. Here Bombacci utilized the term *socializzazione*, which sounded akin to Socialism, instead of the old discredited corporatism. In conformity with Mussolini's "third way" between capitalism and Communism, Tarchi set about the promulgation of stronger factory and worker representation. The preeminent task of the state was to exercise a direct control over firms by harmonizing them with general economic objectives. To achieve this, Tarchi outlined the creation of an institute of financing and management whose structure was not dissimilar to the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (*Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale*), established in 1933 by the minister of finance, Guido Jung, which allowed the state to intervene heavily in the economy. Socialization's task was to create a spirit of collaboration between classes that would allow for the realization of these objectives. However, to avert a stifling of enterprise, he eschewed direct centralized planning. Corporations would experience social partnership on a factory floor free of worker disruptions and violence.

In line with this thinking, Tarchi created a sensation by issuing a decree on socialization, the "Fundamental Premise," that the Council of Ministers published on 12 February. In all private companies and those owned by the state with a capital of one million lire or more—or a hundred employees or more—an equal number of representatives of labor and capital would sit on managerial boards. Workers involved in industrial co-management were invited to become stockholders and share in the management of both nationalized and private enterprises. But since this updated version actually did not go far beyond verbiage, it offered only a mild challenge to the partisan

Action Party's program of comprehensive social justice. The position of the non-Communist resistance parties was much stronger: the state should be empowered to break up oligarchies and assume direct management of firms controlling economic sectors essential to the welfare of the people. Tarchi's decree, in their view, did not provide for socialization of capital, only a tepid requirement that management and unions be brought under the same company's jurisdiction.

Employing Bombacci's term *socializzatore*, Tarchi had thus formulated a law to achieve a social collaboration directed by the Fascist regime that bore only small resemblance to syndicalism or Socialism. But, for the Duce, "This new system should present the opportunity of awakening in the Italian industrial worker a sense of participation and interest in his firm. This had hitherto proved impossible through the fault of the big Italian industrialists who were for the most part typical representatives of high finance. One could not expect a positive attitude on the part of workers who up to the present had been neither trusted nor guided by their employers and had no other link with the enterprise. Without these measures ... there was a danger that the workers might plunge headlong into Communism."<sup>9</sup>

At first, Tarchi's handiwork was enthusiastically accepted by Fascist youth and syndicalists who saw in his measures the realization of a "Social Fascism" that had finally and decisively broken with the old nexus of monarchy and grand capital. As opposed to the major social changes advanced by their resistance adversaries, however, the Fascist social reforms, in spite of Mussolini's challenging words, and the enthusiasm of the leftist strain in the party, offered little in bringing about the egalitarian society held dear by the Italian left.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, Mussolini's foray into Fascist-style Socialism met stiff opposition from people in his own cabinet and inner circle who viewed any opening to the left as a dangerous move toward Communism. Farinacci was one of the most unreceptive: "The Socialization idealized by Fascism can only be realized thanks to collaboration on the part of the interested parties. This up to now is rarely verified. The mass of workers

<sup>9</sup>Rahn to Ribbentrop, 10 February 1944, cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 158–59.

<sup>10</sup>The press exalted the *socializzazione* as the realization of the "true" Fascism. For example, "Socializzazione," *Il Messaggero*, 23 febbraio 1944.

parade their indifference toward our program.”<sup>11</sup> Tarchi and his allies, including Pellegrini Giampietro, were not willing to take on these strong conservatives, who turned pale at any formulation of “Jacobin” *socializzazione*. Reform would do only if integrated in existing structures that would not basically alter the commanding position that owners currently exercised over workers.<sup>12</sup>

Such cosmetic proposals could hardly elicit enthusiasm on the part of workers who to the present had been abused by their employers and had no other link with factories save their labor. Impoverished by rising prices, living in bombed-out dwellings, and harried by material scarcity, the workers had little faith in the regime’s promise to improve their living standards and social standing. They rightly suspected that certain proprietors had voiced approval for workers’ rights in the sure knowledge that they would not be stripped of managerial prerogatives by a basically friendly regime. *Socializzazione* for the working Italian was pure farce.

According to a German command post in Verona, workers commenting on Mussolini’s remarks on socialization were reported as saying that it was only empty words; they already knew the song.<sup>13</sup> And more dismissively still was the comment: no job, nothing to eat, only the empty words *socializzazione* and *unions*.<sup>14</sup> The *questore* of Milan in February summarized these sentiments in February 1944: “Publication of the law on socialization of the factories has not produced much of an impression on the workers, whereas the industrialists make no secret of their disappointment.”<sup>15</sup>

On hearing that Tarchi’s reforms were a serious work in progress, the Italian stock exchange fell precipitously. But the industrialists did not swing into open opposition. Believing that the war was fast coming to a close, they simply snickered at such vague and unthreatening reforms. Moreover, knowing that the Germans greatly benefited from their many war orders to Italian factories, they could count on Nazi protection from Mussolini’s neo-Corporatism.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Bocca, *Storia dell’Italia partigiana*, p. 195; Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 419, 442–44.

<sup>12</sup> Francesco Grossi and Massimo Greco, *Battaglie sindacali. Intervista sul fascismo rivoluzione sociale incompiuta*, (Rome: Istituto di Studi Corporativi, 1988), pp. 204–205. On Romualdi’s views, see his *Fascismo repubblicano*, pp. 122–223.

<sup>13</sup> ACS, Uffici di polizia e comandi tedeschi in Italia, b. 2, “Meldungen zur Lage in Italien,” (Reports from Italy), rapporto settimanale dal 24 al 30 dicembre 1944.

<sup>14</sup> ACS, Uffici di polizia e comandi tedeschi in Italia, b. 2, “Meldungen zur Lage in Italien,” (Reports from Italy), rapporto settimanale dal 22 al 29 gennaio 1945.

<sup>15</sup> ACS, Ministero degli Interni, RSI, Direzione generale di PS, Divisione affari generali e riservati, b. 5, rapporto del questore di Milano del 29 febbraio 1944.

But other Germans were not so charitable. The word *socialization* was anathema to General Hans Leyers, the head of the war armaments and production in Italy.<sup>16</sup> A crusading representative of German big business, he feared that if Fascist *socializzazione* found a home in his country, Communism would come knocking on the door. Leyers, who wanted no letup in the stream of German orders to Italian factories, would not listen to Tarchi and his “dreamy-eyed leftist friends” with their *socializzazione* schemes. When Leyers tried to sabotage the socialization legislation in the following months, he constantly argued and wrangled with Tarchi, at one point threatening to arrest him.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, Leyers enjoyed the passionate support of fellow Germans likewise horrified by any attack on “free enterprise.” In their minds Fascist socialization with its faint overtones of a collectivist economy contrasted unfavorably with the untrammelled capitalism in the Third Reich, where big business had financed Hitler’s coming to power and eagerly supplied him with the sinews of war. Rahn, who was acting more and more as *Reichsprotektor* in a land of military occupation rather than as an ambassador appointed to a sovereign state, still resorted to guile and double-talk to sidetrack Tarchi. At the same time, sizing up Mussolini’s talk of socialization as mere show, he advised Berlin to quiet down the distraught General Leyers. No doubt, Mussolini took malicious pleasure in provoking German discomfort over social reform in any of its guises.

Powerful opposition to Fascist *socializzazione* came from those in Italy who supposedly would benefit from Mussolini’s neo-corporatist schemes: the workers themselves. Led by a cadre of Communists, factory workers mostly in Turin and Milan went out on strike on 10 March 1944, joined by employees and technicians at Edison, Montecatini, and the *Cassa di Risparmio*. A total of 724,064 workers walked off their jobs in the Italian industrial triangle.<sup>18</sup> Although they had no intention of unleashing a revolution, their demands for improvement in factory conditions and standard of living were enough to sound the death knell to Fascist socialization and its sponsors in the Salò republic.<sup>19</sup> Low salaries, devaluation of the currency,

<sup>16</sup> Leyers reported: “I choose the opportunity to clarify explicitly that the law on socialization is not currently in force ... If in future you observe any tendency of socialization in a particular factory do not hesitate to send me a detailed report.” Vaini, “La strategia del mondo economico e finanziario italiano,” p. 90, who cites ACS, RSI, SPD, c. 16, f. 91, stf. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, pp. 249–56.

price increases, disappearance of needed goods, and insufficient food rations—common problems plaguing most Italians—were grievances that workers could put right by applying united pressure on the factory floor. But if the strikers were mainly preoccupied by economic scarcity, anti-Fascism and disgust with the German alliance were certainly not absent from their long list of grievances against the regime.<sup>20</sup>

In response to this, the first and only general walkout to occur in Nazi-occupied Europe, Buffarini demanded a violent repression of the strikers. Mussolini's punishment was to deny them the benefits of *socializzazione*. Dolfin records: "After having meditated for a few moments, [Mussolini] burst out violently: 'if the workers do not want socialization, we will suspend the laws'"<sup>21</sup> After a moment of reflection, the Duce quieted down and ruled out any drastic reaction.

Hitler, worked up over the workers' effrontery, demanded the forced transfer of 70,000 (20 percent) of the strikers to Germany.<sup>22</sup> But since no serious revolution was brewing, cooler heads prevailed. Although General Leyers, in the months leading up to March 1944, had from time to time advocated factory lockouts and massive deportation of leaders and workers involved in labor unrest, he realized that excessive repression and punishment would boomerang by cutting deeply into factory output so vital to the German war effort. Against the urgings of *SS-Brigadeführer* Paul Zimmermann, who, in holding down the job of repressing strikes short of massive reprisals, wanted to answer the Turin strikes with intimidating and terroristic measures,<sup>23</sup> Leyers unexpectedly favored appeasement: salary increases and a lower cost of living for the workers.<sup>24</sup> The Wehrmacht, namely Wolff, Rahn, and Toussaint, who wanted to be sure that the strikes did not lead to a general insurrection, was loath to undertake a massive and seemingly over-the-top intervention; best to let the police handle the situation.<sup>25</sup> Rahn, pointing out a shortage of transportation for mass shipment of strikers to the Third Reich,<sup>26</sup> prevailed on Hitler to reverse his

<sup>20</sup> Roberto Battaglia, *The Story of the Italian Resistance* (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1957), pp. 31–32.

<sup>21</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 272.

<sup>22</sup> Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, p. 203.

<sup>23</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 201.

<sup>24</sup> Collotti, *L'amministrazione tedesca dell'Italia occupata*, pp. 198–99.

<sup>25</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 219.

<sup>26</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 165–68; Giorgio Pini and Duilio Susmel, *Mussolini. L'uomo e l'opera*, IV: *Dall Impero alla Repubblica* (Florence: La Fenice, 1955), p. 402; Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 276.

punitive order that called for punishment of striking workers in Turin and Milan, which sufficed to keep the factories relatively quiet and humming until the Allies took control of the cities in the North. In favoring amnesty for both deserters from labor service and draft dodgers, Rahn induced around 40,000 men to come down from the mountains.<sup>27</sup> This was, however, a drop in the bucket compared to the number of Italians who joined the resistance during the course of 1944.

The wave of strikes that culminated in early March, though it had not spawned a general uprising, buried the hopes of the RSI regime for a “civil peace” incorporated in the notion *socializzazione*. Behind the workers’ economic demands lay their ultimate determination to take down the regime.

The people at large were not far behind the workers in their discontent. They grumbled over severe rationing of electric energy, butter, olive oil, rice, cheese, wine, tobacco, and coffee. Unrelieved scarcities gave rise to a flourishing black market and, consequently, to an inexorable rise in the cost of living, which further squeezed the average Italian family.<sup>28</sup> A figure in the Ministry of Interior reported that the incapacity of the authorities to close off the black market and stock up cities with needed supplies prolonged the crisis in confidence of the republic’s citizens.<sup>29</sup> As people dodged bombs and fled from crumbling buildings during the endless Allied air raids, they frequently took out their displeasure in skirmishes with the RSI police, which thought them to be clandestine groups in the pay of Communists.

A strange series of events occurred when, from 12 March to 23 May 1944, the *Corriere della Sera* published a series of articles under the pseudonym “*Giramondo*,” challenging the official line by renewing the overture for a “passage of power” to a “Socialist” republic. To counter proletarian estrangement from the regime manifested in the strikes of March 1944, such articles were written to wean workers and crypto-fascists, who might be responsive to a strong new social Fascist message, from the allurements

<sup>27</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 430.

<sup>28</sup> “What is really embarrassing is that the cost of living, as well as the black market, can be traced directly to the German authority in Italy, which continues to supply itself on the Italian market by paying directly in lire.” ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 77, “Appunto per il Duce” del 28 gennaio 1944, intitolato “Rapporti Italo-germanici nel settore economico e degli scambi con l'estero.”

<sup>29</sup> “Avvenimenti e relazione sullo spirito pubblico nelle provincie del settore di Torino,” 14 febbraio 1944, in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, RSI, Segreteria del Capo della Polizia, b. 76.

of Communism. By testing the ground for a broad Socialist front, “*Giramondo*” sought to fix a clear divide between those Fascists beholden to capitalism who had poisoned the spirit of the March on Rome, and the “*duri e puri*,” whose loyalty to Mussolini’s Socialist precepts had never wavered.

Both Bombacci and Carlo Silvestri probably played a part in ghostwriting the articles for Mussolini, since he wanted to have his Socialist notions propagated to regain those anti-Fascists who at one time had been drawn to Fascist corporatism.<sup>30</sup> It is inescapable that the authoritative “*Giramondo*,” whose articles Mussolini either oversaw or revised,<sup>31</sup> had launched a vigorous new appeal to Italians. Appalled at civil war, they could find common ground in a decisively anti-Communist version of Socialism.

The articles took dead aim at the king and Badoglio, servants of the English, who had brought shame to the country and war on loyal and heroic Fascists fighting for a resurgent Italy. By fanning the polemical flames between the CLN and the *Badogliani* serving the Allies, “*Giramondo*” aimed at splitting the anti-Fascist opposition by a “historical compromise” between Mussolini’s Fascism and traditional Italian Socialism. But nowhere did “*Giramondo*” indulge in the slightest criticism of the Third Reich, certainly not Silvestri, who thanked Hitler for overlooking Italy’s betrayal by welcoming the RSI back into a refurbished Axis New Order.<sup>32</sup>

The articles, however, backfired. Instead of breaking the anti-Fascist front by sowing discord among their enemies, they resuscitated the constant fissures in the RSI. Farinacci lambasted “*Giramondo*” for advocating “national accord” and warned off other journals from discussing “compromise.” Mezzasoma followed up by a campaign to silence moderates such as Borsani, Pettinato, and Giobbe, all of whom were Silvestri’s allies.<sup>33</sup>

Given the stiff opposition from Berlin, the feigned or lukewarm support of the factory owners, and the obvious estrangement of the Italian workers

<sup>30</sup> Salotti, *Nicola Bombacci*, pp. 180–83.

<sup>31</sup> Mauro Forno, “La guerra delle parole. Fedeli e traditori nelle pagine del ‘Corriere,’” in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 68, n. 18. It is ironic that Amicucci, the chief editor of *Il corriere della sera*, published the “*Giramondo*” articles only under duress. He wrote Mezzasoma that he felt forced into an “asylum” by having to publish articles that harmfully singled out the bourgeoisie for attack. p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> Stefano Fabei, *I neri e i rossi: Tentativi di conciliazione tra Fascisti e Socialisti nella Repubblica di Mussolini* (Milan: Mursia, 2011), p. 182.

<sup>33</sup> Gloria Gabrielli, “Carlo Silvestri e la perpetuazione del mito di Mussolini,” in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale Italiana*, pp. 90–91.



from the Fascist regime, the decree on *socializzazione* was not published in the official Gazette until June 1944 and feebly activated the following October. A small step toward a syndicalist state was taken in January 1945 with a legislative decree sponsored by the Ministry of Labor. A bundle of administrative syndicalist legislation and reforms embraced the notion of neo-Socialism at the expense of the previously touted corporatism. Attacks were aimed at Italian capitalism: the elimination of the confederation of employers in a newly formed "Labor State" in a kind of "Corporatism from below."<sup>34</sup> On 22 March the Council of Ministers decreed the socialization of all industrial firms having 100 workers and capitalized at a million lira. This vacuous legislation was supposed to fulfill the dream of social revolution proposed by the RSI syndicalists. Big business had no grounds for fear. By 1945, since managerial prerogatives remained untouched, *socializzazione*, a sham from the outset, had turned into bad theater.

Mussolini, for whom *socializzazione* supposedly stood as a rock of unshakable belief, hardly went down fighting in defending it. In early April 1945 the National Directorate of the PFR, under the presidency of Alessandro Pavolini, met at Madero. At the outset Mussolini yielded ground by declaring that his economic system would be defined as a "*sistema sociale del fascismo*" (a social system of Fascism) instead of the more forthright "*socialismo fascista*" (Fascist Socialism). The more radical Paolo Zerbino contested this view by arguing that the party should always lean decisively to the left in order to satisfy the masses, which were anti-Fascist only because they thought the movement to be bourgeois and reactionary. Zerbino received the support of many Socialist-minded Fascists who included the *federale* Giuseppe Solaro, Costa, Borsani, Porta, Parini, Spanpanato, Pisenti, Montagna, Pettinato, and Pini. But the economic conservatives—Pavolini, Mezzasoma and Ricci—who wanted no part of social legislation they feared would shred the collective fabric of the state, voiced disapproval of "*socialismo fascista*" for violating fundamental Fascist principles.

Mussolini intended to preserve Fascist corporatism to be part of his legacy as a true revolutionary who had finally succeeded in halting the march of "white guard" capitalism. But such a legacy was not to be, due to the opposition put up by the Germans, the men behind the scenes of the Italian industrial system, and workers distrustful of *socializzazione*,

<sup>34</sup> Mario Cuzzi, "Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.," in *L'Italia in Guerra: Il sesto anno-1945* (Rome: Commissione italiana di storia militare, 1996), pp. 103–05.

who conspired together to prevent a resurgence of the already moribund Fascism by means of hybrid corporatist models. The internal debate among RSI Fascists on *socializzazione*, therefore, amounted to an empty discussion that had lost contact with reality.



## CHAPTER 8

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# Persecution of the Jews

For Italian Jews under Fascism, 1938 was an *annus horribilis*. Mussolini's experience of empire deriving from the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 had brought the issue of racial superiority front and center in his world view. He would school Italians to be hardened imperial masters by instilling in them a profound *Italianità* permeated by racism. In taking a totalitarian turn, Mussolini's regime would no longer tolerate "soft and covetous" Jews who thrived on the cupidity of the liberal state.

On 18 September 1938 the Duce subjected Jews to a decisive change from grudging acceptance to outright repression by defining Judaism as "an irreconcilable enemy of Fascism."<sup>1</sup> Through the Fascist Grand Council he set the tone of official anti-Semitism in Italy by passing the *Carta della razza* (Race Charter) on 6 October. Reminiscent of Hitler's Nuremberg Laws, the charter found that Jews simply did not "sincerely" accept the regime. They therefore should be excluded from positions in the military, education, bureaucracy, party, and any but small-scale businesses and

<sup>1</sup>Cited in Michele Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy: From Equality to Persecution* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 138. Earlier, on 14 July, Mussolini approved the publication of a "Manifesto on Race" in which ten "scholars" asserted that race was a biological concept, Italy belonged to the Aryan race, a pure "Italian race" existed, and that Jews were not part of the Italian race. Philip V. Cannistraro, "Mussolini and Fascist Anti-Semitism: Turnoing Point of a Regime," in Honorable Thomas P. DiNapoli, ed., *The Italian Jewish Experience* (Stoney Brook, NY: Forum Italicum Publishing, 2000), p. 133.

agriculture. The provision that “marriage of an Italian citizen of Aryan race to a person belonging to another race is prohibited” foretold permanent barriers between “Indo-European” ancestors and Jews. These bans were made somewhat less comprehensive by exemptions for “loyal” and “patriotic” Jews who had served the nation and Fascism and their families. Mind you, these measures were taken in a country in which Jews constituted less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the population. However, prominent Fascist writers such as Giovanni Preziosi and Telesio Interlandi took the next step by urging that Mussolini incorporate radical Nazi biological anti-Semitism in Italian Fascist ideology.<sup>2</sup> Stopping short of an unequivocal endorsement of an anti-Semitism based on biological “scientific proof,” Mussolini, in the body of his writings, concentrated on the theme that Jews should be condemned, basically, as spiritual enemies of the Fascist faith and political foes of the nation thanks to their Zionism, which, partnered with Communism, represented deadly international threats. To give Fascism a hard revolutionary edge, Mussolini aimed to create “the new man” who would be animated by populist nativism and the anti-capitalist aspects of corporatism couched in anti-Semitic prejudice. In essence, for the Duce, the Jewish psyche epitomized what he violently hated: Italy’s groveling bourgeoisie sordidly amassing money. In his view, by standing against the Fascist ethos of warrior heroism, both the selfish Italian kleptocracy and the Shylock Jew were undermining his campaign to regenerate Italy by means of a thorough fascistization.<sup>3</sup>

At the onset of World War II, Mussolini’s police began immediately to arrest and intern foreign Jews. Italian Jews who were judged “of real danger” to the public order, or who might carry on “defeatist propaganda and espionage activities,” were sent to join their stateless brethren in the camps.<sup>4</sup> For Italian Jews able to stay at home but subject to the Fascist racial laws of 1938, life was hardly a picnic. Facing discrimination everywhere, they

<sup>2</sup>The *Giornale d’Italia* on 14 July 1938 published a “scientific” document that soon came to be called the *Manifesto della razza*. Inspired by the Ministry of Culture, in which Mussolini took a hand, the manifesto claimed that since only purely biological races existed, there was a pure Italian race of Aryan origin and the Jews did not belong to the Italian race. This was anti-Semitism based on the biological argument.

<sup>3</sup>The Italian historian and journalist Giorgio Fabre, in his *Mussolini razzista. Dal socialismo al fascismo: la formazione di un antisemita* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), is the leading proponent of the view that Mussolini was animated by a deep-seated, long-standing racism and anti-Semitism. Renzo De Felice, in his *Storia degli ebrei sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), mitigates the depth and impact of Fascist anti-Semitic doctrines and policies and lays them at the door of Nazi Germany.

<sup>4</sup>Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, p. 146.

found jobs hard to find, which made scratching out a living a daily hazard. Ugly anti-Jewish passions fanned by the war further harassed the Jews. Yet, despite being stigmatized as undesirable outsiders, most Jews managed to stumble along in spite of the privations. Official anti-Semitism was relaxed enough to allow the *Delegazione Assistenza Emigranti Ebrei* (Delasem) to provide much help for Italy's beleaguered Jewish population.

Until his fall in July 1943, Mussolini abetted the persecution of Jews and did not stand in the way of their internment. But he had none killed. No matter his ultimate intentions, Mussolini did not aim at having his nation turn into a cohort of Nazi-crazed racists, and he refused to release any Jew to the Nazis for deportation.

Meanwhile, the German ally was relentlessly pursuing the Final Solution as a top war priority. Mussolini could hardly have been unaware of the unfolding Holocaust. In June 1941 his journal *Il Popolo d'Italia* published a long article entitled "500 traitorous Jews shot," reporting on the massacres in Jasi, Romania.<sup>5</sup> In October 1942, during a meeting with the *Reichsführer* of the SS-Heinrich Himmler at the Palazzo Venezia, the Duce was informed *apertis verbis* that, in Russia, Jews—men, women, and children who were supposedly accomplices of the partisans—had been exterminated. Mussolini not only made no objection but replied that the Germans really had no other choice.<sup>6</sup> In February 1943 the Italian ambassador in Berlin Dino Alfieri sent a report to Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, employing the term "mass executions" of Jews.<sup>7</sup> That same month Ciano passed around a note issued by the International Information Office in London that read: "In Poland, during the last year, two million and a half people, of which a million were Jews, have been shot dead or are vegetating in German concentration camps. The maximum time of survival in a concentration camp is about nine months."<sup>8</sup> Italian soldiers returning from Russia narrated similar stories that detailed exterminations on a mass scale.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> F. Trandafilo, "Pronta reazione romena a bieche manovre giudaico-comuniste. Cinquecento ebrei traditori fucilati a Jasi (Nostro servizio particolare)," *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 1 luglio 1941.

<sup>6</sup> *Der Dientskalendar Heinrich Himmlers 1941/42* (Hamburg: Hans Christian Verlag 1999), pp. 148–51. The meeting is commented on also in Wolfgang Schieder, *Mythos Mussolini* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), pp. 188–89. Himmler commented: "In Russia we have a not insignificant number of Jews." Yad Vashem Archives, O. 10–45.

<sup>7</sup> This document is published in De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, pp. 601–05.

<sup>8</sup> ASMAE, AP, Germania, b. 75, informazione del 27 Febraio 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Le notizie dalla Russia sono in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Polizia politica, "Materie 1926–1944," b. 253, f. Germania/Russia.

Most tellingly, when the Germans on 18 August 1942 applied heavy pressure on the Italian government to order the Yugoslav 2nd Army to transfer Jews to their hands, there can be no doubt regarding Berlin's intentions. That the word "annihilation" in the original German memorandum was crossed out in favor of "dispersion" was something Mussolini could hardly have missed.<sup>10</sup> In early November of the same year, the Italian trouble shooter in the Balkans, General Giuseppe Pièche, informed the Foreign Ministry, whose report contained the notation "seen by the Duce," that "the Croatian Jews who were deported from the German-occupied territories of the West were 'liquidated' by poisonous gas in the railroad cars in which they were locked."<sup>11</sup> After the Germans demanded a handover of Jews in Italian-occupied France, Luca Pietromarchi, the *eminent* *grise* of the Foreign Ministry, apprised Mussolini of the horrifying massacres being perpetrated against the Jews: "Our people know what fate awaits the Jews consigned to the Germans. They will all be gassed without distinction, including old women and babies. And that's why our people will never permit such atrocities to take place with their connivance. And you, Duce, ought not to give your approval. Why would you want to assume a responsibility that will surely fall entirely on you?"<sup>12</sup> On the protection of Jews in France, Yugoslavia, and Greece, Mussolini emerges with a mixed record of vacillation and callousness.

Badoglio's short-lived government of forty-five days provided Jews practically no relief. He refused to abrogate the racial laws on the books and, although the police in Rome released interned Jews, did not officially end forced labor. As before, discrimination against Jews abounded: no students and teachers in public schools, no Jewish adults admitted in the professions or the public sector, severe cut-backs in property rights, inter-marriage prohibited, and foreign Jews denied work permits.<sup>13</sup>

This brings us to Salò, whose anti-Semitic banner reads, "*il sangue e l'oro*." (blood and gold) The history of the relations between the RSI and the Third Reich regarding the persecution of the Jews is subject to various

<sup>10</sup> ASMAE, GABAP, b. 42, for the two drafts of the memorandum, unsigned, 18 August 1942.

<sup>11</sup> NAW, T-821, 405, Pièche to MAE, 4 November 1942.

<sup>12</sup> Pietromarchi Diary, 31 March 1943; De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy* (New York: Enigma Books, 2001), p. 396 and D. 32; Serge Klarsfeld, *Vichy-Auschwitz: la "solution finale" de la question juive en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2012), pp. 45–48, 235–240; Egidio Ortona, *Diplomazia di guerra: Diari 1937–1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), pp. 201, 209.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 138–39.

interpretations. According to Salò Fascists, their heirs, and apologists after the war, Fascism was never truly anti-Semitic; the RSI had functioned as a “shield” protecting the Jews along with all other Italian citizens against the barbarous Huns. Indignantly rejecting the notion that they had abused Jews, they claimed to have looked after their persecuted countrymen.<sup>14</sup>

The truth, however, reads otherwise, for many Fascists in the RSI favored anti-Semitic policies no matter how much the Salò government reeled from German highhandedness. Throughout the regime’s history, nary a protest was uttered to the “occupying ally” regarding German roundups of Jews. And not for a lack of knowledge, for the Third Reich’s arrest and deportation of Jews to extermination camps all over Europe were known throughout the higher echelons of the Fascist government, well before the onset of the RSI. Still, many Fascists harbored doubts about collaborating with Nazis in the arrest and deportation of Jews to extermination camps in the Third Reich. Hence, attitudes toward and treatment of Jews in the RSI were hardly linear.

To be sure, there was a hard-core group in the Fascist Party, not dissimilar to the German SS that aimed to finish off the internal Jewish enemy for having supposedly sabotaged the Fascist regime, undermined the war effort, and contributed to the humiliation of defeat. These Fascist *duri e puri* contemptuously ignored all and sundry calls for restraint in their anti-Jewish crusade. Since 1938, the year of the racial laws, a segment of the party, above all the old *squadristi* and university students, had thought that the anti-Semitic campaign provided them with the occasion for a return to the “revolutionary” origins of the regime. Under cover of the RSI, these groups were given open season to express a violent anti-Semitism and the certainty of a “Judeo-Communist” conspiracy. Some Fascists carried out these tasks with fanatic conviction; others were more bent on receiving a cut from Jewish wealth seized and bounties from the Germans. These extreme Fascists aimed to show Germans their toughness. As any SS unit would, they stopped at nothing in achieving victory. To nazify Fascism and radicalize the party and society, they aimed to present themselves as part of that European elite spearheaded by the “superhuman” SS. An unflinching way to reach these exalted goals, they believed, was to earn Nazi approval by leading the charge against Italian Jewry.

But for the majority of Fascists, as well as the mainstream Italian, to pass from anti-Semitic prejudice and discrimination to extermination

<sup>14</sup>For example, Angelo Tarchi, *Teste dure* (Milan: SELC, 1967), p. 45.

would mark a return to the Dark Ages. The ultimate arbiter was, supposedly, Mussolini. Known more for extreme cynicism than exterminationist principles, he, for opportunistic reasons, nonetheless, brought his regime perilously close to outright collaboration with the Nazi shoah.

During the early stages of the RSI, when the Fascist regime was struggling to put down roots, Jews fell immediately under the gaze of the RSI government, the action squads, and Fascist press.<sup>15</sup> On 13 September the police chief in Rome put out an order to arrest Communists and “Jews dangerous to the public order.”<sup>16</sup> Provincial heads and *questori* offered support between October and the beginning of November in roundups of Jews undertaken by the Germans. When Fascist newspapers, on 10–11 October 1943, declared the need of safeguards to prevent them from damaging the national interest, and the opinion that all Jews should be arrested, they were put on notice that more troubling times lay ahead.<sup>17</sup> Adding to the threat, Mussolini, on the 14th, denounced “the voracity of Jewish capitalism, which is aiming at ... the scientific exploitation of the world.”<sup>18</sup> No wonder the Jews living in Mussolini’s nascent republic suspected that they should not count on his protection. They were particularly concerned about the Fascist party racial bigots running riot under him, who were not the least disturbed by the reality that deportation equaled extermination.

From the German standpoint, the Wehrmacht’s occupation of the peninsula had brought a salutary change in the official Italian attitude toward Jews. In Mussolini’s earlier regime, both the major players in the government and the military had gone out of their way to prevent the handover of Jews to the Germans in Italian-occupied zones in Croatia, Dalmatia, and France despite heavy pressure from all manner of Nazis.<sup>19</sup> In the

<sup>15</sup> Liliana Picciotto, “The Shoah in Italy: Its History and Characteristics,” in Zimmerman, *Jews in Italy under Nazi and Fascist rule*, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Levis Sullam, “L’avvio della persecuzione degli ebrei e il ruolo degli italiani,” in Monica Fioravanzo and Carlo Fumian, eds., *1943 Strategie militari, collaborazionismi, Resistenze* (Rome: Viella, 2015), p. 269.

<sup>17</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, p. 187. On 7 October 1943 the newspaper *Il Popolo di Alessandria* launched an anti-Jewish campaign under the title “Basta con gli ebrei.” Avagliano and Palmieri, *L’Italia di Salò*, p. 370.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews. German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy* ((Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 398; and in Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> On the difficulties that the Italians created for the deportation of Jews in the German-occupied zones, see Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*; Menachem Shelah, *Un debito di gratitudine: storia dei rapporti tra l’esercito italiano e gli ebrei in Dalmazia, 1941–1943* (Rome:



altered circumstances of Salò, the Germans were in a far stronger position to act with impunity and drag along a weakened and inefficient ally.

Overall, the German and Italian manhunts were aimed at rounding up the approximately 43,000 Jews living in north-central Italy, which consisted of about 8000 foreigners or stateless ex-Italians and around 35,000 Italian citizens.<sup>20</sup>

Needing no urging from the Nazis, RSI stalkers in some areas started tracking down Jews immediately following the armistice. In Nonantola di Modena, the Fascist chieftain Ascanio Boni led a German military police unit to Villa Emma, which seized around a hundred Jewish orphans from all over Europe that were hiding there.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes together with the Italians, and sometimes on their own, the Germans, after Mussolini's fall in July 1943, swung into swift action against the Jews in Italy. On Lake Maggiore German soldiers massacred a group of Jews hidden in the town of Meina. At Borgo San Dalmazzo, near Cuneo, 328 foreign Jews in flight from German-occupied France were assembled by a German officer in a local camp and then deported. Between the end of September and the beginning of October 1943, Germans began drawing up plans for mass deportation of Jews.

On 9 October, by Hitler's specific directive, Berlin ordered the head of the Gestapo in Rome, Major Herbert Kappler, and his men to arrest and deport some 8000 Jews to Mauthausen.<sup>22</sup> Fearing a popular revolt and the hostility of the Catholic Church, Kappler and the German consul in Rome, Eithel Moellhausen, attempted to delay deportation.<sup>23</sup> Tired of their tergiversations, the Berlin chieftains of the Reich's Security Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) sent a specialized SS unit to Italy, commanded by Theodor Dannecker, who had formerly been responsible for deporting Jews from France.<sup>24</sup>

Ufficio Storico Stato Maggiore Esercito, 1991), Jonathan Steinberg, *All or Nothing. The Axis and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); H. James Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of the Balkans 1941–1943* (New York: Enigma Books, revised and enlarged edition forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Giuseppe Mayda, *Storia della deportazione dall'Italia 1943–1945* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002), pp. 77–78.

<sup>22</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 403.

<sup>23</sup> Yad Vashem Archive, Tr. 10/1600.

<sup>24</sup> Claudia Steur, *Theodor Dannecker. Ein Funktionär der Endlösung* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1997).

Without further ado, the Nazis conducted a *rastrellamento* of the Jewish ghetto in Rome on 16 October 1943, which ended up with the seizure and deportation of 1022 of Rome's 6730 Jews to Auschwitz.<sup>25</sup> It was the SS point man Dannecker who executed the action under the gaze of the entire city.<sup>26</sup> Italian police did not participate in the 16 October roundup.

At the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel following the war, Kappler testified that after October 1943 all arrests of Jews in Italy were made not by Germans but by Italians.<sup>27</sup> But he neglected important facts. While in Rome, Italians did arrest Jews, but under the supervision of the German police headquartered in the infamous villa on the Via Tasso. Kappler had at his disposition about seventy German police, enough to keep the resistance in check. He banked on a group of Italian informants and collaborators who, cognizant of the rewards placed on Jewish heads, cashed in by offering their services in rounding them up. The Germans paid as much as 5000 lire for every Jew denounced or arrested.

Though there had been no direct RSI participation in the events of 16 October, no one in the government seems to have publicly protested the German action that flagrantly violated Salò's sovereignty. The police forces, terrorized by the Nazis, caught in the governmental chaos, and only hazily aware of the reality of the Holocaust, remained strangely silent and uninvolved.<sup>28</sup> Though they had not joined the Nazi roundup of the Jews following the infamous day of 16 October 1943, they now did nothing to sidetrack further comprehensive persecution. Similarly, no protest emanated from Salò following the German arrest of 200 Jews in Milan on the same day and 144 apprehended in Genoa on 2 November.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding the enormity of the October raid in Rome, which constituted a German slap in the face of the RSI, official Fascism aligned itself with Nazi policy on the Jewish question. On 28 October the Fascist Federation approved an order of the government demanding that all Jews be confined in concentration camps.<sup>30</sup> The press followed suit on 5 and 6

<sup>25</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1986), pp. 622–23.

<sup>26</sup> The most recent work on the roundup of 16 October is by Silvia Haia Antonucci, Claudio Procaccia, Gabriele Rigano, Giancarlo Spizzichino, eds., *Roma, 16 Ottobre 1943. Anatomia di una deportazione* (Milan: Guerini e associati, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows*, p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> Mayda, *Storia della deportazione dall'Italia 1943–1945*, pp. 107–22.

<sup>30</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 124.

November by reporting that the Ministry of the Interior had developed and was about to present to Mussolini, and subsequently to the Council of Ministers, legislation “aimed at regulating the racial question based on the pertinent German enactments known as the Nuremberg laws.”<sup>31</sup>

The RSI further helped out the Nazis by leaving the door open for Kappler to recruit men from many of Italy’s notorious squads. Anxious to embark on expeditions, they flocked into SS units conducting roundups. Gangs took advantage of the German bribes, the most important of which was led by one Cialli Mezzaroma, who set about the arrest of around eighty Jews.<sup>32</sup> He had counterparts in many Italian provinces.

Special Nazi units launched the first sweep of Jews in Florence on 6 November with the active participation of the Fascist Militia, including the cutthroats of Mario Carità’s band of special Italian political police and Carabinieri, who actively compiled lists of Jews, undertook arrests, and threw them in jail.<sup>33</sup> In Genoa, Giorgio Pini (no relation of the famous journalist bearing the same name), a Fascist of the First Hour, placed his band at the service of the local SS command in 1943. According to a police report of 1947, Pini denounced and arrested Jews, then allowed them to escape, only to supervise their re-arrest by the German SS. For this duplicity he received double pay.<sup>34</sup> The same system of arrest, release, and re-arrest was also utilized by Fascists in Turin who belonged to the “federal police.”<sup>35</sup> In November the Carità band broke into the Carmine convent and rounded up Jewish women and children for deportation to Auschwitz via Verona.<sup>36</sup>

In December 1943 Pietro Koch, in cooperation with the Gestapo Chief Herbert Kappler, masterminded audacious raids on three Vatican institutions, including the Seminario Lombardo, the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, and the Collegio “Russicum,” a cluster of religious institutions in the immediate vicinity of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore known to be harboring influential anti-Fascists, military officers hostile to

<sup>31</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, pp. 187–88.

<sup>32</sup> Archivio di stato di Roma, Corte di assise di appello, sezione straordinaria, Sentenza contro Cialli Mezzaroma Giovanni, 20 giugno 1947.

<sup>33</sup> John Tedeschi, with Anne C. Tedeschi, *Italian Jews Under Fascism, 1938–1945: A Personal and Historical Narrative* (Madison, WI: Parallel Press University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, 2015), pp. 292–93.

<sup>34</sup> ACS, Casellario politico centale 1944–1947, f. “Pini Giorgio.”

<sup>35</sup> Adduci, *Altri: fascismo repubblicano e comunità nel Torinese*, p. 128.

<sup>36</sup> Avagliano and Palmieri, *L’Italia di Salò*, p. 372.

the regime, and Jews. In early February 1944, thanks to an informer, the Koch band, egged on by the *questore* Pietro Caruso, broke into a monastery adjacent to the Basilica of San Paolo in Rome, which violated the Vatican's extra-territorial rights.<sup>37</sup> The raid netted sixty-six fugitives, many of whom had dressed as friars and priests, including a general, along with draft-dodgers, deserters, and Jews, who were dragged away for interrogation to Koch headquarters.<sup>38</sup>

It was not unusual for church lands to become battle grounds. In a monastery located in the Località Conventino, Fascists, wearing church attire, shot at partisans from the windows. On 31 March Italian police arrested various members of the CLN in the Turin Duomo. Frequently during *rastrellamenti*, Nazi and Fascist squads would round up enemies who had taken refuge in monasteries and murder them.<sup>39</sup>

Some ecclesiastics could not refrain from firing back. In Umbria two friars took up arms against Nazi raiders and died in the subsequent fire fight. This was too much for the Holy See, which bent over backward to get out of the line of fire by ordering that refugees be sent away from some Vatican properties.<sup>40</sup>

Far from lending support to these Nazi and Fascist roundups, many ordinary Italians, as opposed to their government, sometimes showed outright hostility to this cruelty.<sup>41</sup> However, citizens who dared to defend Jews placed themselves at immediate risk of arrest or worse. A certain Professor Wittgens, director of the Academy of Brera, was prosecuted by the Special Tribune for the Defense of the State in September 1944 for having hidden and helped a dozen Jews to escape to Switzerland.<sup>42</sup> According to a report of the partisan Raffaele Jona from Milan, "the 'types' of people who served in the BN, the Italian SS, and in the Republican political service ... of the X Flottiglia Mas etc., bent themselves to the task of hunting down Jews, the capture of whom they considered a badge of honor that won the esteem of their superiors."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Koch's shameful deeds were assembled during his trial held in May 1945 at Milan. Archivio di Stato di Milano, Processo Koch.

<sup>38</sup> Katz, *The Battle For Rome*, pp. 168–69.

<sup>39</sup> These examples are taken from Gasparini and Razeto, *1944*, pp. 51–52, 143, 170, 271, 341.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Kornberg, *The Pope's Dilemma: Pius XII Faces Atrocities and Genocide in the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), p. 117.

<sup>41</sup> Meir Michaelis, "La persecuzione degli ebrei," in *La Repubblica sociale Italiana*, p. 371.

<sup>42</sup> ACS, RSI, Miscellanea, b. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Yad Vashem Archive, JM 3386, "Relazione n. 2."

After reading Kappler's report, Himmler was sorely disappointed that for every Roman Jew captured by the SS eleven got away. He was further displeased on learning that Dannecker's search fell far short of expectations, thanks to the sabotage of Italians who provided Jews hiding places.<sup>44</sup>

Pavolini had no trouble in taking up the blatant anti-Semitic sentiments of the rogue squads when Jewish wealth caught his attention. Hungering after the large properties held by wealthy Jews, he told the faithful at the 14 November 1943 Fascist Party Congress in Verona: "As you know there have been in these days provisions aimed at the expropriation of Jewish patrimony [approval and applause: 'It's about time!'] The occasion for indulging in rhetoric has passed, for we must take action to punish those who are bleeding the Italian people dry. It is right that vitality be restored to the people. To do this, we must take severe measures to meet the needs of those suffering from the bombing raids and those struck down by the war, whose responsibility clearly rests with Jews."<sup>45</sup> In the eighteen-point manifesto, the seventh one reads: "Those belonging to the Jewish race are foreigners. During this war they belong to an enemy nationality."<sup>46</sup> When this statement was approved by acclamation on the part of Fascists assembled at Verona, two trains loaded with deportees had, by order of the Nazis, already left for Auschwitz.<sup>47</sup>

On 30 November Interior Minister Buffarini tightened the legal vise in Police Order Number 5, which instructed the provincial heads to arrest and intern all Italian and foreign Jews, even those excluded in the laws of 1938. Their goods would be sequestered for the benefit of those who had suffered damage from the Allied air bombardments—exactly what Pavolini had demanded at the Verona Conference.<sup>48</sup> Individuals born of mixed marriages but officially declared Aryan under the racial laws were to be placed under special police vigilance. The questore of Venice, Filippo

<sup>44</sup> Michaelis, "La persecuzione degli ebrei," p. 376.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler*, p. 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>47</sup> Picciotto, "The Shoah in Italy: Its History and Characteristics," p. 215.

<sup>48</sup> The text of Buffarini's memorandum can be found in Saverio Gentile, *La legalità del male: L'offensiva Mussoliniana contro gli ebrei nella prospettiva storico-giuridica (1938-1945)* (Turin: G. Giappichelli Editore, 2013), p. 304; M. Sarfatti, "Gli ebrei negli anni del fascismo," in C. Vivanti, ed., *Storia d'Italia, Annali II: Gli ebrei in Italia, II: Dall'emancipazione a oggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), p. 1744. "All Jews resident on the national territory must be arrested, with their property seized and handed over to people made indigent by Allied air raids."

Cordova, was emboldened by this measure to undertake a house-to-house arrest of 163 Jews, mostly women, and transfer them to a concentration camp at Fossoli, from which they were shipped to Auschwitz.<sup>49</sup>

These harsh directives were modified somewhat on 10 December, when police chief Tullio Tamburini instructed provincial heads to exempt from internment certain Jews, including the aged, the sick, those who had been “Aryanized,” and those with Aryan spouses.<sup>50</sup> The diluted Italian position seemed to suggest that the Fascist regime was about to resume the privilege of writing its own rules on the Jewish question while looking on “in silent assent” to whatever the Germans did with their own Jews.<sup>51</sup>

Apart from its uncooperative attitude on the question of deportation, the RSI, led by Fascist Party stalwarts in the press, had actually entered a new phase and became directly involved in the physical persecution of the Jews. Buffarini’s orders had dramatically altered the landscape. Before November 1943 it had been Dannecker who set into motion the round-ups, with the Italian police simply being called on for assistance. Now officials in the RSI were to act on their own by promulgating specific Fascist governmental directives that called for arrests, internment, and the seizure of property.<sup>52</sup> Mussolini toed this hard line by issuing a decree on 4 January 1944 that ordered the confiscation of all Jewish property and belongings, a decree the head of the police fully agreed to carry out a few days later.<sup>53</sup>

Buffarini certainly did not have the moral fiber to oppose Mussolini’s increasingly severe position, but he wanted to make sure that Jews would not be consigned to the Germans for deportation in the East by declaring on 20 January that Italians should hold on to control of the camps in Italy.<sup>54</sup> Police chief Tamburini followed this up on the 22nd by informing

<sup>49</sup> Alexis Kerr, *The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy: Fossoli di Carpi 1942–1952* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2016), p. 49; Simon Levis Sullam, “L’avvio della persecuzione degli ebrei e il ruolo degli italiani,” p. 272.

<sup>50</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 339–41; Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, p. 351; Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 117, n. 11.

<sup>51</sup> A term employed by Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, pp. 193–97. Some *questori*, as for example the one of Modena, attempted to protest when Germans arrested Jews who were theoretically protected by Italian laws, but invariably without result. Yad Vashem Archive, Tr 10/754.2.

<sup>52</sup> Picciotto, “The Shoah in Italy: Its History and Characteristics,” p. 217.

<sup>53</sup> ACS, Ministero dell’Interno, Direzione generale di Pubblica sicurezza, Divisione Affari generali e riservati, categoria A5G (Il Guerra Mondiale), b. 137.

<sup>54</sup> Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 409.

the provincial heads that Italian Jews must be sent to concentration camps in the peninsula. The Germans were to be informed that the Third Reich should refrain from challenging Italy's authority in matters pertaining to Jews on Italian soil.<sup>55</sup>

In early December 1943, the Salò regime, under the direct jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry, set up its one and only "special" concentration camp at Fossoli in the province of Modena as a collection depot for Jews originally confined in provincial camps.<sup>56</sup> On the 31st, ninety-three Jews departed for Fossoli, followed by a group of children sent in January 1944.<sup>57</sup> In that month the Germans called on Modena officials to aid in the deportation process. Tamburini wrote evasively: "I have already visited the Carpi concentration camp and requested from those in charge a list of all the Jews in the camp in order to prepare for their transfer to Germany."<sup>58</sup> From the beginning of December to early February 1944, the RSI authorities were loath to do more for the Germans than compile lists. In this period they did not take the ultimate step of actually releasing arrested Jews interned in Italian camps to the Nazis for deportation to the Third Reich.<sup>59</sup> A rough difference over ultimate purpose emerged between the two partners: the Italians reserved for themselves the sole right to search, arrest, intern, and sequester Jewish goods and property without deporting them, while the Nazis were set on sending Italian Jews to their favorite slaughtering houses in Third Reich-controlled territories.

The Militia leader Pietro Caruso, appointed *questore* of Rome at the beginning of February, for one, broke with RSI policy by falling into line with the German determination to deport Jews. Under Caruso's order, the Rome police, aided by Militia groups, loaded up at least six convoys of Jews that headed either to the Fossoli camp or the Durchgangslager, a transit site run by Germans in the Modena province, the notorious anteroom of Auschwitz.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 34.

<sup>56</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini's Italy*, p. 197.

<sup>57</sup> Simon Levis Sullam, "L'avvio della persecuzione degli ebrei e il ruolo degli italiani," p. 278.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Alexis Herr, *The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy. Fossoli di Carpi* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016), p. 44. German troops oversaw the transfer of the prisoners from Fossoli to the Carpi train station. The first group of Jews left the camp on 26 January 1944. Herr, *The Holocaust and Compensated Compliance in Italy*, p. 45.

<sup>59</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, p. 168.

<sup>60</sup> The list of Jews deported by the *questura* of Rome is found in ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale di PS, Divisione affari generali e riservati, categoria A5G (II Guerra Mondiale), b. 66. The total number of deported is 149.

Mussolini's fears notwithstanding, the Nazis did not engage in a huge kerfuffle with the RSI for measures the regime had taken against the Jews on their own initiative. Rahn was told to express the German government's satisfaction that the RSI had passed laws successfully guaranteeing the security of the state.<sup>61</sup> The Germans, when they intended to track down Jews, simply did not bother notifying the Salò government, which, they knew, would not stand in their way. Various German command centers aimed to hurry matters along by demanding that Jews already placed by provincial heads in various local Italian camps be handed over to them.<sup>62</sup>

At the end of January 1944 *Sturmbannführer* Friedrich Robert Boßhammer, a favorite of Himmler, was sent by Eichmann to Italy where he took up office in Verona.<sup>63</sup> As the *Judenreferent* for Italy, Boßhammer had the task of coordinating the arrest of Jews and informing Berlin of the numbers apprehended and deported. As an authority of the Gestapo for "the Jewish question," Boßhammer gave new impetus to the deportations by imposing orders on the *questori* and provincial heads to deliver all Jews who had heretofore avoided deportation or were still enclosed in local concentration camps.<sup>64</sup> But he was prompted by a higher SS authority to refrain from raising thorny questions with the "untrustworthy ally." Such restraint was eliminated when, in the following weeks, he received the go-ahead to prepare the terrain for the Final Solution regardless of Italian laws on Jews. The *questori* and provincial heads were startled when Germans appeared to gather up Jews enclosed in Fascist concentration camps, but the majority, adjusting to changing times, bent to the Nazi will by delivering their victims without too much fuss.

Examples of this are legion. On 2 February 1944 the provincial head of Genoa informed the Interior Ministry that all Jews had been transferred to Marassi to be placed "at the disposition of the SS Command of Genoa."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Michaelis, *Mussolini e la questione ebraica*, pp. 36–61; Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei*, pp. 751–52.

<sup>62</sup> ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale di PS, Divisione affari generali e riservati, Cat. A5G (II Guerra mondiale), b. 151.

<sup>63</sup> Friedrich Robert Boßhammer, born in 1906, was a Gestapo specialist who had masterminded the deportation of Jews from Kassel in 1941 before passing on to the central office of the RSHA (sezione IV B 4) in Berlin at the beginning of 1942.

<sup>64</sup> Yad Vashem Archive, Tr.10/754.1.

<sup>65</sup> ACS, Ministero dell'Interno Direzione Generale di PS, Divisione affari generali e riservati, A5G (II Guerra mondiale), b. 151, telegramma del Capo della provincia di Genova al Ministero dell'Interno del 2 febbraio 1944. The telegram refers to another telegraphic circular of 24 January that cannot be found.



On the same day, the provincial head Mosero telegraphed the Interior Ministry, giving notice that eleven Jews currently enclosed in concentration camps had been turned over to the Germans.<sup>66</sup> A few weeks later on 22 February, the provincial head of Ferrara Vezzadini signed accords with the local German commander for the transfer of Jews from his province to the Fossoli concentration camp,<sup>67</sup> which, having originally been under Italian control, had been placed under the charge of the German police command of Verona in the second half of February 1944.<sup>68</sup> These Italian deliveries to the Nazis clearly demonstrate that the RSI authorities had pretty much capitulated to the demand of the Nazis that Jews held in their custody be delivered into German hands.<sup>69</sup> With this German takeover of camps in Italy, the RSI police could no longer prevent Jews from being deported to the Third Reich even if they had still wanted to do so. Hence Buffarini dropped all resistance to this development. In the Litorale Adriatico, Jews arrested by Germans usually ended up at a former rice-processing plant, the Risiera di San Sabba. This served primarily as a collection point prior to deportation, although some were killed on the spot. At least 1200 Jews were deported from Trieste. Living daily in an atmosphere laden with intimidation, “silently assenting” Italians in time ignored the German use of the Carabinieri and RSI police to assist them in the transfer of Jews into their own hands.

Still, RSI resistance to the German roundups of Jews had not yet entirely disappeared. Piero Parini, the provincial head of Milan, wrote Buffarini that he had not succeeded in finding agreement with the Germans, which implied an effort to avoid handing over Jews enclosed at the San Vittore prison. Taken aback, the “German authority” bore down hard both on him and his superiors to do their duty.<sup>70</sup>

While sparring with the Germans over a general handover of Jews for deportation, the RSI systematically seized Jewish riches to fill the treasury of the financially strapped state. In preventing Jewish valuables from moving

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale di PS, Divisione affari generali e riservati, A5G (II Guerra mondiale), b. 151, telegramma di Vezzadini al Ministero dell'interno dell'11 febbraio 1944.

<sup>68</sup> Liliana Picciotto Fargion, *Il libro della memoria* (Milan: Mursia, 2002), p. 914.

<sup>69</sup> Levis Sullan, *I carnefici italiani*, p. 45; Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista*, p. 263.

<sup>70</sup> ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione Generale di PS, Divisione affari generali e riservati, A5G (II Guerra mondiale), b.151, telegramma di Piero Parini al Ministero dell'Interno del 27 gennaio 1944.

into German coffers, the RSI claimed that Italian sovereignty had been defended.<sup>71</sup>

As of 8 March 1944, the RSI provincial heads had handed out 4267 confiscation decrees at the expense of Jews that included 123 commercial and industrial businesses for a value estimated to be 12.222.470 lire; 1452 agrarian businesses; factories valued at 215.498.661 lire; bank deposits amounting to 12.672.401 lire; postal deposits of 20,932 lire; bonds worth 584.861 lire; credits of 14.339.622 lire; and various other values totaling 4.796.277 lire.<sup>72</sup>

Mussolini, in the meantime, carried on with the persecution of Jews. On 18 April 1944, in a revealing telephone exchange with Pavolini, the Duce rebuked him for failing to make mention of the Jews in a circular to the BN calling for punitive action against them. Pavolini replied: "Duce, I can't do that. Our people are not mature enough." Mussolini replied: "A signal must be made; on this I insist! Not because [Giovanni] Preziosi puts pressure on me, as you might believe, but for other reasons. The Germans, with good reason, reproach us for weakness and docility."<sup>73</sup>

Just before Rome fell to the Allies on 4 June 1944, the Fascists arrested 835 Roman Jews.<sup>74</sup>

Sometime between the end of July and early August 1944, as the Allies advanced northward, the Germans moved the police and transit camp for Jews from Fossoli to a safer harbor in the Prealpi, in Bolzano-Gries, which would be in operation for the next nine months. From there Jews were carted off to Auschwitz.

His anti-Semitic zeal notwithstanding, Eichmann and his emissaries in Italy fell short of eliminating obstacles put up either by certain RSI officials or the people at large who stood in the way of a smooth solution of the Jewish question. Bernard Berenson wrote: "It is said that the Fascist prefect, while taking charge of his duty, had warned Jews to leave their houses and find hiding places."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, II: 434–37.

<sup>72</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, Careggio riservato, b. 84, f. "Sequestro beni ebraici."

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Lazzeri, *Il sacco d'Italia*, p. 81.

<sup>74</sup> Susan Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution Rescue & Survival* (Lincoln NE: Nebraska University Press, 1996), p. 136. The historian Frauke Wildvang argues that Italians collaborated with the Germans on 16 October 1943 and during the months that followed by assisting them with the deportation of an additional 1000 Jews from Rome to camps in the East. See her "The Enemy Next Door: Italian Collaboration in Deporting Jews during the German Occupation of Rome," *Modern Italy* 12: 2 (2007), pp. 189–204.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Michaelis, "La persecuzione degli ebrei," p. 380.

The biggest scourge of the Jews in the RSI was the venomous writer and would-be replacement of Mussolini, the ex-priest Giovanni Preziosi. Immediately after the First World War Preziosi founded the violently anti-Semitic paper *La Vita Italiana*, and in 1921 he was the first in Italy to publish the infamous and libelous anti-Semitic tract, "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."<sup>76</sup> He was also one of the fundamental contributors to the *Manifesto della Razza* in 1938.

Moellhausen described Preziosi as "mean, vindictive, wretched ... incapable of speaking well of other people ... Preziosi was the true incarnation of hate." Rahn, noted Moellhausen, had described Preziosi as "that authentic psychopath and excommunicated priest, whose ill-omened influence was evident in all fields," and would have willingly seen him interned in an insane asylum.<sup>77</sup> Although Mussolini had been drawn to Preziosi's theory of the Judaic-Communist world conspiracy, which had a moment of fame and fortune in the months following the appearance of the 1938 racial laws, he was not actually bound to a man whom he described as "a repulsive creature, a real figure of an unfrocked priest."<sup>78</sup>

Preziosi did not cease keeping Mussolini apprised of his thinking. From Munich he wrote on 31 January: "Duce! Listen to me! I am your faithful man at every turn. Fascism has one true and potent enemy: the Jew. With him stands his monstrous ally, the Mason. The Jews and Masons dominate the entire national life and is the real Italian government ... The work of reconstruction cannot begin as long as ministers, functionaries, party members, army officers, the Republican National Guards—let alone those who hold subordinate offices or whatever place in the state administration—are under their sway. Not only should everyone be required to demonstrate that they are not Masons, but, as in Germany, they must verify that they are full-blooded Aryans proven by genealogical records."<sup>79</sup>

Suspecting that Preziosi was prodding Rahn and Leyers to be ever harsher on the Jews, Mussolini exploded to Dolfín: "Finally, I have discovered the reasons behind the hardening German position these last few days ... This rascal Preziosi on 2 February has sent Hitler a copy of the letter he directed to me on the 31st of last month. He is a traitor, who for

<sup>76</sup> Obviously, with the outbreak of the war, Preziosi increased his editorial activity, outlandishly accusing Jews of every crime in the book. Giovanni Preziosi, *Come il giudaismo ha preparato la guerra* (Rome-Milan: Tumminelli, 1940).

<sup>77</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, pp. 312–13.

<sup>78</sup> Cited in Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, p. 350.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 43.

unknown reasons has attempted to gain points in Berlin by casting discredit on the government and on me ... If Preziosi crosses the frontier, give the order to arrest him.”<sup>80</sup>

Given this outburst, it is a bit surprising that Mussolini should have appointed the fractious “deacon of Italian anti-Semitism” to be head of the newly formed General Inspectorate for Race (*Ispettorato Generale Razza e Demografia*) in the Ministry of Interior, which he did on 17 March. But Mussolini made sure that Preziosi would be little more than a nuisance by limiting him to an office staff of four and very modest funds. In a move reminiscent of Giolitti’s time-honored *trasformismo*, Mussolini contrived to have a dangerous man, who was strongly supported by Fascist Party insiders,<sup>81</sup> inside the tent where he could be watched rather than outside stirring up trouble. Still, nothing could stop Preziosi from challenging Buffarini’s foot-dragging on his, Preziosi’s, proposed drastic anti-Jewish legislation. Preziosi was in a position where he could call on his friends in the Nazi SS to share a large stash of files on Italian Jews taken from their communities and synagogues.<sup>82</sup>

Preziosi had a staunch ally—and rival—in Minister of Finance Domenico Pellegrini Giampietro, who, in addition to the list of valuable goods and property already earmarked to be confiscated from the Jews, wanted to divest them of their most modest and humble possessions.<sup>83</sup> On occasion he did not refrain from advocating the death of certain Jewish victims.<sup>84</sup>

In spite of his unpopularity in RSI circles, and lack of real power, Preziosi’s appointment marked a passage from denial of legal rights to denial of life.<sup>85</sup> Still, Buffarini, whom Preziosi considered a “friend of the Jews,” tried to water down Preziosi’s extremist racial proposals and warned Mussolini of the dangers of accepting a new “*Carta della Razza*” featuring an Italian “*razza ariana*,” defined in biologically based terms, that was being circulated among radical anti-Semites.<sup>86</sup>

Mussolini’s position toward the Jews was opportunistic, coldhearted, and changeable. He actually thought that Nazi-style persecution was

<sup>80</sup> Dolfi, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 264.

<sup>81</sup> D’Angeli, *Storia Del Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, pp. 157–63.

<sup>82</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 316.

<sup>83</sup> Gentile, *La legalità del male*, p. 311. Preziosi had anti-Semitic allies located in strategic places elsewhere in the RSI bureaucracy.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Sarfatti, *The Jews in Mussolini’s Italy*, ch. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Gentile, *La legalità del male*, p. 314, n. 216.

witless and stupid, but not immoral. Occurring during a time of dire troubles, Nazi obsession with the Final Solution was, in his view, wasteful, a mindless distraction from the top priority of winning the war. But in spite of the many disputes and protests between the two Axis partners, Mussolini did not allow the subject of the fate of the Jews to disturb his rapport with the Germans.<sup>87</sup> He abided the barrage of anti-Jewish measures emitted by his government with no letup, even in its death throes when, during the last meeting of the Cabinet on 16 April 1945, the RSI adopted legislation to dissolve the Union of Jewish Communities and to suppress all Jewish welfare organizations.

Even if Mussolini did not believe in Nazi racial doctrines, nothing stopped him from allowing his regime to assist Germans in sending Jews, some of whom had been stalwart Fascists, to Hitler's furnaces. Thus did the Duce demonstrate that his urge to remain in Hitler's good graces far overshadowed the gratitude he should have shown to prominent Jews who had served him and his regime.<sup>88</sup> To advance his aim of holding the Italian people under a totalitarian yoke, which he was finding ever more difficult to do in the RSI polyarchy, he was prepared to transform his Fascist movement with its ultra-nationalist claims into a servile instrument of Nazi occupation in spite of his visceral dislike of Germans. As the Führer's ally, he played the role of the anti-Semite with ease and brutal cynicism: "Had circumstances taken me to a Rome-Moscow axis rather than a Rome-Berlin axis," he wrote, "I probably would have prepared the Italian workers, dedicated to their work as they are with such briskness, and yet with a detachment that the racists would call Mediterranean, for the same joke of Stakhanovism ethics and the happiness they represent. And in this case as well they would have been an obvious but inexpensive pawn."<sup>89</sup>

From Fascism's sorry record of Jewish persecution, one should not minimize how much these crude and unjustifiable measures reflected the barbarity of counterinsurgency and the vicious combat of the civil war that raged in Italy, which provided fertile ground for racist views and ethnic hatred to flourish. The Fascist maestros of Salò, who chose to live and die at the side of the Third Reich, perpetrated the growing racism of the conflict.

<sup>87</sup> Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler*, p. 87.

<sup>88</sup> A clamorous case was that of Aldo Finzi, a Jew and first undersecretary at the Interior Ministry of Mussolini. In 1944 he was assassinated in the Fosse Ardeatine together with seventy-five other Jews.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, p. 447.

In contrast to the many Fascist desperadoes and Nazi zealots hunting down Jews, many Italians, acting spontaneously, and willing to throw caution to the winds, rescued them. Having become disgusted with a war fought on the side of Hitler, not a few Italians risked their lives in giving Jews shelter. Others in small but important ways cleverly put the Germans off the track by deceit, or more directly by sabotaging roundups. Their efforts involved considerable peril, since informers stood at the ready to infiltrate these clandestine circles and blow the whistle on Italians saving Jews. Many impecunious RSI loyalists were ready to denounce a Jew for a cappuccino, which demonstrates how Fascism threw Italy into a moral and material abyss.

As opposed to the German people, Italians had experienced no real anti-Semitic tradition. With an elementary sense of justice and common human values as their heritage, the generally practical Italians were unreceptive to the ranting of rabid anti-Semites such as Preziosi and Interlandi. Experiencing solidarity with people who often looked and acted as they did, many Italians shared with Jews the feeling that they were martyrs, or victims, of a relentlessly invasive dictatorship tied to madcap Teutonic barbarians.

Moreover, the Jewish community in Italy was small and had little influence or visibility. The fervent anti-Semites had difficulty making their denunciations stick with the majority of a skeptical population. Fascism itself, as opposed to Nazism, was not brought into the Italian world nourished by a toxic biological anti-Semitism. Equally important, thousands of Italian Jews had sworn loyalty or given service to Mussolini's first regime, including Aldo Finzi as undersecretary of the Interior Ministry and Guido Jung, minister of finance. In their endeavor to integrate into Italian society, many Jews tried to be more Fascist than the hardcore Fascists themselves.

The Catholic Church, through an imposing chain of institutes and religious homes presided over by bishops and priests, opened the door to Jews for safety in convents and parishes. This, in spite of the checkered history of the Vatican under Pope Pius XII, who can hardly be hailed as a stout defender of Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>90</sup>

Many scholars have criticized the Catholic Church on the Jewish question. The "silence" of Pius XII during the roundup of Jews on 16 October 1943 is thought by some to have blighted his moral image. He never did

<sup>90</sup>The bibliography of Pope Pius XII is filled to the brim. A recent book that is both balanced and documented is one by Andrea Riccardi, *L'inverno più lungo, 1943-1944: Pio XII, gli ebrei e i nazisti a Roma* (Rome: Laterza, 2008).

anything to reverse the long-standing religious and political anti-Semitism that was a regular feature of the mainstream Catholic press, including the popular *Civiltà Cattolica* and the official *Osservatore Romano*. Vatican publications continued to view Jews as a separate nation and as parasites sucking the life blood of nations where they lived. Jewish emancipation, according to the Catholic press, had the nefarious consequence of allowing Jews to mix in Christian society, exert excessive influence, and subvert Christian beliefs. To avoid their mischievous intrigues, the Vatican press advised that they be herded back into the ghetto. There is no evidence that Vatican officials tried to dissuade Italian police and Carabinieri leaders from zealously carrying out the order to arrest Jews.<sup>91</sup>

The pope's defenders point out that the German roundup of Jews on 16 October had caught him by complete surprise; he had no idea that such an abomination could take place "under his very windows."<sup>92</sup> If choosing to remain silent, he allowed nuns, monks, priests, and prelates to provide refuge in religious institutions, which they traced to his unspoken permission to hide them. In an SS-occupied Rome, monasteries and convents by the end of October 1943 had given 4238 Jews sanctuary; a further 477 found shelter in the Vatican and its enclaves.<sup>93</sup> Jonathan Gorsky, writing for *Yad Vashem*, judged that the scale of Jewish rescue would have been impossible without the pope's approval.<sup>94</sup> The pope's detractors, however, point out that he failed to issue clear directives on the matter and therefore hardly gave unstinting support to ecclesiastics involved in sheltering Jews.<sup>95</sup>

On 25–26 October the official Vatican paper *Osservatore romano* published an article entitled "The Charity of the Holy Father" (*La carità del Santo Padre*), which reads: "With the increase of so many evils that have taken place, one would say that the charity universally fathered by the Supreme Pontiff will not be restrained by nationality, religion, or race."<sup>96</sup> This amounted to a vow that opened the doors for hiding the persecuted.

<sup>91</sup> Zuccotti, *The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*, p. 292.

<sup>92</sup> Michael Phayer, *Pius XII, The Holocaust, and the Cold War* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. xiii.

<sup>93</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Righteous—The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), p. 314.

<sup>94</sup> "Pius XII and the Holocaust," by Jonathan Gorsky for *Yad Vashem*, 4 October 2013.

<sup>95</sup> Zuccotti, *The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*, p. 301.

<sup>96</sup> "La carità del Santo Padre," *l'Osservatore romano*, pp. 25–26, ottobre 1943.

But frequently, their hiding places were discovered and violated, for at no time were religious buildings immune to the entry of Fascist and Gestapo agents. With the possible exception of Milan, the German SS pursued Jews wherever they could be found. In convents, however, they tended to display a bit of restraint, much preferring to set up comradely Fascists to search for them on holy land for fear of incurring the wrath of the Church. Fearing papal rebuke, the Wehrmacht tried from time to time to bridle the SS from storming ecclesiastical domains.<sup>97</sup>

Occasionally, the Fascists were scared off in their search for enemies in sacred places by indignant Catholic Fathers. When in August 1944 they had arrested men of the robe blocking their way, Cardinal Schuster sent a letter to the "Supreme Authority of the Republic," in which he stated: "To all those [arrested ecclesiastics] we owe a debt of gratitude for the work of Christian charity that they have lent to the poor, elderly, infirm, and oppressed Israelites who have fallen into the most gloomy misery. We already have had many occasions to explain to the 'Supreme Authorities' that if the exercise of such charity is a crime, then we Christians, including Protestants, are all guilty. The Gospel of Christ obliges us to succor the poor, especially those who find themselves in extreme straits."<sup>98</sup> It was thus not unusual for Catholic clergymen to remind their parishioners that denouncing or turning in Jews to Fascist authority was morally reprehensible.

When the *Osservatore Romano*, the official daily of the Vatican, published an article "Today the Jews flee, tomorrow you will too" (*hodie mihi, cras tibi—oggi a me, domani a te*),<sup>99</sup> the Fascists were put on their guard. The Church had declared its intention to defend the persecuted, and it was refusing to come out in favor of the Axis Powers, which, if fighting against the evil Bolsheviks, were crusading without God.

Looking back at the history of the Jews in Italy, one sees that after unification of the country, while there may have been prejudice and jokes mocking them, there was rarely open hostility or violence, even among the Fascist hierarchs. It was Mussolini's Racial Laws of 1938 that constituted a significant turn of events. These laws were rigid and frequently applied without pity. In Fascist circles, where knee-jerk conformism to the party

<sup>97</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, p. 194.

<sup>98</sup> Archivio di Stato di Milano, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 365, letter of Ildefonso Schuster "Alle supreme autorità" of 24 July 1944. This document is not cited among those published by the cardinal in his book *Gli ultimi tempi di un regime* (Milan: La Via, 1946).

<sup>99</sup> *L'Osservatore romano*, 9 febbraio 1944.



line was commonplace whatever the ideological twists and turns, anti-Semitism overnight became *de rigueur* for protecting one's career and gaining promotion.

Under the RSI regime, Italian prefects and police who initiated or facilitated the Nazi roundups of Jews were active participants in the machinery of annihilation. People and businesses that made money, or who secured benefits accruing from construction, maintenance, and supply of the camps, if not perpetrators, were their partners in genocidal crime. From a larger perspective, members of the RSI who observed a collective silence in the face of Jewish persecution and thereby allowed anti-Semitic violence to go unchallenged were accomplices of genocide. This attitude also characterized many citizens who did not share the officially sanctioned hatred of Jews but did nothing to intercede on behalf of beleaguered Jews or to protest the violence against them, since they were more concerned that their own daily lives should continue unimpeded. This non-involvement can be attributed in part to peer pressure, careerism, anti-Communism, and outright fear of reprisal, but it constituted moral complicity nonetheless. While the Italian people on the whole did not share the officially sanctioned hatred of Jews, in a suffocating atmosphere of intimidation on a matter that did not impinge on their daily lives they were not prepared to challenge the regime.

The Italian historian Michele Sarfatti concludes that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that a tacit accord between the RSI and the Third Reich eventually evolved to facilitate the deportation of Italian Jews for extermination in Nazi concentration camps. "The absence of known Italian protests seems to suggest that the Fascist regime adopted an attitude of 'silent assent.'"<sup>100</sup>

The Israeli historian Meir Michaels reported that there were 44,500 Jews in Italy and Italian-occupied Rhodes on 8 September 1943, of which 12,500 were foreigners. By the end of war, at least 7683 had perished, including 173 murdered on Italian soil. But more than four-fifths survived the war. Liliana Picciotto estimates the total number of Jews deported from Italy and killed on the peninsula as being between 8028 and 8128. Of the 6806 deported from Italy to the German death camps, 2444 were arrested by Germans, 1951 by Italians, 332 by Italians and Germans together, while 2079 were probably arrested by Italians aided by the Germans.<sup>101</sup> It is estimated that 9837 Jews survived; 2700 Jews fought in

<sup>100</sup> Sarfatti, *Gli ebrei nell'Italia fascista*, p. 263. Sarfatti's hypothesis is confirmed by the study of Mayda, *Storia della deportazione dall'Italia*, pp. 150–54.

<sup>101</sup> Liliana Picciotto Fargion, *Il libro della memoria: Gli ebrei deportati dall'Italia (1943–1945)* (Milan: Mursia, 2002), pp. 27–33,

the resistance, of whom one-tenth died in combat; and 5000–6000 ultimately found their way into Switzerland. Susan Zuccotti estimates that approximately 85 percent of Italy's Jews survived the Holocaust.<sup>102</sup> The number of Jews whose lives were saved in areas under RSI or German control was about 27,000, not an insignificant number, which shows that perhaps a majority of Italians wanted no part of Fascism's participation in the Nazi Holocaust.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Zuccotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust*, p. 272.

<sup>103</sup> De Felice, *The Jews in Fascist Italy*, p. 460.



## CHAPTER 9

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# The RSI and the Italian Catholic World

The Holy See, in spite of great pressure, never granted the RSI official recognition, a rebuff that irked Mussolini. Still, the Duce bid for the Church's support in an article he had published in *Corrispondenza Repubblicana*: "Above all there are many questions of principle that make for a natural alliance between the doctrines of the Church and Fascism. They are spiritual, profoundly humane, and thoughtful in thinking through a general improvement and elevation of the masses of people. And then the Church owes a debt of recognition to a unique regime. For over twenty years, the regime has unambiguously acknowledged the Church's great dignity and mission that has made such a salutary contribution to a healthy environment."<sup>1</sup>

Cardinal Luigi Maglione, the Vatican's secretary of state, issued directives that called on the clergy to maintain "an attitude of superior impartiality before the armed conflict." Avoid "manifestations that might appear either as purely political proclamations or as statements of preference towards either of the two belligerent forces." In an exchange with General Graziani, who asked him to express sympathy for the cause of the RSI, Monsignor Ambrogio Marchioni, secretary of the Nunciature in Italy, reiterated the neutrality of the Church, and "still more of the Vatican,"

<sup>1</sup> OO, XXXII: "Stato e Chiesa," in *Corrispondenza Repubblicana* 63 (14 July 1944), pp. 380–81.

which did not permit political intervention on either side of the war or in favor of one group of citizens in a country against another. The duty of priests was straightforward: to “instill calm, tranquility, and order for ensuring that ill-advised actions do not produce serious reprisals against innocent people or entire populations.”<sup>2</sup> But Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Pius VI) advised diplomatic “prudence,” which implied acquiescence in RSI rule by recommending calm and obedience to public authority.<sup>3</sup>

Among the small number of highly-placed ecclesiastics who came out openly in favor of the RSI, the Fascist par excellence was Monsignor Borgongini Duca, the Apostolic nunzio to the RSI, who, on 15 October 1943, joined with Graziani in a public appeal calling on Catholics to do their duty in supporting Salò’s faithful warriors defending country and religion.<sup>4</sup> He was joined by other eminent Catholics holding similar views, such as the bishop of Bologna Monsignor Nasalli Rocca, Monsignor Bocoleri of Modena, and the Bishop of Parma Monsignor Colli.

Holding the partisans primarily responsible for the ubiquitous terrorism visited upon ordinary citizens, some men of the cloth aligned with the Fascist cause. It was not the reality of one person killing another that induced many priests to condemn terrorism; for they neither commented on nor went out of their way to counter the daily outrages that occurred in the country. What pushed them to condemnation was the appearance, during this time of war, of bloodshed by “revolutionary cut-throats,” which impeded their peace-making mission best practiced in a law-and-order environment. The bishop of Biella made this clear in deploring violence directed against the rights of property and work, violence that in his view legitimately provoked strong sanctions and severe dispositions. The guilty, naturally, were the “few, who were malicious, unreflective, and unjust, but those few damage the image of everybody.” The word *partisan* is unmistakably implied in the bishop’s discourse, which illustrates the tendency of certain churchmen to move beyond even-handed mediation to a visible filo-Fascism.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Malgeri, “La Chiesa di fronte alla RSI,” in *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, p. 315.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 318.

<sup>4</sup> Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Ibid., p. 227.

On 1 May the influential Archbishop of Milan Ildefonso Cardinal Schuster issued the following decree that spelled out his notion of what qualified as a valid accommodation to the Fascist regime: "It is legitimate to take an oath to a 'de facto government' that is responsible for maintaining public order, provided that it rules in accordance with one's conscience, within the scope of divine and ecclesiastical law, and acts within the sphere of its own duty and office."<sup>6</sup>

This conditional approval allowed the archbishop from time to time to take a stand against RSI excesses. Schuster admonished the RSI authorities on 21 July 1944 to extend Christian charity to "poor Israelites, the elderly, infirm, and oppressed."<sup>7</sup> In a directive to the Salò authorities the following September, he protested against the tortures perpetrated by the Muti Legion.<sup>8</sup> Writing to Mussolini on 30 October 1944, Schuster denounced the persecution of parish priests and imprisoned ecclesiastics.<sup>9</sup> When the RSI began to disintegrate, the archbishop drew Mussolini's attention to the seven uncoordinated police headquarters that were wreaking havoc on the citizenry. Every official had his own band of fifty agents. On the same day he admonished the Duce to pay heed to what the population had to say: the government must have full control and responsibility, which is now fragmented into dozens of companies and autonomous squads, each one of which acts on its own initiative. "In the history of the Roman Empire there was a period of anarchy, which was called the Thirty Tyrants. Do take steps to see that it does not happen again, and abolish them."<sup>10</sup> Notice that Schuster does not question Fascist ideology or the regime's leadership, only the confusion and misgovernment that characterized

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London & New York: Verso, 2014), pp. 64–65.

<sup>7</sup> Malgeri, "La Chiesa di fronte alla RSI," in *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, p. 331.

<sup>8</sup> Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Malgeri, "La Chiesa di fronte alla RSI," in *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, p. 331. Schuster's letter to Mussolini of 30 October 1944 describes the chaos in his diocese due to the dozens of autonomous squads by denouncing the persecution against priests and churchmen who had been beaten up and maltreated; the anti-clerical campaign of the press, and the impossibility of the scholastic life in the archbishop colleges. ACS, SPD, RSI, carteggio riservato, b. 49, lettera di Schuster a Mussolini del 30 ottobre 1944. The antifascist clergy and top ecclesiastics of the archdioceses were very preoccupied with the fact that the provincial head of Milan prepared a "monthly report on the Clergy" sent directly to Mussolini. These reports can be found in the ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Malgeri, "La Chiesa di fronte alla RSI," in *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, p. 331.

Salò's rule. In his last meeting with Mussolini on 25 April 1945, Schuster spoke of the Duce's "misfortune" for having been badly served by the hierarchs and collaborators surrounding him.<sup>11</sup> In spite of everything, the archbishop continued to believe that Mussolini should not be held responsible for the violent deeds perpetrated daily by his regime.

Criticized from all sides for bias behind outer walls of impartiality, the Church reeled ever more as Axis violence became more regular and systematic after the fall of Rome. Reports from ecclesiastics on these injustices appeared on balance to be weighted in favor of the partisans. But such a preference is hard to prove conclusively, for publicly the Church never wavered from its efforts to preserve an official equilibrium among militant anti-Fascists, the RSI regime, and the German ally. "Never should a clergyman close the door to whomever might come knocking" was the order of the day. But as time passed the rapport between ecclesiastical and Salò authorities became ever more strained by the activities of the rogue militias against their many and varied enemies; the growing diffidence and suspicion on both sides threatened to upset the formally cordial and correct exchanges.

The most clamorous attempt to "force" the Catholic Church to take up the cause of Nazis and Fascists was undertaken by Roberto Farinacci in the journal *Italic Crusade* (*Crociata italica*), whose editor, Diego Don Calcagno, had already gained great notoriety in the RSI world as a clerical master of hate. For Farinacci, Don Calcagno stood apart from the usual cleric, who, if not hostile to the regime, was, in his view, timid and disengaged. To lead a *crociata italica*, Don Calcagno fused glory to God together with reverence of the Duce; he intended to preside over a holy matrimony between heaven and the Italian Social Republic. Impervious to criticism within the Church, or the pope's preaching, Don Calcagno had no problem splitting the Catholic world between the international papacy and his national Italian church. Calcagno was bound hand and foot to Farinacci, who had a schismatic plan aimed at finally settling accounts with the Vatican. Throughout the Salò period, the RSI never took a position against the *Crociata italica*. Cardinal Schuster, on the other hand, in a sermon delivered at the Milan *Duomo* on 20 August 1944, described Calcagno's teachings as a "historical error and an anti-Italian heresy."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 297.

In a final meeting with Schuster in Milan, when the cardinal criticized the RSI's support of the *Crociata italiana*, Mussolini feigned not to be aware of the controversy. In truth, on 24 March 1944 he had given Don Calcagno and his movement full support by receiving the priest at Gargnano with a host of his supporters: "You that represent the care of the soul can, more efficaciously than others, make other people understand that the ideals of religion and country not only are harmonious but are perfectly unified. All the more, we can see that the future of Catholicism depends on the outcome of the struggle that currently is sustaining the nation ... Some say that we republican Fascists are Catholics only for reasons of expediency in order to win us the sympathy of Catholics in this moment. This is not true: we are Catholics by conviction. I am a Catholic by conviction because I believe that Catholicism has an adequate doctrine to resolve all the problems of individual, social, national, and international life; and, in the contest between the spirit and materialism, Catholicism supports and works for the superiority and victory of the spirit over matter."<sup>13</sup> So said an oft-proclaimed atheist, who opportunistically utilized the *Crociata's* message to his advantage.

Don Calcagno, obsessed by Jews, defined them as "monsters" (*mostri orrendi*) and as a "cancer on humanity" (*cancro dell'umanità*). Above all, the *Crociata italiana* wanted to drag the entire Catholic Church into a condemnation of the "Judaic Mafia" (*piovra giudaica*) and rebuked the pope for refusing to take a stand against the enemies of the Axis.<sup>14</sup> Since Don Calcagno had more than a negligible influence in certain RSI circles, even though only a small church following, it was not until 24 March 1945 that the Church fathers in Rome excommunicated him. Shortly after the war, Don Calcagno was brought before a partisan "tribunal of the people," which condemned him to death.<sup>15</sup>

The day-to-day Catholic Church's relationship with the Salò regime contained an essential ambiguity inherent in the Vatican's endeavor to carry out its religious mission on both sides of the fiercely fought civil war. Whatever the party or regime in power, the Church traditionally would seek accommodation to assure its survival which, in its view, depended on

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 298, who takes the passage from *Crociata italiana*, 29 gennaio 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Annarosa Dordoni, "Crociata Italiana." *Fascismo e religione nella Repubblica di Salò (gennaio 1944-aprile 1945)* (Milan: Sugarco, 1976), p. 99.

<sup>15</sup> The details of Don Calcagno can be found in Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 295–305.

maintaining a subtle impartiality. No doubt, the RSI ecclesiastical authorities understood the perils of neutrality but thought they could ride out the civil war's storm that would end soon in an Allied victory. In maneuvering down this tortuous path, ecclesiastics frequently ended up deprecating deeds without denouncing culprits.

In holding to the straight and narrow, however, churchmen often fell in line with the RSI's vigorous campaign against Catholicism's mortal enemy, atheistic Communism. As long as the Church felt that such a creed commanded the thinking in partisan ranks, clerics would refrain from directly challenging restrictions imposed by Fascist zealots. This point cannot be overemphasized. If forced to choose between Fascism, which had never tried to expunge the Catholic faith, and Godless Communism, which vowed to destroy all religions, the Church would invariably come down on the side of the Fascist "lesser evil." Against this, however, the Church had to weigh the probability that the Fascist state would not last long. In looking ahead to the postwar era, the high clergy could not always keep in line those parish priests who actively supported Fascists advocating forceful action against Communists. On the other hand, there were churchmen who openly supported the partisans and Allied forces because in the name of justice they could no longer be both Catholic and Fascist.

Whatever collaboration existed between the Catholic clergy and the RSI did not tip the scales as, for example, occurred in France, where the clergy in certain notorious cases overtly aligned with German authority. No cardinal offered Fascism unstinting credit or cover. Behind the traditional prudence of the Church lay the wish to forget the heydays of Fascist rule, the former regime's favoritism toward Catholic institutions, and the years of blessing banners in celebration of Fascist victories against Ethiopia and "Communist" Spain. RSI Fascism had spent itself and it was time to move on. The Fascists were able to delude themselves on this score, the Church not.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the Vatican's official general disengagement from politics, and its approval of the "absenteeism and fence-sitting" that leaders of both sides of the civil war deplored, not all parish priests on the local level could avoid or wanted to avoid making political choices. In many cases, in war-ravaged areas near the front, bereft of government, parish priests represented the only authority, which, therefore obliged them to make political decisions. Ignoring for the moment the activity of priests who sided

<sup>16</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 292.



either with the partisans or with the RSI, local chaplains in Italy did the people a signal service by cultivating the ideal of a nation reduced wholly to the state of an open city under their protection. To this end, in the attempt to safeguard traditional morality and customs, the Church aimed to bring peace through a Catholic moral order. Grounded in Christian charity, Italian ecclesiastics administered human and religious assistance to people on both sides of the ideological barricade—Italians who belonged to the same national community and who, by and large, professed the same religion.



## CHAPTER 10

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# Black Brigades

An upsurge in partisan retaliation took place in latter 1943, highlighted by a wave of “patriotic terror” planned and carried out by the Communist-led GAP. The most audacious among the partisans, they established small cells to create urban pandemonium by means of bomb throwing aimed at Fascists, policemen, Germans and their supporters, and by cutting telephone lines and putting electrical stations out of action. In carefully prepared hit-and-run operations directed at middle-rank individuals and Fascist hierarchs, these roving bands expected to spread fear and demoralization and provoke massive retaliation that would fuel criticism of the Fascists and further isolate them from the population. In this they were all too successful. Willing to endure punishments and reprisals, the *gappisti* were determined to gather up the fence sitters and deepen the hatred dividing Italians. But instead of concentrating on the most notorious of their enemies—Fascist torturers and fanatics—the *gappisti* often carried out murders against moderate republican Fascists who showed some willingness to compromise and negotiate, such as Igino Ghisellini, the temperate Fascist *federale* of Bologna; Eugenio Facchini, who had associates among Socialists in Bologna; and the respected philosopher Giovanni Gentile, who on 24 June 1943 had sought to champion a form of national unity based on a broader Fascist base.

In a daring raid on 12 December 1943, GAP members gunned down the moderate Fascist *federale* of Milan, Aldo Resega. Just as the *gappisti*

hoped, the Fascists were goaded into butchery of more innocent Italians. But in the bloody cycle of violence and killing that took place in this civil war. The differences between the two sides were not irrelevant. Nazis and Fascists inflicted reprisals on civilians of all kinds, whereas partisans, in the main, limited theirs to Fascist combatants and RSI officials.<sup>1</sup> In typical form, Buffarini Guidi issued the following directive to Pollastrini in October 1943: "We must pursue actions aimed at routing the enemy; we must terrorize!"<sup>2</sup>

Gripped by a sense of impotence, the RSI teamed up with the Germans to suppress the budding rebellion. Their joint *rastrellamenti* struck Piedmont hard at the end of the year. The following January a powerful campaign inflicted substantial losses on the partisans in Udine. But instead of mounting a fine-tuned response to partisan attacks, the Fascists wantonly devastated the countryside and massacred many innocent people.

In this spirit, Mussolini, on 23 February 1944, ordered the provincial head of Turin to eradicate the partisan threat in Piedmont by conferring on him exclusive authority to liquidate the so-called insurgency that pretended to be patriotic, and prepare men and means to resolve the problem once and for all.<sup>3</sup> Between 4 and 11 March 1944 another *rastrellamento* was launched in the Valle di Lanzo, northeast of Turin, followed up a little later with expeditions against partisans west of Torino and in Val Varaita. According to a report of Turin's provincial head, dated 7 April 1944, during a *rastrellamento* in the Valle di Lanzo, partisans "shot in combat" numbered about 370, and those taken prisoner, around 100, as opposed to two Fascists killed and four wounded.<sup>4</sup> This cycle of search-and-destroy missions was concluded the same month in the Canavese zone.<sup>5</sup> During these operations, the GNR's brutality hardly differed from that of the Germans.

<sup>1</sup> Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 29, ordine di Mussolini al Capo della provincia di Torino del 23 febbraio 1944.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Gentile, *I Crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, pp. 121–23. A summary of these operations from the point of view of the RSI armed forces can be found in ACS, Ministero degli interni, RSI, Attività ribelli, b. 13. According to Zerbino, the provincial head of Turin, the *rastrellamenti* in the valleys of Lanzo and Canavese "did not have the desired results." Operations went better in Val Pellice, Chisone, and Germanasca, where "the recent *rastrellamento* ... has completely eliminated partisan activity."

Another report, signed by the provincial head of Turin, on missions that took place in the Val Pellice during the last week of March, stated that German units participating alongside GNR battalions numbered thirty-four officers, 1057 non-commissioned officers, and a large number of regular soldiers.<sup>6</sup> The Luftwaffe, employing Junker 88 bombers, provided air support. In a textbook *rastrellamento*, the troops, after initially surrounding the entire area to seal off all escape routes, pounded the trapped and defenseless Italians with heavy artillery and air bombardment that made no distinction between uninvolved civilians and proven partisans. Towns were leveled, communication networks destroyed, and innocent people used as human shields to protect the attackers as they moved in behind the preliminary barrage of heavy shells.<sup>7</sup>

On the conclusion of operations in Val Pellice, Fascist reports counted eighty-three partisans dead, 163 shot during flight, another 205 “probably killed,” and 143 prisoners taken. Five RSI men fell in battle and thirty-two were wounded. Two villages were razed to the ground. The number of arms captured from the partisans amounted to three heavy machine-guns, six light machine-guns, two mortars, and twenty-six rifles.<sup>8</sup> In all, more than six were confirmed dead for every seized firearm. Adding the probable killed, one arrives at more than twelve were killed for every captured firearm. The ratio of firearms to deaths would seem to suggest that widespread violence was employed against local people, even those who were unarmed and not associated with the resistance. The sizeable disproportion between Fascist and partisan dead reveals that many a Fascist *rastrellamento* involved the killing of innocent civilians. Such wanton violence became a hallmark of both Fascist and German missions.

A word of caution is in order here on the likelihood of inflated body counts submitted by Axis commanders during counterinsurgency operations carried out against the Italian “rebels.” They were not alone in this. Officers in counterinsurgency operations whatever the country have had the tendency to exaggerate the number of enemy killed and amount of equipment

<sup>6</sup>ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 29.

<sup>7</sup>The partisan commander Giorgio Agosti wrote to Livio Bianco on 4 April 1944: “In Val Chisone, the SS did not hesitate in placing in front of the assaulting wave women and children to overcome partisan resistance: and by this blackmail they were able to cleanse the area by shooting till every sign of resistance was crushed.” Giorgio Agosti e Dante Livio Bianco, *Un'amicizia partigiana. Lettere 1943–1945* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2007), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>The reports of these operations are found in ACS, Segerreteria particolare del Duce RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 29.

captured. For example, if one adds the total number of the Vietnamese enemy killed by American soldiers, as reported by military scribes in the field, the final figure at the end of the hostilities is found to exceed the total Vietnamese population! The same phenomenon obtained in Fascist Italy's occupation of Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1943. This inflation of body counts by Italian commanders was intended to burnish their reputations, please their arm-chair commanders, and gain promotion.

On 23 March 1944 (the same day in 1919 that Mussolini and kindred souls founded the Fascist movement in Milan's Piazza San Sepolcro), a partisan strike force of GAP, the military arm of the clandestine Communist Party, ignited explosives that killed thirty-two German soldiers from the 11th Company of the 3rd Bozen SS Battalion marching along the Via Rasella in Rome. SS Commander Herbert Kappler and the German Commandant in Rome Kurt Mälzer, pondering a convincing reprisal, agreed that the execution of ten Italians for each German killed was a suitable ratio. That night Hitler, shrieking for revenge, demanded a reprisal to be carried out in twenty-four hours that would "make the world tremble."<sup>9</sup> General Kesselring called for the execution of Italians who had been previously sentenced to death. In preparing to carry out his orders, Kappler discovered that he did not have 280 Italians on death row, so he had to improvise by including those suspected of partisan activity and Jews being held in captivity. By noon of 24 March, Kappler had assembled a list of 271 victims and required that his Fascist partners do their bit by coming up with fifty "*Todeskandidaten*" to be shot. Finally, a total number of 335 Italians were herded into the Ardeatine Caves south of Rome where they were massacred. In carrying out this ghoulish demand for Italian blood, the *questore* Pietro Caruso dragged his heels in doing this dirty business, while the enthusiastic Dr. Koch eagerly scribbled down names more or less randomly to meet his quota.

Mussolini exemplified the typical Fascist callousness and dissimulation in his coldhearted reaction to the events of Via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine in a telephone call to Buffarini: "What's new?" Buffarini: "Peace and order reigns everywhere. Consternation only prevails in Rome for the massacre and its consequences. The population speaks of Germans carrying out the massacre." Mussolini: "Have you done anything to counter this psychological propaganda?" Buffarini: "No, Duce. The majority of the population does not reprove us for anything."

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, p. 3.

Mussolini: "That's wrong, signor minister. The Germans likewise should not be reproved for anything. Their reprisal is legal and sanctioned by international law."<sup>10</sup> Mussolini proceeded to issue a decree on 18 April 1944 aimed at striking a crippling blow on all armed "bandits" and their following and, in another wave of repression, to round up draft dodgers and deserters.<sup>11</sup>

While uncontrollable Fascist squads in local areas were having a field day making life miserable for innocent citizens, the government in Salò conducted an anti-partisan campaign that was badly splintered by a dispersion of an ill-trained and lackluster GNR, whose units were jealous guardians of turf, answerable to any central command. The Fascist Party, swelled by disparate and contending forces—RSI civil servants, high government officials, heads of provinces, the literary world, rogue Fascist squads, and various police organizations—had become far too unwieldy to undertake any coherent and decisive action. In carrying out search-and-destroy missions, it was not clear if the motley crew of RSI combatants in the field would obey the provincial heads, the local SS, the Wehrmacht, or just idle away the time. Pavolini was distressed that the PNF's principled hard core had been adulterated by soft-hearted people enamored of assemblies and elections.<sup>12</sup>

The RSI's mounting misfortunes and breakdown of government sapped confidence in Mussolini's leadership among party stalwarts. Fascists who had looked to the Duce to redeem national honor and restore a vigorous Axis partnership began to see a leader falling back on his old *trasformismo* ways with its unsavory compromises that resulted in internecine conflict and ideological ambiguity. Whispers abounded: should the Duce be replaced by a military cabinet or by a German Gauleiter?

More alert to the partisan danger, Graziani in March 1944 informed the German command that, in spite of its 134,000 troops, the GNR had stumbled badly in countering the partisan threat. A body composed mainly of police "forces of order" did not make for an effective counterinsurgency weapon.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Lazzerro, *Il sacco d'Italia*, p. 78. Mussolini showed a softer side to his wife, Rachele, who wrote in her diary: "My husband is furious over the events in Rome. 'The German reprisals (Mussolini told her) for the outrage on the via Rasella are atrocious: more than three hundred hostages shot in the via Appia. I was not warned in time to stop it, I could only protest afterward. Why so many manifestations of hatred? On their part the Germans by their fearful reprisals will not prevent such (partisan) actions from being repeated.'" Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, pp. 125–26.

<sup>11</sup> Rovatti, "La violenza dei fascisti repubblicani," p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> D'Angeli, *Storia Del Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, p. 190.

Graziani hoped for a beefed-up *Esercito Nazionale Repubblicano* (National Republican Army [ENR]): ten *battaglioni cacciatori*, equipped and armed by the Germans. Absent any helpful reply from Kesselring, he instructed the ENR's chief of staff, General Archimede Mischi, to prepare a counterinsurgency force at the Center for Special Training (*Centro addestramento reparti speciali* [CARS]) on 18 March 1944. Meanwhile, the Germans conceived their own *rastrellamenti* as a purely military enterprise, which ran counter to Mussolini's idea of regarding the partisans as mainly an ideological enemy. At this point the Duce was undecided as to whether he should stave off a major civil war by keeping the door open to political compromises or by undertaking a divide-and-conquer strategy.

Besides having to cope with his enhanced military duties, Graziani was called upon to satisfy German Luftwaffe Marshal Wolfram von Richthofen's demand for 24,000 soldiers to man his anti-aircraft units in Germany. To reduce another big drain on his numbers, Graziani persuaded Mussolini to issue a decree that would bring the GNR under the ENR, from whose ranks he would send Richthofen 7000 men, thereby enabling him to keep hold of his own troops.

While Graziani prepared for strong countermeasures against the mounting partisan danger, Mussolini, during the beginning of April 1944, worried about the intractability of the resistance, tried a soft touch by promulgating amnesty for draft dodgers and deserters: "NO REPRISALS" [*NESSUNA RAPPRESAGLIA*] for those who voluntarily rejoined their units.<sup>13</sup> Rahn fully supported the measure, whose purpose was to weaken the partisans by persuading the runaways to abandon the resistance.<sup>14</sup>

With the onset of summer, certain leaders of the RSI, too, had become quite aware of the growing hostility and indifference toward the regime unmistakably manifested across large swaths of the population. In a report from Tuscany on 17 June 1944 one reads: "Indifference, fence-straddling, anti-Fascism of every kind, and defeatism of every variety predominate because they find no robust riposte in public opinion. Much of this is due to war fatigue. Newspapers, radio, and placards preach in deserts of emptiness. Only subjects that harp on the longing for the end of the war awakens the interest of the population. The most absurd anti-German chatter circulates and proliferates without letup."<sup>15</sup> In an attempt

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, pp. 134–35.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Rapporto della Commissione storica italo-tedesca insediata dai Ministri degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Federale di Germania il 28 marzo 2009, Inserto allegato al n. 1 January 2013, p. 31.

to overcome this apathy and hostility, Mussolini issued his clemency and amnesty of June.

The Duce's act of clemency suggested a more forgiving attitude in the future. But for hard-and-fast Fascists such leniency amounted to a "betrayal of the revolution." "For the worn-out rebels we offer comfortable beds in our barracks." A little more than 40,000 "dispersed" showed up to take advantage of the amnesty.<sup>16</sup>

According to Police Chief General Renzo Montagna, both the Duce's acts of clemency and amnesty offered to deserters and partisans of the preceding month had turned out barren of results. Drawing on his counterinsurgency experiences in the Balkans, Montagna realized that no gambits or appeasement would suffice in defeating "rebels," only overwhelming force.<sup>17</sup>

In his usual manner of rebuking Germans for alienating the Italian population, Mussolini, in a series of letters between May and August, spelled out his objections to Rahn: Germans had carried out unacceptable requisitions—bicycles, farm animals, radios, and foodstuffs. In their mopping-up exercises, they needlessly torched houses, destroyed villages, forcibly drafted youths for work camps in the fatherland, conducted *rastrellamenti* against unarmed civilians, and carried out reprisals against innocent bystanders. The Wehrmacht's politically indiscriminate operations, Mussolini concluded, aimed solely at securing a graveyard silence and ran roughshod over the Italian objective of detaching the civil population from the partisans. The German reply was typically self-satisfied: everything was being done in an exemplary manner to combat the partisans. Since extraordinary good will was present everywhere, there was no reason to lodge complaints.

The Allied breakthrough of the Gustav Line and capture of Rome on 4 June 1944, the first European capital to be liberated, followed two days later by the Normandy landings, severely rocked the RSI. Mussolini commented in the *Corrispondenza repubblicana*: "The idea that colored troops are bivouacked between the Coliseum and the Piazza del Popolo assails our spirit and causes us much suffering that becomes worse and worse by the hour. These Negroes are passing under the arches and on the streets that were constructed to exalt Rome's glorious past and present. This outrage, inflicted on this sacred city of history and civilization of the world, burns us like a red-hot iron."<sup>18</sup> In a further shrinkage of the Salò

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> AUSSME, H8, b. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 160.



republic's power base, the partisans were emboldened to chip away further the regime's stability. Two days later the Allied commander General Harold Alexander invited the Italian population and partisans to step up their resistance against the Germans and the RSI. Kesselring noted on the 18th that Alexander's appeal was making much headway.<sup>19</sup>

To address this wide-ranging crisis, Mussolini on 13 June told Wehrmacht Colonel Jandl, the liaison officer of the German Army Command attached to the Duce, that he would undertake a general reorganization of the Fascist Party by arming the "old Fascists," the only reliable defenders of the RSI, which included the *squadristi* of the original march on Rome who were withdrawing northward to escape capture.<sup>20</sup> On the same day, Graziani and Mussolini grappled with the mounting indiscipline and desertions among the Italian army units under German command. Moreover, in many places the GNR had simply disintegrated: the Carabinieri had long ago deserted in droves and provincial heads were abandoning their posts, which left nothing in place to check the institutions of government from disintegrating. Ricci, who considered the major problem to be a shortage of military equipment, complained bitterly to German General Jürgen von Kamptz: "Currently we don't have any more shoes, uniforms, equipment, and armaments to distribute ... it is indispensable that today I should tell you in complete frankness what is urgent and can no longer be delayed: at least give the GNR arms, munitions and shoes ... Make sure that the outlying German forces take initiatives that do not conflict with the accords already in force between the GNR and high German military commands in Italy."<sup>21</sup>

In the absence of a reliable army and with an unruly police force presided over by irresponsible leaders, the writer Concetto Pettinato published a sensational article in the influential newspaper *La Stampa* on 21 June 1944 that exposed Piedmont as a breeding ground of delinquency, military desertion, and civic disorder. Where were the Italian divisions that supposedly were helping to plug the gaps in the sagging German lines? Efforts to nationalize industry had gone off the track too. The owners showed no enthusiasm and the workers looked on indifferently. The RSI, Pettinato claimed, suffered from bureaucratic sclerosis and a lack of will in fending off partisan raids.

<sup>19</sup> Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, pp. 140–41.

<sup>20</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Zanzanaini, *Renato Ricci*, pp. 149–50.

Most daringly, Pettinato implicitly called out the Duce. Why were officers returning from the camps in Germany deserting in droves? Why were the “rebels” still having a field day in Piedmont? “It’s like in spiritual sessions, where we painfully grope in the dark for months shouting for our supreme being: ‘*Se ci sei, batti un colpo.*’”<sup>22</sup> Here Pettinato likened the government to a specter that shows itself during a spiritual gathering around a table: “Spirit if you are with us strike a blow to save us,” which, in indicating sagging spirits, placed in doubt the very *raison d’être* of the RSI.<sup>23</sup> To suppress the hatred generated by party zealots, Pettinato called for a military government to knit the nation together again. Inspired by the activism of Borghese and Graziani, his newly-forged RSI would find redemption by an infusion of a renewed Mussolinian spirit. “THE REVOLUTION MUST BE CARRIED OUT AGAINST ALL AND SUNDRY AND EVERYTHING, COST WHAT IT MAY ... our dead commands this to be done, and the future of Italy requires it.”<sup>24</sup> There was nothing to fault Pettinato here in the view of radical Fascism.

Unsurprisingly, for one who had been appointed president of the Turin section of the Italo-German Association earlier in the year, Pettinato counted on Germany to provide the key to a resurgent Italy. But in bracing up the Italian military units, the ally was letting the RSI down. “It is fine to rely on an alliance with a great and friendly power such as Hitler’s Reich; it is fine to have pacts containing solemn and conventional agreements properly signed and tested. But in the real world a country deprived of an adequate military force is a country whose sovereignty is fatally exposed to a thousand dangers and to continuously abnormal oscillations.”<sup>25</sup> Derelict in their responsibly, Pettinato wrote, the Germans had no right to treat Italy’s participation in the war as a “comedy.”<sup>26</sup> Since Rahn’s newspaper attaché Ludwig Alwens had given his stamp of approval to the article, the Germans, knowing that Pettinato was a faithful devotee, overlooked his biting criticisms.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 253–54. This phrase harkens a folk tale. Having gone to a witch asking to talk with a ghost, the witch says: “If you are here, knock. If the government acts like a ghost, no one will believe you, but if you prove that you exist, people will take notice.”

<sup>23</sup> Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, pp. 25, 93–94.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 279.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>26</sup> Concetto Pettinato, *Tutto da rifare* (Milan: Casa Editrice Ceschina, 1966), p. 307.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

Though Pettinato's article was soaked in Fascist nationalism, his entreaty for the government to broaden the meaning of Fascism so that it would attract mainstream Italians was coldly received by the party radicals. Mezzasoma wrote the Duce that the article was "the hardest blow yet dealt to the prestige of the Fascist Republican Government."<sup>28</sup> Pettinato did, however, find a strange bedfellow in Pietro Koch, the head of a police unit renowned for brutality in the service of the RSI security apparatus, who shared Pettinato's objective of reaching out to larger sectors of the population.<sup>29</sup> RSI officials made a move to sequester the edition of the journal containing Pettinato's article, but remaining copies sold at sky-high prices on the black market.<sup>30</sup> Pettinato escaped incarceration for his critical words, but was suspended from the directorship of *La Stampa*.

Shaken by Pettinato's philippic,<sup>31</sup> and worried by a growing schism in Fascist ranks, let alone the rising partisan threat, Mussolini came down in favor of forceful measures to clear out dangerous rivals from within his circle. Still, there were problems. Where would he find arms for the soldiers? Certainly not from the Germans. To assist in the retreat northward from abandoned Rome, the Wehrmacht requisitioned weapons and every form of transport in sight.<sup>32</sup>

In this grave crisis Mussolini was aided and abetted by Pavolini, who, relishing the role as the *deus ex machina* of the RSI, had already been at work superintending the organization of a Fascist nucleus by drawing volunteers from the ENR and GNR. The *federale* of Milan, Vincenzo Costa, had already done spade work in early June by forging a *reggimento federale*, which was joined by 1500 men. Following Costa's example, similar organizations emerged in other cities.<sup>33</sup>

Building on this local network, Pavolini, hand in hand with Mussolini, brought to birth the Black Brigades—Auxiliary Corps of the Black Shirts' Action Squads (*Brigate Nere* [BN]—*Corpo Ausiliario delle Squadre d'azione di Camicie Nere*), a throwback to the *squadristi* of the early twenties, the "springtime" of Fascist life. "Italians don't fear fighting; those faithful to the Duce indeed fight for him. They however don't like to be shut up in barracks, enclosed, and regimented ... The partisan movement

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 261.

<sup>30</sup> Pettinato, *Tutto da rifare*, p. 317.

<sup>31</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 254.

<sup>32</sup> Rossi, *Mussolini e il diplomatico*, p. 486.

<sup>33</sup> Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, p. 334.

has had success because the combatant in its ranks has the impression of being a free man. He is proud of his work because he acts independently and acts according to his personality and individuality. We have therefore to create an anti-partisan movement on the same basis and with the same characteristics.”<sup>34</sup> For Pavolini, the existing lack of political vitality could only be dealt with through violence in a protracted vendetta against the “fake” Fascists of the early 1920s and against calculating Fascists who had reappeared after twenty years of silence. Under the maxim “Life, you are our friend; death, you are our lover” (*Vita, sei nostra amica; morte, sei nostra amante*), Pavolini, rifle in hand, would lead a streamlined Fascist military onward to conquer all enemies.

For Mussolini, Pavolini had arrived as the man of the hour to breathe life into the Fascist regime by transforming a flabby and lifeless party into a vibrant militarized phalanx. But a personal problem cropped up that threatened disgrace. Pavolini had raised eyebrows by abandoning his family for the famous actress Doris Duranti. Apprised of this story, Mussolini told him that only he had the right to accept lovers. Pavolini retorted: “Duce, you’ll have to see her.” Mussolini agreed to do so. Dazzled, he called his collaborator: ‘Pavolini, I understand you completely.’”<sup>35</sup>

On 1 June Mussolini issued the following statement that was not immediately made public: “Given the current situation that is dominated by only one supreme factor, of arms and of combat, before which all other considerations pale in importance, I have decided from 1 July to carry out a change in the party from the existing political and military structure to one that is exclusively military. From 1 July all regular members of the republican Fascist Party from eighteen to sixty years old who do not belong to the republican armed forces will constitute an auxiliary corps of the Blackshirts and consist of action squads. The other activities that the party has carried out to this point will be entrusted to competent entities, like assistance will be assigned to Fascist women, the communes, and other organizations; the propaganda to the national institute of Fascist culture. The party secretary will implement the transformation of the actual direction of the party in the auxiliary corps of the Blackshirt action squads. Given the nature of the organism and its purposes, the command will be entrusted to the local political heads. There will not be ranks but only command functions. The Corps will be subjected to military discipline and

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, p. 355.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 234–35.

the military code in time of war. The Corps will be deployed at the orders of the provincial heads, who are responsible for public order and the security of citizens against the cutthroats and groups who are accomplices of the enemy.”<sup>36</sup>

In advancing Pavolini’s hard line,<sup>37</sup> Mussolini gave the militant action squads leeway to dial up anti-Semitism and anti-Communism by wiping out partisans, disciplining those engaged in *attesimo* (waiting to see which way the wind was blowing before deciding to act), assisting Nazis in running down Jews, and providing cover for the Wehrmacht in their search-and-destroy missions across the land. This was just the beginning. With Mussolini’s blessing, the energetic Pavolini took measures for taking the offensive behind Allied lines by forming clandestine units using whatever means—terrorism included—to chip away at Allied rear areas and prepare them for eventual uprisings behind the lines.<sup>38</sup> He wrote Mussolini on 19 June: “the organization and armament of the noted Fascist nucleus has been completed.”<sup>39</sup>

Since the GNR had fallen into a coma, Pavolini had clear sailing to form a hard core of shock troops. A militarized Fascism (a political army) would supplant Fascism as a party. The door had swung open for the radicals striking *squadristi* poses in the BN to transform the bland and uncoordinated bureaucratic apparatus and the ineffective GNR into a sharp-edged instrument capable of forcing the population to accept a far-reaching makeover of government.<sup>40</sup> Pavolini’s BN would be “anti-Carabinieri” and above politics, ready for a “war of religion” against the Italy of Badoglio and the Communist luminary Palmiro Togliatti.

On 21 June 1944 Mussolini signed an order that decreed the birth of the Black Brigades, many of whose members wore black “Marcello” M33 steel helmets with white skull markings. Four days later, he ordered Graziani to prepare “all the RSI armed formations to take on and defeat the outlaws ... in a March of the Social Republic against the Vendée.”<sup>41</sup> The main target was Piedmont, which Mussolini targeted as the center of

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Perticone, *La repubblica di Salò*, pp. 203–05.

<sup>37</sup> Roberta Mira, *Tregue d’armi: Strategie e pratiche della guerra in Italia fra nazisti, fascisti e partigiani* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), p. 106.

<sup>38</sup> Dianella Gagliani, “Mussolini e la scelta del partito armato,” in *La RSI: La Repubblica voluta da Hitler*, p. 50.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> For a comprehensive recent history of the Black Brigades, see Gagliani, *Brigate nere*.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Mira, *Tregue d’armi*, pp. 104–05.

the Vendée-style monarchists and a chief Bolshevik hideout.<sup>42</sup> Troops for this mission would be comprised of the ENR armed forces (whose soldiers were beginning to take up battle positions on Italian soil), X Mas, GNR, and PFR, under the guidance of a committee that would include Mischi, Ricci, Pavolini, and the newly appointed head of police, Eugenio Cerruti. The Duce wrote Mischi: "I am sure that deeds will follow words. We have to free ourselves from this most odious plague with fire and brimstone."<sup>43</sup> "The organization of the movement against bandits must have a character that will have a heavy impact on the psychology of the people and stoke the enthusiasm of a unified Fascist following. In the march of the social republic against the Vendée, the new spirit will little by little radiate in every province and radically cleanse them."<sup>44</sup>

Although the Duce showed readiness to involve the auxiliary fighting force, the Blackshirts, to resolve the crisis,<sup>45</sup> Pavolini was not happy that he should rely so heavily on Graziani's soldiers. On the 27th he wrote Mussolini that "wherever the army exists on national soil it is directly represented by nuclei of officers and men ready to desert and pass to the other side." The only remedy, he argued, was a thorough reorganization of the Fascist action squads. "The whole Party must be transformed into an armed corps."<sup>46</sup> Mussolini had done nothing to work out the unbridgeable difference dividing them: Graziani's lack of faith in Pavolini's determination to transform the PNF into a reliable military organization capable of taking on the partisans, and Pavolini's belief that Graziani's army was filled with useless and fly-by-night soldiers.<sup>47</sup>

Graziani hovered over Mussolini like the wrath of God. In the republic, he wrote the Duce, the war was popularly believed to be lost; Communism was spreading; men such as Buffarini, Pavolini, and Ricci aggravated the prevailing distrust of Fascism; the Wehrmacht's far-flung military operational zones affronted the republic; and the German labor roundups dried up Italian recruitment. In practice, he asserted the RSI only controlled the plain of the river Po; the rebels virtually controlled the rest. Germany must send him armaments and stop meddling in Italian affairs. "The whole party must be transformed into an armed corps."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, p. 169.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, p. 365.

<sup>44</sup> Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*, p. 217; Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 193.

<sup>45</sup> Gagliani, "Mussolini e la scelta del partito armato," p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 188–89.

<sup>47</sup> D'Angeli, *Storia Del Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, p. 206.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 185–89; Processo Graziani, II: 38.

Between 3 and 5 July 1944 high-level German and Italian brass assembled to coordinate an intensified campaign against the partisans. General Mischi offered to create special anti-partisan units that included the CARS headquarters in the Veneto. Soon after, in the campaign to “defeat banditry” (*debellare il banditismo*), Wehrmacht General Tensfeld, in meetings held on 18 and 21 July between Mischi, Wolff, and their subordinates, was given responsibility for coordinating operations. A newly created Anti-Guerrilla Command (*Comando contro Guerriglia* [CoGu]) was set up on the 25th. Formally under the authority of the ENR chief of staff, it was to act as a rear-area command for the Ligurian Army Command (*Comando d’Armata; Ameeoberkommando Ligurien* [AOK]) with the chore of clearing the region of partisans under Wolff’s directives and Tensfeld’s operation orders. These arrangements, which kicked off in earnest at the end of July, succeeded in sidetracking Ricci and impeding Pavolini from assuming leadership in the anti-partisan campaign.

As the thrill of violence rippled through the ranks of the party activists, Mussolini allowed compromise to slip through his fingers. Sidetracked were his tepid efforts to bring together the disparate components of the Fascist Party, and lost was the illusion of the “sacred union.” But he seemed not to care. On the ethical plane, the radicalized Salò regime, of which he was the head, judged a wait-and-see attitude to be a sophism.

Determined never to be outshone as Fascism’s redoubtable warrior, Mussolini rolled up his sleeves before the troops on 18 July: “He who does not fight today is a man morally dead or who merits such fate.” “Rome,” he proclaimed, “which in thirty centuries of its history has never seen Africans except when shackled to the chariots of its victorious consuls, now has its walls profaned by this uncivilized and bastard race.”<sup>49</sup> In the same vein: “Military glory is tied to war and war is the supreme test in the relations among peoples. In this decisive trial final judgment is rendered. Through war a people reveal their virtues and defects.”<sup>50</sup>

On 20 July 1944, when Mussolini was scheduled to meet with Hitler at his headquarters in the East Prussian forest, the Führer escaped death from a bomb left under the thick oak desk by Wehrmacht officer Count Claus von Stauffenberg, who had orchestrated the plot to kill him. In the ruins of Hitler’s bunker, Mussolini, never one to appear wimpish before the

<sup>49</sup> OO, XXXI: 105; OO, XXXII: 100–01.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 467; Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 40.

Führer, told the disheveled German dictator: “Now only the republican Fascist Party and its organizations can be trusted.”<sup>51</sup> Later, with Francesco Maria Barracu, the undersecretary to the president of the Council of Ministers, he relished Hitler’s close call: “The days of humiliation are over. It is not only Mussolini who is beset with traitors.”<sup>52</sup>

As July wore on, Italian units, fighting side-by-side with the Germans, redoubled their fierce reprisals everywhere they campaigned: the Battalion M of the 9 Settembre in the Romagna; the Assault Legion Tagliamento, operating in the province of Pesaro; and Italian army units wherever they were engaged partisan units.<sup>53</sup> At the end of July the Fascist commentator Giorgio Pini summarized recent events: “The republican Fascist Party, which has renounced political activity, has been transformed into Black Brigades to confront the partisan guerrillas.”<sup>54</sup> The BN aimed to radicalize republican Fascism on a terrain enriched under the Salò regime by a faith concealing a dangerous mixture of passion and violence that would be carried out against other Italians.<sup>55</sup> By early fall, 11,627 volunteers had been enrolled in the BN.<sup>56</sup>

His bellicosity restored, the Duce, on 16 August, fully endorsed Pavolini’s methods: “Partisans captured during and after the fighting are to be immediately shot. The unarmed will be sent to Germany. Those who turn themselves in ‘would do manual labor or military service.’”<sup>57</sup>

The BN’s approach to counterinsurgency fit in nicely with German search-and-destroy missions contrived to extirpate the partisans by severing their ties with the civil population. By order of Kesselring on 7 April 1944, Wehrmacht soldiers were given *carte blanche* to repress the “fellow-travelling” population by killing off the “outlaws.”<sup>58</sup> On 26 April he assumed the unchallenged authority to conduct the struggle against the partisans, formerly regarded as a police responsibility. And on 17 June Kesselring informed Pavolini, who hardly needed urging, that “in the struggle against the ‘bandits’ there must be no limits on choice of means waged with maximum harshness,” which included the roundup of

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 231.

<sup>52</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, p. 609.

<sup>53</sup> Rovatti, “La violenza dei fascisti repubblicani,” pp. 157–58.

<sup>54</sup> Pini, *Itinerario tragico*, pp. 108, 192.

<sup>55</sup> Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, p. 182.

<sup>56</sup> Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 270.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in Pavone, *A Civil War*, p. 288, and in Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 268.

<sup>58</sup> Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 333.



hostages, reprisals, torching of houses, and the hanging of victims in public squares.<sup>59</sup>

Cooperation between the Italians and Germans seemed to tighten. In line with the radical Fascist leadership, Felice Bellotti wrote: "We must conquer the faith of the German ally in order to prove that, in the fight against the enemy, we are worthy comrades. Without this confidence, they would harbor doubts of betrayal."<sup>60</sup> General Mischi, the Italian expert in counterinsurgency, worked closely with General Wolff in mapping operations against the "bandits." But Mischi, who had the additional purpose of sidetracking Ricci and fencing out Pavolini, was reduced by General Tensfeld—with whom he was supposed to plan joint *rastrellamenti* operations—to protecting the Wehrmacht's flanks. The Italo-German cooperation was further strained when Mussolini, on 21 August, tried unsuccessfully to limit the scope of fierce German reprisals at the Piazzale Loreto following a partisan attack, which underscored the RSI's subaltern status.<sup>61</sup> Equally damaging, many of the German reprisals were carried out by the Muti Legion's execution squads, which left exposed the stinking bodies of the dead hostages they had massacred to terrify the population. Vincenzo Costa, the stalwart Fascist *federale* of Milan, was greatly exercised over the excesses that took place in the Piazzale Loreto, which, in his view, handed the partisans a gratuitous propaganda victory. Furthermore, he thought, the incident deepened the aversion of the Italian people toward the RSI regime and further estranged Fascists from their over-zealous German allies.<sup>62</sup> Mussolini, too, was on occasion mindful of the terrible repercussions of overkill. When a detachment of GNR mixed with Muti operatives carried out a reprisal in the Abruzzi on 10 August by viciously killing a number of hostages, Mussolini lamented: "We will pay very dearly for the blood on the Piazzale Loreto."<sup>63</sup>

By the middle of August, notwithstanding a few successes, the united Italian and German forces had been unable to destroy the partisan adversary in spite of the escalation of violence. In frustration Mussolini disposed that captured partisans, as well as rounded up deserters, would be shot.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Enzo Collotti, "Occupazione e guerra totale nell'Italia occupata," in Tristano Matta, ed., *Un percorso della memoria. Guida ai luoghi della violenza nazista e fascista in Italia* (Venice: IRSML in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Electra, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 182.

<sup>61</sup> Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, p. 145.

<sup>62</sup> Costa, *L'ultimo federale*: pp. 107–08.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 336.

<sup>64</sup> AUSSME, RSI, b. 6.

No German disagreed with Mussolini's view that the BN had taken a big step in the wrong direction. Their men turned out to be difficult to control and quickly gained a reputation of fanatical brutality and summary procedures in a merciless guerrilla warfare that ravaged northern Italy in 1944–45. To intimidate the civil population into severing all ties with partisans and their sympathizers, Pavolini's rowdy troupe had engaged in wanton terrorism and killed many innocent victims, thus willfully ignoring any rational connection between calculated punitive responses and actual acts of resistance.<sup>65</sup> Indiscipline and corruption seeped deeply into the ranks. Many simply disappeared, usually with their weapons. Mussolini received an anonymous letter in July 1944 informing him that "the military flees their units because, undeniably, they lack the will to fight. The majority do not desert to join the rebels but solely to stay home where it is safe."<sup>66</sup> The deputy head of police Eugenio Cerruti added: The mindless illegal *rastrellamenti* that terrorized the population had created hatred and rancor.<sup>67</sup> The Fascist-leaning Italian historian Attilio Tamaro later commented: "In order to increase the number of troops and fill the voids, very bad individuals were enrolled, including scum, which carried out repressions accompanied here and there by torture and torments that were sometimes extraordinarily merciless"<sup>68</sup> During the last months, the BN bin was crammed with reports on wastrels in the ranks holding criminal records and infiltrating partisan Communists carrying out propaganda and sabotage.<sup>69</sup> Morale fell further when soldiers found themselves chasing down partisans who were fellow Italians instead of redeeming the nation's honor by taking part in the military action against the Allies.

Making matters worse, Kesselring refused to grant the BN arms. General Wolff was hardly less stingy. Although BN recruits were paid well for the times—much better than the GNR troops, let alone the army—the lack of military equipment severely cut down on the quantity of men who could be enrolled in the organization.<sup>70</sup> Moellhausen wrote that Pavolini had spoken of 30,000 volunteers, but actually the number oscillated

<sup>65</sup> Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> Ministero dell'Interno, RSI, Divisione Polizia politica, "Materie," b. 246, rapporto anonimo per Mussolini del 10 luglio 1944.

<sup>67</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, carteggio riservato, b. 79, appunto per Mussolini del Capo della Polizia Cerruti.

<sup>68</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 194.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 523–24.

<sup>70</sup> Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della RSI*, p. 125.

between three and six thousand,<sup>71</sup> consisting of about two thousand men of the X Mas, fifteen hundred special forces, a thousand BN, and some hundred German troops.<sup>72</sup> At the outset Wolff and Rahn thought that Pavolini's BN would be an effective antidote to the partisans.<sup>73</sup> But it did not take long, according to Moellhausen, for Wolff to fume over "the scarce discipline of these improvised units" and Pavolini's determination to act independently of his German advisers.<sup>74</sup> Using the pretext of indiscipline and wanton violence, Wolff cut off delivery of arms and transportation fuel, and collaboration with the Italians.<sup>75</sup> The SS commander "Willy" Tensfeld had the additional complaint that he could never count on the BN formations to obey orders or appear punctually at the right place.<sup>76</sup> Moellhausen's reproach of his Wehrmacht colleagues over their failure to prevail on Pavolini to exercise more "moderation" seems odd,<sup>77</sup> since those very Germans had blood on their hands as mass killers of innocent Italians across the length and breadth of the country. "Smiling" Albert Kesselring, for one, was extending an ever broader net to catch and punish civilians, which the unhurried Rahn tried to mitigate with small success.<sup>78</sup>

The GNR in tatters, Mussolini cashiered the disgruntled Ricci on 19 August, took command himself, appointed Nicolò Nicchiarelli as his chief of staff, and transferred the GNR to the army. The Duce wrote Ricci a stinging letter: "The text of your letter and above all the *stato d'animo* revealed in your audience of yesterday convinced me that you can no longer be the executor of my orders, that such orders must be discussed neither by you nor by your officials, whom you have aimlessly held *au courant*. Moreover, I cannot tolerate the way that you have treated comrades Basile

<sup>71</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 340.

<sup>72</sup> AUSSME, RSI, b. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 339.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>75</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 524; Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 342.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>78</sup> The partisans retaliated in kind. As in civil wars the world over, both sides in Italy committed unspeakable atrocities. Italians sympathetic to the partisan cause have described the RSI military filled with delinquents. The Italian historian Leo Valiani, in his *Tutte le strade conducono a Roma* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1947), achieves a more balanced judgment when writing: "To the fallen in war, honors should always be given, no matter on which side they fought. They should be rendered honors for their sacrifice, but not necessarily for their ideas or their praxis. I know very well that many, who in autumn 1943 took up arms at the side of the Nazi army that occupied and tore Italy apart, did so from sincere patriotism."

and Marshal Graziani, who are rendered 'poor men' for having been in grave situations subjected to extraneous snippets reminiscent of rumors emanating from a ladies' salon. To be trained to defend Italy, to prepare cannons, is an honor and a supreme necessity, not a humiliation. From today, the 19th of August, I assume directly the command of the Guard ... Mussolini."<sup>79</sup> This expository dash seemed to belie his so-called flagging resolution.<sup>80</sup>

A veritable free-for-all ensued. General Nicchiarelli, down to 38,404 men, clashed with the head of the Public Police, who wanted to strip him of police powers. Nicchiarelli also took on the duties of ENR undersecretary, while General Basile was finally forced to allow the development of the moribund GNR as a fighting arm of the ENR. Montagna, when he became police chief in the Fall, was able to cut into the GNR's police functions, while Nicchiarelli held on to a scattering of its prerogatives. Overall, it was a draw that left authority fragmented.

As a whole, the RSI armed forces, which were already suffering from low standards and morale, were hampered by a slowed influx of new soldiers, many of whom were recruited without thought of ideological suitability and readiness to brave serious combat training. An official report read: "Our best legions are perhaps to be found in the X Mas, but they are politically neutered for being commanded by anti-Fascist officers. The army does not exist; the police is composed in good measure of draft-dodgers and ex-Partisans, and commanded by free masons. They all fight each other for men and all claim to receive them from the National Republican Guard."<sup>81</sup>

Both RSI police excesses and German wanton violence rattled Mussolini, who sent out anguished inquiries but was too far out of the loop to put things to rights. Other than a demotion here and there, he did not change course or punish wrongdoing. Considering the unabated Fascist violence against its own citizenry, one can reasonably ask: did the RSI really stand as a bulwark for the defense of Italians against the *furor teutonicus*?

<sup>79</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camincie nere*, pp. 196–97.

<sup>80</sup> Observations made by Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, passim; and Rahn, *Ambasciatore di Hitler a Vichy e a Salò*, p. 287.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 310.



## Italian Diplomacy Adapts to Fascist Radicalism

As opposed to the old-time Fascists who dominated the government and were bent on decisive changes, the Foreign Ministry originally consisted of Fascist *fiancheggiatori*, nationalists, and permanent officials whose watchword was stability, not revolution. They wanted détente among the Italian people, a rallying around the flag, a “sacred union” that would put to rest the fear of civil war. Since no declared loyalty to Fascism’s ethical and political profile was required, adherence to Salò for them was a simple step to take. Acting in harmony with other conservatives, the diplomat Luigi Bolla, in the opinion of one well-informed observer, opposed Fascist entry into the state apparatus, which amounted to a subtle resistance common among many state functionaries.<sup>1</sup> The Foreign Ministry was filled with elitists who hated Communists, their confreres, or any genuine grass-roots popular movement.

Who would Mussolini appoint as foreign minister? Pavolini and Rahn sponsored Secretary-General Augusto Rosso and *Console Generale* Camillo Giuriati for the position, but both declined. Mussolini then offered the job to the ambassador in Spain, Giacomo Paulucci di Calboli, but he, too, turned it down. Renato Bova-Scoppa in Bucharest was given his chance, but, out of monarchist scruples, begged off. Massimo Magistrati from Berlin feigned not to recognize Mussolini’s voice on the phone.

<sup>1</sup> Giordano Bruno Guerri, introduction to Bolla, *Perché a Salò*.

On the urgings of Buffarini, the Duce finally decided to take over the position himself and selected Serafino Mazzolini, on 23 September, to be his secretary general. Deluded by the king and horrified by the armistice and surrender, Mazzolini, “in profound sadness,”<sup>2</sup> agreed to join the government.<sup>3</sup> He was a *ventottista*, a Fascist who had gained a foreign ministry appointment during the latter twenties without having to take a competitive exam.<sup>4</sup> A nationalist/monarchist, he climbed on the Fascist bandwagon after the Duce had made peace with king and pope. Mazzolini had a checkered career. Appointed high commissioner of Albania to preside over the conquered country after Italy’s entry into the war, he mismanaged an insurgency against Italian rule that broke out on 17 July 1941 and was unceremoniously recalled, to the relief of the Italian military. When, in May 1942, highly motivated Axis forces under the command of German General Erwin Rommel knifed through battered Commonwealth troops in North Africa bound for Cairo and the Delta, a euphoric Mussolini earmarked Mazzolini to be the future high commissioner of Egypt. But that idea came to naught when, at El Alamein, British General Bernard Montgomery unleashed a massive offensive on 23 October against the Desert Fox’s undermanned and tattered forces. Consequently, Mazzolini was forced to bide his time for better days.

As a fervent patriot, Mazzolini was drawn to Salò, since, for him, Mussolini was a more fitting representative of the nation than the Anglo-American pawn and turncoat Badoglio. Assuming his post with no illusions on the outcome of the war,<sup>5</sup> Mazzolini was determined to assist Mussolini in redeeming honor for the badly wounded nation and salvaging the best from the shards of the past.

Mussolini abided Mazzolini’s monarchist sentiments. Since loyal service to the state did not imply political adhesion to the regime, Mazzolini was not obliged to take out a party card.<sup>6</sup> According to the Italian historian

<sup>2</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Gianni Scipione Rossi, *Mussolini e il diplomatico: La vita e i diari di Serafino Mazzolini, un monarchico a Salò* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), p. 133. “He sees the RSI as a tragic life of the nation, not as an abusive “Obstinacy” of a regime defeated by history.”

<sup>4</sup> Mario Lucioli, *Palazzo Chigi: Anni roventi. Ricordi di vita diplomatica italiana dal 1933 al 1948* (Milan: Rusconi, 1976), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> Mellini Ponce de Leon, Alberto, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò: 9 ottobre 1943-aprile 1945* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1950), p. 126.

Giorgio Bocca, "Mussolini has infinite patience with these gentlemen in the foreign ministry ... the Republic is hard, ferocious against the militant anti-Fascists, especially if their names are obscure and they belong to a lower order, but he is very magnanimous toward the *signori*."<sup>7</sup> Mazzolini was not burdened by a heavy workload or the need to elaborate a comprehensive foreign policy, because, as the Duce admitted, the major objective consisted of "saving what can be saved."<sup>8</sup> Within the Salò government Mazzolini encountered strong rivals: Buffarini, who was a telephone call away from Rahn, the German plenipotentiary; Pavolini, the scheming Fascist; and Graziani, the mulish head of the armed forces. Fernando Mezzasoma at the Ministry of Popular Culture was no friend either.<sup>9</sup> The Germans were outright frosty. It was not until 6 December that Rahn deigned to meet with Mazzolini.<sup>10</sup> The major decisions between the host of Germans blanketing the country and their RSI counterparts were commonly made outside official diplomatic channels.

Mazzolini suffered embarrassment when only a handful of countries recognized the RSI—Japan and Germany, and their satellites Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Denmark, Croatia, Manchukuo, Thailand, Burma, and San Marino.<sup>11</sup> In those captive places, therefore, there was nothing much for Salò's representatives to do. Particularly disheartening was the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco's choice to recognize the Badoglio government instead of the RSI, which was an unfriendly answer to Mussolini's military help during the Spanish civil war. The Caudillo told the German ambassador that Mussolini was only a shadow leader and unlikely to live long.<sup>12</sup> His standoffish position deprived the Axis of any chance of retrieving Italian ships caught in Spanish ports when the armistice was declared.<sup>13</sup> Neither Vichy France, which hated Mussolini for falling on an already prostrate foe, nor the Vatican sent official representatives to Salò. The Vatican's non-response displeased those in the Fascist government since the RSI never asked for official recognition on the part of the Holy See.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> The list can be found in the ACS, SPD, RSI, b. 76, "Relazione sull'attività della direzione generale affari politici dal novembre 1943 al dicembre 1944," 20 gennaio 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, p. 569.

<sup>13</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Francesco Malgeri, "La Chiesa di fronte alla RSI," in Pier Paolo Poggio, ed., *La Repubblica Sociale Italiana 1943–45* (Brescia: Annali delle Fondazione "Luigi Micheletti," 1986), p. 320.

Adding to the Foreign Ministry's woes was the vast exodus of personnel from the embassies and legations abroad. Only a few reliable candidates for diplomatic service could be found to replace them. One who stood out was the unstinting Fascist Filippo Anfuso. Bolla summarizes his personality: "Anfuso possesses intelligence, culture, and authentic refinement that allowed him to hide the richness of his spirit behind finely uttered irony, often cruel, which was also directed toward himself."<sup>15</sup> Anfuso came directly from the upper echelons of the Fascist Party. Assuming service in the diplomatic corps of the regime at the end of the 1920s, he and other Fascist appointees broke the predominance of old-school diplomacy at the Palazzo Chigi.<sup>16</sup> In declaring his opposition to Italy's entry into the war, and in 1942, having postulated withdrawal from the fighting against the received opinion in Rome, Anfuso was capable of giving forthright advice.<sup>17</sup>

After Mussolini's fall from power, Anfuso, who had been Ciano's golfing partner, and moved easily in aristocratic salons, faced a dilemma. Since his old party crony had been sent to the gallows thanks to his "betrayal" of the Duce, Anfuso wondered if he should join the Salò regime. As he confided to the journalist Bellotti: "Do I have any other way of saving my head since for the Germans I am a creature of Ciano?"<sup>18</sup> But Anfuso won high marks for promptly rallying to Mussolini by writing to him on 13 September: "Duce: I'm with you till death."<sup>19</sup> The embassy in Berlin was tailor-made for such a nimble operative, since the German capital was the only posting abroad where any serious business could be transacted.

As the one diplomat with the grade of ambassador who adhered to the RSI, Anfuso took up his duties on 28 September 1943. He was well aware that Berlin cared neither for the stability of the Salò government nor Fascist ideology. He perceived his major task to be serving as Mussolini's advance man in cushioning Italy from a vengeful German occupation.<sup>20</sup> "The liberation of Mussolini," wrote Anfuso, "by thwarting the age-old Hitlerian vendetta, Nazi Germany was perceived differently by the Italians."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> Gianluca Falanga, *L'avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler: La politica italiana a Berlino (1933–1945)* (Milan: Tropea, 2011), p. 289.

<sup>17</sup> Mauro Conciatori, "1943: La diplomazia italiana dopo l'8 settembre. I diplomatici italiani di fronte alle conseguenze dell'annuncio dell'armistizio," *Storia delle relazioni internazionali* 6 (1990/2), pp. 217, 227.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al lago di Garda*, pp. 311, 316–17.

<sup>20</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, pp. 110–11.

<sup>21</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 309.



As did his colleagues in the Foreign Ministry, Luigi Bolla, angrily reflecting that the *classe dirigente* had behaved like cowards,<sup>22</sup> experienced the events of 8 September in bitterness and humiliation.<sup>23</sup> Living in obscurity in the Foreign Ministry, he kept a detailed diary that tellingly portrays the mindset of Salò conservatives and moderate Fascists. As Mazzolini's loyal follower, Bolla adhered to Salò, but not to the party, which left him breathing space in making any ethical and political choices. His support of the regime was, therefore, lukewarm, and he had no illusions on the final outcome of the war. But his sense of professional duty to his diplomatic trade, which valued *raison d'être* above any political considerations of the government in power, demanded that he put his shoulder to the wheel to avert a German scorched-earth policy (*terra bruciata*) before surrendering to the Allies.<sup>24</sup> While safeguarding the welfare of the state, Bolla and his fellow functionaries hoped they would have sufficient time to prepare a bureaucratic apparatus stable and strong enough to fend off the "barbarian" Communists in the aftermath of hostilities. Bolla saw no point in mobilizing the national will, since most Italians had already retreated to the sidelines. For a mainly passive and watchful people, he advocated application of the "elastic tactic" employed by Rahn, which involved a downgrade in repression and a stepped-up search for collaborators. Mindless violence against fence sitters only encouraged them to join the resistance.

The Foreign Ministry's first serious test came in Croatia, where Mussolini had installed his Ustaša henchman Ante Pavelić as *poglavnik* (leader) subsequent to Italy's invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941. After the break in the Axis following Mussolini's fall on 25 July 1943, Pavelić, who actually pandered more to Hitler than Mussolini, turned on his former Italian sponsor by advancing claims to areas in the Venezia Giulia, Istrian peninsula, and Dalmatia. He tore up the 18 May 1941 treaty with Mussolini that he had been forced to sign, because it contained clauses ceding portions of those lands to Italy. Although receiving no support from Berlin, Mussolini forged ahead by placing Zara, which contained a majority of Italians, under a Fascist prefect. Since the grasping Pavelić looked on the city as Croatian, tensions flared between Salò and Zagreb, which brought Italian initiatives in the Balkans to a standstill.

<sup>22</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

It was not until the aforementioned Verona party conference of 14 November 1943 that Mussolini spelled out RSI foreign policy for the first time. The Duce promised to ensure his nation's unity, safeguard independence, maintain territorial integrity, carve out vital living spaces for the country's teeming millions, thwart Great Britain's intrigues on the Continent, abolish predatory capitalism at home, emasculate the power of the world's plutocracies, outline a federated European community of non-capitalist states, and utilize African natural resources for the benefit of the European peoples while respecting the rights of Muslims, especially in Egypt. Rudolf Rahn claimed in a report to Berlin that he had obtained the cancellation of any claim to "*confini naturali*" in the Italian northeast,<sup>25</sup> which stole the irredentist thunder of the neofascists. Particularly noteworthy was the absence of any reference to the Soviet Union and the struggle against Bolshevism.<sup>26</sup> Mussolini's program was in line with the thinking at the Foreign Ministry. However, they all knew the tall order they faced in carrying out his expansive mandate.

As a first step in imposing Fascists on the Foreign Ministry in 1944, Mussolini shifted Giovanni Dolfin, his personal secretary, to take charge there as "political commissar." In bidding farewell to the Duce as his secretary, Dolfin commented: "The one pain I feel is leaving you!"<sup>27</sup>

The Foreign Ministry was not happy to have a Fascist of high standing pitched into its ranks. In keeping with the newly radicalized atmosphere, the ultras in the PFR who had been railing against the politically tepid "*badogliani*" mounted pressure on the members of the Foreign Ministry to declare fealty to the Fascist regime.<sup>28</sup> Though the busybody Fascists who surrounded and penetrated the Foreign Ministry were intensely disliked, few defections occurred as a result of their presence. Looking on the brighter side, Bolla expressed the hope that Dolfin, "who has sufficient good sense ... and has the prestige of a Fascist and secretary of the Duce," would defend him from the party's vicious attacks.<sup>29</sup> But much to his discomfort, Dolfin created problems with Mazzolini by his remarks on the Foreign Ministry's disloyalty.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cospito and Neulen, *Salò-Berlin*, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Cuzzi, "Presupposti sociali ed. organizzativi della R.S.I.," p. 499.

<sup>27</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 290.

<sup>28</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 197.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.

The Foreign Ministry lost ground to the party in the struggle over control of the Fascists Living Abroad (*Fasci all'Estero*) organization. At the outset of Salò's rule, the *Fasci all'Estero* was under Mazzolini's jurisdiction in his capacity as general secretary of the Foreign Ministry. Pavolini, the party secretary, wanted to lift the *Fasci all'Estero* from Mazzolini for placement under his jurisdiction. A power struggle commenced. "It is not possible," wrote Amedeo Mammalella, the director general of the Italians Living Abroad (*Direzione Generale degli Italiani all'Estero*, DGE) to Mazzolini, "to leave the Fascists overseas under the control or dependent on diplomatic and consular personnel, who, in the shifting course of events, have demonstrated such a sad spectacle of bad faith."<sup>31</sup>

Reeling from Pavolini's pressure, Mussolini on 15 January 1944 authorized the establishment of a secretary general of Fascists Outside the Country and Overseas (*segreteria generale dei Fascisti all'estero e d'oltremare*), to be directed by the party leader's subordinate, Dr. Carlo Giglio. Although such Fascists were required to act in collaboration with the consulates, they were not dependent on them. The Foreign Ministry was thoroughly miffed by this usurpation of its authority overseas, which, by creating a parallel representation, threatened to split responsibility for Italian policy. In spite of their opposition, the General Direction of Italians Overseas (*Direzione generale Italiani all'Estero* [DIE]) by April 1944 was able to set up the After Work, Boards of the Sons of Italy Abroad (*Il Dopolavoro, i Collegi dei Figli degli Italiani all'Estero*, and *La Gioventù italiana del Littorio all'Estero*).<sup>32</sup> In his habit of yielding to the party, Mazzolini gave *Fasci all'Estero* the green light to manage Fascist institutions abroad without interference by the consulates.<sup>33</sup> As if this were not enough, Pavolini initiated a breach between the DIE and the PFR by proposing to take Fascists away from the DIE for the party at home, which further annoyed Mazzolini. But as the war wore on, the Fascists Outside the Country and Overseas had less and less to do, and eventually dried up.<sup>34</sup>

Confronted by deepening party intrusions, Mazzolini retreated into his shell. Bolla noted on 20 September 1944 that he had become "estranged

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Marino Viganò, *Il Ministero degli Affari Esteri e le relazioni internazionali della Repubblica Sociale Italiana 1943-1945* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1991), p. 47, who draws on the document MAE AGRSI, b. 4 Italia 6/1. DIE/Sg./84. 22 December 1943.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Ibid., p. 50, who draws on the document MAE AGRSI, b 4 Italia 6/1, Riservato 1/2932/C.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 43-51.

from us and from his old path: he has become engaged in other ministries ... and is solid with them ... lacking a suitably strong backbone, he is easily influenced.”<sup>35</sup> Beyond words, Mazzolini did not expend much energy in protecting the integrity of his ministry, a demonstration of how much he had become a plaything of the Fascist *duri e puri*.<sup>36</sup>

The amiable Mazzolini continued to exchange pleasantries with and show good will toward friends and old colleagues who refused to join him in the Foreign Ministry. Forced to cope with more powerful and ruthless extremists such as Buffarini Guidi and Pavolini, he was kicked around like a soccer ball on the Fascist playing field. Neither did he have any influence with Rudolf Rahn, who paid him scant attention and ignored his protests.<sup>37</sup> This is not surprising since the Germans made sure that the RSI’s foreign policy initiatives were held firmly under their control.<sup>38</sup> Yet this martyred image of a loyal functionary, a “reluctant” *repubblicano* fighting honorably to defend his country, must yield to the more realistic view propounded by the writer Attilio Tamaro, who described Mazzolini as a “Fascist of lively intelligence, the purist in his faith and life.”<sup>39</sup>

Claretta Petacci, a fiery supporter of radical Fascism, whose opinions were far from nuanced, had a contrary view. She considered Mazzolini a “filthy” man who moved with eel-like slowness in preparing for an exit from the war, “and she dressed down the Duce for tolerating this ‘false Jesuit and traitor.’”<sup>40</sup>

At variance with Petacci’s insults were the patently political articles Mazzolini wrote for the periodical *L’Italia combattente* under the editorship of Bruno Gemelli, a radical Fascist. Under the pseudonym Maser, Mazzolini exalted Fascist war while paying homage to the German ally in a common enterprise to save their world.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly inaccurate were depictions of Mazzolini as a “guest” of the RSI determined mainly to defend the guild spirit of career diplomats who migrated to Salò after Badoglio had abandoned Rome. Although Mazzolini served as their lawyer for as long as he could, it is a historical distortion for

<sup>35</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 225.

<sup>36</sup> Rossi, *Mussolini e il diplomatico*, p. 131; Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 110.

<sup>38</sup> Enzo Collotti, “‘Salò’ nel Nuovo Ordine Europeo,” in *La repubblica sociale Italiana*, p. 364.

<sup>39</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, II: 6.

<sup>40</sup> Mimmo Franzinelli, *Il prigioniero di Salò* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012), p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Rossi, *Mussolini e il diplomatico*, p. 132.

two highly placed diplomats, Alberto Ponce de Leon Mellini and Luigi Bolla, to portray him as a “soft” Fascist repelled by combative oratory, a technician serving the state. Since their underlying purpose was to prove that they, too, were technocrats unsullied by Fascist excesses, their representation of Mazzolini is contrived.

Mazzolini to his last breath on 23 February 1945 held fast to Mussolini. On 8 October 1944, after a meeting with the Duce, he noted: “The tragedy of the country consumes this man, who has dedicated himself entirely to making Italy great.”<sup>42</sup> He told his colleague Mellini in latter October 1944: “History will assemble in its entirety Mussolini’s tragedy and will render him justice.”<sup>43</sup>

Giovanni Dolfin was another steadfast Mussolini loyalist. Though perceiving his leader as possessed by shifting moods and whims, Dolfin invariably gave him the benefit of the doubt: “The Duce has always been favorable to containing whenever possible the typical consequences of the civil war. His intransigence, responding to ideological and sentimental norms, is more formal than concrete. He understands that today, more than political faith, one must speak charitably toward the country and nation.”<sup>44</sup> Like a good Fascist, Dolfin worshipped war as a supreme value. “Military glory is tied to war, and war ... represents the supreme test in the relations among peoples. Through war a people reveals its virtue and defects.”<sup>45</sup>

Alberto Mellini Ponce de Leon, the head of the Foreign Ministry Gabinetto, who, after Mazzolini’s death, became Mussolini’s principal contact man with Rahn and Wolff, avers that he agreed to work at Salò because Mazzolini assured him that the regime would accommodate fence sitters and moderate anti-Fascists. Without having to declare formal adhesion to Fascism, Mellini thought that his impartiality as an apolitical functionary and go-between would enable him to curb political divisiveness and safeguard Italian resources from German predators.

Mellini became Anfuso’s right-hand man at the Foreign Ministry after the latter’s appointment as undersecretary of state on 14 March 1945. As with Mazzolini, Mellini imagined that the Duce would defend the country against all and sundry, including Nazis bent on domination and plunder.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 508.

<sup>43</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 186, 281.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Ibid., p. 34. Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 467.

<sup>46</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, pp. 7, 56.

Occasionally, he tried to stand his ground against Berlin, which caused many Germans to consider him obstinate and unhelpful.<sup>47</sup> Moellhausen commented: "Italo-German relations, while correct, were devoid of cordiality; occasionally, dark clouds collected on the horizon, whose origins invariably could be traced to Mellini's intransigence."<sup>48</sup> In rejecting the accusation of having played a double game, Mellini insisted that he had performed an honorable civic duty by assiduously defending the supreme interests of the state. Mellini's Fascism lived on after the war. Along with Luigi Villari, Attilio Tamaro, and Amedeo Mammalella, another diplomat at Salò, Mellini was a steady contributor to the postwar neofascist leftist review *Nazionalismo Sociale*.<sup>49</sup>

Luigi Bolla, from his distant workplace in the Foreign Ministry, labored diligently to burnish the image of the Salò government for those public servants who out of principle refused to follow the king and Badoglio south. Bolla gagged at having to deal with people such as the floating "diplomat" Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce's son. No wonder then that he should take offense at Fascist desperadoes who would cede life and conscience to the Nazis in the act of punishing hated Italian "traitors." It did not seem to occur to him, however, that Mussolini was doing the same thing. Working with moderates, including, he assumed, Mazzolini, Bolla hoped to curb people such as Vittorio Mussolini and the radicals' guerrilla warfare against the traditional non-Fascist state apparatus.

Bolla's Duce often appeared a beaten man. "Physically, he had recovered his strength, but his hands are small and wrinkled and his look revealed the constant presence of an intimate agony even if at times his eyes would sparkle in the old way." Bolla took an indulgent view of Mussolini's spirits: "I couldn't look at him without feeling inside myself something worrisome, a combination of affection and pity ... He imparts a feeling of impotence, a paralyzing lack of confidence in himself."<sup>50</sup> And later: "I've found him in a physical condition noticeably less good than a dozen days ago. His eyes are frightening: two enormous white spheres that suddenly seem to jump out of their sockets."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Viganò, *Il ministero degli affari esteri*, pp. 440–41.

<sup>48</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 308.

<sup>49</sup> Rossi, *Mussolini e il diplomatico*, p. 130.

<sup>50</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 126.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.

While sympathetic to Mussolini's health, Bolla was certainly not averse to pointing out his character shortcomings: "He is without doubt a man who lacks or has lost his sense of history and reality, the capacity to know people without fearing them, a man who suffers from an incredible weakness when confronting the pressures of people around him."<sup>52</sup> On 14 March 1944: "He repeats often that he knows he is the most hated man in Italy and asserts that he attributes no weight to that fact. In reality he resents it with profound bitterness, and that explains why he repeats it often."<sup>53</sup>

In his memoirs Bolla singled out Mussolini as a German hostage, and, even more, a captive of himself, "a prisoner of myths created by him to his design, a prisoner of his past ... of having destroyed and not created, of not having formulated any message that could survive him. He knew the game was up ... In the squalid setting of the Villa Feltrinelli, almost hallucinatory in the days without sun like a Kafkaian scenario, he followed in slow motion the false routine of the old times, the routine of a functionary awaiting tasks to be gotten rid of, and of long, dead hours, almost a parody of himself."<sup>54</sup>

His severe observations aside, Bolla, like everyone else in the Foreign Ministry, remained enamored of the Duce. When at a high-level conference with Germans in April 1944 Mussolini forcefully insisted that "For twenty years I have fought with desperate energy to give the Italian people military glory," Bolla sympathetically noted: "None of the Italians present could dry their tears. The Germans were moved, and at the same time strangely surprised."<sup>55</sup> This maudlin paean to military glory in such company tells us something about Bolla's Fascism.

While Bolla was a lukewarm *fiancheggiatori*, Filippo Anfuso was a minted party member who campaigned ceaselessly in prompting Fascist radicals to achieve sweeping changes. Despite his hard and fruitless work in freeing Italian military internees from Hitler's grasp for Graziani's army, Anfuso wrote Mussolini on 18 November 1944: "I am convinced that the Black Shirt is the only military experiment which will yield results in the end. The Blackshirts are people who are aware of why they are fighting, and of the need to defend their ideal. Even if they are of necessity very few, their contribution will certainly be more decisive than that of the large units of

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

good troops commanded by people who have no ‘*Schwung*’ [dash] as they say here. This is the secret of the SS armies, and the reason for their military and political success. All this refers to the unsuccessful employment of our units, which logically frustrates operations, and at the same time hinders our governmental activity. It is for this reason that I can never recommend strongly enough that our divisions trained in Germany should be treated in the Fascist way, and that all our officers’ cliques who are even slightly suspected of monarchic weakness or capitulationism, should be swept away.”<sup>56</sup>

Anfuso had some success in thwarting the Nazi plan of putting the Italian economy completely at the service of the German war industry by devising stratagems for impeding the transport of goods and entire productive installations northward.<sup>57</sup> But Anfuso did not see fit to question German behavior in other areas such as the atrocities committed in his country: the torture, shootings, reprisals, and public hangings of simple people suspected of sympathy for the resistance.<sup>58</sup> Nor did he lift a finger to prevent roundups of some 30,000 political prisoners and Jews that were sent to the infamous Fossoli camp, thence to Gries, and eventually to Auschwitz. Anfuso thereby ended up as an accomplice of the RSI anti-Semitic legislation passed in November 1943, which, in declaring Jews a “hostile race,” deprived them of Italian citizenship. Many other officials in the Foreign Ministry, who simply sat on their hands while anti-Semitism in the Salò government progressed from legal discrimination to active roundups, behaved no better.

As did Mussolini, Anfuso took offense at the Germans for refusing to grant the RSI sovereign rights and for being politically unfaithful and militarily incompetent.<sup>59</sup> On 20 September 1944 Anfuso wrote bitinglly: “It seems that distrust of us increases as the situation deteriorates. The German newspapers vie with each other in remembering the capitulation and in ascribing to us most of the responsibility for Germany’s present position. Today, they no longer say ‘Badoglio’s Italy,’ or ‘Southern Italy,’ but simply ‘Italy’ to indicate the country that invented betrayal ... Once the new Fascist Republican state was set up our ally did nothing to give real character to a national organism, which could only become a rallying

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Falanga, *L'avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler*, p. 354.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 155.



symbol for Italians by taking root in the respect of a friendly neighbor. They have shown complete ingratitude for what the German historians call the ‘nature’ of Italian national life, so that we have, in practice, been treated like the states who have today abandoned Germany in disgrace.”<sup>60</sup> Anfuso wrote Mazzolini on the 27th: “With slight effort the Ally could impart the impression of a national revival to the new Fascist state. Beyond allowing us a chance to recover popularity, it would be very beneficial to Germany and to Axis war effort. On the other hand, the treatment offered to our interned soldiers, the diffidence shown toward our armed forces, the indiscriminate reprisals dealt to our population, and the outright occupation of some of our provinces have put us in a situation of limiting our action to those groups of Italians for whom fidelity to the Axis constitutes a question of honor and loyalty to Mussolini ... It is truly commendable that the Italian volunteer who, only because of Mussolini’s guarantee, still fights for the Axis, whereas on the part of the Germans it is never said how Italian national unity will be reestablished in case of a German victory.”<sup>61</sup>

Doubtless, the Duce thoroughly agreed, but he was so hopelessly entwined in Nazi coils that breaking loose was not an option. Yet, Anfuso was not always on his diplomatic page. In early February 1944, for example, Anfuso advanced the idea of asking the German leaders to broach peace talks with the Allies.<sup>62</sup> For Germany, he implied, the only way out of a militarily disastrous situation consisted of a strategy to detach Great Britain from the phalanx of enemies in order “to save the army, the nation’s unity, and the regime.” Anfuso really did not care about the fate of the Third Reich. “Whether or not Germany wins or loses the war is secondary. Our interest must be for the Italian nation to live.”<sup>63</sup> He was prepared to try splitting his country’s enemies by helping the Anglo-Americans wean themselves from the Soviets in exchange for recognition of Italy as a new ally in an anti-Communist front, while Mussolini, until the penultimate hour of his life, preferred a truce with Stalin in order to concentrate on defeating the Western Allies—exactly his position throughout the war.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 212.

<sup>61</sup> ASMAE, AGRSI, b. 31, Germania, 1/1, 007051–007057, Anfuso letter to Mazzolini, 27 September 1944.

<sup>62</sup> Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> ASMAE, AGRSI, b. 31, Germania, 1/1, 098257–098262, Anfuso to Mussolini, 10 February 1944.

Anfuso met his match in Rahn. Since he held only shadowy authority, Anfuso was precluded from wringing many concessions from his powerfully-backed German interlocutor. In his memoirs Anfuso admitted: "I feel ashamed at my powerlessness."<sup>64</sup>

Unquestionably, by the actions he took and the memoranda he wrote, Anfuso stands out as the most fervent and relentless radical Fascist in the Foreign Ministry, loyal to Mussolini to the end and beyond.<sup>65</sup> Mellini on 16 April 1945 noted: "Anfuso is very attached to the Duce ... Above all he has felt and lived Mussolini's dream of a more powerful Italy."<sup>66</sup> Can one say more about his ultimate motive? The Italian diplomat Mario Lucioli, who originally held Anfuso to be an outright cynic and opportunist, came to the conclusion that his unshakable allegiance to the Duce marked him as a born contrarian who nourished a romantic fidelity to a cause he knew was lost.<sup>67</sup>

Mussolini's contacts with the foreign ministry were sporadic and distant. Though he got along well with the plodding and colorless Mazzolini, he was not impressed by his judgment. Anfuso was more to the Duce's taste. He was impressed by his cleverness and amused by his cynicism and sarcastic wit. Above all, Mussolini appreciated Anfuso's unflinching loyalty.

<sup>64</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 383.

<sup>65</sup> Ciano defined Anfuso on 4 October 1940 as the most Germanophile of his collaborators, which Anfuso denied in his memoirs, where he wrote of his "malintesa germanofilia." See his *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 138, wrote on 16 April 1945: "Anfuso is very attached to the Duce. Under his habitually cynical and prejudiced appearance, he appears to me what he truly is: full of humanity and sentiment. Above all he has felt and lived the Mussolinian dream of a stronger Italy."

<sup>67</sup> Lucioli, *Palazzo Chigi*, pp. 58–59.



## CHAPTER 12

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# In the Grip of the Third Reich

Mussolini could barely restrain his growing hatred of the Germans. Anfuso recorded that he sized them up as “a crowd of small, sinister, disquieting, and at times monstrous people ... The Germans mutated, from historical lithographs ... into hysterical, complicated, and tendentiously hostile creatures.”<sup>1</sup> The Duce frequently flew off the handle when overbearing Nazis slighted him or visited wrongdoing on Italians, such as maltreatment of 650,000 military internees, obstruction of RSI military recruitment, ruthless *rastrellamenti*, and massive deportation of his countrymen. Germans apprehended Italian property, seized art treasures, interfered in local administration, ignored the provincial heads, blackened the reputation of uncooperative Fascists, and sequestered manufactured products and farm produce. In the Wehrmacht’s “zones of operation,” the Italians could only mutter complaints.

The rehabilitated Axis partnership started off on the wrong foot when Mussolini, demanding that he be a fully sovereign ruler and treated as a valued ally of the Third Reich, was immediately confronted by the German takeover of the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico. Mussolini wrote Hitler on 4 October 1943: “It is my duty, Führer, to indicate to you the reasons that obstruct the reorganization of Italian life ... The German military commands issue a continuous stream of orders on matters that concern civilian

<sup>1</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, pp. 403–04.

life ... The Italian civil authorities are ignored and the population has the impression that the Fascist Republican government has absolutely no authority, even in matters totally extraneous to the military sphere.”<sup>2</sup>

If Mussolini in formal letters of protest to Berlin struggled to keep his anger under control over the most serious cases of German high-handedness, he suffered no inhibition in expressing his true feelings to friends and confidants. He confided to Giovanni Dolfin, who served as his head of the *Segreteria Particolare* from 5 October 1943 to 28 March 1944: “It is clear that the Germans are bent on creating an accomplished fact in their military possession of the alpine watershed above and beyond the Alps up to the Quarnaro. In this objective, they depart from the usual assumption of having won the war. Thanks to this attitude, the Italians are bound to oppose collaboration in the war; instead, we are reduced to a waiting game, resigned to our destiny.”<sup>3</sup>

Later, he told Dolfin: “As usual, orders as always are sent here from Berlin. They obfuscate and shift responsibility on us: an obvious and stupid game. The Germans go out of their way to discredit me more and more and to make me hated by Italians.”<sup>4</sup>

On the questions of the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico the Duce indeed had reached a crossroads. He could energetically reply to the German fait accompli by a public denunciation or resort to the ultimate threat of resigning his post and shutting down the RSI. For how could his government grounded on nationalism and territorial integrity acquiesce in such a violent amputation of Italian provinces that had long been a focus of Fascist irredentism? If the Duce should walk the talk, he would restore Fascist dignity but probably go down in flames. Lacking the martyr’s courage, he issued no ultimatum and so remained an angry servant waiting on an imperious patron.

Mussolini did, however, let loose a barrage of formal complaints. In a letter submitted to Rahn on 11 February 1944, he wrote: “Dear Ambassador von Rahn: I send you attached a communication of a German command directed to the command of the National Republican Guard, in which it is

<sup>2</sup> OO, XXXII: 205–07. In the same vein, Mussolini complained to Rahn on 25 January 1944 that the German army had arrogated to itself exorbitant duties and responsibility at the expense of Salò functionaries. ACS, AGRSI, 25 January 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

said that Italian sovereignty in the Alpine province and in the Litorale is temporarily suspended following accords with the Duce.

"You know, dear Ambassador, that I have never received advance notice, let alone an official one, of the constitution of the two Commissariats in the Prealpi and the Litorale Adriatico. Similarly, I was informed of the names of the two commissioners only after they had taken office and had already removed the Italian civilian authorities. Four days after the official constitution of my government, I directed a letter to the Führer in which I said that the nomination of a supreme commissioner of Innsbruck for the province of Bolzano, Trento, and Belluno has created a painful impression in every part of Italy. Likewise the detachment of the judiciary authority of that province from the Court of Appeals of Venice, already ordered by the said Commissariat, has provoked many incidents that enemy propaganda, particularly active at this moment, has not failed to exploit. The sole person to profit from this has been the traitor Badoglio. Three days after this letter, Rainer took position in Trieste, and every residue of Italian jurisdiction has completely disappeared. Has the policy inaugurated by Rainer produced the intended results? The episode of the other day, in which an Italo-German column was annihilated to the final man, demonstrates that the Slavs—Communists or not—are against Germany and Italy. In the Venezia Giulia there are, evidently, only a few forces. But why has Signor Rainer 'forbidden' the call-up of so few Italian classes? I send to you, dear Ambassador, together with my highest consideration, my most cordial salutations. Mussolini."<sup>5</sup>

To Anfuso privately Mussolini railed against the two Gauleiters for "obstacles that have been placed to obstruct Italian administration," such as replacement of Italian functionaries by Germans, indiscriminate occupation on the part of the Wehrmacht, and exorbitant requisitions, violence, and reprisals.<sup>6</sup>

As Mussolini prepared to meet Hitler at Klessheim on 22 April, Claretta Petacci implored him to be strong: "Don't bow to Hitler but insist on 'absolute parity' with the Nazis."<sup>7</sup> In this spirit Mussolini vented directly to Hitler on the "annexed territories," complaints that, previously submitted by letter, had been ignored. Hitler promised to reduce German domination in the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico after the RSI had been strengthened,

<sup>5</sup> ACS, RSI, SPD, b. 16, cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 103–04.

<sup>6</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 378.

<sup>7</sup> Bosworth, *Claretta*, p. 194.

which, in fact, the Germans were doing everything to prevent. Ribbentrop was hardly more reassuring when telling Anfuso that the matter “would be taken care of after the end of the victorious war between the two old companions involved together in the struggle, the Führer and the Duce.”<sup>8</sup>

German annexation, de facto, of the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico infuriated the foreign ministry as well.<sup>9</sup> Immune to the Führer’s sweet-talk, Anfuso, cognizant of the Wehrmacht’s security requirements, despaired of ever retrieving the two lost provinces: “There is no possibility, above all in the present circumstances and at a moment when the six provinces represent the vital routes of access to the Italian front, of inducing the German leadership to slacken the policy which they have pursued up to now.”<sup>10</sup> With typical circumlocution, Rahn explained away the occupation by telling Anfuso that the Italians living in the two frontier regions had shown disrespect and traitorously sidestepped labor and military service.<sup>11</sup> In the postwar era Anfuso confessed: “The only justification of Mussolini’s political existence was to defend them against the Germans and Slavs, and he was the only one, in the given situation, who would be able to succeed in this. If we remained with him, it was precisely to prevent [the Germans] from carrying [the two provinces] away. If we believed in him it is because we held to the inviolability of our frontiers, and his presence for us assured the development and continuation of our national unity.”<sup>12</sup>

Mazzolini experienced the same frustration. The fiery patriot Junio Valerio Borghese, the celebrated *condottiero* of the daredevil X Mas—who was not exactly a fervent Fascist—did too. Mazzolini wanted to defend the “natural frontiers” of the national territory. In the Prealpi and Litorale Adriatico, he wrote Anfuso on 8 August 1944, there seemed to be a “pre-ordained plan not only to annul what Fascism has done to adjust those

<sup>8</sup> ADAP, E. VIII, 310, pp. 573–78; Mario Toscano, *La controversia tra Salò e Berlino per l'occupazione nazista e per le decisioni annessionistiche di Hitler dell'Alto Adige e del Trentino nei documenti diplomatici della Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Rome: Storia e Politica, 1967). Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 52. A list of Italian complaints regarding the Germans for the situation prevailing in the Litorale Adriatico and the Prealpi can be found in ASMAE, Repubblica Sociale Italiana, Affari Generali, b. 151, f. “Tutela interessi italiani con la Germania.”

<sup>9</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 327.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 222.

<sup>11</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 223. Anfuso expressed to the Duce on 12 September 1944 his dismay over the anti-Italian policies of Rainer and Hofer, NAW, T-821, 006965–00967.

<sup>12</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, pp. 379–80.

provinces to the others in Italy, but to destroy everything Italian in those regions ... The Germans should be brought around to realize that. *It is difficult, if not impossible, to convince Italians that they must be tightly united to fight with Germany* when the latter, the foreign country, advances claims on parts of Italian territory that deprive the Italian government of its sovereignty, notwithstanding all the affirmations of alliance and common struggle against the rapacity of the enemy.”<sup>13</sup>

The Litorale Adriatico stood out as a region that had fallen prey to a deadly struggle between the Wehrmacht and Communist Partisans. Only in December 1944 did the Germans finally allow the X Mas to step into the breach by providing more than 3,000 warriors to fight Tito's legions. From the sidelines, Mussolini, fighting for his political life, decided to curb his authoritarian impulses by putting forth the idea of a *blocco italiano*, collaboration on the part of all Italian parties regardless of their politics (save Communists) to protect the Venezia Giulia against the attacking Titoist forces. But the ploy of unity failed thanks to the lack of interest displayed by key leaders of the anti-Fascist resistance. Ideological conflict had become more important than the idea of Italian nationalism.

During his stay at the municipal theater of Trieste on 26 January 1945, a frustrated Pavolini shouted: “Italy Italy Italy! We demand that Trieste be incorporated into the Italian Social Republic; all the Venezia Giulia must be incorporated! We demand that all Triestini be called to arms, all the women to work! Civic Guard get out; Civic Guard go home! Enough talk of the Litorale Adriatico!”<sup>14</sup>

In late March 1945 Rahn warned the Italians not to press the issue. Anfuso gave him an immediate reply, claiming that: “A declaration, albeit indirect, on the integrity of our frontier and on the restitution of our colonies, would facilitate the Republic's national program. I also brought up the matter of the Italians in Germany ... *He insisted that the DUCE must have patience and have confidence in the loyalty of Germany, which fights and will win and will restore to Italy what it had.*”<sup>15</sup> Italian *démarches* to the Germans on this question vanished into thin air. As Dollmann summarized: “If the Reich had won the war, the Italian frontier, given the Duce's weak position, would infallibly have been restored to that of 1914.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> ASMAE, AGRSI, b. 31, Germania, 1/1, Rapporto, 8 August 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 362.

<sup>15</sup> ACS, RSI, “Appunto per il Duce,” 29 March 1945, NAW T-821, 061347–061353.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Viganò, *Il Ministero degli affari esteri e le relazioni internazionali della repubblica sociale Italiana*, p. 116. As a friend of Himmler and one of Hitler's interpreters,

Implementation of socialization projects stood high on Mussolini's conception of government. But as we have already seen, Rahn, Wolff, and Leyers, much to the Duce's anger, moved to block such innovations because they would disrupt war production, upset the social foundations of the Italian industrial system, and, as a revolutionary virus, contaminate the Third Reich.<sup>17</sup> Equally galling, the Germans recruited Italian industrialists and workers to oppose his leveling politics and fabricated stories to discredit him before his fellow Italians. Mussolini concluded: "All that is incredible; it's simply brigandage!"<sup>18</sup> In the next breath the Duce lamented: "We are a group of freed slaves commanded to govern a people of slaves."<sup>19</sup>

On receiving a report describing German favoritism toward Slavs at the expense of Italians in Trieste, Mussolini exclaimed: "It is perfectly useless that these people [the Germans] persist in calling us allies! It is far more preferable that they throw off the mask and tell us that we are an occupied people and territory like all the others! That will give us good reason for putting an end to the comedy, which will simplify our personal problem. None of us, I repeat none, can any longer passively witness the gradual enslavement of our country!"<sup>20</sup> Dolfin concluded: "In these bitter and rebellious outbursts, he [Mussolini] reveals his anxiety over a German victory. At the same time he frequently shows that he does not believe in a German victory, and, above all, does not desire it."<sup>21</sup> When Germans portrayed his countrymen as idlers and cowards cleaving to a feeble patriotism, Mussolini, even if he actually shared their opinions, resented their criticism. Equally galling was the Nazis' response to Italian racial policy, which they considered to be a farce. When Germans labeled him a "Quisling," Mussolini took offense, not recognizing that for them such a description was testament of reliable collaboration. As Anfuso noted: "This [Mussolini's] contempt for the nomenclature Quisling was incomprehensible in Germany."<sup>22</sup>

Dollmann held an *ad homorem* rank of Lieutenant Colonel of the SS. At the end of the war, Dollmann moved seamlessly to serve as a source for Allied intelligence. Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 119.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 331.



The meddling Rahn, whom Mussolini described as the “viceroy of Italy,” was a man with whom the Duce rarely sought common ground. In the view of Moellhausen, head of the political office of the German embassy, Mussolini, habituated to dictating orders, chafed at Rahn’s attempts to push him around. And, according to Dolfin, he walked away from many meetings testy and tired.<sup>23</sup>

The Duce was no less critical in his asides to the courteous Moellhausen: “These [German] excesses: bloody deeds, reprisals, arbitrary arrests, violations of homes, and lack of respect for human rights, how can I accept this without protest? Look at these SS reprisals! Do you really believe that a head of government can simply receive reports like these impassively? Who benefits from all this violence? They render me and the Germans unpopular and add to the strength of my enemies. Far from diminishing, their wounding activity is on the upswing. But know this: no Italian is intimidated, not even by death—the many deaths that have become part of your occupation apparatus. Italians today die smiling; they die as the French did during the revolution, issuing cutting remarks from the handcarts leading them to the scaffold.”<sup>24</sup>

Time and again Mussolini was irked by German disapproval of the RSI’s handling of the insurgency. On too many occasions, the Duce noted, the Italian troops, having been poorly armed by the Wehrmacht, were outgunned by partisan units. Rahn replied testily: “The English have many arms. We Germans no! We therefore ought to give them only to those in whom we trust!”<sup>25</sup> On another occasion Mussolini lashed out to Dolfin: “I am only the first actor in a vast comedy that we all recite together ... We don’t love each other and we say we love each other. We call each other allies and know we lie. I have no effective power.”<sup>26</sup>

Mussolini also took umbrage over the German predisposition to engage in tactical battlefield truces with the partisans in specified local areas. While this was done to limit wear and tear of their troops in endless search-and-destroy missions, Mussolini had to deal with the political repercussions. Having declared a no-holds-barred war against the partisans, he would not allow any ceasefire or contacts of any kind that might grant them legitimacy as a fighting force. Nothing should be done, he insisted, to

<sup>23</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della Repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 161.

<sup>24</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 292.

<sup>25</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 263.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

elevate their standing with the Italian people at the expense of the RSI.<sup>27</sup> Mussolini had already given a lesson in Fascist counterinsurgency in Italian-occupied Yugoslavia between 1941 and 1943 when he branded Tito's partisans as "bandits" and "criminals."<sup>28</sup>

In the aforementioned conference with Hitler at Klessheim on 22 April 1944, Mussolini put forth his case. The troops he had were small in number, and those available for anti-partisan warfare lacked adequate provisions and arms. But Hitler gave him no relief: the interned soldiers were *Badogliotruppen* imbued with sedition, brainwashed by Communism, resentful toward Germany, and lacking the stern stuff of the Nordic warrior.<sup>29</sup> He finally made the small concession to sort out the younger, more reliable men in order to supply the Duce with "the yeast, the germ from which the future Italian army would be developed."<sup>30</sup>

Carried away by the moment, the Führer bragged to his Italian guests about his secret weapons to "destroy the English capital." "My people and I have come to an irrevocable decision: to fight to the last cannon and man." The Italian diplomat Luigi Bolla concluded: "From the exposition of the Führer, those present drew a strange rather than profound impression, the impression of finding themselves before an altar without any ornament on which a madman, horribly wounded, sacrifices with crazy firmness the last fibers of his life to 'redeem' his destiny for eternity."<sup>31</sup> The Nazi dictator had made his position clear: he wanted nothing to do with any Fascist save Mussolini.

Anfuso shared Mussolini's belief that the RSI had only one real chance of survival: recruitment of a new and strong army composed mainly of the interned soldiers in Germany. This would redeem Italian honor on the battlefield and ultimately win Nazi respect. But first Mussolini had to prevail on Germany to cease brutal treatment of its Italian prisoners. In carrying out this mandate, Anfuso acidly told his German counterparts that it would be preferable to shoot those wretched soldiers rather than leaving them slowly to perish.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Mira's thesis in his *Tregua d'armi*.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see H. James Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia 1941–1943* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 177.

<sup>30</sup> Cited in Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, p. 603.

<sup>31</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 175.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Major Marcello Vaccari, as a supervisor of the Service of Assistance to Italians Interned in Germany (*Servizio Assistenza Internati Italiani in Germania*, SAI) stationed in the Berlin embassy, had vainly tried to alleviate the suffering of the imprisoned men from malnutrition and harsh treatment by affording them a new status of civilian worker.<sup>33</sup>

On 20 July 1944, at the Wolf's Lair, a shaken Hitler, who had barely escaped a bomb explosion under the oak desk where he was sitting during a meeting, ushered Mussolini around the still shattered and smoldering conference room. Preoccupied with plans to avenge himself against his enemies, Hitler, who had previously insisted that Mussolini hand him men to staff his anti-aircraft batteries, gave in to the Duce by agreeing to the creation of two divisions made up of captive soldiers that the Wehrmacht would train and equip. In this chastened spirit, the Führer accepted the Italian proposal of transforming the military internees into free workers or drafting them into military units. Mussolini was euphoric over Hitler's concessions, which Mazzolini celebrated as a great diplomatic triumph.<sup>34</sup> Good thing they did not hear Hitler mutter to Rahn: "Be on your guard."<sup>35</sup>

Some difficult issues still needed to be resolved. Hitler had inquired about new Italian volunteers for his anti-aircraft units, a request followed up by Keitel, who asked for an additional 25,000 men. Graziani was so shocked by this demand that he threatened to abandon his office. (Finally, after the GNR was incorporated in the ENR on 14 August, the Italians released 7,000 to von Richthofen.) Vaccari foresaw problems on the issue of the free laborer label, predicting that certain internees—for example, officers—would scorn this nomenclature because of their insistence on being recognized as war prisoners, which precluded any work duty. Anfuso gruffly rejected Vaccari's caveats by claiming that his formula would suffice and that officers who refused to go along would be viewed as useless martyrs. He held out strongly for only reliably Fascist soldiers to be released.<sup>36</sup> Irritated by the carping Vaccari, Mazzolini and Anfuso cashiered him for lacking a Fascist character and allowing humanitarian impulses to

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 185, 189.

<sup>34</sup> Falanga, *L'avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler*, p. 337.

<sup>35</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 275.

<sup>36</sup> MAE, AGRSI, Germania, 1/1, Anfuso to Mussolini, 006905-006908, 10 December 1943.

supplant far more important political objectives.<sup>37</sup> This was a decision fully supported by Bolla, who, having assumed direction of the SAI on behalf of the foreign ministry, thought that Vaccari “had naively surrounded himself with thieves, scoundrels, and vile characters, who exploited, compromised, and then abandoned him.”<sup>38</sup> As Vaccari accurately foresaw, his more compliant successor, Armando Foppiani, shut down the SAI.<sup>39</sup>

Thanks to Anfuso’s indifference to Vaccari’s forewarnings, the superficial transformation of military internees into free civilian workers, which was pressed by the Nazi and Fascist press, did little to change their existing condition as political prisoners enduring forced labor.<sup>40</sup> Vaccari later wrote that Anfuso, as a cynical egoist, did not really care about the maltreated interned Italian soldiers. The ambassador’s major concern was to score a propaganda victory by appearing to have wrung an important concession from the Germans: “liberation” for the interned soldiers.<sup>41</sup> He was more interested in recruiting for the Republican Army than in alleviating the pitiable conditions in which the captured soldiers were held. The military men surrounding Vaccari were dismayed by Anfuso, whom they viewed as a shifty individual.<sup>42</sup> Like Anfuso, Mazzolini considered the internment question not so much from the humanitarian standpoint but as a political and propaganda matter.<sup>43</sup> On this basis he attempted to influence Mussolini. Although disinclined to challenge Hitler directly, the Duce did what he could by personally organizing the dispatch of food trains to the camps in Germany.<sup>44</sup> However much Mazzolini and Anfuso were annoyed by Hitler’s negativity on the question of an enlarged Italian army, they actually preferred an expansion of the Fascist Militia over the apolitical professionals favored by Graziani.

<sup>37</sup> The most difficult conditions that the Italian military were experiencing in Germany are revealed in a long memorandum in the ACS, Ministero dell’Interno RSI, Gabinetto, b. 54, “Condizioni morali dei militari italiani internati in Germania,” 22 April 1944.

<sup>38</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 211.

<sup>39</sup> Falanga, *L’avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler*, p. 343.

<sup>40</sup> For example the article “Tag der Freiheit” (“Day of Liberation”), in *Adria Illustrierte*, 19 September 1944. *Adria illustrierte* was the periodical in the German language for the zone of occupation in the Litorale Adriatico.

<sup>41</sup> Falanga, *L’avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler*, pp. 339–41.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>43</sup> Gabriele Hamermann, *Gli internati militari italiani in Germania (1943–1945)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), p. 370; Massimo Papino, “Serafino Mazzolini: Una carriera all’ombra del Duce,” in *Violenza, tragedia e memoria della Repubblica sociale italiana*, p. 195.

<sup>44</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 109.

The trickle of soldiers Hitler did release mainly deserted the minute they set foot on home soil, since they believed that the war was already lost, and they did not take to the idea of fighting as German mercenaries. As Bolla admitted, the soldiers deserted “not for love of the English, nor hatred of the Germans, but for aversion of the Fascists and a desire to hasten the end of the war.”<sup>45</sup>

Mussolini reeled from an attack by Radio Munich on 13 December 1944, presumably orchestrated by Goebbels, which hurled “incredible” accusations of dishonesty and traitorous behavior at members of the RSI government, notably Pavolini and Buffarini.<sup>46</sup>

The last straw, perhaps, came on 3 February 1945 when Rahn told Buffarini, not for the first time, to inform him in advance of the names of provincial heads and other high functionaries he intended to appoint in the future. Mussolini indignantly replied that the Germans were false allies by treating Italy as harshly as France while rendering him odious in the eyes of the Italians.<sup>47</sup>

Mussolini got a measure of revenge by dismissing Himmler’s favorite and Claretta Petacci’s confidant, Italian Minister of the Interior Buffarini Guidi, on 21 February.<sup>48</sup> Suspected of running his office as a Mafiosi kingpin would, Buffarini had, Mussolini affirmed, in his cynical attempt to mitigate the worst aspects of Fascism to attract moderate and conservative elements, incurred the hatred of all, anti-Fascists and Fascists. “He is even more loathed than I am.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, benefiting from close ties with Wolff and Kappler, Buffarini was deeply immersed in corruption: sale of state property, contraband, illegal export permits, and monetary speculations. Assisted by a strong camarilla, Buffarini had established his own police units, spun a web of spies, and tapped important telephone exchanges, including the Duce’s.<sup>50</sup> Though a rival of Pavolini, Buffarini joined him in thwarting personnel changes and preventing dangerous meddling with the official Fascist message. Carlo Silvestri wrote: “Intelligent and sly, he [Buffarini]

<sup>45</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 199.

<sup>46</sup> Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 441.

<sup>47</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 232, 245.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 240.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 517–18; Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 69, made this observation: “He [Mussolini] is a man who has many merits, but is hated by everyone, anti-Fascists and Fascists.”

<sup>50</sup> This bill of particulars is brought against Buffarini by Felice Bellotti, a radical “pure” Fascist who hated him. See his *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 139.

was the personification of the worst in Fascism; he was a harmful enemy of Mussolini and Graziani's policy of national conciliation."<sup>51</sup> For Mussolini, Buffarini had become too big for his britches.

The Germans took his removal as a sign of Italian ingratitude: "The SS were flustered," noted Moellhausen.<sup>52</sup> Unnerved by his dismissal, Buffarini's good friend SS General Wolff asked Mussolini to reconsider, but the Duce turned him down and officially replaced his interior minister on 21 February with the Piedmont provincial head Paolo Zerbino. Wolff responded by stepping up German obstruction. Moellhausen reported: "A *questore* was proposed, the SS replied: no! When an appeal arrived for the release from prison of an Italian, the SS replied, No! When requests piled up for munitions, tires, fuel, and requisitions, the SS, as always, replied No!"<sup>53</sup> For having finally challenged German predominance openly, Wolff commented: "From that moment my good relations with Mussolini ceased."<sup>54</sup>

In retaliation, Wolff ordered the arrest of the deputy chief of police at Salò, Tullio Tamburini, who had been provincial head of Trieste in 1942–43, and Eugenio Apollonio, Mussolini's chief of the Secret Police. During a meeting with Mellini, Rahn, justifying the arrests, pointed out that the "Jew" Apollonio was involved in intrigues against both Duce and Germans, whereas Tamburini had secretly contacted Anglo-American agents in Switzerland.<sup>55</sup> This was no tall story, for the Germans possessed evidence of Tamburini's machinations, a fact later documented by the British historian Richard Lamb.<sup>56</sup> Without further ado the Germans deported their two prisoners to the Dachau concentration camp. What perfect irony. While Rahn and Wolff were raking Mussolini over for allowing his henchmen to contact the Allies, they themselves were about to engage in secret contacts with the enemy behind the backs of the RSI aimed at a German withdrawal from the war in Italy.

The Duce angrily reacted: "I've swallowed so many bitter pills; now, no more."<sup>57</sup> "Let us not speak of the situation in the reign of Hofer and

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Moseley, *Mussolini*, pp. 170–71. Moseley cites Carlo Silvestri, *Mussolini, Graziani e l'antifascismo* (Milan: Longanesi, 1949), p. 61; Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 303–04.

<sup>52</sup> Moellhausen, *La carta perdente*, p. 326.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 305.

<sup>55</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 74.

<sup>56</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, pp. 281–83.

<sup>57</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 75.

Rainher [sic] and of the bitter pills that I have had to swallow every day for the continuing and unjustified interference and overbearing manner of German authority toward the prefects.”<sup>58</sup> He heatedly told Mellini: “Go immediately to Rahn and tell him that I cannot tolerate this new affront that gravely prejudices my prestige and that of my Government. The arrest of Tamburini and Apollonio, functionaries under my direct orders, is what overturned the vase. I intend to have immediate satisfaction. Otherwise, better for the Germans to arrest me, dissolve the republican government, and transform this disguised and humiliating occupation into a real and true occupation.”<sup>59</sup> But ingest the bitter pill he did again, which proved once more his failure to protect Italy from German fury.

On 16 February Mussolini let down his guard with Dolfin: “It’s very difficult to convince a [German] people that have been betrayed of our good faith. Perhaps the problem would be notably simplified on their part if they [the Germans] sent us all, including myself, to a concentration camp ... We ourselves feel that of all the initial enthusiasm that has carried us here, which should have produced decisive action against the surrender, nothing remains save the dull business of uttering measured words to express the daily torment, humiliation, and demoralization, which is hardly conducive to a more profound and bracing spirit.”<sup>60</sup> A little later, the Duce told Mellini: “I have already made plain to the Führer the extent of the useless cruelty, violence and robbery. It is too late ... I have drained the poisoned chalice to the dregs.”<sup>61</sup>

On 18 March 1945, Mussolini told Carlo Silvestri: “The Germans have shown themselves to be full of arrogance and violence and have put in motion a barbarous system, which has made it easy to detest them.”<sup>62</sup> Personal relations between Mussolini and the Germans seem to have hit rock bottom.

As opposed to Mussolini’s confidential and bitterly sharp impromptu remarks and complaints, officially—in his public appearances and writings—the Duce invariably kept his Nazi chin up. In his radio message of 18 September 1943, he pointed to Germany as the example to follow, a hammer to forge the spirit of the Italian people. In the open air he lectured to officers of the GNR that Germany, justified before God and man, could

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>60</sup> Cited in Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 260.

<sup>61</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, pp. 100–02.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Innocenti, *Mussolini a Salò*, p. 50.

not be beaten.<sup>63</sup> On 27 December 1943, in a long article that appeared under the rubric “Corrispondenza repubblicana,” Mussolini exalted the German people who, despite the Allied bombardments, continued to resist with an implacable hatred against the enemy. The population, he wrote, stood solidly behind Hitler and Nazism. The Germany of 1944, contrary to the Second Reich of 1918, did not have internal enemies such as Masons, Socialists, and Jews, which therefore entirely precluded any collapse on the domestic front. The obvious conclusion: “Germany cannot be beaten.”<sup>64</sup> In a radio speech on 27 September 1944, Mussolini outdid himself in praising the German people: “I ask Italians to look at the sublime proof of the patriotism and valor that the German and Japanese peoples demonstrate by their resolute spirits, shaken by betrayals, sure proof of the strength of their faith.”<sup>65</sup> On 18 April 1945 he told an Italian journalist: “No matter what errors the Germans have committed, they were, after 8 September, fully justified to feel as well as to judge themselves betrayed. The ‘traitors’ of 1914 were the same as in 1943. They [the Germans] have the right to comport themselves as absolute masters. Without a doubt they would have appointed a military government of occupation. What would have happened? Burned land, starvation, mass deportations, sequestrations, currency manipulations, and forced labor. Our industry, our artisan workshops, all would have been treated as war booty.”<sup>66</sup> In an address on 7 March 1945 at Brescia, Mussolini unflinchingly stated: “Collaboration with the German comrades must be daily, clear-cut, loyal, and without reserve. Occasionally, there are difficulties of language and temperament, but remember: we are in the same boat and share the resolve to reach port victoriously.”<sup>67</sup> Mussolini, however, was careful not to let praise of the Third Reich translate into an exaltation of Nazism and its leaders since he wanted to uphold Fascism as his unique creature and model for the world.

To the end, Mussolini wavered between skepticism and hope in Hitler’s promise that the pace of new and terrifying weapons was quickening. A heartbeat away from re-establishing equilibrium of arms with the Allies, the Führer assured him, Germany was set to wait calmly for the inevitable breach to occur between the capitalist Western Allies and the Communist Soviet Union in a strung-out war.

<sup>63</sup> *OO*, XXXI: 164–65.

<sup>64</sup> “Consuntivo di guerra 1943,” *La Stampa*, 27 December 1943.

<sup>65</sup> Cited in Pini and Susmel, *Mussolini. L'uomo e l'opera*, IV: 439.

<sup>66</sup> *OO*, XXXII: 198.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.



During the high seasons of his rule, Mussolini genuinely believed that he was the teacher, the Führer the student. Hitler, although holding Italy in contempt, customarily treated the Duce with genuine warmth and respect as a fellow dictator. But much changed in their relationship during the course of the Second World War and after Hitler had set him up as head of the Salò government, which explains a lot of Mussolini's frustration and fury. In September 1943 Goebbels pointed out what had happened: "The Duce's personality did not act so strongly on him [Hitler] this time as in their earlier meetings. The main reason may be that the Duce now came to the Fuehrer without any power and that the Fuehrer accordingly looked at him somewhat more critically. The Duce has not drawn the moral conclusions from Italy's catastrophe that the Fuehrer had expected of him."<sup>68</sup> On 23 September 1943 Goebbels noted: "The Fuehrer is no longer determined to make the personality of the Duce the cornerstone of our relationship with Italy."<sup>69</sup> On some level of consciousness Mussolini fathomed his fall from Hitler's grace, and this turn of events rankled him.

In spite of his shifting moods, as Anfuso pointed out, Mussolini's loyalty toward Hitler was enduring. "Never until his death did he think of abandoning the Germans."<sup>70</sup> In 1945, discussing his foreign policy with Bombacci, he gave a frank explanation of the motives that had caused him to align himself with Germany. "Hitler's Germany was Fascist: immense gatherings; dazzling parades, an epic atmosphere of vitality and military glory. All this blinded me, I must admit it. I also loved the life which was mystical and heroic, the conquests, and the glory. I thought that my future lay with the Axis. I wished to convert a nation of artists into a warrior people."<sup>71</sup> Having come back to power on Hitler's dictate, and with no independent army to provide him leverage, Mussolini was not one to risk a break with the Third Reich by denouncing Germany's abuse of his country in direct talks with the Führer.<sup>72</sup> The Duce made do with letters of complaint and by voicing his discontent to Hitler's underlings.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, p. 532.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 535.

<sup>70</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 466.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, p. 617.

<sup>72</sup> Graziani noted that at the Salzburg meeting Mussolini was not incisive and did not know how to speak clearly, particularly in front of Hitler. Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 184.

<sup>73</sup> Fioravanzo, *Mussolini e Hitler*, p. 198.



## CHAPTER 13

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# In the Line of Fire

Fixated on a “return to combat,” Mussolini and his collaborators hoped for the best from the RSI’s newly forged army on the field of battle. With the GNR and BN in disarray, Graziani’s troops represented the RSI’s last chance for military glory.

RSI military detachments returned to the front in January 1944 when a battalion of *Nembo* parachutists and the *Barbarigo* unit of the X Mas deployed at Anzio. Some units of the *Folgore* Division, who swore allegiance “for the honor of Italy” to the Third Reich, were placed in coastal defenses along the Laziale littoral against the Allies at Salerno. In various bloody actions they suffered heavy losses. The last regiment surrendered on 5 May 1945 on the front in the Western Alps.

Mussolini hoped that the legions placed under Graziani’s command would be stationed on the Gothic Line or on the Anzio Front, ideal places to showcase the RSI military by giving them the opportunity to take the measure of the Anglo-Americans.<sup>1</sup> The trenches on the Tosco-Emiliano in the Apennines offered a fitting place for the Italian troops to “redeem the honor” of Italy by fighting a “pure” war on the side of the Axis ally against the strong Allied forces arrayed against them. On Mussolini’s intervention in early July 1944, Italian divisions were to be sent to areas free of partisan activity and held in reserve to counter any Allied landing along the coastlines.

<sup>1</sup> At Anzio fought a small unit of the X Mas *Il Barbarigo* and a parachute unit of the *Nembo*.

However, disagreements with the Germans ensued. The Wehrmacht generals wanted to break up the Italian divisions by sending Mussolini's troops to man German anti-aircraft units on the Eastern Front, while Göring demanded another twenty-four thousand Italians to form auxiliary units for German anti-aircraft service. When the Germans issued the proclamation "*Richtofen*" that required the *Regia Aeronautica*'s personnel to choose either between enlistment in a Luftwaffe detachment or service in anti-aircraft units, the *Folgore* parachutists, infuriated by such high-handedness, encircled SS units in the vicinity. In the following stare-down, the Germans backed off but retaliated by eventually destroying or requisitioning RSI planes and equipment, which practically eliminated the *Aeronautica* as a fighting force.<sup>2</sup>

Mussolini, refusing to take this episode lying down, wrote Hitler on 26 August: "On the morning of the 25th, completely without my knowledge, all the airports, barracks, and aviation offices were surrounded by German armed forces, which cut telephone lines and confined officers and troops to barracks under threat of death ... I urgently ask you, Führer, to give orders aimed at putting an end to this painful episode as quickly as possible."<sup>3</sup>

Further insult was to come when Keitel informed the Italians that the *Littorio* and *Italia* would be dissolved and the men used for German anti-aircraft units on the Russian front. A dismayed Mussolini on 29 September pointed out to Hitler that such orders constituted grave blows to the Italian government's prestige.<sup>4</sup>

Mussolini pursued his case by exhorting Göring on 9 October to refrain from scattering his men simply to suit German needs. The Italian workforce had already been seriously drained by eighty thousand men assigned to German anti-aircraft units, manpower employed to supply important war goods and materials for Germany, Todt organization demands, men employed on fortifications and repair of railways, roads, and bridges.<sup>5</sup> Mussolini and Graziani both fought hard to keep their soldiers intact for warfare against the Allies. Hitler was the man in the middle, caught between the pressures of his own military and his desire to keep the Duce on board.

<sup>2</sup> Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 350.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 350–51.

<sup>4</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 215–16.

Hitler finally yielded, up to a point. The Wehrmacht was facing a serious threat. On 17 July the Allies attacked Ancona and on 10 August liberated Florence. The retreating Germans on their way to new battle stations in the North destroyed all bridges over the Arno River, except the Ponte Vecchio. In spite of these setbacks, Hitler ordered the *Monete Rosa* and *San Marco* to be posted along the Green Line, far from the combat zones, where, possibly, they would be deployed for coastal defense and anti-partisan operations.

Mussolini sent repeated requests to Kesselring demanding that his new divisions be used in combat against the Allies for a large Axis counter-attack to drive the enemy out of Florence and beyond the Arno.<sup>6</sup> On 14 November he wrote Hitler that the Axis should “mass a force of eighty to a hundred thousand men to attack in the winter, when the enemy’s superiority in armored vehicles and planes cannot be exploited to the full ... This would turn the situation upside down and constitute the first longed-for day of sunshine after so many months of fog.”<sup>7</sup>

In October the Germans gave Graziani command of the new army group *Liguria* (*AOK Ligurien*), which consisted of the *Monte Rosa* and *San Marco* reinforced by German divisions to defend the Ligurian coast west and east of Genoa and the French frontier against a possible Allied landing. As things turned out, Wehrmacht generals mainly controlled the army group Liguria.

On 15 July the Alpine Division, which had been trained and reasonably provided with weapons in Münsingen Germany, was placed under the command of General Mario Carloni, who had served on the Greek, Albanian, and Russian fronts. On paper the *Monte Rosa* appeared formidable—about 20,000 men organized in three regiments.

At the end of July the *Monte Rosa* arrived in Italy in questionable fighting mood. More than a few had enlisted simply as a means of getting back home where they intended to desert. Expecting a warm homecoming, they heard, instead, angry shouts: “Traitors, wastrels, sellouts!” Provoked by this shower of insults, the soldiers of the *Monte Rosa Alpini* often reacted immediately and energetically by shooting people randomly and

<sup>6</sup> On 4 October Mussolini wrote Kesselring: “From 26 August your tireless and incomparable troops fought to prevent the Anglo-Saxons from taking possession of the Padana Valley. From this day the Italian people have waited in vain the announcement that Italian troops have been engaged in the decisive battle.” Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, pp. 390–91.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 218–20.

yelling: “at the end of the war they’ll be the ones to sort out the Italians who ‘need to be purged.’”<sup>8</sup> Another observer wrote: “You say that the *Alpini* haven’t yet arrived, but I have to tell you that they have all managed to flee.”<sup>9</sup>

First deployed in mid-October on a quiet part of the west end of the Gothic Line between Pontremoli and Lucca to defend transportation arteries and the coast against eventual Anglo-American landings, the *Monte Rosa* was immediately diverted to secure the rearguard areas from partisan attacks. Dug in along the Val di Taro to the Cento Croci pass and along the Val di Vara, the troops participated in a large-scale *rastrellamento* in the Trebbia and Taro valleys at the end of August. Rocked on their heels by fierce partisan counterattacks, the *Monte Rosa* suffered bloody losses. The troops, who had expected to take on the Allies, had no stomach for hunting down fellow countrymen in a fratricidal war. Their morale having been severely shaken by this changed mission, soldiers deserted, and by September the division had lost 6 percent of its original force.<sup>10</sup>

The severity of the conflict, exacerbated by winter’s punishment—temperatures falling to twenty degrees below zero—further sapped morale. With hardly a moment to catch their breath, and deprived of home leave, the troops were compelled to undertake long and grueling marches by foot, and they had to hit ditches without letup to dodge constant Allied strafing attacks. Soldiers experienced contradictory orders from officers who had no talent for maintaining discipline. Notwithstanding all of this, they initially held their own. During one *rastrellamento*, for example: “They obeyed orders by burning houses and shooting all captured partisans.”<sup>11</sup> However, the hostile attitude of the population generated by pillaging soldiers—coupled with propaganda spread by Communist partisans—induced three companies of the *Vestone* Battalion to pass over to the partisans during November.<sup>12</sup> Imagine the anger of both Germans and Graziani over this mass defection!

In October 1944 some *Monte Rosa* battalions, which were transferred to the Gothic Line in the vicinity of Garfagnana and placed at the disposal of the XIV German Army, finally had the chance to test their mettle in

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Pavone, *A Civil War*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, carteggio riservato, b. 9, found in Pavone, *A Civil War*, p. 133, n. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della Rsi*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, Carteggio riservato, b. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Gimelli, *La Resistenza in Liguria. Cronache militari e documenti*. Vol. 1: *Dall’8 settembre alla stagione dei grandi rastrellamenti* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), p. 400.

combat against Allied units of the *Força Expedicionária Brasileira* facing them.<sup>13</sup> On the 28th the Brazilians, aided by partisans, launched an attack against the *Alpini*, who immediately fell into a disorderly retreat. Only when a German battalion intervened to help them recover lost ground were they saved further embarrassment.

Since the *Monte Rosa* had suffered fragmentation by the dispatch of key units to other fronts, the major core lacked coherence, which led to confusion in the command structure. Inferior equipment further deepened military morale. The division hardly had any heavy artillery at its disposal, almost no anti-aircraft guns, and only a handful of 20-millimeter caliber machine-guns. Notwithstanding all the difficulties, the *Monte Rosa*, on 17 November, though sustaining heavy losses, was able to fend off an attack launched by the 92th American Buffalo Division. Immediately after the battle, the *Monte Rosa* was united with the 148th German infantry to form an autonomous group under the command of the Wehrmacht General Fretter-Pico, who was the major protagonist in the offensive of 25–26 December 1944, denominated *Operation Wintergewitter*.

To Mussolini's satisfaction, his troops were slated to be seriously tested under the command of Wehrmacht General Kurt von Tippelskirch, who believed that an assault against the Buffalo Division opposing him would be a cakewalk. The *Brescia* Battalion spearheaded the attack, which emanated from Perpoli along the Valley of Serchio in the direction of Gallicano. Under the heavy pounding of the combined Italo-German troops, the Americans fell back on the night of the 26th. The next day, advancing eight kilometers, the *Alpini* reached Gallicano on a twenty kilometer front. On the 28th the offensive was resumed. Deprived of reserves and lacking air support, however, the Axis forces were constrained to fall back to their original positions. The Allies, undisturbed by anti-aircraft fire, closed up the gap by use of armor and aviation that strafed the Italian and German forces. Allied fighter-bombers flew around 400 sorties in a sky clear of Axis pursuit planes. A study of *Operation Wintergewitter* reveals that the initial success, due to surprise, was not exploited, thanks to a lack of troop reinforcements, transport vehicles, and air support. The Italian soldiers were

<sup>13</sup> On the *Força Expedicionária Brasileira*, see Mariano Gabriele, "La Força Expedicionária Brasileira (FEB) sulla Linea Gotica (1944–1945)," in Giorgio Rochat, Enzo Santarelli, Paolo Sorcinelli, eds., *Linea Gotica 1944. Eserciti, popolazioni, partigiano* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986).

literally cut to pieces by American aviation and Indian divisions, which pushed them back to their original jumping-off positions.

If there was no strategic gain from this brief Axis breakthrough, the Italian and German forces did succeed in capturing around a hundred prisoners and much materiel consisting of arms, munitions, and equipment. It was the last hurrah of the *Monte Rosa* in Garfagnana, for almost all units were soon transferred out of the region. The few *Alpini* soldiers who remained in the zone surrendered to the Brazilians near Parma on 29 April.<sup>14</sup>

On 21 August the *Littorio* was sent for training at the camp at Sennelager and on 1 September transferred to Münsingen in Germany. It appeared on paper to be a rather formidable force consisting of approximately 14,930 men organized in two regiments (one *Granatieri* and one *Alpine*) and a regiment of artillery divided into four groups and placed under the command of General Agosti. Returning to Italy in October 1944, the division was deployed on the shoulder of the Gothic Line in the zone of Oltrepò Pavese, where, after a brief lull, it experienced strong partisan attacks. On 6 November, attacked on all sides, units of the *Littorio* found themselves imperiled. Unable to fend for themselves, the troops were transferred at the beginning of December to a less dangerous front in the Western Alps. Concentrated to face eventual Anglo-American attacks that never materialized, they had time on their hands for search-and-destroy missions against the partisans.

The *San Marco* Division consisted of two infantry regiments and one artillery unit. General Amilcare Farina, who was attached to the CARS, a winner of three *Medaglia d'Argento* awards in the Spanish Civil War, and a friend of the Germans, was appointed commander on 5 September. The nucleus was made up of a naval infantry unit that was stationed on the Aegean islands as well as Blackshirts surprised by the armistice in the Balkans. Having arrived in Italy during summer 1944, the division was placed in Graziani's *Liguria* army group deployed to defend the coastal regions. But since this front remained quiet in the absence of an Allied landing, the *San Marco* was utilized in a series of *rastrellamenti* in a zone west of Savona and Acqui. Having little heart for such undertakings, the men of the *San Marco* moved lazily and ineffectually against the partisan enemy. A Wehrmacht colonel describes units of the *San Marco* engaged in the struggle against the partisans in the area of La Spezia as a "band" whose combat efficiency was "practically zero."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della Rsi*, pp. 38–41.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Gentile, *I criminali di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, p. 116.

Like the other divisions, the *San Marco* was shredded by desertions, which from the middle of September numbered 41 officers, 104 non-commissioned officers, and 2,287 infantry.<sup>16</sup> An order of the day on 1 October 1944, issued by General Amilcare Farina, clearly documents the demoralization and lack of preparation of the unit: “*Officers*: They exhibit deplorable behavior, lack respect, esteem, and affection. They have no sense of authority. They understand only one impulse: cowardice. They contemplate only one idea: idleness. They do nothing but ink proposals and kill time: sabotage ... Toward the public they radiate disrespect and defiance (toward women they act like fools). As for the soldiers: weakness. With their superiors, hangdog embarrassment for habitual absences from their posts. On orders delivered to their posts: indecisiveness. When engaged in combat with the partisan enemy, they ought to know how to die. Cleaning of arms: shameful, faulty. Use of arms: no effective instruction. Arms available: defective. Battalion commanders: no coordination between infantry and artillery. I declare that all infantry and men manning the artillery, if they are not at their battle stations, are in dereliction of duty. This goes too for those responsible for breakdowns in communications between infantry and artillery and vice-versa. There should be strict collaboration between the division and German infantry as well as between infantry and aviation and navy. Look out for one another, know one another, trust one another. Rebels: maximum shame! Nothing is ever done! Commanders bed down at 9:00! No: The night is full of surprises and danger lurks everywhere. There must be a network of vigilance that is enforced daily. Every battalion must be watchful. Same goes for auxiliary units. There must be drills night and day! But everyone sleeps, and no one gives a damn.”<sup>17</sup>

Deployed along the Via Aurelia to guard against possible Allied landings, the *San Marco* at the same time took up positions deep in the hinterlands to defend the roads and Apennine passes from partisan attacks. Two battalions, the 11/6 and 111/5, were deployed in autumn 1944 between Castelnovo of Garfagnana and Fiumalbo on the Gothic Line next to the comrades of the *Monte Rosa*. Aligned against the Buffalo Division in mid-November, it was subjected to an American offensive. One battalion, the 11/d, which made up a part of *Operation Wintergevitte*, covered the

<sup>16</sup> Alberto Leoni, *Il paradiso devastato. Storia militare della Campagna d'Italia 1943–1945* (Milan: Ares, 2012), p. 354.

<sup>17</sup> Pansa, *Il gladio e l'alloro*, pp. 210–11.



flank of the *Monte Rosa*. The two battalions remained in the line until 20 March 1945, when they were replaced by units of the *Italia* Division.

Made up of *Bersaglieri*, who had been trained in Paderborn Germany, the *Italia* Division also included two infantry regiments and one artillery regiment. The *Italia* was the most poorly trained and equipped of the four and the last to leave Germany. At the beginning of December 1944 the division reentered Italy and was deployed in the Parmense to defend the Cisa Pass. As soon as it arrived, the men were brought under heavy partisan fire and suffered calamitous defeats. The number of desertions immediately shot up. Graziani told the Duce in November that he had to buy clothes for the troops on the black market. Worse still, there were serious weapon deficiencies, especially in sub-machine guns.<sup>18</sup> In April 1945 an officer sent Pavolini the following report: "The vicissitudes visited on the *Italia* Division are well known, and it is superfluous to repeat this information. Such vicissitudes have materially and morally humiliated the units and have profoundly impaired the compactness of the division, which has witnessed the sad spectacle of a very high percentage of desertions."<sup>19</sup> At Santa Margherita Parmense, an entire battery was taken prisoner by the partisans on 26 December 1944. The division's first operation, during which it was to be joined by an anti-partisan unit denominated *Totila*, whose commander, General Fretter Pico, amalgamated to his force Turkmen of the SS division *Turkestan* in the Taro valley, turned out to be a fiasco.

In mid-January 1945 a regiment of the *Italia*, replacing a unit of the *Monte Rosa*, was deployed on the Gothic Line in the valley of the Magra River between Pontremoli and Aulla. Another battalion was deployed on the left bank of the Serchio. Having shoddy equipment severely depressed morale. Equally discouraging, the men suffered from a scarcity of supply trucks and gasoline and endured partisan ambushes. They enjoyed only a trickle of reinforcements. Mussolini was so perturbed by the deficiencies of the *Italia* that, bypassing both the Italian and German High Commands, he ordered the immediate requisitioning of vehicles to send decent clothing to the *Italia*'s divisional headquarters.<sup>20</sup>

Immediately after the ill-prepared units of the *Italia* entered the lines after the New Year, they were brought under fire in early February by a fierce American and British attack that imperiled the entire division.

<sup>18</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 120.

<sup>19</sup> AUSSME, H8, b. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 121.

The Germans arrived to stiffen the Italian lines and, after the removal of “disloyal” elements, the men of the *Italia* acquitted themselves better. Thereafter, the *Italia* held together but not for combat duty against the Allies, for Kesselring in March 1945 removed both the *Italia* and *Monte Rosa* from the line in favor of anti-partisan warfare in the rearguard areas. In mid-April 1945, after the *Italia*’s remnants retreated toward Pontremoli, they surrendered to the Brazilians on the 28th.

The reasons behind the failings of Graziani’s divisions are legion. The personnel making up his army was mixed. Some of his soldiers consisted of interned military who had agreed to enlist as a means of getting out of the hated German camps for a return to the homeland.<sup>21</sup> Others, recruited in Italy against their will, naturally had little will to fight.<sup>22</sup>

Next to these forcibly drafted soldiers were youths convinced that they would be fighting a war of national liberation aimed at chasing the foreigner from the country’s “sacred” soil. War with the long-standing German comrade would continue to be fought in the same trenches against a common enemy as had been done since June 1940. Once having arrived in training camps in Germany, the men comprising the four divisions were inundated with patriotic propaganda that repeated the norms of military honor and brotherhood-in-arms preached by the regime: the *patria* must be freed of the foreign hordes. But those soldiers who had bought into this propaganda were in for a rude awakening. On their return home, they found themselves subjected to scorn and coldness by the civil population whom they aspired to defend. Moreover, they were hustled away without any home leave and immediately thrown into a civil war that was reaching barbaric dimensions.

Unprepared psychologically, and having had no training for counterinsurgency maneuvers, the soldiers turned out to be easy pickings for Italian partisans who had been seasoned by guerrilla warfare in the Apennines and who profited from the know-how of English officers and old-hand ex-Yugoslav prisoners. Mediocre and insufficient military equipment either for counterinsurgency or for traditional means of war against a well-armed standing army caused Graziani’s men in all four divisions to

<sup>21</sup> According to a German report, sixty percent of the recruits taken in the camp at Münsingen were not Fascist and waited for the first opportune moment to desert. Bundesarchiv, Berlin, NS 19, Band 1881, rapporto da Münsingen of 19 October 1943.

<sup>22</sup> In a meeting of the commanders of the various regional military commands held in April 1944, the number of draft dodgers came to 15,000. AUSSME, H8, b. 2, “Riunione della riunione del 18 aprile 1944 a Parma.”

perform shoddily and live hand-to-mouth. They suffered from endemic lack of transport, an absence of armored equipment, archaic means of communication inherited from the old *Regio Esercito*, scarce heavy weapons, decidedly obsolete artillery, practically non-existent anti-aircraft guns, and no air cover. The units that reached the Gothic Front got there by forced marches, mules dragging along wagons and heavy equipment under the usual heavy autumn rains in the Apennines, which had disastrous effects on morale.

To determine the motives for desertion, one needs only to read the memoirs of army officers who note that the public's taunting and scorn frequently convinced the troops of the utter uselessness of fighting on. "We're sick of being soldiers," wrote one disgruntled warrior speaking for many of his comrades.<sup>23</sup> Fascist sources are unsparing in their observations of the low morale and scant fighting spirit of the new republican army.

Just as depressing to Italian morale, the German commanders were loath to rely on their allies to defend any part of the front on their own. To instill discipline, the Wehrmacht frequently broke up Italian units and scattered them among their own. Obviously, this impinged on the formation of any *esprit de corps*, which rendered the Italian units less compact, less efficient, and less combative. Finally, the Germans resisted giving their Italian comrades adequate supplies and arms owing to persistent distrust in their will to fight and predisposition to desert at the first angry shot. Graziani retorted to Rahn and Wolff in January 1945 that the Wehrmacht preferred to engage Italians as workers rather than as soldiers.<sup>24</sup> By the end of March 1945, all four of Mussolini's divisions, with the exception of some mild fighting between French patrols and the Littorio in the Mediterranean Alps, were engaged in counterinsurgency.

Considering all the problems and shortcomings, it is surprising that some battalions were able to maintain a modicum of cohesion and will to fight until the end in April 1945. Ironically, the desertions served as a weeding-out process that rendered the men who stayed in the ranks more resolute, compact, and faithful to the regime.

Women were not absent in the police forces of the RSI, organizations undertaking campaigns against the partisans, and in Graziani's military legions, which contained 6,000 female auxiliaries who did not bear arms. Pavolini formed a woman's auxiliary corps, which was placed under the

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Pavoni, *A Civil War*, p. 137.

<sup>24</sup> Bocca, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, p. 471.

command of Piera Gatteschi Fondelli. An RSI decree issued on 18 April 1944 invited women to enlist in the GNR and in other units involved in the national defense. Women also formed auxiliary units of the X Mas, the BB, and SS Italian, participating in execution squads and *rastrellamenti* against partisans and civilians. Besides wearing the uniform, women served as spies and informers.<sup>25</sup>

Mussolini declined to visit his troops until the Wehrmacht had provided them adequately with arms: "I intend to visit a division, not a sporting club of gymnasts."<sup>26</sup> On the rare occasions that the Duce did review his troops, he invariably was greeted by blaring trumpets in a salute to Italian grandeur. The soldiers experienced a "vibrant excitement" (*tutto in orgasmo*) at his very appearance, which greatly lifted their leader, who had always been happiest mingling with his military. The Fascist Pino Romualdi reports that the Duce's chest swelled with the feeling of "superiority" of the Italian warrior over the German: "These units are magnificent. They absolutely have nothing to envy in the best Wehrmacht soldiers. They are more ready than the Germans; our soldiers learn more rapidly the new training techniques and the use of the most recent weapons. Every man has a profound belief. There are a few small deficiencies among the officers and in other command circles that Graziani is rapidly eliminating."<sup>27</sup> On 16 July 1944 Mussolini told the *Monte Rosa*: "No one can escape the clash between Fascism and Bolshevism ... The war in progress has the character of a religious war, a war of ideas." Three days later, he addressed the Alpini of the Littorio: "You must profit to the maximum from this school, because you have been instructed, one can surely say clearly, by the top masters of the military trade."<sup>28</sup>

But Mussolini's elocation fell flat, particularly when he broke his promise that they would not be deployed against fellow Italians in the resistance. On the other hand, when the soldiers were sent to fight the Allies, Fascist propaganda worked, for they saw themselves descending into combat against the "Negroid people of Africa, Asia, and America, whose presence besmirched the homeland paradise."<sup>29</sup> Once again the racist chord had been sounded, and many listened.

<sup>25</sup> Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, pp. 237–52.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Pietra, *Guerriglia e contro guerriglia*, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Romualdi, *Fascismo repubblicano*, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> OO, XXXII: 96–98.

<sup>29</sup> Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 242.



## Ringed by Enemies

Mussolini had experienced a troubled relationship with Germany throughout World War II. Although the Duce had originally persuaded Hitler to accept Italian troops on the Eastern Front to assist in Operation Barbarossa, when, in a dramatic turnaround in the war's fortunes, the Soviets threw back Wehrmacht advances, he urged the Führer to engage Stalin in truce talks. Predictably, this advice was not heeded. The war in the Soviet Union, therefore, dragged on, which cost Mussolini German planes and tanks that, in his mind, should have been sent to chase the British out of the Mediterranean and North Africa, thereby salvaging Italian imperial interests.<sup>1</sup> The Axis surrender at Tunis on 13 May 1943 was, in his mind, the end result. Equally reprehensible, in his view, was the Führer's earlier failure to invade England.<sup>2</sup>

Dolfín noted that Mussolini was anxious for the Germans to redefine their war purposes, a view he expressed in the article "*Il caso della Pravda*" published in the *Corrispondenza Repubblicana*: "There exist in Germany deep and thoughtful currents favorable to an immediate accord with Stalin. Hitler, who persists in the initial error that carried him into war against Russia, demonstrates that he is not aware of any miscalculation.

<sup>1</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 74–75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Speaking of the Mediterranean sector, Mussolini declares himself convinced that if the Germans had not ‘undervalued’ [the North African theater] and had furnished us in time the men and means for conquering Egypt, the war would already have ended victoriously.”<sup>3</sup>

Since Mussolini’s pressure on the Führer to make up with Stalin did not diminish during the Salò period, it is clear that all along he had underestimated the dynamism inherent in Nazi Lebensraum and the toxic Holocaust mindset that long ago had turned Hitler and his following into crazed mass killers. Acting as if he were conducting business with Bismarck’s Germany, Mussolini was swept into the Nazi *Götterdämmerung*.

Although Fascist propaganda had long targeted the Soviet Union as the personification of evil, Mussolini throughout his reign had been open to agreements with Stalin if consonant with Italian national interests. After the onset of World War II, his stated hatred of Stalin and Communism abated, and he could not resist chortling when the Soviet leader bloodied Hitler’s nose on the battlefield. On 26 November 1943 he gave the enemy their due: “They fight like the devil! And there still are people who doubt the political capacity of Stalin! ... Stalin has known how to give Russians real soul [anima]: ‘Santa Russia!’ There is nothing paradoxical about this affirmation. The Russian feels his country like no other people. Only we Italians in a full-scale war love to speak of liberty, ideas, and political congresses. Elsewhere, as in Russia, one fights and contrives miracles to win!”<sup>4</sup>

Mussolini once declared that he would prefer to live under Soviet rather than German domination in a future Europe. “In a struggle that is underway among the great colossi—Germany, Russia, and America—we are destined after our voluntary exile from the war to be crushed like ants whatever the course of events. In this eventuality, which by now seems certain, as an Italian citizen I would not hesitate a moment in choosing Stalin ... Between becoming an English dominion, a German province, or a Soviet federal

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 214–15. In the *OO*, XXXII, there is a section “Note della ‘Corrispondenza Repubblicana.’” In a comment, the editor describes that the articles therein were official and anonymous, sometimes originating in the Ministry of Popular Culture and other times issuing from the pen of Mussolini himself. The above article, number 29, according to the editor, was written by him.

<sup>4</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 109.

republic in the unfolding tragic game of events, the choice is clear.”<sup>5</sup> Dolfín records more of Mussolini’s thoughts on Russia: “Stalin has accomplished a move that denotes above all his great political ability and his intelligence. For all peoples liberated by the victory of his arms from German domination, Stalin has proclaimed a new Europe in which they can participate fully autonomously. These people, according to Stalin’s plan, can at the end of the war, if they wish, separate themselves from Russia, but they would not have any reason to do so. All this occurs while the Germans oblige us to deliver them our gold reserves and they give us in exchange a billion in paper money, the money of monkeys, as the French call it, which is ours because it is fabricated in Italy. It is clear, he [Mussolini] concludes, that ninety-five per cent of Italians, if allowed freely to choose their destiny, would opt for Stalin.”<sup>6</sup> Whenever Mussolini haplessly experienced German abuse, he was prone to retaliate by emphasizing Soviet accomplishments.

According to two of Mussolini’s supporters, Giorgio Pini and Duilio Susmel, Mussolini described his priorities as follows “If it were only a matter of the United States, I could be undecided. But there is England in the middle and because of this I do not deny my sympathies for Russia ... I am an old Socialist.”<sup>7</sup> Dolfín records the same thought: “The Duce has for long held the conviction that a separate peace with Russia was possible, a peace that would align people that he considers truly proletarian against Anglo-American capitalism.”<sup>8</sup> At the conference with Hitler at Klessheim in April 1944, after pointing out that England was their real enemy, Mussolini suggested that the Axis Powers persuade the USSR to sign an armistice guaranteeing the country’s old borders, which would enable the Soviet armies to transfer troops westward for a decisive breakthrough against the Allies.<sup>9</sup>

In a conversation with Preziosi, Mussolini favorably compared Stalin to the Anglo-Saxon leadership: “Stalin has proven that he is a better politician and he is the strongest. His armies have awed the entire world; they are the only ones who have beaten the Germans in the open field. In addition [Stalin] offers an ideal program that assures the felicity of his people, even though at a very dear price. The Anglo-Saxons lack such an appeal, for they worship the golden calf. Russia can conquer the world without making war

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 235–36.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Ibid., pp. 236–37.

<sup>7</sup> Pini and Susmel, *Mussolini: Uomo e Poeta*, IV: 473.

<sup>8</sup> Dolfín, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 214–25.

<sup>9</sup> R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 20.

by employing propaganda and promoting class struggle. The capitalist countries no ... For in these places, like in Italy, the bourgeoisie fears the Bolsheviks. To save their skins they place themselves at the service of the Anglo-Saxons. Is this not the policy of the proverbial ostrich that, head in the sand, refuses to look at tomorrow or contemplate a wiser policy? ... I know that the downfall of Italy has been brought about by the bourgeoisie; that is, the materialistic mentality and accumulation of riches, in other words, the egoism of the upper bourgeoisie and the cowardly petite bourgeoisie. This class is bent on betrayal and, if disloyalty advances their interests, it will always betray. The proletariat, no.”<sup>10</sup>

Those comments on the Soviet Union, when measured against the violent anti-Communist propaganda of the Fascist regime, dumbfounded listeners and readers alike, but one must remember that the Duce had always, if grudgingly, admired Stalin and never tired of expatiating on the similarities between Communism and Fascism. For was he not originally a revolutionary Socialist? And was there not a driving ambition to create a Fascist brand of Socialism—*Socializzazione*—during his time at Salò? The Italian historian Attilio Tamaro believes that Mussolini did not intend to copy the Soviet model of Communism, which offended him, but to emphasize his parentage of proletarian reform and the disarming of capitalism. One can only conquer Bolshevism, thought Mussolini, by substituting something better, a true Socialism, such as Italy was on the point of developing as idea and action.<sup>11</sup>

The similarities between the two regimes was nothing new in Fascist writings, for both Ugo Spirito, a Fascist political writer on Corporatism, and the intellectual Giuseppe Bottai had encouraged publication in 1934 of Stalin's *Bolshevism and Capitalism*. During the RSI period, the Socialist journalist Carlo Silvestri, with Mussolini's approval, attempted to reach agreement with Salò leaders in the name of leftist ideals supposedly embodied in the Italian Social Republic.<sup>12</sup>

On a different tack, Dolfin wondered if Mussolini's sympathy for Russians and admiration of Stalin amounted to retaliation against Germany's contempt of Italy or flowed naturally from an anti-Western orientation that was

<sup>10</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 203–05.

<sup>11</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, 1943–1945, II: 425.

<sup>12</sup> Spencer Di Scala, “Resistance Mythology,” *The Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 4:1 (Spring 1999), p. 71.



more consistent and revealing of his genuine political thinking.<sup>13</sup> Probably both. No doubt Mussolini's notion of a block of proletarian peoples pitted against what he characterized as the industrial and banking plutocracies of Washington and London had long been fixtures in his ideology.

It well might be that Mussolini's most direct and honest observations on Communism and the Soviet Union were imparted in monologues to his personal physician, Dr. Georg Zachariae: "Based on what is happening today in Russia, Communism represents for Western Civilization the greatest threat ever, and I cannot understand why nations, such as England and the United States, who in the long run are constituted on the indestructible foundations of Greek civilization, have not yet understood the gravity of such a danger. I affirm to them that first and foremost ideological fissures will crop up among the actual allies. That is inevitable. An out-and-out rupture among them will most certainly follow. The people of good sense in England and America admit that, but persist in the grave error of failing to recognize the sacrifice that Germany is currently making for their salvation. They should not be surprised when one day they will bear the consequences of this error.

"I categorically insist that the Anglo-Americans are making a big mistake in believing they can overcome Communism with moral force or democratic methods. Bolshevism can only be defeated by supporting something better, a true Socialism, like the one I have developed as idea and action. If during this war the soldiers of Western Europe had been able to see the Bolshevik 'paradise,' and if the captured and imprisoned Russian soldiers had known Occidental Europe, a far greater danger to the existence of the Soviet system would have occurred, much more telling than all the books written by foreigners on Soviet Russia ... If the Allies are fated to win this war and devastate Germany, they will be destroying the unique people who have the capacity and the force of preventing the Soviet system from reaching one country after another, one people after another. The responsibility of Western Civilization that America and England assume in combating the spread of Communism is enormous. But the way they are going about it carries much greater peril than the concurrent danger they pose in managing the world market solely for the benefit of their own monopolies."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup>Zachariae, *Mussolini si confessa*, Kindle edition, locations 1208–1227.

Speaking to Zachariae on another occasion, (as quoted by Zachariae in his memoirs), Mussolini declared: "No social progress has been made for the classes to which Marxism supposedly has imparted strength, respectability, and prosperity. There is only a total decadence of the masses, a moral and material decadence of the worst kind ... The gentlemen of Moscow ought to admit that they have robbed men of the joy of living, permitting them only to vegetate in the worst economic conditions. To implement their absurd Communist formula, they have eliminated all the truly productive people from every category and profession, for only in this way are they able to impose their will on the masses. They have resolved matters in a radical manner, by shooting everyone who thinks differently ... such as people who give vent to their horror in the misery of the masses. Every observer, I say, ought to have understood that this form of Socialism, in spite of all the promises, can never achieve the success that various Socialists eagerly hope for ... Worse still is the energy expended in describing this as *democracy*, a word that rings as an atrocious hoax, a word that has lost its old value in the world."<sup>15</sup>

Mussolini's sharp criticism of Soviet Communism frequently was an outgrowth of the pleasure he took in pointing out the vast superiority of his own *Socializzazione*: "The events of the war have demonstrated that it is impossible to conquer Bolshevism militarily and eliminate by force the danger it represents for European Civilization. Perhaps it is possible to contain the universal spread of the Communist germ by limiting its development to Russia, but it has penetrated too deeply in the soul of its followers to be stamped out by force alone. The Bolsheviks will never desist from rendering other people slaves by force and then amalgamating them to their political system. Against this danger to European Civilization I see only one means with which to fight Communism that has any prospect of success: the Socialist ideas I have propounded and which are being realized in the new social order I am implementing. Only in this way can men be given new faith and hope!"<sup>16</sup> Mussolini's views on Communism and the Soviet Union fluctuated according to the nature and composition of his audience and what occupied his mind at the moment: historical grievances, resentment against the Germans, and the shifting tides of war.

As compared to Mussolini's penchant for hyperbole in his brusque praise of Soviet heroism, his off-the-cuff remarks on the Americans appear to reflect strong-minded and hardened opinions. On the USA he wrote in February 1944: "The so-called Stars and Stripes Republic is a country

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., location 1905.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., locations 2445–2451.

profoundly, incurably, and psychologically remote from every religion. Gold is the only God over there that stands perched on an altar. More than in Russia, the America of Roosevelt is a Godless Country. There are a good forty million declared atheists, professed atheists, and collections of powerful associations that herald the diffusion of that doctrine. The other eighty million Americans, including fifteen million negroes, are divided in about three hundred and twenty-three religions, many of which constitute real manifestations, sometimes of a carnival nature, of folly and stupidity, and invariably rest on dollars and business ... And here, as a proof of this irresponsibility, there are many or few Catholics who would welcome an Allied victory not knowing that they stand outside Catholicism and oppose the Church in Rome."<sup>17</sup>

On 9 February 1944 Mussolini wrote: "The anti-Christ of the twentieth century has a name: Franklin Delano Roosevelt."<sup>18</sup> A little later he harped on the same theme: "War criminal number one is Roosevelt, number two, Churchill." The Anglo-Saxon conception of justice gives them unique title to "the right to life, power, and wealth, while condemning the other peoples to serve. If they don't serve but rebel, they [the British] take their refusal to obey as a rebellion against the divine will, and therefore deserving of punishment without pity or a second thought."<sup>19</sup> He took an almost fiendish delight in the prospect that the Soviet Union was gaining the upper hand over the Western Powers: "The center of the world could be Moscow ... the Western Powers with great and sad resignation are preparing to enter into the new society of nations under the standard of the hammer and sickle."<sup>20</sup>

Indiscriminate American and British bombing triggered further Italian anger. Some considered them as outright bearers of wanton destruction rather than as liberators from Nazi oppression. The bombing of Monte Cassino deepened the belief that the Americans were uncultured assailants impervious to the magnificent Italian Renaissance heritage. In the final accounting, the airborne Allied terror campaign killed from 41,420 to 70,000, or even 100,000,<sup>21</sup> let alone the enormous destruction

<sup>17</sup> OO, XXXII: 306.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 425–26.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 308–39.

<sup>21</sup> The German figures can be found in Klinkhammer, *Stragi naziste in Italia*, p. 15. The number of Italian victims of Allied air raids are reported in Giuseppe Bonacina, *Obiettivo Italia. I bombardamenti aerei della città italiane dal 1940–1945* (Milan: Mursia, 1970), p. 205; Chiarini, *L'ultimo fascismo*, p. 91. Overy, in *The Bombing War*, p. 546, hazards the

inflicted on housing, museums, and national monuments, while Germans slaughtered 10,000 Italians besides the vast damage they visited on countryside, property, and industrial plant.

Thanks to long-standing grievances that had built up over the years, Great Britain occupied the unenviable standing as Mussolini's principal *bête-noir*. The Duce never forgot the Allied treatment of Italy at the Paris Peace Conference as a grasping and coarse Balkan statelet which, after failing to pull its oar in the war, whined for underserved territorial gain. Equally objectionable, in his view, the British lived by a notorious double standard. In holding that preservation of the empire and naval mastery of the high seas was the Island Kingdom's natural right, Perfidious Albion refused to grant Italy a fair share of African spoils in the name of the League of Nations, whose principles the imperialists in London egregiously flouted.

Owing to Britain's policy of sanctions against Italy during the Ethiopian campaign in 1936, Mussolini was given a handy opportunity to fan this historical resentment, embodied in the phrase "mutilated victory," into national fury. By exploiting the diffuse anti-British rancor surging through the country, he turned historical grievances into mainstream Fascist ideology. In the days leading up to his fall in July 1943, Mussolini told his undersecretary at the Foreign Ministry, Giuseppe Bastianini, that he would never deliver Italy to England and would never allow the British to make use of Italian territory to carry out attacks against Germany, thus accepting the German thesis that Italy was simply a strategic outpost of the Third Reich. Time and again, from the lead-up to the Second World War to his days at Salò, Mussolini claimed the keys to the gates of the Mediterranean as an "Italian lake" and broadcasted the theme "proletarian Fascist Italy" inescapably pitted against the "decadent Western Democracies."

Italians almost universally shared Mussolini's resentment of some unforgettable examples of British snobbery, which stemmed from a belief in certain upper class circles that Italy was an excellent vacation haunt for those who would take pleasure in the lavish attention of born-to-serve errand boys, hotel owners, and restaurant chefs. What grated Mussolini the most was sarcasm. Many a British newspaper cartoon depicted him as a swaggering buffoon, his chest covered with oversized medals and colorful ribbons, his jutting chin and hands resolutely on hips, revealing insolence

estimate of 59,796 deaths from the bombing, and a further 27,762, of whom there were certainly bombing victims.

and defiance. These historical grievances and images frequently sufficed to drive the typical patriotic Italian into the Fascist camp.

Hardly noticed in London was that such attitudes, prevalent among the upper classes, provided grist for the Italian propaganda mill. Mussolini made sure that Italians were stirred up by his thunderous demands for a place in the imperial sun and respect for being something more than the “least of the great powers”—a view that sat well in the foreign service and among most Italians. These powerful resentments and the Fascist depiction of Italian “life force” against British “gold”—coupled with a nightmarish fear of the Soviet Union—dominated the minds of the Salò diplomats and moderate Fascists. The same train of thought helped drive them into Mussolini’s arms, blind to the Third Reich’s Holocaust juggernaut.

So it was natural that on 19 October 1943 Mussolini would rail against “plutocratic” Britain’s denial of Italy’s just colonial objectives and right to economic independence. “The British imperialists, strutting vexatious arrogance, have usurped Italy’s rights by dominating the Mediterranean. In controlling our traffic and our settlements, the British have rendered our colonization of Eastern Africa unproductive for the Italian economy.”<sup>22</sup> In a last meeting with the writer Carlo Silvestri on 20 March 1945, Mussolini declared: “The English mentality is constitutionally anti-social and anti-socialist. In contrast, the socialist conception substitutes the duty and obligation of the state to promote social and human solidarity with philanthropy.”<sup>23</sup>

The ideological linkages in Mussolini’s reading of the Anglo-Saxon world and Italian society were unmistakable. Silvestri reports the Duce telling him that he knew that Fascist Italy’s ruin was brought about by the reactionary world, the conservative and egoistic Italian bourgeoisie, which utilized Fascism to safeguard their own class privileges and obstruct and retard the social aims of the regime.<sup>24</sup> Finally at Salò he could exact revenge by implementing Fascist Socialism, a vision inspired by Stalin’s handiwork. The Fascist Party would destroy the stranglehold of the bourgeois classes and call on the Italian peoples to fall in with his vision of a proletarian dictatorship. Mussolini’s intellectual world view, shaped by a dangerous cocktail of philosophies—Marx, Sorel, and Nietzsche, among others—derived from his plebeian origins, which led him to resent the sophisticated world

<sup>22</sup> *OO*, XXXII: 259.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 284–85.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

of upper-class Italy—"the English in our house"—meaning the high-born who exhibited supercilious attitudes toward the lower orders—and himself. Similarly, Mussolini recoiled in anger against those Anglo-Americans whom he perceived to look upon current Italians as infantile successors of the true man of all seasons of Roman and Renaissance days. It did not help the Duce's ego when he witnessed English bombs fall freely on unprotected Italian cities, reducing them to rubble while Italian planes had only briefly touched English shores early in the war. As a valiant Socialist revolutionary, Mussolini would replace the English umbrella with the Italian truncheon in the transfer of European power from decadent democracy to virile Fascist Socialism.



## Muddling through Lawlessness

When the Communist-led *Gappisti* carried out a series of assassinations in mid 1944, Fascist legions responded blindly by cracking the whip on innocent victims, which snuffed out whatever positive feelings ordinary people held out for the regime. Roving vigilante gangs looking for adventure did their part in alienating the population by firing away at partisans, Jews, wobbly Fascists, and draft dodgers. Salò's inability to tame the undisciplined free-wheeling rogue outfits, such as the Muti, Koch, and Carità bands, made for unpredictable public order and disorderly government. Aware of these unpleasant realities, Buffarini vowed to redress the well-known hitches in the chain of command and straighten out the confusion of authority between his harried local officials and the mushrooming rogue militia leaders.<sup>1</sup>

But instead of disparaging the bad guys, Buffarini would manipulate them, as he did with the Muti Legion, to suit his purposes. Thinking he had the Muti chieftain, Franco Colombo, at his beck and call, Buffarini created an office in Milan to serve as a liaison between him and the city's *questura*, whose head, Alberto Bettini, had already made the Muti an auxiliary organ of the police. The *federale* of Milan, Vincenzo Costa, assured Buffarini that party members under his authority would collaborate with

<sup>1</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 287.

the Muti.<sup>2</sup> In exchange, the legion would sacrifice autonomy by obeying Interior Ministry directives as a “special section of the police.” Furthermore, the legion was required to obtain written authorization before undertaking any punitive action against either recalcitrant Fascists or the partisan enemy.

All seemed to fall into place when the *questore* Bettini, employing the Muti Legion, arrested elements of the GNR in Lodi for kicking up a storm of violence and robbery.<sup>3</sup> But that did not stop the Muti from undertaking unauthorized action elsewhere that involved many arrests, requisitions, and torture. In an environment filled with rivaling private armies, Muti toughs expended as much energy in fist fights with Koch Band ruffians recently redeployed in Milan as they did in carrying out their own presumed police duties. Bettini apparently refrained from disciplining Colombo because of the latter’s close ties with Buffarini. Lacking a large disciplined force of his own, the beleaguered Bettini was unable to challenge Colombo head-on.<sup>4</sup>

As a stickler for law and order in the Salò government, Pietro Pisenti, Mussolini’s justice minister, brought to the attention of his colleagues the scandals and shenanigans of the Koch Band. Yielding to this pressure, Buffarini, on 21 September 1944, tried once again to bring the irregular forces under the authority of the state. He forged what on paper looked like a formidable committee composed of himself; the head of the police, Cerutti; the undersecretary of the Ministry of the Interior, Paolo Zerbino; and the *questore* Bettini. Their aim was to chase the Koch Band out of Milan and bring an end to the Brigata Nera Resega, another gang of trouble makers.

Ready to do business with the reprobate Colombo, Buffarini brought in his Muti Legion to assist Bettini’s Milan police in taking the measure of the much-hated Koch Band. (Buffarini paid Koch a subsidy of two million lire a month for turning in anti-Fascists and for squealing on his opponents within the party.<sup>5</sup>) But in reaching into the lion’s den of delinquents for help, Buffarini found Muti Legion hooligans already committing outrages at their pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>3</sup> Griner, *La “pupilla” del Duce*, p. 186.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 197.

<sup>6</sup> Battistelli and Molinari, *Le forze armate della RSI*, p. 205.



On the changeable assurances of Mussolini, Bettini, as a temporary solution, agreed on the 25th to cooperate with the Muti, whom he now distrusted, in raiding the Villa Triste, home of the Koch Band.<sup>7</sup> They arrested around three score members of his Special Police Detachment-*Reparto Speciale di Polizia*.<sup>8</sup> Although armed to the teeth, Koch's crew submitted peacefully and marched off to the Villa Fossati where they ended up fraternizing with the captors who had just robbed them of materials and equipment.<sup>9</sup> But the Muti legionnaires failed to pick up the big fish, Koch, who was away that day.<sup>10</sup>

In closing down the notorious Villa Triste, Koch's choice house of torture, Bettini's enforcers stumbled across a staggering amount of cocaine, morphine, and other drugs, as well as instruments of torture. The cells were crammed with people, of whom forty were in dreadful physical condition. It had only taken Koch a few weeks in Milan to establish a reign of terror in the city, which rewarded him with unbounded hatred. He had become a casualty of the ceaseless street fighting—the very political tumult that he had denounced. Koch was ultimately arrested at Maderno. The head of police, Renzo Montagna, eventually flung him into the San Vittore prison on 17 December 1944,<sup>11</sup> where he hoped to be liberated by his friend Farinacci. It was the Germans who brought about the release of Koch's men,<sup>12</sup> who swaggered defiantly out of incarceration.

Buffarini's roundabout ways in establishing the Milan *questore's* sway over the local militias dismayed the German Security Police, which had been quite pleased by the Koch Band's successful penetration of clandestine Communist cells. Herbert Kappler, the SS attaché to the Italian police, was aghast that Bettini should think of bridling his precious collaborator,<sup>13</sup> since he “was perhaps unique in the corps of Italian police who, in contrast with other institutions ... had supported and provided assistance to the German security police in performing its tasks.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Massimiliano Griner, *La “Banda Koch.” Il Reparto speciale di polizia (1943–1944)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), p. 267.

<sup>8</sup> Caporale, *La “Banda Carità,”* p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> Griner, *La “Banda Koch,”* p. 269.

<sup>10</sup> Griner, *La “Pupilla” del Duce*, p. 185; Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Griner, *La “Banda Koch,”* p. 273.

<sup>12</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. 136.

<sup>13</sup> Griner, *La Banda Koch*, pp. 272–73; Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 315.

<sup>14</sup> ACS, RSI, Prefettura di Milano, b. 1, “Appunto per il Capo della Polizia” di Herbert Kappler, 29 September 1944.

Bettini, one of the few straight arrows in the RSI, was even more disliked by the Fascist hierarchs. When the embattled *questore* tried to assemble the rogue police militias in Milan under one roof in an “*azione purificatrice*,” as Mussolini in a guarded way suggested that he do,<sup>15</sup> the feckless RSI operatives, mainly Buffarini, let his plan wither on the vine. Buffarini sacked Bettini at the end of October 1944.<sup>16</sup>

The hooligan Mario Carità provides a chilling example of one who spread terror but was rarely shut down by the government. “Duce!” he wrote, “To administer lessons, let’s not waste time simply by shooting proletarians; cutting down the military, political, and aristocratic top dogs is far more satisfying ... and forget about the costs!”<sup>17</sup>

Carità’s inescapable image of ferocity should not obfuscate the political objectives that he and his ilk shared with *squadristi*, who, marginalized during the *ventennio*, saw in the RSI a second chance to climb into power.<sup>18</sup>

Since Carità’s diabolical violence fit neatly into the tyrannical heart and soul of RSI Fascism, it was anything but unique. Praised for serving as a “necessary evil” in the struggle against declared enemies of the state, Carità was able to “raise the stakes” (*alzare il tiro*) over what the “pure first ones” had accomplished in originally propelling Mussolini into power. The Duce, Carità assured, could benefit from one of his basic reforms: “A POLICE ORGANIZATION THAT CLEARLY CONTROLS THE ENTIRE HIERARCHY OF GOVERNMENT.”<sup>19</sup> His would be a cavernous underground of dedicated Fascists who fueled and prodded a mass movement of people into their imagined land of glory and conquest.

With Carità in mind, Pavolini wrote on 18 April 1944: “We insist that the military and political traitors of the country in war be publicly brought to trial as quickly as possible and administered exemplary punishment ... We therefore insist that hierarchs who have been deemed guilty of illegal enrichment prove their honesty before the courts of law, because our disciplinary measures, which various believers in Italy regularly expect, must have a more profound effect on the guilty than the justice meted out by our adversaries.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 315.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Dianella Gagliani’s preface to Caporale, *La “Banda Carità,”* p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Lepre, *La storia della repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Caporale, *La “Banda Carità,”* p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

In these perilous times, when the Allies were pounding at the gates of Rome, Mussolini was often merely a bystander to the abuse of power and unconditional violence of the Fascist and Nazi squads carrying out indiscriminate killings of both real and supposed enemies. Oscillating between merciless Fascist prescriptions and a lighter hand, Mussolini arrived at a decision on 25 June 1944: he would hush up talk of excessive indulgence and order the provincial heads to strike out at the enemy passionately in the same “*fasciso da combattimento*” spirit that had fired up the *squadristi* in the *ventennio*.<sup>21</sup> As leader of his “*leoni vegetariani*” (radical Fascists), Carità’s viewpoint was championed by the Duce at a time when consensus and concord had passed.<sup>22</sup> Mussolini would mastermind a party purge that conformed to the Verona Protocols, an arrangement that fully satisfied Carità and his fellow gang members. They would not be treated or feel like pariahs standing outside mainstream RSI Fascism but would be working hand in hand with those radical Fascists in the government who saw the necessity of “striking out at society’s big shots” (*colpire in alto*).

This enabled the Carità, Koch, and Muti bands, the groups of Bardi and their ilk, and other autonomous militias, to demand and receive space in the RSI apparatus to pursue their enemies regardless of ongoing quarrels with Salò officials, provincial heads, and Germans—and with each other.<sup>23</sup> These “autonomous” groups eventually surpassed *squadristi* of the early twenties in their violence. Though truncheons, knives, and bullets to break bones and murder people were utilized by all, Carità’s brood of killers took horror to the ultimate level by drawing on the distinctive SS manual of torment. By liberal use of the instruments of anguish crammed in SS storehouses, they guaranteed themselves a solid reputation as sadists.

The public servants in the RSI faced a Hobson’s choice: either protest against Fascist vigilante justice and lose their jobs, or keep their silence, which meant holding the ring for Carità and his fellow legionaries to act with unrestrained repression outside official authority.

The memoranda, in which Buffarini prescribed a concentration of police powers under the Internal Ministry’s control, with a few notable exceptions, generally encountered blank stares from provincial heads, *questori*, *federali*, and the rogue militias determined to turn these local areas into their own privatized satrapies. Since the rivaling factions within and between the local levels were at loggerheads, they refused to be coordinated from

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Dianella Gagliani, “Prefazione,” in Ibid., pp. 13–17.

the outside and were averse to cooperating with one another. This go-it-alone attitude effectively prevented the Salò ministers from charting or implementing an unimpeded flow of authority to remote police precincts. Furthermore, a revolutionary fanaticism prevailed, which led to general unrestrained behavior and unjust reprisals. With so many nomadic people posturing as police, far too many arrests had been made illegally and on a whim. Besides disobedience, the Interior Ministry had to cope with Fascists at all levels of authority who were prone to view local militias either as useful allies in crushing rivals or as political adversaries to be crushed.

Finally, on 26 August 1944, Buffarini took action on law and order abuses: "I repeat, again on the Duce's orders, that every police activity of the Black Brigades is prohibited. The provincial heads are the ones invited to notify promptly the infractions that must be immediately suppressed."<sup>24</sup> To remove any lingering doubt that the Interior Ministry was ultimately in charge of police action, Police Chief Tullio Tamburini, on 27 August 1944, with Mussolini's blessings, gave the *questori* responsibility for imposing obedience on the plethora of bands under his jurisdiction. Only provincial heads could issue arrests.<sup>25</sup>

No less stressful to the regime were the omnipresent Germans, who, caring not one whit for coherent RSI administration, defiantly co-opted Italians holding police power to do their bidding. The *questore* of Torino, who stands out among local RSI officials in expressing fair-minded opinions, was particularly vexed by the uncontrollable Germans and their Fascist militia allies committing mindless atrocities. He wrote on 25 July 1944: "The public spirit is depressed and disoriented by reprisals carried out by responsible organs ... Hangings prescribed by the German command and carried out by units of the '*Leonessa*' in the main streets of Turin have produced a painful impression among many inhabitants who have witnessed and been astonished and horrified by such a retaliation against admittedly irresponsible people who have committed grave acts of terrorism against two officers of the Axis armed forces."<sup>26</sup> In a later report on 9 September, he wrote of Italo-German "torching of houses, shootings, hangings, and roundups to find workers for manual labor in Germany." So many shootings have "fomented the psychosis for insurrection by fueling hatred of a repression that almost always torments the innocent."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 239.

<sup>25</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 289.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 316.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 365.

In the splintered RSI world, the Germans had a field day aiding and protecting favorites, playing them off against one another, and prevailing on Italian officials to enforce tighter discipline on the workforce. In Milan they were able to bring about the removal of the provincial head, Piero Parini, who “did not possess the energy needed to infuse office workers with a new ideology of work or to overcome their general lassitude and indifference.”<sup>28</sup> Crisscrossing loyalties time and again hamstrung the RSI from acting effectively against either the resistance or internal enemies. In this lawless environment unrestrained sadism, violence, and corruption thrived.

Since Buffarini had a hand in every camp, not a few of the obstacles facing him were of his own making. Many of the newly appointed provincial heads were of a different breed than the older traditional functionaries who had served under the former rubric of prefect. In the RSI, countless numbers had been dismissed by both the Germans and Fascists for their suspected royalist loyalties and replaced by more pliable party men who, though not always zealots, were disposed to look the other way when various squads ran riot in their provinces. Hence the state police forces, including the *questura*, were not always sticklers for obedience to the law and directives handed down by their superiors in Salò.

Of the “police,” the Milan Prefecture reported: “They make a bad impression by their disorderly manner: On duty they dangle a cigarette and play with bread ... The sentries, rather than upholding a martial and austere appearance, linger to chat with civilians and generally fail to respect the forms expected of sentries in service. In brief, they exhibit an ‘indecorous spectacle.’”<sup>29</sup> Negligence, indifference, casual care of arms, and evasion of duty marked the behavior of many a policeman. GNR and BN squads arrested police and vice-versa, which invariably poisoned relations between them and blurred lines of responsibility for maintenance of the public order. At the same time many disreputable self-reliant militias flouted legality by running their own prisons, undertaking searches according to whim, and torturing those rounded up for interrogation.

On 6 October 1944 Mussolini discharged the dull Eugenio Cerruti as police chief, who had replaced Buffarini’s favorite, the luckless Tamburini, on 24 June 1944. In Cerruti’s place the Duce in November appointed General Renzo Montagna, an ex-officer of the Militia who at the same

<sup>28</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 290.

time received the rank of RSI general. His subordinate was Guido Leto, former head of the Fascist Secret Police (OVRA).<sup>30</sup>

Upon assuming his new duties, Montagna was ready to take a stand against the illegalities and violence pressing in on the RSI. By pulling together a credible and unified police force, he planned to purge unworthies who had committed crimes.

In the same vein, Buffarini sent Montagna instructions on 8 October that read: "Mussolini has emitted an order to the head of the police that the *questori* Finizio and Koch are to be taken into custody by the Head of the Police and held in conditions of detention at Maderno or in another locality. 'Detention' signifies that they must be continuously guarded day and night in such a way that the required vigilance precludes escape and that they will always be at the disposition of the Ministry."<sup>31</sup> It seemed as if Buffarini had finally arrived at the view that, no longer able to protect or manipulate the vigilante squads, he had to cut all ties, and then arrest them.<sup>32</sup>

To tighten unity of police units under the command of the state police and the *questori*, Montagna on 24 October sent out a circular defining the norms to be observed in the exercise of judicial authority by the police. On the same day Mussolini strengthened the pitch for legality by appointing, as undersecretary of the Ministry of the Interior, Giorgio Pini, who had for long expressed criticism of the "reactionary intransigence" of his new boss, Buffarini.<sup>33</sup> Two days later, Concetto Pettinato, the influential newspaper editor of *La Stampa*, approved the renewed determination to assure justice and legality, whose credibility rested on a police that scrupulously observed and upheld existing law. "The citizen has the right to full and entire legality regarding his own person and possessions."<sup>34</sup>

During early November Montagna founded the Loyal Police Units (*Reparti Arditi di Polizia*). "Such units, beyond the ones that constitute the representative nucleus of every *questore*, as well as the ones that meet the requirements of the most prompt engagement for every eventuality, must be utilized in *rastrellamenti* in collaboration with the other armed units plus German forces. They will document in a detailed manner the support of the Republican police in the struggle against the rebels, particularly against Communism."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 201.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 215.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>33</sup> Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, p. 154.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 153, n. 43.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, pp. 292–93.

General Graziani, consistent with his dislike of the rogue militias as threats to his authority, composed this critical note: "Various warnings, complaints, and protests have come to my attention regarding illegal requisitions, embezzlement, and robbery committed by anti-rebel members and formations at the expense of civilians during their *rastrellamento* operations, and sometimes this also happens outside any planned engagement against outlaws ... I am convinced that those responsible for such ignominious acts are formerly militants in the camp of our adversaries who sneaked in and disguised themselves and who have stolen into our ranks for the purpose of sabotaging our work and casting discredit on our flag."<sup>36</sup>

Mussolini took up the challenge of a police shake-up in December 1944, when, at the Lyric Theater in Milan, he declared on the 16th: "I dare believe that Italians of whatever opinion will be happy when the day arrives that all the armed forces of the Republic are assembled together in a single organism serving as a single police ... The manifesto holds that no citizen can be held for more than seven days without an order from the judiciary authority. That has not always happened. The reasons can be found in the plurality of our police organs and those of our allies, as well as actions taken outside the law. Together, these problems have caused us to descend into a civil war characterized by reprisals and counter-reprisals."<sup>37</sup>

After his address, Mussolini cut through the adulating mobs to review BN troops with Pavolini, Graziani, and the notorious Colonel Colombo of Muti Legion fame, nattily dressed as a BN colonel—not a reassuring example of the Duce's declared intention to weed out para-military detractors from his government. In a crowded courtyard, Mussolini was met by devotees shouting hysterically: "Duce! Duce!"<sup>38</sup>

Absent a hard-hitting and dependable Mussolini, law-and-order misdeeds, unsurprisingly, did not cease. The *questura* of Milan in January 1945 reported that various "bands," including the Muti, continued to arrest people illegally.<sup>39</sup> There is no question that Montagna endeavored to bring illegalities and excesses under control by purging the recalcitrant radicals who had committed "unlawful" crimes in defiance of the authorities in Salò.<sup>40</sup> But whatever successes he achieved were marginal, for at this

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, p. 440.

<sup>37</sup> OO, XXXII: 128–31.

<sup>38</sup> Zachariae, *Mussolini si confessa*, Kindle edition, locations 2542–2551.

<sup>39</sup> ACS, Prefettura di Milano, b. 1, "Appunto per il Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia" di Mario Bassi, 17 gennaio 1945.

<sup>40</sup> Between 1942 and 1943 Montagna commanded the Blackshirts in Ljubljana, returning to Italy shortly before 25 July. Arrested by the Badoglio government, he was liberated by the

late stage only the most deluded could believe that the RSI would be able to contrive a law that would be universally obeyed after such a long and splintered history of competing factions with different takes on Fascist ideology, particularly the hotheads who would ignore any law obstructing their freedom of action. Quite expectedly, the BN, and the Office of Political Investigation of the GNR, which had long expressed complete distrust of the *questori*, refused to fall in line.<sup>41</sup> Montagna had circulated a rehash of many hastily assembled reforms that seemed as rushed and raggedly put together as ever.

Having received unending reports of outraged prelates and disgruntled local police regarding the crimes, tortures, and arbitrary justice of the free-wheeling bands, Mussolini, if he truly wanted to give his regime a shot in the arm, could hardly stand aside. Orderly repression under uniform law advanced by his subordinates could no longer be systematically flouted. One way or the other the rowdy militias had to be disciplined.<sup>42</sup> Paolo Zerbino, the undersecretary of the Interior Ministry, who took over Buffarini's portfolio on 28 February 1945, decided to make a last stab at reform by issuing a detailed circular aiming at a "return to legality" of the RSI.<sup>43</sup>

Whereas the chronically scheming Buffarini had proceeded at a snail's pace toward reform, Zerbino moved with dispatch. To lift bureaucracy from politics, he aimed to encourage state employees to espouse their Fascism peacefully. In a tidier environment, citizens, he felt, would respond with renewed respect and confidence in the government's promise to dispense even-handed justice and be a true servant of them all. To create an aura of detachment, Zerbino granted the provincial heads and *questori* unhindered responsibility for enforcing public order. All unauthorized local armed militias were told to keep out of the way and refrain from

Germans after 8 September. Adhering to the RSI, he served as one of the judges during the Verona trials against Ciano and his fellow "traitors." He was nominated police commandant, a position he maintained until the end of the war. He died peacefully in 1978.

<sup>41</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camincie nere*, pp. 294–95.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Bosworth, in citing Buffarini's book *La vera verità* published in 1970, writes: "His [Buffarini] fall may have been precipitated by his open complaint to Mussolini in January 1945 that everything that Salò did, or sought to do, was methodically denigrated and blocked by the PFR and that too many envious informers and more or less secret agents interfered with ordinary administration." Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, p. 508.

<sup>43</sup> Luigi Ganapini, "Le polizie nella Repubblica sociale italiana," in Costantino Di Sante, ed., *I campi di concentramento in Italia. Dall'internamento alla deportazione (1940–1945)* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2001), p. 291.



undertaking police operations.<sup>44</sup> Absent the usual radical militia free-for-all, Zerbino hoped to limit wanton violence against “cowardly” Fascists and the politically uncommitted. Gone, too, would be German bullying and cajolery of sympathetic militia groups to obey them rather than RSI authority.

When the Italian police and public security commands began efforts to establish blanket control over areas theoretically under RSI sovereignty, the Germans replied with a stepped-up campaign to employ the Salò’s Public Security Police.<sup>45</sup> To no one’s surprise, they were most unhappy with Zerbino’s reforms, which threatened to loosen their grip on the Italian forces of order. On multiple occasions General Wilhelm Tensfeld, a German specialist in the anti-partisan campaign, had been able to persuade Italian militiamen to join the German repressive machinery. He had only to ask Franco Pollini, the commandant of the GNR of Milan, to furnish him men and supplies. Since Pollini was under the instructions of the commanding general of the GNR to place at German disposal whatever he had on hand for counterinsurgency operations, he was obliged to summon the men of Colombo, who unhesitatingly answered the call.<sup>46</sup> Since Italians knew best how to find partisans, such militias saved the Germans lives and resources. Without the collaboration of the Fascists and Italian police, German arrests and deportations would not have been possible.<sup>47</sup>

Having already experienced the liquidation of Koch’s Special Police Unit (*Reparto Speciale di Polizia*), which deprived the SD of a handy instrument in the anti-partisan repression, the Germans were determined to take a stand against any further erosion of their influence. They would neither accept any separation between the SS/SD and RSS nor allow the slightest pullback from their incursions into the byzantine Italian police force structures.

Mussolini no doubt realized all along that a wholesale housecleaning was needed to unfetter his RSI administration from entrenched interests and internal squabbles, but whenever he or Buffarini advanced the most timid reforms, insuperable barriers immediately popped up everywhere. On the few occasions when Buffarini launched a serious investigation regarding police abuse, he usually relied on enervated envoys that more

<sup>44</sup> Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere*, p. 295.

<sup>45</sup> Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Griner, *La “pupilla” del duce*, p. 171.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 332.

often than not sent back superficial and whitewashed reports. And many provincial heads and *questori* lacked backbone in disclosing the criminal behavior of Germans and their affiliated Italian comrades, who were working together to tighten the screws on local politics.<sup>48</sup>

These reforms were doomed to failure because they were far overdue, pursued only half-heartedly, obstructed by entrenched cliques, and plagued by a lack of dedicated men, weaponry, and training in the newly formed patchwork of armed “forces of order.”<sup>49</sup> There were no reliable police academies to draw on for promising recruits. The men populating the jungle of competing military and police forces—the GNR, BN, SS Italian, X Mas, and the plethora of rogue bands—never ceased engaging in turf wars and scurrilous propaganda exchanges, and dispensing hand-outs to favorites. To survive, the Italian people, if not stalwart Fascists, had few choices. They could seek out sponsors among the various cut-throat factions, sink ever deeper into anonymity, live in the borderlands of the black market and illegality, or say goodbye to family and friends for bare existence in inclement partisan hideouts. Montagna wrote in 1958: “The disorder deriving from this state of affairs became, day by day, increasingly worrisome. Some of these police only obeyed the Germans and did not care about keeping their own actions within legal limits. The most absurd part of this business was that we financed all these bands, also those paid directly by the Germans.”<sup>50</sup> Worst of all, Mussolini, as well as his attendants, who were supposedly leading the charge to redress the pervasive fragmentation, were engaging in barely concealed lip service.

In the aftermath of war, former hierarchs, supported by Fascist apologists, endeavored to relieve themselves of responsibility for the wanton violence that had taken place in the RSI world. The rogue militias, who, in their view, either acted on their own or in defiance of the state, were mainly responsible for the savage violence in the period 1943–45. The many upright RSI servants, they claimed, had loyally upheld law and order in the state. Regrettably, however, they had inadvertently fallen afoul of those bloodthirsty gangs. Since many highly placed individuals inside the RSI government were tied in with the local bands, and were therefore complicit in their violence, this explanation does not hold water.

<sup>48</sup> Caporale, *La “Banda Carità,”* pp. 303–08.

<sup>49</sup> Pavolini boasted that the Black Brigades consisted of 20,000–30,000 men. In reality, only 3000–4000 showed up “ready to fight.” Roberto Chiarini, *L’ultimo fascismo: Storia e memoria della Repubblica di Salò* (Venice: Marsilio, 2009), p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 201.



## Mussolini Woos the Intellectuals

In seeking a winning outcome for Fascism and the RSI, the Duce, by the turn of 1945, had arrived at a dead end. The formation of a conscript army deployed against the Allies had run up against insurmountable German obstacles and massive draft dodging; the constituent assembly remained on the books; and *Socializzazione* appeared to be more a propaganda ruse than a seriously proffered economic model for overhaul of the state. To mitigate criticism of his rudderless government, Mussolini issued general amnesties and pardons, but without significant results. He had hardly better luck in bringing the rogue militias under control.

As the regime faltered, Mussolini was more than dimly aware that party sages defending Fascist old-timers had, in doing so, turned a fossilized ideology into the prevailing wisdom. Fresh initiatives were needed. Mussolini therefore restlessly mused on a resurrection of a *union sacrée* that had won popularity among Fascist moderates in the early years of the Salò regime. To explore ways of achieving this, he would allow writers and journalists to present innovative thoughts on the triad “*Italia, Repubblica, Socializzazione*” as long as the commentary was constrained and disciplined.

The idea of national reconciliation had never been abandoned even during the Fascist radical *svolta* in June 1944, but such essays in compromise had invariably been swatted down by the likes of Pavolini, Mezzasoma, and the Duce himself. For example, on 29 November 1943, Piero Parini of *La Stampa* boldly invited discussion of the burning topics of the day posed by

the moderates: a constituent assembly, which implied a modification of dictatorship, a let-up in the restrictive press laws, social reform, and a progressive distancing from the unpopular alliance with Germany. By opening a dialogue with partisan moderates, the compromisers hoped to end the fraternal bloodbath and diffuse the Communist bomb ready to detonate both in Italy and on the European stage. But the radicals put pressure on the Duce to scrap such dangerous ideas and took pains to weed out those favoring free and critical voices from positions of power and influence.

Still, others kept alive the idea of reconciliation, among them National Education Minister Biggini, and *La Stampa*, whose editor, Concetto Pettinato, wrote in May 1944: "When we learn to put aside all personal rancor and act only in the supreme interest of the homeland ... we will have overcome the obstacles that divide us ... We must abolish every form of terror. Above and beyond every one of our threatening miseries stands the admonition: save the country!"<sup>1</sup> But when Mussolini, a month later, gave Pavolini the green light to proceed with a BN-dominated RSI, he snuffed out all further talk of change and compromise.

Differences continued to simmer throughout the latter half of 1944 between "innovators," such as Parini, Cione, Spampanato, Pettinato, and Bombacci, and the "orthodox," whose core dominated the Duce's cabinet. Spurred on by the ongoing quarrel between Farinacci and Pettinato, Mussolini came down on the side of the party's intransigent nucleus.

On 3 December 1944 in the *Corrispondenza Repubblicana*, he published an article entitled "*Il sesso degli angeli* (the sex of Angles)." "The author [Parini] favors the existence of all parties, and not only at the end of the war, when we know what will become of Italy, but immediately, as if republican Italy at this moment had nothing better to do than imitate the buffoonery of the old days when the vestiges of the old Italian *classe dirigente* took pleasure in amusing Rome with its absurdities ... It is hard to understand why republican Italy has to put up with those same parties that delivered the country to the enemy on 8 September. And they have given laureates and honoraria to the generals responsible for the indiscriminate destruction of Italian cities and for the bestial outrages administered to women and children. And they confer honorary citizenship of Rome on those responsible for the starvation of the Italian people (we are speaking of Roosevelt). One does not understand, let us say, why the right of citizenship should be given to those same parties, which in [Allied] invaded

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Perticone, *La repubblica di Salò*, p. 268.

[southern] Italy not only impede every activity on the part of the Fascist Party, but consider it outside the law. The Fascists, who in southern Italy suffer from incarceration, persecution, and vilification, have the right to question the underlying motives of Piero Parini and his ilk for bestowing favorable treatment on the anti-Fascist parties in republican Italy. There are many things to say from the theoretical standpoint, but let us repeat: this is not the moment to discuss ‘*Il sesso degli angeli*’.”<sup>2</sup> (By this headline, “*Il sesso degli angeli*,” Mussolini was referring to the time when, while Mohammed II was besieging Constantinople, the Byzantine senate was discussing whether angels have a sex. One should not repeat this example, the Duce was implicitly admonishing, by wasting time in the current dangerous era uselessly discussing similar irrelevant and distracting problems.)

Hardly any other theme held Mussolini’s fancy as much as Socialization. He subjected captive audiences, including his personal physician, Georg Zachariae, Preziosi, and Silvestri to endless monologues. As 1945 turned, knowing that the war was lost, Mussolini pondered a negotiated surrender based on a construction of a “*castello repubblicano*” (republican castle), not with the Allies, not with foreigners, but with the socialist wing of the Italian resistance that might be drawn to his socialization program.

In mulling over the formation of a state based on “*Italia, Repubblica, Socializzazione*,” Mussolini thought to broaden his base by allowing a contrarian faction inside the RSI to sponsor “national independence, liberty, and social justice.” Fascism, he believed, should transcend narrowly defined ideology by evolving in a more pluralistic setting. Since the defeat of Communism seemed beyond the reach of the currently narrow sectarian Fascist RSI, a more open regime might stand a chance.

Mussolini’s eye fell on the essayist Edmondo Cione, an ex-student of Benedetto Croce and an inoffensive Fascist who had written anti-German tracts and favored Socialization seasoned by Mazzinian ideas. Cione’s credo: “We could arrive at an agreement with the rulers of the Salò government while holding faith to our ideals of the past and limiting the accord to such fundamental points as defense of national interests against foreigners, a policy of civil dignity, respect for the human personality, and a resolute attitude in confronting the social question.”<sup>3</sup>

Cione’s group spelled out a program of conciliation. To avoid fraternal slaughter, he and his followers would split off middle-of-the-road Fascists

<sup>2</sup> OO, XXXII: 120–25.

<sup>3</sup> Cione, *Storia della Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, pp. 191–92.

from the intransigents by opening a dialogue with partisan moderates. To guarantee popular support, they would resuscitate the long-dormant constituent assembly, whose purpose would be to promulgate a constitution, decree the end of monolithic dictatorship, establish freedom of the press, abandon the burdensome alliance with the Germans, and advance socialist reforms that would bring about a genuine proletarian Fascism. A coalition of Fascists inclined to Socialism and ex-Fascists of the Left would create a renewed Italian gravitas that rejected monarchy, capitalism, and Communism. Relieved of an ideological straightjacket, Fascists would be open to a modification of *ventennio* notions of dictatorship. By resting on a broader base of support, “pluralistic” Fascism would be spiritually prepared for combat against Communism.

Through the intercession of Minister Biggini, Mussolini met with Cione on 21 August 1944, 1 December 1944, and 11 February 1945.<sup>4</sup> In extending a *ponte* (bridge) to anti-Fascists,<sup>5</sup> the Duce proposed that Cione create an “*afascista*” movement based on the Verona Manifesto that would rest on a broadened version of Fascist principles. As head of an opposition party within the RSI, Cione could apply constitutional postulates based on “*Italia-Repubblica-Socializzazione*,” a formula that notably left out the word *Fascism*.

Cione’s approach coincided with an arrest in the Allied advance. South of the battle lines, the Duce saw a split in the CLN developing between anti-capitalists and republicans against the conservative pro-monarchists owing to Allied setbacks in the field that, in his mind, begged to be exploited for the advantage of the Salò government. Cione’s opening to the left would enable him to appease political opponents and create divisions among the partisans. Hence Mussolini saw that Cione could be useful in making the RSI a welcome mat for moderate Fascists offended by having to express unimpeachable loyalty to hard-line Fascist ideology.<sup>6</sup> In corralling an enthusiastic Cione, who was ready to make a name for himself,<sup>7</sup> Mussolini hoped to breathe new vitality into his regime.

In a meeting with the radical Vincenzo Costa in Pavolini’s presence in early 1945, Mussolini advised them not to impede his reconciliation overtures à la Cione, a position, he insisted, that rested on precedent. In his

<sup>4</sup> ACS, SPD, RSI, b. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Cuzzi, “Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.,” p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi, passim*; Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> Cione, *Storia della repubblica italiana*, p. 394.

address at the Lyric Theater on 16 December 1944, he reminded his interlocutors he had renounced formation of an outright multi-party system. But, he added, since the Verona postulates of 14 October 1943 allowed people who did not formally hold a party card to be considered Fascists in good standing, the party could aspire to a broader base of support.<sup>8</sup> This was too much for Pavolini to swallow. In a note to the Duce, dated 20 February, the party secretary, supported by Mezzasoma, strongly opposed the exploratory ideas launched by the bridge builders,<sup>9</sup> fearing that they represented a prelude to the dissolution of the BN as a totalitarian and militant Fascist troupe.

In February 1945 Mussolini gave Cione the go-ahead to establish an independent political movement, the National Republican Socialist Grouping under the masthead "*Italia-Repubblica-Socializzazione*."<sup>10</sup> Soon after, Cione received permission to publish a daily journal, *L'Italia del Popolo*. On the 14th the Duce wrote: "Dear Cione: As you have already seen from the communications by 'Radio' and 'Stefani' the *Raggruppamento* has been launched. The boat is in the water. I'm sure that you will pilot it faithfully by staying the course till the goods are brought home."<sup>11</sup> The grateful professor gave him one of his books: "To Benito Mussolini with the knowledge that certainly in your heart there beats the loftiest aspiration: that of saving Italy."<sup>12</sup> The love fest did not last long.

The Italian historian Giorgio Bocca describes Cione as a "fop" who uttered empty phrases. "To Mussolini these useful idiots (Cione, Amicucci, and Pettinato) came in handy, but to the Fascist ministers they were a big nuisance."<sup>13</sup> Cione's group did contain some strange bedfellows that defied political coherence: Fulvio Zocchi, an ex-revolutionary syndicalist; Gastone Gorrieri, a commander of the notorious Ettore Muti; Ugo Manunta, the director of the *Sera*; Alberto Bettini, the *questore* of Milan; Vittorio Mussolini, who delighted in ideological brawling; and Germinale Concordia and Gabriele Vigorelli, loyal supporters of Corrado Bonfantini, an executive member of the Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity of Upper

<sup>8</sup> D'Angeli, *Storia Del Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, pp. 225–26.

<sup>9</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. 224; D'Angeli, *Storia Del Partito Fascista Repubblicano*, pp. 226–27.

<sup>10</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 100–01.

<sup>11</sup> Cuzzi, "Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.," p. 118, and Cione, *Storia della repubblica italiana*, p. 305.

<sup>12</sup> Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 308–09.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Italy (*Partito Socialista di Unita Proletaria di Alta Italia*—PSIUP) as well as commander of the partisan Matteotti Brigade. Captured by RSI men, Bonfantini was released from prison by order of Mussolini in January 1945. Worried about the Communist threat following Togliatti's appointment as vice president of the Council of the *Regia Luogotenenza* in March 1944, Bonfantini was one of the very few leaders in the resistance who was amenable to an alliance between Socialists and leftist ex-Fascists.<sup>14</sup>

In the RSI cabinet, Minister of National Education Biggini was perhaps the only one sympathetic to the aims of the Cione group. Among Mussolini's broader circle open to *ponte* ideas was General Niccolò Nicchiarelli, vice comandante of the GNR and a reformist Socialist, who was in close touch with Bonfantini.

Bonfantini was a friend of Carlo Silvestri, a noted journalist, who, with the Duce, aimed at breaking Socialists off from the liberals and Christian Democrats belonging to the Committee of National Liberation for Northern Italy (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale per Alta Italia* [CLNAI]). To avoid a bloodbath, they wanted to serve as intermediaries between the RSI and the resistance by forming "battalions of the people," which, on the orders of the GNR, would fill a political void once the Germans had withdrawn. Silvestri suggested to Bonfantini that they work for a passage of power from a Fascist-dominated government to one that included Socialists, republicans, and anti-capitalist members of the Action Party.

A member of the Italian Red Cross, Silvestri aimed to reduce tensions and hostility in the RSI by applying a "humanizing" touch.<sup>15</sup> In reconciling intransigents and moderates, Silvestri wished to wrap the RSI in a "*pelle fascista*" (a Fascist skin) for ultimate lodging in a pluralistic society. This "corrective" to the Fascist *ventennio*, according to Silvestri, would encourage non-Communist Socialists and ex-believers to view the Duce's reforms not as the ultimate act of Fascism but as a first step in a new phase that would transcend the Italian civil war, an aspiration very much in keeping with Mussolini's hope of preserving a Fascist legacy irrespective of the war's outcome.

In his frequent meetings with Mussolini (thirty-six in all), Silvestri urged him to summon up the party's Socialist origins. As a "fifth columnist" in the RSI, he was willing to serve as an intermediary with the resistance to broaden the RSI's Socialist base. Mussolini had told Dolfin back

<sup>14</sup> Osti Guerrazzi, *Storia della repubblica italiana*, p. 192.

<sup>15</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. 30.



on 25 October 1943: "Silvestri is an interesting man with whom we will have contacts. He is an old Socialist who often has not been my friend. He loves the country, and that suffices for us to listen to each other."<sup>16</sup> Silvestri, in turn, in spite of his differences with the Duce—he was briefly incarcerated in the thirties for his dissident views—never ceased believing that Mussolini was "the man of Providence" who, in repudiation of his original *squadristi* following, would formulate a persuasive Fascist morality as groundwork for a higher Italian unity.

In January 1945 Mussolini asked Silvestri to make an attempt to pry loose those of a socialized bent from the CLNAI, leaving behind moderates, liberals, Christian Democrats, and Communists.<sup>17</sup> The sometimes lenient Silvestri pursued a Red Cross undertaking to save anti-Fascists from the gallows before 25 April and Fascists after the surrender. But his was an illusory attempt to salvage the "good" in Fascism in a milieu of political acrimony.

In Silvestri's endeavor to promote reconciliation, he had the support of noteworthy newspaper writers: Concetto Pettinato, Mirko Giobbe, Ugo Manunta, Franco De Agazio, Ezio Maria Gray, and Giorgio Pini. In the government, bridge builders included Piero Pisenti, Minister of Justice at Salò; Biggini; Gorrieri; provincial head Nicolò Nicoletti; and military leaders such as Nicchiarelli, Diamanti, Borghese, Parini, and Nunzio Luna. They were agreed that the RSI-led regime of Pavolini and Mezzasoma—men who incorrigibly clung to outmoded ideological precepts—was incapable of puzzling through a truly novel Fascist revolutionary synthesis that reflected current conditions.

On 20 February 1945 Concetto Pettinato published an article in *La Stampa* under the title "*L'assente*" ("The Absent One"), which noted that Italy had disappeared from the world of great peoples. He blamed the Italians themselves for this predicament. By assuming intransigent ideological positions, and by fighting one another in a deadly civil war, they failed, in his view, to take responsibility for undermining the integrity of the country. The RSI, the article maintained, should stand above foreign bayonets and internecine conflict by exhorting Italians from all walks of life to work for reconciliation.

<sup>16</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Corrispondenza Repubblicana*, of 3 January 1945. The article, "Palmiro, overosia il paladino della corona," is attributed to Mussolini. For the quote, see Cuzzi, "Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.," p. 120, and *OO*, XXXII: 444.

In a conversation with Silvestri on 10 March, Mussolini expressed his displeasure regarding Pettinato's biting criticisms of the government: "Thoughtlessly, we run the risk of killing the newborn in the mother's womb."<sup>18</sup>

Uncompromising Fascists, such as the young cabinet firebrand Giorgio Almirante, who was destined to become the no less fiery leader of the proto-Fascist Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiana* [MSI]) in the postwar era, denounced Pettinato and his ilk for softness, which, by weakening resolve, brought on capitulation.<sup>19</sup> No less harsh was the judgment of Vincenzo Costa, the *federale* of Milan, who, after the war, delivered this blistering critique of the regime's "jackals": "After the brief truce following the assassination of Aldo Resega, when new victims of the fratricidal struggle were found daily heaped up on the asphalt, many of us bid our adversaries to take up the fraternal spirit and embrace them. The ingenuousness of our leaders, as a result, allowed the heads of the insurrectionary movement to infiltrate our ranks and construct 'bridges' between the two competing sides to facilitate mutual comprehension in reaching a 'passage of power without pain' ... And while our sons died at the front to redeem the honor of the flag, that sorry lot of schemers, double-dealers, spies, and traitors slipped into our hard-working daily life to size up our resistance capabilities. Posing as lambs, they plotted ambushes, and when ready to strike, they turned into wolves. Only later did we learn who these men were when we found them in execution squads cutting down our men with bursts of machine gun fire ... Our valorous generals who wrote glorious pages in the conquest of Eastern Africa were joined as interlocutors by the likes of General Montagna, head of the Fascist police, and General Diamanti, military commander of the Lombard region. Add-ons to this knot of charmers included Minister Biggini, Professor Cione, the journalist Gastone Gorrieri, the *questore* Bettini, and countless others who busied themselves in discussions with our adversaries over the modalities of a passage of power from our hands to theirs."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 234–35.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Ibid., pp. 226–27. "As long as the war lasts, if one side invokes concord and manifests the desire of exiting from the war, he is actually surrendering to the enemy."

<sup>20</sup> Costa, *L'ultimo federale*, pp. 195–96. On 5 March 1945 Costa spoke to the Fascists of Sesto San Giovanni, saying that "Cione and Sollazzo look to put the stick between the wheels, but we Fascists will stop at nothing in overwhelming everyone." ACS, RSI, Prefettura di Milano, b. 1, "Appunto per il Duce," 5 marzo 1945.

The Farinacci cohort likewise denounced Pettinato for advancing a policy replete with the “errors of consensus, collaboration, and mutual embraces.” In an article entitled “How to Walk away from These Veiled Threats,” Farinacci wrote: “While anti-Fascism counts many victims, while in Allied-invaded Italy trials, arrests, and persecutions escalate, equally deplorable events take place under our noses, like people selling out to the enemy, a plethora of lawless characters running about, and deserters ready to shoot us in the back.”

Pettinato concludes his article by imploring his readers “to expend whatever extreme human strength is needed for finding common agreement on saving the unity and integrity of the country. Full commitment to this endeavor will presumably free us from a perfidious Italian addiction to factional city strife, fractious class conflict, and focus on the private life over the public realm. Ceasing to fight, let us hold our arms above foreign bayonets. Let us remember that we all have the same blood, speak the same language, suffer the same pain, and bear the same humiliations.”<sup>21</sup> To this, Farinacci responded with the curt observation: “We cannot say that this is Fascist language, a revolutionary language, an authentic language.”<sup>22</sup> Mussolini, in a disavowal of his own testing the waters of reconciliation, and, not unexpectedly, Pavolini too, lit into Pettinato for throttling the passionate spirit needed in these harsh times. They criticized him for displaying lamentable party discipline and advocating a spirit of concord that debased the Fascist Party. By these shortcomings, according to Pavolini, Pettinato had committed the major sin of contravening the Duce’s will.<sup>23</sup>

When Cione’s paper finally came out on 28 March 1945, Pavolini was furious. The editors were defeatists, chimed in Mezzasoma. The hard core branded as traitors anyone who ventured to disagree with them and failed to appreciate that Fascist ideology was primarily a mystical experience. Under their watchful eye, *squadrismi* moved in to punish those who bought Cione’s tabloid. All who disagreed with the official party line were declared traitors; any suggestion made to modify government policy would invite the end of the world. Germinale Concordia (an extremist member of the *ponte* group) was immediately arrested by Major Bossi of the GNR of Milan on the information provided him by the Gestapo. “Germinale

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Perticone, *La repubblica di Salò*, p. 295.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 254–56; Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 22–25, 224–35.

Concordia having been detained,” reads one report of the *questura* of Milan, “the entire *Raggruppamento*, just now authorized by the Duce, has been required to suspend every activity.”<sup>24</sup> The intransigents vowed to defend the purity of Fascism as a “*bella morte*” (beautiful death). Under this onslaught, the paper, frequently sequestered, finally folded on 10 April 1945. The hardheads had no real reason to worry, for implementation of Cione’s program would hardly have led to a full transition from Fascism to an embryonic democracy.

Strengthened by the nomination of the flinty Antonio Bonino and Pino Romualdi, two new militant vice secretaries to the National Directorate of the PNF, the Central Commission of Party Discipline served as the Fascist Grand Inquisitors overseeing rigorous obedience to the existing party line. Allowable behavior was limited to “constructive” and “valid” support of the government. Finding Pettinato in contempt of these principles, the commission suspended him from the directorship of *La Stampa*. Mezzasoma followed up by removing him completely for having advocated a coming together among Italians “above foreign bayonets,” one of the main *ponte* themes.<sup>25</sup> Shortly afterward, Mezzasoma cut Mirko Giobbe loose from the newspaper *La Nazione*. Giorgio Pini, however, because Mussolini had him ticketed for the Interior Ministry, escaped the unemployment ax and stayed on as director of *Il Resto del Carlino*. Pini chided Mussolini: “They do not punish Farinacci when he writes that the Italian people deserve the club; instead they punish Pettinato when he affirms that the supreme truth lies in the need for reconciliation among Italians.”<sup>26</sup> Pini was the titular head of a group of “moderate-liberal” Fascists composed mainly of journalists and intellectuals. His appointment as undersecretary of the Interior Ministry was intended to serve as a counterpoint to the devious Buffarini.

The Germans, like the RSI’s zealots, took the Duce’s permission for Cione to establish the National Republican Socialist Grouping as compromising dictatorship, coddling Communists, and exposing his regime to Marxist propaganda.<sup>27</sup> In a long harangue delivered to Rahn on 31 March, Mussolini tried to disarm these fears: “To take the wind out of our

<sup>24</sup> ACS, RSI, Prefettura di Milano, b. 1, “Appunto per il Ministro dell’Interno,” 21 marzo 1945.

<sup>25</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. XI.

<sup>26</sup> Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, III: 525.

<sup>27</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 100–01.

opponents' sails, I let certain critics have their say as soon as I thought the New Fascism in Italy strong enough. Among other things, I allowed formation of an opposition group under Professor Cione. This assemblage calls itself national, republican and socialist. Professor Cione is no great brain, and will have no success. But the people who are now seeking an alibi will gather around him, and will therefore be lost to the much more dangerous Liberation Committee. This Liberation Committee is furious about the new group and already labels Cione and all his friends as the worst kind of traitors. On the other hand the members of the Fascist Party have been very exercised over this new group and are launching a full-scale attack against it. This suits me perfectly since Fascists are further incited to take a stand and do something active. I have allowed the Cione group to put out a small weekly newspaper. If the Foreign Minister [Rahn] sees some danger in this, I will suppress it. But I should regret this, for it would take away from the new group part of its ventilating function that I consider extraordinarily important."<sup>28</sup>

German patience was sorely tested by these circumlocutions. But here the Duce was not trying to put one over on them, for he knew that Cione was essentially a pseudo-philosopher windbag, not a politician who would know how to work a room of Fascist insiders. Cione's followers, he suspected, consisted of marginalized or neutered Fascists whom he would only bother using in a last-minute, shot-in-the-dark effort to turn around his political fortunes.

Tottering down the finish line to the end of the regime, Mussolini tried through Silvestri, on 22 April 1945, to obtain terms of surrender from the resistance leader Sandro Pertini and his following but was roundly rebuffed.<sup>29</sup> No authentic Socialist would take up the Duce's gambit, save the commander of the partisan Matteotti Brigade, Corrado Bonfantini. Suspecting a bad end, Mussolini preferred that the Socialist-minded inherit the country rather than the old conservative bourgeois classes restored to power in the baggage of victorious "plutocratic" Allies.

The hard-core party members comprising the RSI's political vanguard were aghast over Mussolini's drift toward conciliators favoring ideological compromise with leftist elements.<sup>30</sup> Headed by Minister of the Interior

<sup>28</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 275.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>30</sup> Gloria Gabrielli, *Carlo Silvestri socialista, antifascista, mussoliniano* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1992), pp. 294–95; Cuzzi, "Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.," p. 121.

Paolo Zerbino, they favored a different approach: a search for allies among certain anti-revolutionary and anti-Socialist Christian Democrats. General Montagna lent a hand by attempting to get in touch with conservative political liberals through his Masonic contacts. The majority of the hierarchs in the government, clearly hostile to *Socializzazione*, tended to reach out to the anti-Fascist right.<sup>31</sup>

Mussolini, in the end, would neither share power with “bridge builders” nor give in to drastic changes that put his stature as a radical Fascist duce on trial. He was willing to ponder integration of new forms and structures tinged by a neo-Socialist credo in the regime, but these “cerebral” reforms were usually cast aside by a burning urge to throw off what weighed down true Fascism: the despised *Italiotta*—monarchy, parliament, and the old *classe dirigente*. From humiliation and shame Mussolini constantly renounced his former *trasformismo* ways that left bourgeois Italy untouched and Fascism only skin-deep. Such resentments, simmering throughout the Salò period, affected everything he said and did. In his last hurrah, behind the vacillations, trial balloons, and the so-called *trasformismo*—the desperate efforts of a man whose survival hung by a thread—Mussolini remained at heart a dogmatic revolutionary Fascist circling around the intransigent head of the Fascist Party, Alessandro Pavolini.

<sup>31</sup> Cuzzi, “Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.,” p. 121.



## Frenzied Endgame

The end of the war was in sight. Times worsened for the Germans during spring and summer of 1944 with the opening of the Allied second front in France and inexorable Soviet advances in the East. Wehrmacht armies were pressed to the limit in Italy too. Having captured Rome, the Allies, on 17 July, launched an attack on Ancona, while Yugoslav partisans drove into the Northeast Adriatic. The Germans pulled out of Florence on 4 August and the Allies clawed their way toward Bologna. At the beginning of September Hitler pondered retreat from the Po Valley to a line in the Prealpi, giving the Wehrmacht a respite from severe losses in life and equipment. But at this juncture the High Allied Command, to take pressure off the troops on the Normandy beachheads, removed seven Allied divisions from the Italian theater and sent them to southern France, where they would add muscle for an invasion by mid-August. This caused a slow-down in the Allied advance in Italy. Hitler took advantage of the thinned Allied ranks to fight the partisans fiercely for control of Tuscany. During the campaign, the German Wehrmacht and SS engaged in a scorched-earth policy; in Marzabotto alone they executed 1,830 civilians.

On 13 November 1944 Field Marshal Harold Alexander advised the partisans to stand down for the winter, as if they could easily hide their arms, saunter home, and avoid roundups by Fascists controlling the local villages. Many partisans saw their insurgency aspirations dashed by General

Alexander's discouraging missive.<sup>1</sup> The Axis partners, of course, were delighted that the Allied commander had issued the partisans an unexpected invitation to disband for a winter vacation.

Benefiting from a relative peace and quiet in the countryside, the RSI had time to recuperate and redefine strategy against the partisans, who were alarmed by the spread of banditry on the part of deserters and outright criminal elements that preyed on the rural populations already battered by the hardships of war. The partisans were hard-pressed to bring them under control. Mussolini seized the moment by announcing another amnesty on 28 October 1944, which guaranteed that they would not be faced with military drafts and deportation to Germany for obligatory work. Rather, they would be engaged in "labor activity" in Italy. But since the pardon assured such ex-partisans only "relative safety," hardly any seasoned guerrilla warrior answered the appeal. Those who profited from the amnesty initiative were above all draft dodgers and those fleeing the obligatory work call-ups.

On the military front, the last of Italy's four divisions finally returned from Germany. The Italians looked forward to their taking up positions against the enemy, while the Wehrmacht had them ticketed for the less glamorous business of tracking down partisans. The Axis partners concluded that the wheel of fortune had begun to turn in their direction.

Still, the Italians faced many thorny issues. Graziani's army, having been trained and equipped in Germany, did not benefit much from Wehrmacht tutelage. Fighting a counterinsurgency war continued to be a mystery, and the troops had no heart "for decapitating the rebellion of the outlaws."<sup>2</sup> The only mission that stirred enthusiasm was defense of the homeland against the advancing Allied forces, the very task that the Wehrmacht was most reluctant to concede.

For the most part, Graziani's troops were deployed in presidios far from the front lines: 3,000 fought on the Gothic Line; 20,000 were sent out on *rastrellamenti* missions against the partisans; and the rest stayed put in forts along the Ligurian Coast. In the process, whatever professional standards of discipline and respect for hierarchy had existed in the army were slowly but surely supplanted by an unmistakable outlaw mentality. Radical Fascists suffered from no shortage of evidence in bringing charges against Graziani's floundering *Regio Esercito* for glaring incompetence.

<sup>1</sup> Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia*, pp. 180–81.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 185.



The lone individual who emerged strengthened in these muddled conditions was General Graziani himself, who had proved to be an adept weathercock in taking up the ways of radical Fascism. He was the beneficiary of Mussolini's effort to overcome a fragmented military system by unifying the GNR and Black Brigades under his command. Taking a cue from the confusion gripping the RSI to advance his own power, Graziani asked Kesselring for the authority to replace the provincial heads with generals.<sup>3</sup> There was no Ricci or Pavolini to challenge his authority over a Fascist army that rested on an amalgam of party, police, and armed forces.<sup>4</sup> By becoming *primus inter pares* over all things military, Graziani had made a convenient adjustment that enabled him unobtrusively to cast off his former "apolitical" position that the party should be subordinate to the regular army.

Even though, at the end of October 1944, Mussolini had finally granted Graziani his due by ordering the GNR to be incorporated under the general's command, and even though Graziani had begun to give the police functions currently supervised by the GNR over to the party militants in the BN, he would come up short in providing them with appropriate tools for carrying out the assigned police work and *rastrellamenti*. Distressed by their housing in miserably provisioned barracks, many Fascist radicals turned out to be untrustworthy. Some expressed discontent by handing in their party cards. A unit of the X Mas, the Swimmer Parachutists Battalion, threatened mutiny if they were not sent to the Gothic front instead of combating partisans. Other radical groups simply ignored orderly police procedures and would not relinquish their favorite death squadron forays. Cardinal Schuster, in October 1944, wrote Mussolini: "By now we have arrived at the point that, whereas in Milan a month ago there were at least seven *questure* independent of each other, now every officer who commands a squad of fifty men takes it upon himself to assault villages, torch farmsteads, herd people into prisons, and torture, shoot, and plunder wantonly in Lombardy."<sup>5</sup>

Still hoping that the tide of war would change in his favor, Mussolini, on 14 November 1944, urged Hitler to throw a massed force of 80,000 to 100,000 men in the Po valley against the Allied armies, which would "turn the situation upside-down." There was no more need to concentrate

<sup>3</sup> Moellhausen, *La carte perdente*, p. 207.

<sup>4</sup> Cuzzi, "Gli ultimi mesi della R.S.I.," pp. 103–06.

<sup>5</sup> Ildefonso Schuster, *Gli ultimi tempi di un regime* (Milano: La Via, 1946), p. 66.

on the partisans, because they were “dying out.”<sup>6</sup> Hitler did not reply, for he had another offensive in mind that was far more dramatic: a surprise attack in early December against the Allies through the Ardennes, a game changer he hoped. Nonetheless, General Kesselring brought the disorganized partisan units under heavy fire and relentless pressure, which caused them heavy losses in lives, equipment, arms, and food.

Emboldened by Anfuso, Mussolini looked forward to straight talk with Germans who had been endlessly flouting him. At the Lyric Theater in Milan on 16 December 1944, his first public appearance in the city since 1936, he stated that the Italian people had committed no betrayal; Italy had manfully pulled its own oar since 8 September. Mussolini daringly suggested that his Nazi detractors remove the notions of Italian “falsity” and “betrayals” from political discourse.

The Italians present lustily cheered the Duce’s nerve, while the Germans were taken aback by the vitality of a man they had dismissed as slipping badly in both energy and judgment. On 17 February a large contingent of Fascists marched through Via Dante to the headquarters of the Fascist Ettore Muti Legion, where Mussolini displayed his racial prejudices while addressing an enthusiastic crowd: “If some among our multicolored enemies, and I say multicolored because alongside a few white bastards are people of all races, had witnessed the march today in Via Dante, they would be convinced that, despite the grayness of this autumn, the grand spring of the nation is imminent.”<sup>7</sup> But the frenetic Italian enthusiasm toward the Duce was a flash in the pan, for people quickly recognized that the regime was bare-boned and the Duce’s urgent call for patriotism worn out. Mussolini was both buoyed and dispirited. He told Rachele: “In twenty years of fascism I never had a reception like this ... After my speech there was a triumph, a real triumph ... A sea of people so enormous that it had no end. I was pleased to pass among the people, standing in the car, while they shouted their faith in me.”<sup>8</sup> But at the same time, in a confidence to Claretta Petacci, Mussolini poured out his heart: not a single Italian soldier could be found during the recent Allied offensive on the Gothic Line.<sup>9</sup>

In a fit of self-pity, Mussolini, in January 1945, confided to Madeleine Mollier, the wife of the German press attaché: “Yes, madam, I’m finished;

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 218–20. For the text in Italian, see Gasparini and Razeto, 1944, pp. 419–20.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Moseley, *Mussolini*, pp. 165–66. See also Rachele Mussolini, *La mia vita con Benito* (Milan: Mondadori, 1948), p. 255, and OO, XXXII: 128–40.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Ibid; Rachele Mussolini, *La mia vita con Benito*, p. 255.

<sup>9</sup> Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, p. 233.

my star has set. I work and do my best, knowing that it is all a big farce. I wait for the tragedy to end, and, oddly, I feel totally cut off from everything. I am no longer the actor. I am only the last spectator. Even my voice, I feel it as an imitation. You know, as I do, and perhaps better than I, that I'm a prisoner, only a simple pawn in the game ... I would like nothing better than to read, read and wait for my destiny to work itself out."<sup>10</sup>

In a meeting on 20 January 1945, hosted by Rahn and Moellhausen, Graziani arrived, surrounded by a cluster of RSI officials: Pavolini, Pellegrini Giampietro, Buffarini Guidi, Barracu, and Mazzolini. Hounded by criticisms and misfortunes, the Italian general bore a long list of particulars for a showdown with the Germans. The Wehrmacht had done virtually nothing to assist the four Italian divisions coming from the Third Reich reach fighting trim: no decent clothing, scarce munitions, and a disparaging attitude that Italians were seen more as workers than soldiers. Rahn pointed out the uselessness of arming troops who were deserting at an alarming rate and insisted that he was doing everything possible to help set the Italian army on its feet. Graziani, angered by the German characterization of the Italian troops, maintained that "we are not traitors and will never be ... Give us the means and the possibility of carrying arms and we will put an end to the suspicions that humiliate and offend us." Graziani also bitterly complained about the German failure to outfit and provision his troops. No wonder, he noted, that Italy's finest, equipped so shabbily—or not at all—would drift into rebellion and desertion.<sup>11</sup>

Italian Finance Minister Pellegrini Giampietro weighed in with complaints that Germany was excessively burdening the RSI with too many monetary and supply demands, while Buffarini grumbled about annoying interferences, the worst of which occurred in the German-occupied border provinces where Graziani was denied contact with Italian military units in the region. Buffarini commented: "In the zones of the Prealpi, the work of denationalization, reinforced by the destruction of [Italian] symbols, is accentuated in an obvious manner." Rahn brutally replied: "Once the Germans had taken charge, 10,000 fiercely determined Slovene allies were assembled to fight Tito's forces, an unheard of occurrence during the Italian occupation."<sup>12</sup>

Wanting to beef up his troops under arms, Graziani complained to Mussolini on 29 January that General Wolff, predicting inevitable draft-

<sup>10</sup> OO, XXXII: 157–61.

<sup>11</sup> Viganò, *Il ministero degli affari esteri*, Verbale della riunione tenutasi all'ambasciata di Germania sabato 29 gennaio 1945/XXIII, pp. 567–78.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. See also Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 232–33.

dodging or flight to the partisans, was not obliging. Send the men to the Todt and RUK organizations, Wolff advised, where they would be more profitably employed and supervised; meanwhile, proceed with “deforestation”, a euphemism for sparing no method, including torture, to elicit information from the “bandits.” Whoever fell into their grasp during *rastrellamenti* or after an armed clash would be immediately shot after interrogation.<sup>13</sup>

But while the growth of partisan resistance was slowed, neither tough Italian talk nor rigorous German search-and-destroy missions succeeded in breaking up the insurgency. As the civil war became ever bloodier throughout northern Italy, Nazis and Fascists arrested, tortured, and summarily shot their enemies, while the partisans reciprocated in kind. Given the ferocity of the strife destroying their neighborhoods, the fence-sitters either hid from the Fascists or found safety in partisan redoubts. As the center of gravity began to shift unmistakably toward the Allies, the wait-and-see attitude gave way to a mounting resolve to make a decisive break with the RSI. If the hunters still searched furiously, their prey was able to find refuge in remote places, its essential leadership still intact.

As spring broke, the resistance had come a long way in overcoming the worst developments that followed General Alexander’s debilitating proclamation in August 1944, let alone a tough winter. Thanks to arms and equipment parachuted in by the Allies, the resistance could finally arm the thousands of draft dodgers and anti-Fascists who were joining up in ever greater numbers. Moreover, the Anglo-American pressure exerted in France, coupled with the Soviet offensives in the East, clearly demonstrated that the end of the war was only a question of months, if not weeks. Propelled by gusts of optimism and an obviously enfeebled RSI, the resistance took the battle to the Axis enemy. Facing insurmountable obstacles, not a few Fascists tried a quick change of uniform or searched frantically for contacts with the resistance. The gallant Italian resistance leader Leo Valiani reports: “Montagna and Zerbino, heads of the Fascist police, Buffarini Guidi, the Interior Minister, and Tarchi, the Economics Minister, were among the dozens of Fascist hierarchs who through tortuous maneuverings aimed surreptitiously to inform the Allies that they were disposed to negotiate their own surrender.”<sup>14</sup> The undying radical Fascists, and those who had blood on their hands from multiple crimes committed

<sup>13</sup> Patricelli, *Il nemico in casa*, pp. 252–53.

<sup>14</sup> Valiani, *Tutte le strade conducono a Roma*, p. 258.

and therefore had no hope or desire to reach out either to the partisans or the Allies, simply joined Nazis in hitting back with arrests, torture, and summary executions. But instead of acting as a deterrent, such violence propelled many fence-sitters into the resistance.

The Italian irregulars fighting alongside their German comrades did no better than the army units employed in tracking down partisans. Having been neither adequately trained nor provisioned to hold up their end on the battlefield, they rarely undertook missions without strong German assistance. But while the Wehrmacht piled up atrocities, the record of the rogue Italian forces of repression was no less gruesome. A shocking example of this occurred during a massacre in the hills of Benedicta, in Liguria, where both partisans and draft dodgers had taken refuge. Commenced on 6 April 1945, the campaign wound up with the shooting of over 100 youth.<sup>15</sup>

As the RSI continued to unravel, Mussolini had to face an ominous and pending defeat at the hands of the Allies. Since military victory was beyond reach, he had only one option—a very slender one—to save both himself and the regime: diplomacy. Should he proceed alone or join forces with Hitler? Advising negotiations to the Führer, who deemed any approach to the despised Allies as shame and sacrilege, would be a tall order.

In February 1945 Mussolini mused on a plan for the Axis Powers to join the Allies in halting the spread of Communism. The Allied summit meeting in latter January at Yalta, which, in his view, had produced an abyss between the USA and USSR, provided him an opening. On the 28th he wrote Hitler that since he had an ace up his sleeve to play with Churchill, his bitter British antagonist could not refuse to parley: “My relations with Churchill are today such that difficulties a priori can be excluded.” He implored Hitler: “Let us delay no further! Führer! Let us not sacrifice our last chance!”<sup>16</sup> He received no direct reply.

Churchill, reasoned the Duce, had recognized the danger to Europe of Stalin’s proposed take-over of Poland and the Baltic states. His entire country would be shaken by fear that the Soviet Union was poised to spread far afield in the Continent, and thus would finally be ready to seek help from the Axis Powers to check the Communist onslaught.<sup>17</sup> Confident that he

<sup>15</sup> Battaglia, *Storia della resistenza italiana*, p. 289.

<sup>16</sup> Lazzeri, *Il sacco d’Italia*, pp. 72–73, citing a letter Mussolini sent to Hitler on 28 February 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 86, record of a telephone conversation between Mussolini and Petacci, several days after the Yalta Conference.

held the British prime minister in thrall, Mussolini, on 25 March 1945, revealed to Pavolini what he claimed to be powerful diplomatic leverage: "At the moment I hold that, to strengthen our hand, the most important thing is to put the correspondence and exchanges [I have] on accords with Churchill in a safe place. These documents will provide the inevitable proof of British bad faith. These documents are worth more to Italy than a war that has been won, because they will clarify to the world the true reasons for our intervention on the side of Germany."<sup>18</sup> Dumbfounded that the Western Powers were opening the door to Communist expansion in Europe, Mussolini described them as shortsighted and rigid. "One thing is certain: before the bar of History, the German and Italian allies can never be accused of responsibility for these errors."<sup>19</sup>

For all the Duce's bravado, there is not one iota of evidence to support his beliefs, as conclusively revealed by the Italian historian Mimmo Franzinelli. The supposed correspondence from Churchill consisted of one letter, dated 16 May 1940, encouraging Mussolini to stay out of the war. "Is it too late to stop a river of blood from flowing between the British and Italian peoples? We can no doubt inflict grievous injuries upon one another and maul each other cruelly and darken the Mediterranean with our strife. If you so decree, it must be so; but I declare that I have never been the enemy of Italian greatness nor ever at heart the foe of the Italian lawgiver." But this expression of good will was followed by a gentle reminder that England, even if alone, was prepared to go on to the end. "Hearken to it, I beseech you in all honor and respect, before the dread signal is given [for Italy to go to war against England]. It will never be given by us."<sup>20</sup> Mussolini's reply was not long in coming. In a note to the British prime minister a couple of days later, the Duce gruffly repeated his resentment over England's sanctions against Italy during the Ethiopian War and the nature of his country's "servitude" to Perfidious Albion in the Mediterranean. Italy would stand by the Axis partner no matter what.<sup>21</sup> Churchill sent no further letter to the Italian dictator.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 90, record of a telephone conversation between Mussolini and Pavolini, 25 March 1943.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 88, Mussolini's phone conversation with Petacci, 3 March 1945.

<sup>20</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, II: Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassel, 1949), p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> DDI, 9, IV, 487, Mussolini to Churchill, 18 May 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Franzinelli, *L'arma segreta del Duce*, Kindle location 47.

If Mussolini was eager to bring Hitler around to negotiations with the Allies, he was hesitant to undertake such a move on his own. "To act on an initiative by ourselves?" he wrote Clara Petacci on 14 March 1945. "This is not advisable. I don't want to follow the footsteps of Savoy and the other traitors,"<sup>23</sup> he said with typical braggadocio. Unable to move Hitler, the Duce had actually overcome such scruples before by searching for a deliberately "Italian" solution of the war. On 9 March he sent a priest to Switzerland with a peace proposal to the Vatican envoy, involving an alliance of Italy, Germany, and the Allies to defeat Soviet Communism.<sup>24</sup> Such bizarre overtures to the Allies revealed Mussolini's vacillating between a "mad world of flames" and diplomatic mumbo jumbo.

Another fanciful proposal involved Mussolini's son, Vittorio. Through him Mussolini transmitted a letter to Archbishop of Milan Cardinal Schuster, dated 13 March 1945, which proposed that Graziani's soldiers, with Allied cooperation, suppress partisan bands, Communists, and strikes. The Allies would return the favor by disarming the partisans before the RSI units laid down their arms. There would be no criminal trials, no purges, and no action brought against those who had taken an oath to the RSI. After peace had been restored, the Fascist Party would be dissolved and constitutional practices implemented. This fanciful proposal reached the Holy See, which informed Mussolini that the Allies did not intend to engage in negotiations outside unconditional surrender.<sup>25</sup>

On 19 March 1945 Mussolini called Anfuso back to be undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry. Anfuso told the Duce that since Germany was in its death throes, there was only slender hope that the British and Americans could be separated from the Russians. With the German-promised new weapons failing to show up quickly on the battlefield, Mussolini braced himself for the worst. In a hushed tone he uttered: "Sooner or later truth comes out. Fate marches inexorably on, nor is there any way of escaping it. Only a miracle can modify matters."<sup>26</sup>

Anfuso told Mussolini a week later that Ribbentrop had sought contacts with the Americans and British.<sup>27</sup> The Duce replied: "Up to a little time ago ... I believed that my mediation with Churchill might have been

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Lazzero, *Il sacco d'Italia*, p. 74, Mussolini's letter to Clara Petacci, 14 March 1945.

<sup>24</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 466.

<sup>25</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, pp. 266–67.

<sup>26</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, pp. 121–25.

<sup>27</sup> Pini and Susmel, *Mussolini, l'uomo e l'opera*, IV: 487.

possible. Now, when one speaks of England to Hitler, he acts as if he has been bitten by a poisonous snake.”<sup>28</sup>

In the hope of sparing Italy further ravages of war, Economics Minister Angelo Tarchi suggested on 29 March that he approach the Western Allies. The Duce gave him the go-ahead, saying: “You know that my initiatives, likewise supported by Hitler, for transforming the front have found only silence on the part of Churchill. In my proposals I placed no conditions either for myself or for the party. My purpose was once again only to save Europe from a Russian invasion, of concluding a war without having immediately created the necessity of making war yet again.”<sup>29</sup> (Such a statement was filled with misrepresentations, mainly that his “initiatives” were supported by Hitler.)

All this tendentious verbosity was self-serving. In truth, the Duce was more preoccupied with working out a plan for a last stand in Milan, or in the Valtellina à la Stalingrad, where he would find ultimate martyrdom in a Fascist Thermopylae.<sup>30</sup> On 18 September 1944 he instructed Pavolini to assemble a commission to be called the *Ridotto Alpino Repubblicano*, whose mandate was to organize a resistance as long as possible against the invading Allies.<sup>31</sup> Defiantly, he proclaimed on 1 March 1945: “Fascism cannot be cancelled from Italian history!”<sup>32</sup> Before officers of the GNR on 6 March 1945, Mussolini declared: “We have promised to defend the Po Valley, city by city, house by house. This is a sacred obligation that we must undertake.”<sup>33</sup>

Having dodged many previous serious scrapes by guile, Mussolini intensified his search for “bridges” toward non-Communist anti-Fascists by supporting Socialists and allowing Fascist dissidents to act as intermediaries with the resistance, details of which have been described in a previous chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Chigi al Lago di Garda*, p. 464. Tamaro lends credence to Dr. Zachariae’s reported conversations with the Duce, who told him that during the war he intended to make contact with Churchill and make an agreement, something that Ribbentrop could never accomplish. But Hitler, listening to Ribbentrop, who always opposed Mussolini’s initiatives, never wanted to follow his advice. Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*, IV: 465.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Pini and Susmel, *Mussolini, l’uomo e l’opera*, IV: 488.

<sup>30</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 466, places emphasis on this Italian solution of the war. The *federale* of Milano, Vincenzo Costa, claimed his paternity of the Valtellina as the last refuge of the RSI. Pansa, *Il sangue dei vinti*, p. 66.

<sup>31</sup> Bocca, *La Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 315.

<sup>32</sup> OO, XXXII: 166.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in Bocca, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, pp. 321–22.



Rahn got wind of these projects and laid into Mellini and Anfuso over Mussolini's leftward drift, social engineering schemes, and contacts with Italian writers he considered pro-English.<sup>34</sup> "Is it true," Ribbentrop asked, "that Mussolini was distancing himself from Fascism?"<sup>35</sup> Hitler, still stewing over the Duce's refusal to include "Fascism" in the name of the Salò republic,<sup>36</sup> rejected his neo-Socialist program, fearing that it could give sell-out Fascists license to contact left-leaning Italian resistance leaders for an agreement leading to Salò's departure from the war. The Germans took *Socializzazione* as compromising dictatorship, coddling Communists, and dangerously exposing Mussolini's regime to Marxist propaganda.

A prickly Mussolini asked why the Germans could be so preoccupied with Italian domestic politics and the "*piccola cucina*" (small talk) going the rounds. Far better, he told Mellini on 24 March that they "concentrate on the war and let me govern Italy."<sup>37</sup> Anfuso tried to reassure Ribbentrop of Italy's fidelity to Germany, but such confidence had rarely existed.<sup>38</sup>

By April the Axis military position was fast crumbling. The Allied spring offensive in Italy commenced on the 9th. Three days later the Western Allies crossed the Elbe and stood only sixty miles from Berlin. Meanwhile the Russians surged toward the Oder River thirty-five miles from Berlin. The imminent defeat of the Third Reich prompted SS generals in Italy to pursue their secret talks with American agents in Switzerland, aimed at a surrender of German forces in Italy. Although rumors abounded, confidentiality was pretty much upheld.<sup>39</sup> Salò remained out of the peace-making loop.

In a RSI law enforcement crisis, a large number of police were drafted and actually showed up. Wolff, in early April 1945, estimated an overall force of 72,000, many of whom, to be sure, existed only on paper. The territorial brigades of the Blackshirts stationed in major centers of the

<sup>34</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 128; Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 249–50; Cospito and Neulen, *Salò-Berlino*, p. 273.

<sup>35</sup> MAE AGRSI, Germania, 1/1, Appunto per il Duce, 29 March 1945, unsigned memorandum but probably written by Anfuso, 061349–061353.

<sup>36</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, p. 251.

<sup>37</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, p. 129.

<sup>38</sup> Fabei, *I neri e i rossi*, pp. 250–53.

<sup>39</sup> One known exception was a report placed on Mussolini's desk that orders had been given to German troops in Milan not to leave their barracks, which suggested talks with local partisans aimed at a truce. Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 272.

provinces comprised 19,000 men, while 3,000 were organized in mobile units. The X Mas numbered 4800, the Ettore Muti legion 900, and the Waffen Italian SS around 4,500.<sup>40</sup>

At a meeting on 6 April between high-level Germans and Italians, Pavolini pressed the idea of a withdrawal to the “Alpine republican redoubt,” Valtellina, where supposedly fifty thousand or so Fascist troops would show up out of thin air to make a stout defense and “die a beautiful death, arms in hand, protecting the Duce.”<sup>41</sup> At the same time, plans were bruited about regarding the formation of clandestine party cells in the Alto Adige to fight on after military defeat and to salvage Fascist ideals for use in more promising times. In the exchange of views that ensued, the Germans plainly wanted to sidetrack such a “macabre fantasy” that, if implemented, would irretrievably compromise their own secret talks with the Allies aimed at getting the Wehrmacht out of the war in the Italian theater and home safely.

On 12 April, encouraged by the death of President Roosevelt, “that paraplegic weakling,” Mussolini perceived a ray of hope that the Allies would be prepared to consider a diplomatic solution of the war. If this should happen, he told Rahn on the 14th, the Yalta agreements would die and American appeasement of the Soviet Union would give way to fear of a Communist takeover of Europe. Dismayed by notable Communist inroads in Greece, the Allies, fearing the same thing was happening in Italy, would seek support of the former Fascist enemy, which now loomed far less threatening than Stalin’s legions advancing deeply into Germany. Borghese and his X Mas would be offered weapons and reinforcements to hold off Tito’s advance in the Venezia Giulia.<sup>42</sup> In the far-fetched hope that the Allied armies in northern Italy were setting in motion a plan to contain Stalin’s juggernaut by a drive over the Alps into Germany, Mussolini would pitch in by bringing his resolutely anti-Communist regime into the Allied fold. Ergo: no Casablanca formula of “unconditional surrender” and no more threatening partisan movement permeated with pro-Soviet disciples.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione tedesca in Italia*, p. 317.

<sup>41</sup> Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 212; Costa, *L'Ultimo federale*, p. XXIX. Military leaders such as Graziani, Diamanti, and Borghese thought the Valtellina was simply a folly.

<sup>42</sup> Cuzzi, “Gli ultimi mesi della RSI,” p. 112.

<sup>43</sup> Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 282.

During a German/Italian conference at the Villa Feltrinelli in Gargnano on 14 April, which included Pavolini, Zerbino, Anfuso, Graziani, Rahn, Wolff, Dollmann, and Wehrmacht General Scheel Heinrich von Vietinghoff, Pavolini, reciting from a sheaf of maps and charts, led off with plans for a last stand at the Valtellina redoubt. Von Vietinghoff dismissed Pavolini as a romantic dreamer. Hounded by rumors, Mussolini asked Wolff directly if there were any German talks going on with the Anglo-Americans. Mendacious to the end, Wolff replied that such was the chit-chat of scandalmongers.<sup>44</sup> Claiming that he had received precise instructions from Himmler, Wolff attempted to put the Duce off by the promise that the Wehrmacht would construct an Alpine defensive line for a “*tramonto eroico*” (heroic twilight) stand.<sup>45</sup> According to Mussolini’s physician and confidant, the German doctor Zachariae, the Duce had some idea of what Wolff was up to in making peace with the Allies with no regard for the RSI and him.<sup>46</sup>

Anfuso’s take after the fact: “I asked the opinion of the Germans—Wehrmacht and SS—on the common Italo-German defense in the Valtellina, considering that the geographical situation would permit its defenders to join up, in a determination to resist to the end, with Wehrmacht legions in Germany. The German generals, who had in their pockets the conditions of surrender stipulated with the Anglo-Americans, did not make clear the true difficulties, calculating that it was useless to oppose us by provoking discussions with Mussolini and his following that would be both stormy and useless ... Passing on to the technical part of the project, Vietinghof gave the word of his chief of staff who advised us on various defenses (without giving any preference), employing the eternal voice of a military professional. He did not mention the substantial defense measures already signed by his commander in chief [*in capo*], the one who was preparing to abandon us to the vendettas of our compatriots.”<sup>47</sup> No matter what the Germans said or did, Mussolini authorized the commandant of the Black Brigades to pursue the Valtellina redoubt plan.

Would the Italians fall for this German skullduggery? Fearful that the well-connected Anfuso might blow the whistle on Germany’s contacts with the Allies, Rahn contrived to send him to Berlin where he would

<sup>44</sup> Bellotti, *La repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 216.

<sup>45</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 469. Wolff’s turn of phrase to Anfuso.

<sup>46</sup> Zachariae, *Mussolini si confessa*, Kindle edition, location 2608.

<sup>47</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, pp. 470–71.

bring Hitler around to the idea of a peace without conditions with Moscow.<sup>48</sup> Undeceived, Anfuso believed that Rahn and Wolff wanted to “remove him from the Duce at such a delicate moment in order to have freer hands.”<sup>49</sup> With Soviet troops poised for a dash into Berlin, Anfuso, having no wish to undertake a wild goose chase, was convinced that the proposal would be dead on arrival.<sup>50</sup> For his part, Mussolini, raising no objections, prepared to let him go, but commented that Stalin would hardly be receptive.<sup>51</sup> Needing more time to get family and friends into safe exile in Switzerland, Anfuso delayed departure for this dreary mission to Germany. Finally, yielding to pressure, he took leave of the Duce on 16 April.<sup>52</sup> As Anfuso was making his way across the Alps, he received a summons from Mussolini to return immediately for consultations.<sup>53</sup> Anfuso left Bad Gastein, where he had been stranded, for Salò, on 26 April.<sup>54</sup> Failing to find the Duce, he took refuge in France.

On 21 April 1945 in Milan, Mussolini convened the last council of ministers meeting of the RSI. Looking utterly downcast, he presided over a short gathering. Still, holding out for a miracle, he pleaded for a last-ditch resistance in the Valtellina.<sup>55</sup> When the meeting broke up, the ministers prepared to carry out singly what they had once vowed to do collectively: “Save what you can” (*si salvi chi può*). Die-hard Fascists looked forward to “dying with the sun in their faces.” (*morire col sole in faccia*). Mussolini was left to brood over his unbearable fear: capture by the British. After a humiliating trial, would he be clapped in the Tower of London or, like Napoleon, be consigned to a deserted island?<sup>56</sup>

During Mussolini’s last meeting with Cardinal Schuster on 25 April, who suggested that he parley with the National Committee of Liberation and rely on the subtle diplomacy of the Vatican to get him out of his quandary, Schuster’s secretary, Don Bicchierai, conveyed the information that

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.; Falanga, *L'avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler*, pp. 365–66.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Deakin, *The Six Hundred Days of Mussolini*, p. 284.

<sup>50</sup> Falanga, *L'avamposto di Mussolini nel Reich di Hitler*, p. 366.

<sup>51</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, pp. 472–73; Pini and Susmel, *Mussolini, l'uomo e l'opera*, IV: 495. A little later he told Anfuso: “It was perfectly superfluous to make a proposal of this kind to Hitler at this moment.”

<sup>52</sup> Mellini, *Guerra diplomatica a Salò*, pp. 137, 140.

<sup>53</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, pp. 476–77.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 480.

<sup>55</sup> Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, p. 397.

<sup>56</sup> Dolfi, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, p. 24.

the Germans had just concluded a surrender of their troops in Italy with the Allies in Switzerland.<sup>57</sup> Feeling betrayed by the Germans, as he had following the Italian “treachery” of 8 September, Mussolini exploded: “We are traitors, but they are worse traitors.”<sup>58</sup> He left the archbishop in a towering rage: how could the Germans dare to negotiate with the Allies without his knowledge and abandon him to the enemy to save themselves? What worse cowardice can an ally display against an old and steadfast friend who has sacrificed everything in their defense?<sup>59</sup> To be sure, only on 25 April did Mussolini have irrefutable proof from the cardinal that the Germans had been negotiating surrender terms behind his back. But Wolff’s scheming was certainly known to Mussolini. He was aware of the capture of Ferruccio Parri, a big fish in the resistance, and of his release to Switzerland as a pledge of good faith on the part of Wolff, who was involved in the negotiations for a German surrender. This should have, or perhaps did, put Mussolini on notice of secret German contacts with the Allies.<sup>60</sup> But did he, as Anfuso claims, have no idea that the Germans were prepared to walk out on the RSI by negotiating unilaterally and in secret a capitulation to the enemy in the Italian war theater?<sup>61</sup>

In a roadblock at Dongo on Lake Como, the partisans stopped a convoy of German vehicles on 27 April and sighted Mussolini crouched in the back of a truck, dressed in Luftwaffe helmet and overcoat and a Wehrmacht uniform. Clara Petacci was arrested the same day. The partisans shot them dead in front of a villa in the nearby hamlet of Giulino di Mezzegra on 28 April. The next day he and his mistress were strung up by their ankles from the roof of a gasoline station in Milan’s Piazzale Loreto before a large crowd of onlookers, many of whom surged forward to hiss, spit at, and defile their lifeless bodies. The decrepit RSI had already crumbled into dust. On 29 April Hitler rewarded his faithful lover, Eva Braun, by marrying her. One day later he supervised the poisoning of his beloved dog, Blondi, and her pups and, with Braun, took cyanide. Thus death came to both dictators—but not transfiguration, which they had surely thought their due.

<sup>57</sup> Schuster, *Gli ultimi tempi di un regime*, p. 168.

<sup>58</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 368.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 368–69.

<sup>61</sup> Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda*, p. 466.

From January 1945 on, it was clear that Mussolini and the RSI regime had lost whatever control of events they had ever had. But the Duce did not go down in flames in one-tracked madness as Hitler did. Different from the Führer, he backpedaled, reset, and tinkered frenetically in a desperate attempt to find a formula for survival, which made him appear more the pragmatist than he really was. When time ran out, Mussolini had been unable to exact revenge against his own country—"intractably senescent" Italy. The Duce's effort to revitalize his ideology by an expanded partnership with Hitler to dominate Europe had ignominiously breathed its last.



## The RSI: Body and Soul

Mussolini emerged as head of the Salò regime appearing like a cut-rate facsimile of the boastful and confident Duce who, headquartered in Rome for over twenty years, exercised, or masqueraded, dictatorship. In spite of his downgraded status, Mussolini was determined to shed the embarrassing popular caricature of him held in the West as a “sawdust Caesar.” After avenging himself against those who had betrayed him, Mussolini aimed to supplant the image of a *trasformismo* wheeler-dealer he had acquired during the *ventennio* with a reputation of fortitude, a refreshed leader poised to perform bold deeds. As ever, Mussolini yearned for place among the strongmen of the world whose authority would be unchallenged by friend and foe alike. When things went wrong, it was someone else’s fault, never his own.

That does not mean that Mussolini was never hounded by doubt and pessimism. And he was habitually evasive. Whenever he revealed an uncertainty in the reigning slogan “The Duce is always right,” Mussolini had his mistress, Claretta Petacci, nearby to assure him that he was the greatest leader in the world. Imparting a cocky self-assurance, she stiffened Mussolini’s spine by playing on his worst prejudices. He should flaunt a hard-line ideology, have no inhibition in resorting to violence, avenge opponents without second thoughts, demonstrate loyalty in Hitler, trust in ultimate victory, display confidence in himself, and affirm the self-reliance of his regime.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bosworth, *Claretta*, p. 208.

If Mussolini did not disappoint in posing as the pro-Nazi *Mensch* of Claretta's imagination, there was nothing he could do from the outset of his rule at Salò to free himself from the German yoke. Compelled to lead from a flimsy power base, Mussolini had only small leeway in thinking through policy and in setting forth ideological positions. Whipped by misfortune—duce only in name—he often appeared irresolute, unable to keep up with shifting currents over which he had no control. Hating to be thought of as a Nazi Gauleiter or Hitler's plaything, he took out his frustration by mocking Fascists, the Italian people, and humankind. Old instincts, therefore, crept back into the bustle of everyday life: avoidance of choice, prevarication, and playing Fascists off against one another. Mussolini did not purge the elites, tighten totalitarian controls, or impose discipline over competing elements in national life. In an atmosphere of intrigue, plots, and jealousy, he vacillated between the giddy self-confidence that his cult reinforced and a gloomy awareness that he lacked the power to overcome the many impasses confronting him.

Belief in his own appeal fading, his interest in delivering inspirational messages flagging, and his inability to assert himself at critical moments becoming ever more apparent, Mussolini transitioned from a charismatic Fascist standard-bearer addressing masses of star-struck followers to a sulking loner out of touch with the common man. Mussolini thus lost prestige and preserved little of the unblinking party and government support he once had. Still, Mussolini's ability to avoid irreversible choices and his skill at juggling groups and purposes sufficed to keep his regime composed of barely compatible factions afloat. Since the RSI Fascists could in no way do without him, and given Hitler's unwavering support, Mussolini enjoyed immunity from any coup d'état.

Throughout the vicissitudes of government, there were constants proving that Mussolini remained at heart a hardened ideologue who showed time and again that his skills as a deal maker were mere episodic exercises. As Mussolini became trapped in ever more unmanageable fixes, however, which caused him to undertake tortured tactical maneuvers, the *duri e puri* lost patience in what they took as shilly-shallying. Nonetheless, Mussolini's hard-core beliefs and generic callousness sufficed to stave off his critics. And pride and ambition did not allow him to fold when fellow Fascists or overbearing Germans undertook action that violated his principles and prestige. Whenever Italians were cut down *en masse* by either Fascists or Nazis, Mussolini would button-hole Rahn and Kesselring to insist that the atrocities cease. He complained not so much



about *rastrellamenti*, reprisals, and torching of houses per se, but about the failure of a counterinsurgency mission to more carefully sort out true-grit Fascists, fence sitters, and anti-Fascists.<sup>2</sup> It was not moral principle regarding violence against Italians that drove him but the calculation that his public image and popularity would suffer if he failed to stand up to indiscriminate German slaughter of Italians.<sup>3</sup> Never, however, did Mussolini demand political satisfaction from Hitler or threaten to storm out of the Axis; and never did he do anything to stop the momentum carrying both himself and Italy into Hitler's version of a Continental new order based on Lebensraum principles.

In the closing stages of his rule, Mussolini expatiated somberly on his time as leader of the RSI: "Under the excuse of protection, I have been constrained to tell others what I do. The nuisance of power is hard to take, for you have to deal with every kind of imbecile and be controlled in personal matters. We do it for your own good they say, but in fact they put you down. Mine is a gilded prison. German wardens bow at my every move, but hold me firmly in their grip. Hitler has agreed to protect me as a sword against the Italian 'traitors,' but meanwhile makes sure that my moves and words are passed on to him daily. True, when I receive Germans, they listen to me. I know that for sure. Protection is the legal side of spying. In Germany one and all distrust everything I do save Hitler, who still respects me. Not a few suspect that I am the author of 25 July. I have been a prisoner from the day that I was arrested in the king's quarters." Even if Hitler and Germany were, against all the odds, to win the war, "Italy and I would be the losers."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout Mussolini's career, the trait that dominated his character, speech, and manner was narcissism. He hungered for admiration, dealt with aides as if they were stage props, and showed displeasure if denied the spotlight. Expecting flattery, Mussolini was a poor listener when offered unwanted guidance, which did not help him make wise decisions. He paid attention only to those who admired him and ignored those holding different views. Mainly preoccupied with appearance, wealth, power, and success, Mussolini was unable to put himself in the shoes of others. Forever suspicious, he sought to neutralize opposition real or imagined by playing people off against one another. An aloof loner, he did not enjoy the company of companions;

<sup>2</sup> Gagliani, *Brigate nere*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.; Mira, *Tregue d'armi*, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> OO, XXII: 168–182.

nor did he host cocktail parties or appear in beer taverns where he could network with important people. Sporting Gaullist aloofness, he would majestically preside over a hostile and treacherous world. Only Claretta Petacci found space in Mussolini's intimacy as a kind of *ducessa* who regularly counseled him.<sup>5</sup> She was the one who constantly urged her lover to crush all who stood in his way of total domination. Indeed, buoyed by Claretta, Mussolini was able frequently to pull himself from impotent, angry impatience over his drab life at Salò to demonstrate shrewdness, cunning, and charisma. But when confronted with a madman who held immense power over him, Mussolini, in spite of all his resentments of the Third Reich, tied his fortunes to the more hypnotic Führer.

The road that Mussolini traveled as head of the RSI, which started with the "rebirth" of Fascism embodied in the Salò Republic, ended up in a radical *nazifascismo*. Throughout this odyssey, in spite of the many twists and turns, Mussolini's transformative ideological changes mirrored a progressively losing war and a growing Nazi predominance.

At the outset of the RSI regime, however, the future hardly pointed to such a cataclysmic outcome, for the Fascists, who deemed themselves moderates, thought they held the upper hand and would therefore be able to bridle radical excesses. But their reverence of Mussolini remained as strong as ever, which eventually put them into very compromising positions when the Duce himself tilted toward radicalism. During the *ventennio*, while he toyed with them, middle-of-the-road Fascists looked on him as an enlightened ruler determined to shield the country from evildoers, much as pious Russian peasants looked on their venerated Tsar to protect them against rapacious nobility. Since Mussolini was the only Italian who had a shred of credibility in Berlin, he might, they thought, still be able to bring the Germans to reason on key contentious issues while keeping the Wehrmacht at bay. For the Fascist-light, Mussolini impersonated the tricolor flag that, torn and tattered, still flapped bravely in the breeze. They did not hold him responsible for the country's misfortunes, deprivations, and defeats. Rather, they attributed the many shortcomings to party radicals and Fascist hierarchs who had hidden unpleasant facts from the leader. "Ah, if only the Duce knew ..."

Though the word *Fascism* had been abolished from the title of the state, the middle-of-the-road Fascists did nothing to prevent their extremist comrades from monopolizing the Salò government. All were agreed that a

<sup>5</sup> Bosworth, *Claretta*, pp. 240–41.

strong and professionally trained military was essential to the survival of the RSI, but the moderates seemed unaware that the government favored undisciplined voluntary and irregular Fascist bands flaunting *arditismo* over Graziani's regular army of draftees. Just as inexcusable, they merely watched as Wolff and Rahn worked hand in glove with Buffarini, Guidi, and Pavolini to perpetuate corruption and profiteering. (The Germans were delighted to keep the worst offenders in power simply because, hated by many Italians, they would be the last to betray the Third Reich.) Not bothered by the tepid criticism of moderates within Fascist ranks, the Salò hierarchs carried out sequestrations, plundered the wealth of the state, and nominated incompetent and morally bankrupt party hacks to important posts in the government. Moreover, the lukewarm Fascists overlooked, or hid from, the great *svolta* of June 1944, when Pavolini, relegating a compliant Mussolini to a back seat, defiantly joined hands with the Third Reich in a move that ruined any chance of achieving greater unity behind the regime. Thus the expectations of the crypto-Fascists, who hoped that Mussolini would in time form a representative government under the rubric of "Long live the nation, death to factions" were dashed.

That Salò functioned from first to last as a papier mâché regime did not escape the attention of main-street Italian Fascists. For this, however, they, too, did not hold Mussolini to account. His worst failing, for them, was simply a lack of gravitas and consistency in accomplishing what he had set out to do.

Moderate Fascists stood transfixed as the Allies trudged forward to crush the Salò regime. If many knew their cause to be hopeless, they shrank from addressing the reality that Mussolini's government was just an outward show that did not much impede Germany's brutal behavior. The less zealous Fascists made the fundamental mistake of believing that Mussolini, and possibly even the war-drained Germans, would avoid a cataclysm by searching for a way out through reliance on old-fashioned diplomacy and compromise. Worst of all, in seeing Mussolini as Italy's supreme patriot, they could not face the reality that he had become the Führer's accomplice in the creation of a Teutonic new European order. Unavoidably embedded in Nazi criminality, therefore, the moderate RSI Fascists hardly did any soul-searching. Rather, they allowed themselves to be pulled along by Fascist ultras that never ceased bragging about their contempt for universal human values.

The more temperate Fascist friends of Salò learned little from their experiences. Admitting no wrong, they, like the ultras, comported themselves after

the war as impenitent neo-Fascists, writing memoirs filled with exculpatory rationalizations as they eased their way unapologetically into a receptive postwar Italian government and diplomatic service.

Italy's turn toward Fascist radicalism can be traced to Mussolini's halting progression from traditional Fascist concepts of nation building to a new mission that aimed primarily at the creation of a *Nuovo Ordine Europeo* hand in hand with the Third Reich.<sup>6</sup> Dolfin notes Mussolini's growing self-doubt and pessimism in Italy's prospects and ability to carry on alone: "When Mussolini speaks of a 'war of continents,' of a 'crisis of civilization,' and of colossal powers 'who will decide for centuries our historical future,' I think with sadness how fragile our poor Italy has become, in which none of us fight any more for a cause that is truly and exclusively ours. He himself told me: 'The Partisans fight for the Anglo-Americans, we for the Germans! No one for Italy.'"<sup>7</sup> In the same vein: "We have fought twenty years to be Fascists. To renounce that idea today solely because things are not currently working out favorably is an act of supreme cowardice! The war that is being fought on many continents is ideological for everyone involved in the fighting."<sup>8</sup>

On the rubble of war's destruction, the Axis Powers would instruct the conquered peoples in the virtues of Fascist civilization. But would Italy be heard? In line with Mussolini's thinking, Dolfin noted: "It is difficult to feel that we still have this country, and yet, every day there is someone who dies for this country."<sup>9</sup>

June 1944 represents a decisive turn when Mussolini sent Blackshirts into battle on a twin mission to destroy partisans and burn out the *Italietta* spirit from the nation. The new Fascist military avant-garde, consisting of disciplined and ideologized soldiers, would mold Italians into a hard-edged *Herrenvolk*. Tough and pitiless, they would parade down streets and country byways armed with modern weaponry and singing war songs. Long gone would be Italy's badly trained rag-tag soldiers of yesteryear, pulling along bedraggled mules weighed down with antiquated equipment.<sup>10</sup> A European *nazifascismo* loomed on the horizon.

<sup>6</sup> MAE, AGRSI, SPD 6.16, f. 91, sf. 6, 061312–061320, Appunto per il Duce.

<sup>7</sup> Dolfin, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*, pp. 100–01.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 100–01.

<sup>10</sup> Germinario, *L'altra memoria*, p. 142.

During a visit to Rastenburg in July 1944, Mussolini sought assurances from Hitler that Germany was fighting a colonial war in Europe not solely for the *Herrenvolk* but for “a new Europe.” In an expanded definition of Fascism, in which defense of the nation was meshed with a Fascist crusade in Europe, there would be no more old-fashioned Italian imperialism and no more subtle *peso determinante* between friends and enemies. Certainly, Mussolini did not want his country to be considered as one of the “small people” (*piccolo popoli*) of a Europe dominated by the Reich, but he had no army worthy of the name to give the Salò regime a voice in Berlin for planning the future of Europe. This was decisive. To obscure his country’s subaltern status, he sought a wider stage by welding Italy to Germany in a newly forged and expanded Pact of Steel for the ultimate showdown against the Western plutocracies and the Soviet Union in Europe’s “civil war.”

Henceforth, there would be less talk of Italy and more attention paid to a united Europe extirpating the Bolshevik menace. Mussolini had once believed that Fascism and Nazism, independently of each other, shared the duty to defend spiritual values against the attacks of Jews, capitalists, and Communists. But with Italian power seriously on the wane, he was prepared to revise his mission by joining Hitler in assembling European Fascists to be the Continent’s chosen warriors under one ideological streamer.

In his Lyric Theater speech of 16 December 1944, Mussolini “recovered” the idea of a “European community [in which] every nation must participate as a well-defined entity.” The Duce wound up by affirming that “we do not feel ourselves Italian *in quanto europei*, but we feel like Europeans *in quanto italiani*.” Italians were asked to welcome the constitution of a European community as a prerequisite for adhesion to the New Order as an essential condition for the alliance with the Third Reich.<sup>11</sup> Fashioning a third way between the Western Democracies and Communist Russia, he, working with Hitler, could yet strangle Communist internationalism and Judeo-Masonic cosmopolitanism.

The Belgian Nazi Léon Degrelle, a general in the Waffen SS, who personified “the ultimate great warrior of the European imperial space,”<sup>12</sup> was an exemplary representative of European right radicalism. Degrelle fascinated Mussolini and his entourage much more than did their fellow Fascist fanatic Farinacci, and they were more taken in by the fiery Josef Goebbels

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Monica Fioravanzo, “La Repubblica sociale italiana fra realtà e utopia,” in Fioravanzo and Fumian, eds., 1943: *Strategie militari, collaborazionismi, Resistenze*, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Germinario, *L’Altra memoria*, p. 135.

than the intellectual Giovanni Gentile. As time passed, the intransigents of Italian Fascism enjoyed a renewed life in *Deutschtum*. And as the war wore on, Mussolini saw in the Nazi crusade the definitive historical eclipse of the national state; his *Italianità* had become transmuted into residency in a European Continental racist state. All Europeans were learning to be militants fighting for a shared political idea: the Continent's future. Welded together by the crusade against Communism, a European elite of chosen leaders led by Hitler and Mussolini, who drew their values and élan from Fascist ideology, were destined to save European civilization from Communists, half-breeds, Jews, Kalmyks, and Mongols. Felice Bellotti wrote in the influential *Avanguardia*: "Italians and Germans must find their way to an agreement. We are still in time to create, united with our allies, the New Europe."<sup>13</sup>

Regardless of how much Mussolini cringed on hearing German contempt of Italian fighting abilities, he worshipped the Wehrmacht soldier, whose steadfastness stood in marked contrast to the Italian troops fleeing from duty and tossing away weapons on every front in the aftermath of his fall from power on 25 July 1943. While Italians cowered in their homes, he saw the Germans as idealistic and spiritually strong with admirable discipline and bravery. Such invidious comparisons made Mussolini determined to renew efforts in transforming Italy into a nation of ideologized warriors who could hold their own with their Wehrmacht counterparts. Having long spent his energies in turning Italians into Fascist legions worthy of Nazi respect, Mussolini had now arrived at his last chance to fulfill this vision, but this time not in flaunting the fasces emblem in competition with the swastika, but in cementing a comrade-in-arms spirit under the banner of *nazifascismo*.

The man of Salò most admired on this extremist right was Pavolini. As the creator of the radical Black Brigades, he inculcated a bellicose spirit to give his knights courage to sally forth toward doomsday, not unlike the Germans, who, plagued by Soviet "locusts" descending on Berlin, prepared, under Hitler's prodding, for a valiant fight to the death. Similar to the Nazis of his imagination, Pavolini valued blood over gold. Cloaked in mysticism, "*l'uomo nuovo*" of Salò would fight courageously for a pure Fascist state by destroying the craven bourgeoisie and Socialist poseurs exemplified by Cione and his crowd.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Cited in Lepre, *La storia della Repubblica di Mussolini*, p. 151.

<sup>14</sup>Germinario, *L'altra memoria*, p. 147.

Pavolini had many allies who, as visionaries drawn to Nazism by ideological kinship, hailed the Führer's victories. They welcomed the Nazi occupier, cooperated with the Wehrmacht, and shared German war objectives. If many officials serving the RSI can legitimately be characterized as reluctant partners in Fascist rule who looked askance at the Nazi behemoth, Pavolini and his followers, because of their willingness "to walk with the Nazi devil," merited the epithet of collaborator.

Hardly a harmless parlor game, collaboration, as practiced by the RSI, was a deadly serious business that implicated Fascists in the imprisonment, torture, and murder of thousands. A regime that strove to be an obedient servant of "the occupying power," the "*repubblica*," however, was unable to prevail on the majority of its citizens living in the "grey areas" of ideological indifference to become loyal German collaborators. Still, the RSI collaborators were able to facilitate the Third Reich's exploitation of the country's human and economic resources, which facilitated the overall German war effort.

Not a few RSI denizens became accomplices of collaboration by cold-shouldering, or turning in, imperiled friends and neighbors. Worse still, the truly unscrupulous, looking for favors, volunteered themselves as informants and spies who received money, protection, and material advantages for the information they provided. The RSI, as well as the Nazi occupiers, benefited more than a little in their work of oppression and anti-partisan warfare from such unsavory collaborators.<sup>15</sup> Who knows how many squalid characters gave false information to RSI authorities on hapless neighbors, for profit or to settle accounts with personal enemies?

In addition to the unvarnished pro-Nazis, there existed in the Salò Republic, as well as throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, many people who fell into a fuzzy zone between full-blown collaboration and uneasy accommodation. Many run-of-the-mill people in the RSI, wandering about in a no-man's land of fence sitting and invisibility, backed into the murky world of accommodation to keep out of harm's way. In this group were small-time entrepreneurs, artisans, and job holders, especially civil servants, who adjusted to adverse circumstances by eschewing politics altogether. Since, however, these people were indispensable cogs in the administrative machine, they ended up working for the benefit of the RSI

<sup>15</sup>Roberta Cairoli, *Dalla parte del nemico. Ausiliarie, delatrici e spie nella Repubblica Sociale Italiana (1943–1945)* (Milan: Mimesis, 2013), p. 17; Mimmo Franzinelli, *Delatori. Spie e confidenti anonimi: l'arma segreta del regime fascista* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001).

regime, and, ultimately, Berlin. Although positioned by reason of their livelihood to be contributors to the power of the regime, they accommodated in order to preserve their careers and social positions, motivated mainly by the resolve to survive the war one way or the other.

Finally, one finds involuntary accommodators, who, having abandoned hope that the occupier's shackles would ever be thrown off, crawled into their small unsafe dwellings hoping to be left alone by both partisans and the regime. Since the RSI had plenty of ways of coercing people without jailing or killing them, people reluctantly submitted, or accommodated, to repressive power exercised by judges, civil servants, and Fascist street thugs.

Looking at matters from a different angle, scores of Italians, especially farmers, concluded that partisans roaming the countryside were scoring more progress in provoking horrific German retaliation than in liberating them from German oppression. Moreover, more than a handful of born skeptics disputed the notion that the resistance was filled with heroic and selfless patriots; in their view partisans were reckless adventurers needlessly endangering their lives by acts of dubious value. In one example among many, the German execution of twenty-five villagers from Ovaro in retaliation for the partisan ambush in the dying days of World War II sent the furious villagers into the streets with shouts of "death to Communist Partisans."<sup>16</sup> The RSI's war had indeed made a lot of people look smaller.

In the case of France, the category of collaboration applies to the political extreme Right as a whole. Unable to seize power on their own before the German invasion, Pierre Laval and his knot of followers ran after the Nazis once the Wehrmacht had crushed all resistance.

In Italy the situation was different and more complicated. Fascism was a homegrown product before the Nazis came on the scene. The RSI in many respects was a Fascist crossbreed, which allowed those who served Mussolini's first regime to transition easily to the second. Even when the RSI fell into dire straits, Fascists were not collaborating traitorously with an enemy simply because they had for long identified with the Pact of Steel to promote Italian conquest and ideological solidarity. Rather, they were offering Germans cooperation, or voluntary collaboration. Many *questure*, in particular, were in a position to lend invaluable service to the SS and

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Rab Bennett, *Under the Shadow of the Swastika: The Moral Dilemmas of the Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler's Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), p. 41.



German police. Without this important assistance on the local level, the German occupation would not have been able to exercise such a strong control over both cities and countryside.

By frequently assuming the initiative in fiercely conducted *rastrellamenti*, arbitrary arrests, and random violence against the population, RSI Fascists were hardly distant spectators. Forming a strong core of the population, they did not carry on simply as Nazi robots, Hitler's puppets, or Wehrmacht servants. Many RSI rogue police on their own initiative formed goon squads that made it a point to be visible, patrol everywhere, and single-mindedly destroy enemies on their own. Since the RSI regime featured coercion as a favored style of rule, the Fascist radicals could employ fearful tools of violence to extinguish the bourgeois spirit of skepticism, accommodation, compromise, and a life of ease in fixed careers. As RSI men linked with Nazis out of belief, many Nazis associated with Fascist radicals as comrades. In significant numbers Italians volunteered for service in the "forces of order." According to Graziani, in an estimate shared by Wolff, 150,000 joined up, not counting the 42,000 disarmed military who declared a readiness to continue the fight at the German side. This, writes the historian Lutz Klinkhammer, constitutes a high number, even if all were not fervent collaborators.<sup>17</sup>

But if under the regime a relatively high number of volunteers filled the ranks (many of whom eventually deserted), the Salò authorities could not count on many supporters living in the RSI "grey areas." The majority of people were not even really neutral. For in their heart of hearts they knew that relief from war's miseries could only come with an Allied victory. But since the people at large felt too helpless, isolated, and intimidated by the Fascist reign of terror to express any overt criticism or hostility, there was no groundswell of opposition to the regime, let alone open resistance outside the partisan world. Those who were unwilling to risk their lives in joining the resistance were not happy in hunkering down at home doing nothing but praying for deliverance on the part of the slowly advancing Allied troops. Taking shelter in embarrassment and false complacency, they imagined that involvement in the resistance would merely invite a worthless death.

For the bona fide collaborators, the Third Reich constituted their model, the Nazi *Weltanschauung* forging the combative Italian *anima* that would follow Hitler to the end. To redeem national honor and shed

<sup>17</sup>Klinkhammer, "Le strategie tedesche di occupazione e la popolazione civile," in *Guerra, guerra di Liberazione, guerra civile*, p. 112.

Berlin's opprobrious charge of betrayal, Fascist warriors would emulate or outdo the fearful and omnipotent German by waging a pitiless war against their own flabby *fiancheggiatori* and ideological enemies in a purge reminiscent of Stalin's war on the Russian Kulaks.

The Italian SS, small as the numbers were, constituted an ultra group determined to create a Fascist/Nazi European new order. Thoroughly politicized, efficient, and ruthless, the Italian SS warrior planned unflinchingly to extinguish the shifty and the time servers. As the spirited avant-garde of the "new Europe," they would lead the crusade against the Jewish/Bolshevik enemy. These men, who experienced anger and humiliation at the time of the armistice, rejected everything to do with the "old" Italian—the crafty, the opportunist, the compromiser, and above all the "*buon italiano*," and they would sweep away all lightweight Fascists.

The weekly *Avanguardia*, a journal of the SS Italian Legion that was published from February 1944 until the end of the war, cultivated the myth of the SS as elite warriors destined to preside over a "new Europe." The indomitable Italian SS would doom the "apolitical" RSI army to extinction.<sup>18</sup>

The legionnaire was obliged to learn that "you are part of a communal spirit in which the nationalities, while warranted and respected, are united in the name of a new Europe that is freed from anti-European burden embodied in Judaism and Masonry, both bearers of misery, betrayal, and empty but dangerous symbols. You wear an honorable uniform that has always been honored not only by soldiers but by all leaders who mark out the road that all upright Europeans will take. Your honor is called loyalty."<sup>19</sup>

The typical SS soldier was required to live up to an exacting creed: cruelty as a higher calling, unquestioned devotion to duty, and exemplary execution of orders. "Character epitomized the principal quality of SS warriors. Bound together by unshakable faith, they are pledged to fight all who stand outside their SS circle. An SS combatant never surrenders and never calculates the odds no matter the number of enemies he faces. An SS man fights till the end with every ounce of his heart and soul. Only idealists like him know how to fight."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "La SS Formazione politico militare della nuova Europa," *Avanguardia*, 7 ottobre 1944.

<sup>19</sup> *Avanguardia*, 7 luglio 1944.

<sup>20</sup> A. De Palma, "Fedeli fino alla morte," *Avanguardia*, 7 October 1944.

The Italian SS adulation of the Germans verged on the unimaginable. An article in *Avanguardia* of December 1944 reads: "German comrades, men made from a divine hand out of diamonds, bound together by a rare and unique solidarity, who have an untamed and invincible spirit, impart an venerable example of discipline, correctness, and loyalty ... The blind and depraved world hates you because they know you are strong, superior, and decisive in pursuing the death of their enemies ... At your side are the men of Mussolini, people incapable of betrayal."<sup>21</sup>

To educate Italian officers and troops on how to fight, *Avanguardia* in October 1944 praised the slaughter that took place in Monte Sole, in which the "Reichsführer SS had massacred around 770, mostly civilian people." This mass killing was depicted as a "successful undertaking by an SS regiment in the rearguard areas of the Apennine front, an area dominated by "Communist brigades."<sup>22</sup>

Under the helmsmen of Salò, the idea of nation, previously so strongly held by Italian nationalists, came to be completely overshadowed by the dream of a Fascist/Nazi Europe. The "l'uomo nuovo's" mission was to wage a "colonial" war against weakling and traitorous compatriots—aliens living in a foreign country. Mussolini thereby had presided over a transformed mission in which Italian soldiers fighting for Italy was supplanted by Italians in the SS mold fighting to conquer the Continent by extirpating enemies hand in hand with Hitler in both Italy and all of Europe.

The Italian SS was not alone in adopting this Nazi ideological mentality. They were joined by certain military police units, which competed with one another in comporting themselves as Nazis. Units such as the Legion of the X Mas, as well as some regular army units, likewise had no shame in crediting Nazis for schooling them in SS-style violence.

What would be the nature of this new order, to which belonged Hitler, Mussolini, Horthy, Antonescu, Laval, Pavelić, and Quisling, that supposedly aimed at a unity of European peoples?<sup>23</sup> With his collection of Nazi partners, Mussolini wanted a revision of Hitler's *Weltanschauung* that would give Italy space to exercise its entitlement to empire over inferior peoples. He yearned to realize his dream of dividing Europe between a comradely Nazi Germany fulfilling Lebensraum and a mighty Italy reviving a Roman Empire in the Mediterranean, thus laying the foundation of

<sup>21</sup> Isa Vecchiotti, "Soli contro il mondo," *Avanguardia*, 2 dicembre 1944.

<sup>22</sup> "La fine dalla banda 'Stella Rossa,'" *Avanguardia*, 20 October 1944.

<sup>23</sup> MAE AGRSI, b. 31, Germania, 1/1, Berlin, Anfuso report, 10 December 1944.

an “Italo-German revolutionary alliance against the West.”<sup>24</sup> As co-founder of Fascism as a European phenomenon, Mussolini was prepared to sacrifice Italian uniqueness by merging with Nazism in a counter-revolutionary war of European independence and unity against Soviet and American imperialism.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Mussolini and Fascism’s leading lights had been engaged in the project of “cultural revisionism” that would bestow on Rome a position of intellectual and cultural preeminence. Their ultimate purpose was for Italy to emerge from the war as a contemporary Greece to Germany’s new Rome.<sup>26</sup>

Pavolini, among others, led the charge by changing around the use and meaning of the concept *civiltà* in Italian philosophical discourse. In an earlier era Italian intellectuals had drawn a distinction between the universal “Roman” *civiltà* deriving from Latin tradition and the idea of culture rooted in *völkish* mystical visions. Hence, their meaning of Italian *civiltà* originally ran parallel to the French concept of *civilisation*. But as time passed, pro-Fascist intellectuals redefined the notion of *civiltà* to embrace a heroic conception of life, the vitalist celebration of the power of the will that contrasted with the “pusillanimous” materialism of the “bourgeois spirit.” This evolved into an ultranationalist, racist, and irrational model of culture that permeated Fascist Italy’s use of *civiltà*. Drawing on the ideas of Germany’s primordial *völkish* community, Fascist writers contrasted their newly minted *civiltà* with the “decadent” democratic/liberal “civilization” of the West. Pavolini and other radical Fascist intellectuals hopefully concluded that this “transnational” union between *civiltà* and Nazi *Kultur* had strengthened solidarity between the two totalitarian regimes having “pure” national traditions, “each systematically purged of its cosmopolitan excrescences.”<sup>27</sup> Since, however, Nazi “blood and soil” proponents of Lebensraum slighted the Fascist endeavor to impart equal value to Italy’s “Mediterranean new order,” they hardly took seriously Pavolini’s philosophical speculations. The Duce, for his part, did not fully realize—or refused to acknowledge—that the Nazis aimed at a mighty racist German imperium that would leave a cheerless Italy in occupation of a borderland.

<sup>24</sup> Knox, *Common Destiny*, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> Mario Isnenghi, “La guerra civile nella pubblicistica di destra,” in *Guerra, guerra di liberazione, guerra civile*, pp. 236–37.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Much of the discussion in this paragraph is taken from Martin’s newly published book, *The Nazi-Fascist New Order for European Culture*.

When these conjugal Nazi/Fascists were forced to face inevitable military and political defeat, they came to the pessimistic conclusion that European civilization was destined to perish. For this irredeemable crowd, however, responsibility for the erosion of values would not be theirs; it would be borne solely by the victors.

While Mussolini's personality and leadership put a clear stamp on the RSI, the regime, as we have seen, having a passionate following, was able to stand on its own legs and have a life of its own. Under the Duce's benign oversight, RSI Fascists waged war against all manner of enemies clearly on their own volition and not infrequently on their own initiative. It must be remembered, however, that actual combatants fighting for the regime consisted of a minor percentage of the population, while the majority of Italians lived in the grey zone of non-participation. But over time, as an eventual Allied victory could no longer be disputed or ignored by RSI authorities, the regime floundered in a deepening isolation as a slowly awakening population started to pass from "benevolent" neutrality to overt defiance and a more audacious support of the resistance. On the other side of the ledger, the partisans, no more numerous in total percentage of the people at large, described themselves as involved in a "war of liberation", which reads more pleasingly than "civil war," "in-house struggle," or "internal war" (*guerra civile, lotta intestina, guerra interna*).

Indisputably, the RSI engaged in a war against the internal enemies of Fascism and against the Allies in a joint venture with the Third Reich. An inordinately large percentage of highly placed people on various levels of the Salò government, therefore, willingly and openly collaborated with the Nazis.



## Legacy of the RSI

As the end of World War II came into sight, it was well-nigh impossible to visualize how the two sides of the Italian civil war could reach a satisfactory resolution of the issues that had divided them. Would collective shell shock and tortured memories persevere to perpetuate civil war violence and terror? Or would Italians of both persuasions work together in a common government to arrest further chaos in order to make the country work?

As opposed to the events of 25 July 1943, when Italians joyfully greeted the collapse of Mussolini's original regime, their mood, after the collapse of the RSI, turned ugly thanks to Fascist atrocities, the tragic violence of civil war, and the brutal German occupation. Partisans joined by other anti-Fascists killed thousands of their hated compatriots in a general settling of accounts. In an interview with *La Repubblica* on 16 October 1991 entitled "*Fucilavamo i fascisti e non me ne pento*" ("I Have No Regrets in Shooting Fascists"), Nuto Revelli stated that "for us [RSI Fascists] were aliens in our country, perhaps more so than the Germans." The Communist writer Giorgio Amendola wrote in the newspaper *L'Unità*: "*Pietà l'è morta*."<sup>1</sup>

Much to the dismay of people such as Revelli, Fascists were able to worm their way back into Italian society and institutions after the end of World War II. Many streamed back into their former positions in government, industry, banks, and universities in the arrogant belief that they

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, p. 403.

were resuming their rightful places, particularly after the Communist Justice Minister Palmiro Togliatti formally ended the purges by issuing an amnesty decree of 22 June 1946, which, by decriminalizing postwar killings, cleared both Fascists and partisans of any legal action.<sup>2</sup> (The amnesty, however, did not apply to high-ranking officials or those who had participated in horrific cruelty and outright thievery.<sup>3</sup>)

This remarkable outcome occurred despite the seemingly strong steps taken by the Allies demanding “defascistization” of the country as a condition for accepting the armistice requested by Badoglio in September 1943—a demand repeated the following November in Moscow when the Italian government was required to “liquidate” Fascism. Though straightforward toward hierarchs serving the Salò regime, this task of settling up with Fascism, if not simultaneously undertaken against the king and Badoglio, held the risk of decided embarrassment for the Allies, since the Brindisi duo were major accomplices in Fascism’s wars of aggression between 1936 and 1943 and supporters, if lukewarm, of Mussolini before his first fall in July 1943.<sup>4</sup> But for the British, in particular, who had a natural proclivity for kings, Badoglio, too, had the required conservative credentials to lead the country to safety under Allied tutelage far out of Stalin’s reach.

Notwithstanding Mussolini’s imposition of an odious dictatorship, and his responsibility in leading his RSI to disaster, it was partially thanks to this essential contradiction tolerated by the Allies that certain Salò Fascists, mainly through the “rehabilitated” Badoglio, were able to find renewed life in postwar Italian society.

Badoglio’s hand was strengthened when the Soviet Union recognized his government on 14 March 1944. One month later Stalin’s man in Italy, Palmiro Togliatti, having just returned from the Soviet Union, surprised the Italian world, as well as his Communist following, by announcing a “*svolta di Salerno*” the following April. Before undertaking any revolution or far-reaching institutional reform, the Communist Party would pursue a no-nonsense policy aimed at the expulsion of the Germans from Italian soil and defeat of Fascism. In a show of national unity, the Communists would act in harmony with other leftist movements, the monarchy, and Badoglio.

<sup>2</sup> Algardi, *Processi ai fascisti*, pp. 213–14.

<sup>3</sup> Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Woller, *I conti con il fascismo: L’epurazione in Italia 1943–1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), p. 103. On the armistice, see Elena Aga Rossi, *A Nation Collapses. The Italian Surrender of September 1943*.

In spite of his disreputable past, Badoglio, to satisfy the Anglo-Americans, was able, with the help of newly appointed Minister of Justice Togliatti, to effect passage of a governmental decree on 26 May 1944 that authorized the court to summon for judgment those suspected of Fascist offenses. Punishment included life imprisonment and the death sentence. The Brindisi government enacted further laws aimed at purging the state administration of Fascists without allowing any interrogation of their own past associations with the Duce. To avoid criticism, Badoglio countenanced slipshod and selective punishments and hung major blame on Mussolini as well as a handful of other important Fascists.<sup>5</sup>

Once Rome had been liberated on 4 June 1944, Badoglio was constrained to resign four days later. King Victor Emmanuel, who already, on 20 February, had agreed under pressure to abdicate when the Allies entered Rome, withdrew to private life, giving over power to his son Prince Umberto, who would hold the title of lieutenant general of the realm.<sup>6</sup>

As the Allied troops plodded northward, the newly appointed government headed by the anti-Fascist prime minister Ivanoe Bonomi, in addition to confirming the High Commissariat instituted by Badoglio in order to counter Allies' suspicions, set up on 27 July 1944 an *Alto Commissariato* (High Commission) for sanctions against Fascism. In due course, corollary decrees established the High Court of Justice (*Alta Corte*) and the extraordinary Courts of Assizes. This "Magna Carta" of the political purge in Italy gave the government the right to punish high-ranking members of the Fascist establishment to life imprisonment or death.<sup>7</sup>

The High Court of Justice, activated on 3 September 1944,<sup>8</sup> was authorized to purge and put on trial highly placed Fascist hierarchs who, having operated the levers of power in the RSI, would have to answer for the catastrophe of war, collaboration with Germany, and the Salò regime's major transgressions.<sup>9</sup> Lower courts in the provinces were established to dole out penalties to the smaller fry.<sup>10</sup> Under this sweeping mandate, the prospects loomed large that the High Commission for Sanctions against

<sup>5</sup> Roy Palmer Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial, 1943–1948* (Chapel Hill, NC and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> In May 1946 Vittorio Emanuele officially abdicated and went into exile in Egypt.

<sup>7</sup> Woller, *I conti con il Fascismo*, p. 196.

<sup>8</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, pp. 73–77; Mirco Dondi, *La lunga liberazione: Giustizia e violenza nel dopoguerra italiano* (Rome: Riuniti, 2004), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Dondi, *La lunga liberazione*, pp. 31–33; Woller, *I conti con il Fascismo*, pp. 196–97.

<sup>10</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, p. 90.



Fascism, particularly since it was placed under the charge of the combative Communist leader Mauro Scoccimarro, would preside over a conversion in Italy from “a totalitarian Fascist state to a totalitarian anti-Fascist state.”<sup>11</sup>

The High Court of Justice swung into action by summoning for trial the infamous Pietro Caruso. As the former *questore* of Rome, Caruso, by drawing up a list of names for the Nazis, had been a major player in the wicked Fosse Ardeatine deed. The court charged him for inciting criminal acts and facilitating Nazi brutality. Under the noses of his guards, he managed a prison getaway. During a madcap drive out of the city, carrying a small fortune that included a collection of women’s jewelry, Caruso’s car was machine-gunned. Wounded, he was taken to a hospital and abandoned by his followers. Confined in Regina Coeli, the same prison from which he had sent fifty inmates to die in the Ardeatine Caves, Caruso was photographed in his cell reading the Bible and claiming repentance. Finally, brought before the High Court in September 1944, Caruso was sentenced to be shot,<sup>12</sup> which was headlined both in Rome and in Salò news outlets.<sup>13</sup> “‘Aim well!’ he cried out to his executioners. They did.”<sup>14</sup> Pavolini answered with threats of vendetta. In spite of this bravado, the fate of the ex-*questore* of Rome was an omen that haunted the many Fascists who felt that their turn before the firing squad was not far off.

When Ivanoe Bonomi formed a new cabinet on 12 December 1944, it marked a victory for the traditional ruling classes and their center-right political party representatives.<sup>15</sup> There was, oddly, no need to administer a *battuta d’arresto* to the Communists because the leadership had already undertaken the *svolta* the previous March. Vigorous anti-Fascist measures were thus further sidetracked.

This loosely formed anti-Fascist front suffered a blow when representatives of the Action Party and Pietro Nenni’s Socialists dropped out of the cabinet. The emergence of a new party, L’Uomo Qualunque (The Common Man), which quickly blossomed into a sizeable “know-nothing” movement allergic to both politics and ideology—a party where the “little Fascist” had found a new home—added proof of the nation’s unwillingness to consider meaningful sanctions against Fascism.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Woller, *I conti con il Fascismo*, p. 193.

<sup>12</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, pp. 92–97.

<sup>13</sup> “Caruso fucilato,” *La Stampa*, 23 September 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Katz, *The Battle for Rome*, p. 331.

<sup>15</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

The most publicized trial held by the High Court was brought against General Roatta (who held no position in the RSI), an investigation that ran from 29 January 1945 to 12 March 1945. Since Roatta was a big fish, his trial was supposed to be a gold standard in bringing to justice men culpable of undertaking aggression and perpetrating war crimes in occupied territories in the Balkans and Africa as well as in the RSI itself. With the connivance of the Carabinieri, Roatta was able to reach safety abroad.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Roatta's escape from justice reflects badly on Italy's will to confront its past, but in his case one should not forget that with the assistance of Luca Pietromarchi, the *eminence grise* of the Italian Foreign Ministry, he engaged in clever subterfuge to circumvent relentless pressure from the Nazis who had demanded that they hand over Jews in Italian-occupied Yugoslavia for dispatch in cattle cars to extermination camps in the North.<sup>18</sup>

Roatta's shocking escape produced an outcry in the country, after which the government promised speedier action on the purges and more severe punishment.<sup>19</sup> In stating that this would be done through legally prescribed trials instead of vigilante justice, the government also sought to harness uncontrolled partisan vengeance against Fascists in territory still stubbornly held by RSI forces.

To control the anger of the Fascist-hating populace, Bonomi, who had succeeded Ferruccio Parri in the usual musical chairs of Italian politics, braced the court system for the impending avalanche of collaboration trials by establishing, on 22 April 1945, Extraordinary Assize Courts (*Corti Straordinarie di Assise*) for each northern province to try mainly RSI Fascists for violent deeds and collaboration with the Germans.<sup>20</sup> The appellate Court of Cassation (*Sezione Speciale Provvisoria della Corte di Cassazione*) was simultaneously legislated into existence. The accused were drawn mainly from the ranks of the BN and GNR. This comprehensive approach by the government brought a sense of optimism that RSI Fascists would indeed be brought to justice.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Roatta's flight raised a storm of anger among Romans. The press on the left unleashed a violent campaign. For example: "Chi sono i complici del fuggiasco Roatta?" *L'Unità*, 6 March 1945; "I carabinieri avevano l'ordine di salutare l'Eccellenza Roatta," *Avanti!*, 9 October 1945.

<sup>18</sup> This story can be found in Burgwyn, *Empire on the Adriatic*, in the section "Italy Saves the Jews," pp. 185–94.

<sup>19</sup> Woller, *I conti con il fascismo*, pp. 312–13.

<sup>20</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, p. 173; Michele Battini, *The Missing Italian Nuremberg: Cultural Amnesia and Postwar Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Woller, *I conti con il fascismo*, pp. 260–72.

In spite of the efforts of the staunchly republican Carlo Sforza—he was the helmsman of the High Commission, supported by the Communist leaders Mario Berlinguer and Mauro Scoccimarro—the wheels of Italian justice regarding anti-Fascist purges creaked along, making little progress and thus dampening high hopes that punitive action was in the works. Countless snags occurred. There were constant changes in the composition of the High Court, intrigues among its members, and scandalous obstructions. Many in the court were tainted with Fascism. The members constantly squabbled over the proper conduct of the purges and who should be brought to trial. Scores of them showed a glaring lack of rhetorical expertise and jurisprudential knowledge. In the war-torn areas of the country—bombed-out buildings, destruction of equipment, and broken-down communications—the High Commission faced practically insuperable obstacles in carrying out Fascist purges. Fortunately, the hard-pressed courts were relieved of work by the unforced resignation of known Fascists who feared that they would otherwise be brought to trial. The German historian Hans Woller concludes that the commission was only moderately successful.<sup>22</sup>

At this point, therefore, months before the end of the war, the anti-Fascist crusade was running out of steam, which gave ex-RSI devotees hope for rehabilitation sponsored by the country's newly forged political right.

On 8 February 1945, while the war was still raging, the CLNAI took the law into its own hands by issuing “death warrants” for various RSI personnel including ministers, undersecretaries, *federali*, *questori*, judges, directors of political journals, and newspaper editors.<sup>23</sup> Special clandestine courts sprang into action, rounding up Blackshirts for summary justice.<sup>24</sup> Determined to cut short what it perceived to be an incipient conservative backlash in official government circles in Rome, the CLNAI, on 19 April 1945, issued a frightening proclamation aimed at Fascists, which was plastered on buildings and telephone poles: “Surrender or Perish.”<sup>25</sup>

As the largest party in the CLNAI, the Communist partisans spear-headed the attacks aiming at revenge. Led by the Garibaldini Brigade, of which Luigi Longo was overall commander and Pietro Secchia the political

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 246–47.

<sup>23</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 146–47.

<sup>25</sup> Dondi, *La lunga liberazione*, p. 108.

commissar, Communists gunned down many enemies. Giorgio Amendola wrote in the official Communist newspaper *Unità* on 29 April 1945: “To express pity is death, the order of the day! Our massacred must be vindicated, every one of them. All criminals must be eliminated! The Fascist plague must be extirpated! With Jacobin resolution the knife must cut deeply into the wound until all the gangrene has been cut out.”<sup>26</sup>

This bloodcurdling pronouncement was issued in an atmosphere bristling with revenge in a no-man’s land of liberated territory lacking the institutions of government—perfect conditions for unrestrained violence to flourish. If soon this phase of insurrectionary carnage began to fade, it would be replaced by other more organized forms of retribution, when already incarcerated Fascists were lifted from prison and executed en masse.<sup>27</sup> Communist vengeance subsided when Togliatti in September 1945 read out the order: “Enough!”<sup>28</sup>

To confound the situation utterly, partisan ranks during the last months of the war were swollen by “followers of the penultimate hour,” bands of ruffians looking for trouble, individuals carrying out private grudges against foes falsely accused of collaboration, brigands on the hunt for loot, and outraged people keen on evening up scores. Mob justice had taken over.

Before and after the war had formally ended, many of the RSI’s most notorious torturers were slain outside Communist “justice.” While several of the Koch Band were dispatched in Milan, Koch himself was languishing in prison, alone and sick. During the last week of April 1945, just before the general insurrection on the 25th, Montagna let him go to escape partisan punishment. The Allies eventually picked up Koch and handed him to the Italian government. Cardinal Schuster visited Koch in jail on Easter Sunday in 1945 and gave him a copy of the Gospels. On the first anniversary of the liberation, 4 June 1945, Koch was brought before the Italian High Court of Justice in Rome, where he asked forgiveness for his crimes, claiming that he had abandoned his unshakable atheism for the everlasting grace of God. But his overnight conversion made no impact on the court, which sentenced him to death. Before his execution, at age twenty-seven, the pope sent him a pardon, a blessing, and a rosary.<sup>29</sup> On the 5th, Koch was finished

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Pansa, *I vinti non dimenticano*, Kindle edition, location 3891.

<sup>27</sup> Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della memoria: La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005), p. 309.

<sup>29</sup> Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Paladin Grafton, 1983), p. 357; Bocca, *Storia dell’Italia partigiana*, p. 566; Bertoldi, *Salò*, pp. 207–08.

off by a firing squad.<sup>30</sup> The Italian writer Bertoldi summarizes: "A high summer sun had burned the dry earth of the meadow."<sup>31</sup>

Although Franco Colombo of the Muti was able to slip free of his enemies and rivals in the RSI by placing his legion at the service of the Germans, he was eventually captured by partisans, who shot him in the closing days of the war.<sup>32</sup> American soldiers tracked down Mario Carità in an Alpine pension in northern Italy. Bursting into his room, they found the fugitive bedded down with his lover. Carità grabbed a pistol, shot the woman, and killed an American soldier before the others cut him down in a burst of machinegun fire.<sup>33</sup> Felice Fiorentini, the commander of the Sicherai, a particularly brutal unit operating in the province of Padua, was captured, paraded around in a cage, and finally shot. Giuseppe Solaro, the notorious *federale* of Turin, was strung up, but when the hangman's noose snapped, the exercise had to be repeated till he hung limp. Biggini survived the war but died of pancreatic cancer in November 1945.<sup>34</sup> Pavolini was arrested by partisans after a brief burst of firearms at Menaggio and transported to Lake Como. He, Mezzasoma, and other ministers and collaborators were shot at Dongo on 28 April 1945. Farinacci suffered a similar fate the same day at nearby Vimercate. The end of the war in sight, Preziosi jumped out of a high window to his death to escape capture by the partisans. Some say he was pushed. Buffarini, after being condemned to death by an Assize Court, was dragged out of San Vittore prison by a riotous mob on 10 July and mowed down in cold blood before he could ingest an overdose of barbiturates.<sup>35</sup>

In early May the Allies proceeded to round up non-resisting Germans on the Italian front. The negotiations, carried on beforehand by the SS commandant in Italy, Karl Wolff, with Allied representatives, included an unconditional surrender that allowed Wehrmacht and SS soldiers free passage back to Germany. Nothing of the sort was mentioned for the RSI soldiery, who were left on their own. In the overwhelming majority of cases, Fascist units broke up. The soldiers stripped off their uniforms, threw away their arms, and dashed off to find hiding places. The few units that

<sup>30</sup> Aldo Lualdi, *La banda Koch. Un aguzzino al servizio del regime* (Milan: Bompiani, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> Bertoldi, *Salò*, p. 222.

<sup>32</sup> Griner, *La "Pupilla" del Duce*, p. 203.

<sup>33</sup> Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 139. See his footnote 22, in Chap. 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>35</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, p. 544; Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, pp. 154, 175.

kept together tried to save themselves by heading toward Austria. During this flight many of the rag-tag and brutalized soldiers gunned down people indiscriminately. Before surrendering at the end of April 1945, an Italian SS unit under Major Thaler shot six captured partisans at Rodengo-Saiano, near Brescia.<sup>36</sup> At about the same time, a militant from the GNR entered the cell of a prison at Cuneo in Piedmont and slew five Jews held captive.<sup>37</sup> The *cecchini* (snipers) of Turin, hiding in houses, fired away at partisans and bystanders who happened to pass through their crosshairs. Between the proclamation by the Partisan Voluntary Corps of Freedom on 25 April giving orders for a general uprising and the end of the fighting on 2 May, the most radical and compromised Fascists made last desperate attempts to save themselves without much hope of survival.

Nonetheless, only a relatively few who had committed crimes paid with their lives. The fate of the Tupin (*Tutti Uniti per l'Italia Nostra*) stands out. Let loose on the orders of the provincial head, Vezzadini, to kill suspected partisans in Ferrara and Novara, the men of the Tupin got off scot-free for their misdeeds. The abbreviation Tupin stood for Everyone United for Our Italy, but since it aimed to shuttle volunteers into execution squads for killing suspected partisans, that description was quite a misnomer.<sup>38</sup> In spite of partisan dragnets, a majority escaped.

When the moderate *azionista* Ferruccio Parri replaced Bonomi as prime minister on 20 June 1945, the sea change in politics to the right of the political spectrum that started before the war's end appeared to slow down. With a cabinet that included the Socialist Pietro Nenni and the Communist Palmiro Togliatti as justice minister, many expected an uptick in the purge of Fascists. This, however, quickly proved to be a mirage when differences broke out among the anti-Fascist groups that weakened the removal and prosecution of Fascists. Moreover, Italian conservatives worked cleverly behind the scenes to reduce the severity of punitive measures against them.

The conservatives were joined in the endeavor to restore official legality by Allied forces preparing to march into cities and towns in the North that the partisans had already liberated. Having set up impromptu revolutionary governments that had quickly imposed law and order, the partisans cheerfully greeted the Allies motoring into their liberated areas. Much to

<sup>36</sup> ACS, Ministero Grazia e Giustizia, Grazie, Collaborazionisti, b. 22, f. "Vigna Alberto."

<sup>37</sup> ACS, Ministero di Grazia e Giustizia, Grazie, Collaborazionisti, f. 171.

<sup>38</sup> ACS, Ministero dell'Interno, Carte SIS, b. 30.

their consternation, however, the government authorities, with Allied backing, started to dissolve their makeshift ruling bodies, dismantle the spontaneously set up popular and factory-purge tribunals, and urge the armed warriors to stack their weapons and go home. With the assistance of Italy's governments, the Allies kept on many Fascist-era "forces of order" and Carabinieri out of fear that police powers would gravitate to the partisans.

During the first half of 1945, therefore, both the number of purges and legal actions taken against RSI supporters had slumped badly. The cathartic sight of Mussolini's mutilated corpse, which to many spelled *finis* to the man, his regime, and his politics, gave way to the recognition that it was time to turn the page and get on with finding solutions to the many problems the country faced.

The increasingly dominant traditional conservatives, made up of liberals, monarchists, and Christian Democrats, held that a far-reaching house-cleaning of Fascists would never bring about the nation's rebirth; a prerequisite for the creation of a democratic republic, they held, lay, rather, in a national reconciliation based on relegating Fascism to an arcane past. Once having punished Fascist luminaries, Italy could return to normality by quietly letting off the camp followers. In this altered political landscape very few people were prosecuted or removed from office; sanctions against Fascism and a surge in arrests for Fascist criminality had run their course.

In November 1945 the government in Rome further played down anti-Fascist measures by enacting the Nenni law. This legislation aimed to stave off lethal counter-attacks on economic reconstruction, stifle incriminations, slow down trials against Fascists, and end purges in industrial companies and the financial system as a whole. It was Nenni's actions and not the Catholic politician Alcide De Gasperi's hostility to the amnesty of the Communist Minister of Justice Togliatti in 1946 that placed the efficacy of purges in doubt.<sup>39</sup>

Following these events, the Extraordinary Assize Courts shut down business on 5 October 1945 (they were replaced by "special sections" of the regular assize courts); the High Commission for Sanctions against Fascism followed by closing its doors on 31 March the following year.

<sup>39</sup> Michele Battini, "Sins of Memory: Reflections on the Back of an Italian Nuremberg and the Administration of International Justice after 1945," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9:3 (Fall 2004), p. 354.

Not unnoticed, De Gasperi, supported by the Americans, was biding his time for leading a conservative resurgence that would dominate the government and enable him further to downgrade the anti-Fascist purges. His time soon came when, on 10 December 1945, he formed a center-right government that spelled an irreversible downturn in CLN influence. No longer would the “wind from the North” be able to stake a claim on political power to guide the future destiny of the country.

When the monarchy was abolished in a referendum of 2 June 1946, many in Italy were ready to conclude that the removal of this Fascist symbol during the *ventennio* sufficed to rid the country of the unholy alliance between crown and Duce, forgetting that Mussolini’s Salò had castigated the king as a traitor.

Against the backdrop of these dramatic political changes, Italian justice lumbered forward. Among RSI high-ranking Fascists brought before the dock were Filippo Anfuso, Mussolini’s ambassador to the Third Reich; Rodolfo Graziani, the RSI’s minister of defense; Junio Valerio Borghese, the “afascist” warrior; Domenico Pellegrini Giampietro, the keeper of the Italian treasury; and Luigi Bolla, the nimble follower of the Duce in the Foreign Ministry.

In 1946 Anfuso was taken into custody in France and charged with plotting against the security of the state. He remained in jail until February 1948. During that period he was condemned to death in absentia by an Italian court for collaboration with the German invader. To escape judgment, he fled abroad until 1949 when his sentence was annulled for insufficient evidence. On Anfuso’s return to Italy, he moved seamlessly into the MSI, where he buffed up Mussolini’s reputation through articles and speeches. In 1953 Anfuso became a deputy in the Italian parliament and took on the job as director of the newspaper *Il secolo d’Italia*. He died of a heart attack on 13 December 1961. (After the war, Anfuso’s diplomatic counterpart, Rudolf Rahn, likewise regained public respectability, not in politics but as director of Coca Cola in Germany.)

With the defeat of the RSI, Marshal Graziani, after dodging his partisan pursuers, surrendered at the CLNAI headquarters in Milan. After spending a few days in San Vittore prison, he was handed over to Allied custody and shipped off to Algeria where he and his American captor enjoyed “a bottle of very fine old cognac.”<sup>40</sup> Eventually, he was brought before an Italian military tribunal, which sentenced him to nineteen years in jail as

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, p. 154.



punishment for his collaboration with the Nazis. After only a few months he was released, never having been prosecuted for specific war crimes. At seventy-two, Rodolfo Graziani died in Rome of natural causes.

Arrested in Milan, following the end of hostilities, Pellegrini Giampietro escaped the firing squad thanks to the intervention of the Allies. Still, he was brought to justice by the Extraordinary Court of Assize and sentenced to thirty years of reclusion and confiscation of goods. During the night of 16 November, Pellegrini Giampietro, together with the notorious racist Telesio Interlandi, managed to escape from the San Vittore prison through a hole in the masonry. Eventually, he was cleared of all charges and complimented for being an inflexible and courageous opponent of the Nazis in his allegedly shrewd economic dealings with the Third Reich. Back in politics, having joined the MSI as an “inflexible” Fascist in 1949, he resigned from the party and betook himself to a more congenial environment in Latin America, where he made a fortune in various entrepreneurial projects.<sup>41</sup>

After the war an Italian court charged the unruly Prince Borghese with having allowed the X Mas to take part in massacres at Borgo Ticino and Porto Canavese.<sup>42</sup> Fortunately for him, he had a protector in James Angleton, a long-standing, powerful operative in the American Office of Strategic Services, who drove Borghese from Milan to Rome for interrogation where an Italian court tried and convicted him of collaboration with the Nazi invaders, but not for war crimes. Borghese was sentenced to twelve years’ imprisonment, reduced to three, thanks to his expeditions against Tito’s partisans during the war. Released from jail in 1949, he became active in neo-Fascist movements, even staging a coup d’état referred to as the *Golpe Borghese* that fizzled in late 1970. Borghese died in mysterious circumstances in Cadiz, Spain, in 1974, aged sixty-eight, having acquired the soubriquet of Black Prince.

Luigi Bolla was brought to trial by a partisan court after the war and immediately set free but banned from public service. In 1949 he was cleared to resume a diplomatic career, serving in various posts until receiving a last appointment as inspector general in the Foreign Ministry.

That the list of corrupt Fascist leaders who escaped or received only minimal punishment goes on and on beyond the top few revealed clearly to the disillusioned populace the moral nadir to which the bureaucracy’s

<sup>41</sup> Mimmo Franzinelli, *L’amnistia Togliatti, 22 giugno 1946: Colpo di spugna sui criminali fascisti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), p. 170.

<sup>42</sup> Lamb, *War in Italy*, p. 74.

upper crust had fallen. Even those diehard Fascists who took fright and fled to safe havens abroad suffered little; after undergoing short-lived obligatory trials, they were eventually allowed to reenter the Italian political system.

The many lesser folk corralled for trial received lenient sentences or were acquitted. Judges knew that, by enforcing sanctions against other civil servants, their own roles might be brought into question. Appeals could be made to the highest court in Italy, the Court of Cassation, whose members were close to Fascism.<sup>43</sup> By continually annulling the sentences handed down by the Assize Courts, by pardoning, ignoring, and covering up some of the worst atrocities committed by the Black Brigades, and by diluting sentences that had already been handed out, the Court of Cassation undermined efforts to bring Fascist criminals to justice.<sup>44</sup> Large corporations and farming estates lived on as before. The crimes of the rogue militias were barely touched, and the purges of the bureaucracy made practically no inroads, which left the RSI “apolitical” managers in charge of the state’s apparatus. These questionable legal outcomes regarding the Fascist higher-ups revealed widespread problems in the Italian postwar judicial system. Courts were generally staffed by the same judges and lawyers who had served under Mussolini.<sup>45</sup> Functioning until the end of 1947, these courts handed out sentences that decreed 469 to death, of which only 91 were carried out.<sup>46</sup>

The measured American historian Roy Palmer Domenico concludes that, on the whole, the purges, directed mainly against members of the BN and GNR, lurched forward irregularly. Moreover, the courts rendered imbalanced verdicts and uneven punishments.<sup>47</sup> The forbearance of the parties on the Left had been sorely tested.

The end of sanctions led to an across-the-board amnesty. In a gambit to win the votes of ex-RSI exponents, Communist Minister of Justice Togliatti engineered passage of a constitutional referendum on 22 June 1946 that approved a broad amnesty that condoned practically all those Fascists who had committed obvious crimes of collaboration during the just-concluded civil war. Among the measures: all verdicts under five years

<sup>43</sup> Dondi, *La lunga liberazione*, p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Lowe, *Savage Continent*, p. 151.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 150–51.

<sup>46</sup> Parlato, *Fascisti senza Mussolini*, p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, pp. 190–230.

were canceled and death sentences were commuted to life. Many were free to walk out of prison. Only hierarchs holding commanding positions guilty of brutal crimes remained behind bars.<sup>48</sup> After an initial burst of activity, the courts had summoned only a handful of government employees to give an accounting for their actions before their work was cut short by the amnesty. How ironic that Togliatti, an avowed Communist leader tied to Stalin, initiated the Fascist whitewash, rather than mandarins on the political right.

This was in line with the Communist Party's *doppio binario*, a two-track policy. The cadre openly participated in conventional democratic and parliamentary activities, while at the same time much of the rank and file believed—and large sections of the leadership allowed them to believe—that there was another track upon which the party was traveling. When the moment was right, the word would come to launch a working-class insurrection. Taking part in elections was simply a Trojan horse to be discarded at an opportune time.

In the throes of forming a “new party,” Togliatti intended to pursue “progressive democracy” as a stepping stone, at an unspecified future time, to a “dictatorship of the proletariat” by playing according to parliamentary rules pragmatically and step-by-step. Togliatti carried out this strategy as Josef Stalin’s messenger boy rather than on his own initiative. The last thing the Soviet dictator wanted was a premature revolution in Italy that could easily be stamped out by the American military, which would set back the growth of the Italian Communist Party for at least a generation. Stalin was scrupulous in living up to understandings reached among the Big Three that Italy lay in the sphere of influence of the Western Powers.

By posturing as a player in the democratic system, Togliatti cleverly made over the standard image of the Communist as savage revolutionary into a party regular working to expand his base by the arts of *trasformismo*. His was no longer to be a party of barricades and Molotov cocktails but one of the ballot box and bargains made in smoke-filled rooms. To rally popular support behind the government, the Communists joined Christian Democrats in consigning further punishment of Fascists to oblivion.

Togliatti’s ruse worked. The Communist Party was able to open a dialogue with ex-Fascist intellectuals, many of whom had escaped prison thanks to his amnesty. Perhaps numbering 34,000, RSI savants and their following constituted a wave of “Red Fascists” who crossed over to the

<sup>48</sup> Franzinelli, *L'amnistia Togliatti*, pp. 180–84.

Italian Communist Party. Even men in Junio Valerio Borghese's Decima Mas joined up.<sup>49</sup> So did the famous Fascist writer Curzio Malaparte. As usual, Italian politics ensured that justice would not be well served.

As Italy's trials against Fascism languished in rancor and new party alignments, the CLN parties and their allies had to prepare for the cold reality that the Conservative do-nothing attitude would undercut any thoroughgoing inquiry into the ruling classes' participation in the reprehensible policies of the Fascist regimes in both Rome and Salò.

In the economic realm, the *classe dirigente* fought tooth and nail against any comprehensive purge of Fascists and their collaborators. If purges cut deep into the political, governmental, and economic institutions of the country, they feared, a Communist take-over could be easily accomplished. Their property would be expropriated and their political dominance lost. Just as they had done during RSI days, big business moguls, who played both ends against the middle (and turned nice profits in doing so), eventually were cleared of blame and allowed to keep their enterprises. Operating in the confines of their powerful General Confederation of Italian Industry (Confindustria) citadel, they engaged in byzantine schemes in league with conservative politicians aimed at staving off any threat to their economic privileges and prerogatives.

Both the Allies and conservative Italians, solidly supported by the American CIA, looked to the old crowd of tycoons as the only ones having the know-how, connections, and managerial skills to bring about a quick Italian economic recovery. Keeping the factories operating would also avoid eliminating workers' jobs, which, they hoped, would quiet down their revolutionary impulses. The Allies insisted that men such as Vittorio Valletta of Fiat be left in place, despite his notorious engagement with the Fascist authorities.<sup>50</sup> For the *classe dirigente* and the Americans pulling strings in the background, this was the required rejoinder to dangerous and untried socialist experiments, inexperienced radical partisans, and scary Communists who had taken to the streets, triumphantly waving their hammer and sickle banners forecasting revolution.

The unsettled conditions in northwest Italy played into the hands of the neo-Fascist resurgence. After the war Tito's forces drove deep into the Istrian Peninsula and Trieste where they instituted a reign of terror by

<sup>49</sup> Di Scala, "Resistance Mythology," p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 51.

rounding up and dumping Italians in *foibe* (deep natural chasms—a horrible death). General Alexander intervened in February 1947 to supervise signature of an international treaty that handed Yugoslavia Istria and Dalmatia as well as over half of the provinces of Gorizia and the city of Trieste, which accelerated the departure of about 350,000 Italians from their homes in the newly expanded Yugoslavia for resettlement in mainland Italy. Thus the neo-Fascists were given a heaven-sent opportunity to join Italian nationalists in utilizing the fate of Dalmatian and Istrian refugees—the *foibe* tragedies, their lost homelands, and their virulent anti-Communism—to win political stature in the country. Ironically, these episodes were downplayed by the Italian Left, particularly Communist intellectuals and opinion makers.

The death knell of anti-Fascist sanctions and purges sounded in 1948 when De Gasperi's Christian Democratic Party gained an absolute majority in the Parliament. Communist expectations were dashed when the party, by playing ball with democracy, lost ground in the final vote. Furious, party radicals struck back with strikes and riots. The government clamped down by arresting Communist trade union leaders and party demonstrators *en masse* and by quickly stamping out residual protests of estranged former partisans. The rightist press seized the occasion to "transform Fascists into victims and Partisans into criminals."<sup>51</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that the government's punitive measures against former resistance fighters were harsher and more widespread than the post-war purges and retribution visited on Fascists.

Charges still flew from a Left in retreat that managers, owners, Nazis, and RSI hierarchs had conspired together to bridle the freedom of the Italian people and rob the poor. And radical partisans did not cease in their refusal to make allowances for certain industrialists who had played a double game with the Third Reich or protected workers from German round-ups. Indeed, they continued to hammer away on the need to expropriate compromised industrial giants, for which they expected to be hailed by masses of destitute and angry people still digging out of rubble and coping with semi-starvation. But in a nation drifting rightward, this revolutionary gusto eventually sputtered out and wholesale change was left for dead.

These developments crushed the hopes and aspirations of the activist partisans who were determined, after rooting out Fascism from the body politic, to rebuild society from the ground up. Lost was the campaign

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial*, p. 210.

waged by the Italian Left to question the notion that Fascism represented only a “parenthesis” in Italian history; lost was the effort to discredit the belief that Mussolini had fought unforeseen but understandable wars that had gone wrong; and lost was the determination to prove that Fascism had imposed an indelible stain on the country, which was in dire need of a drastic overhaul. Stalwart resistance leaders, having believed that they had created a political *tabula rasa* by virtue of their victory over Fascism made at heavy sacrifice, were sure that “reactionaries” had robbed them of their deserved mandate to carry out sweeping revolutionary reforms. Their passionate belief that the Salò regime, by collaborating with Nazis, was complicit in German crimes against humanity and extermination of peoples was a view that the majority of Italians had chosen to forget.



## Historical Controversies

Many old-guard resistance leaders made sure their voices were heard by composing narratives that dwelled on their perilous and valiant fight against the Fascist-dominated RSI. One of Salò's courageous adversaries, the redoubtable Communist resistance fighter Roberto Battaglia, held that the RSI, indubitably a creature of the Germans, lacked a popular base save support on the part of the industrial classes. The Fascists running the RSI, he maintained, had the single-minded purpose of holding the ring while the industrial expropriators crushed the proletarian classes by squeezing their wages to the point of starvation. Other than the privileged bourgeois classes, RSI supporters were no more than a "dismal crew of crazy phantoms whirling madly around amid the havoc they had created."<sup>1</sup> Battaglia rejected the notion of "civil war," which he believed to be part of a rhetorical strategy aimed at neutralizing the ideological dimensions of the conflict. Plainly and simply, he insisted, it was a war of good versus evil: Communists and their Socialist allies pitted against capitalists and their Fascist cronies. On the whole, Battaglia argued, the majority of people living in the RSI were at one in rejecting Hitler and his Italian minions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cited in R.J.B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: Arnold, 1998), p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Battaglia, *Storia della Resistenza in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), pp. 147–52.

Guido Quazza, former commander of the Ruggero Vitrani Partisan Brigade and prolific writer on the resistance, joined Battaglia in believing that the anti-Fascist warriors were engaged in a morality play to restore humanity and civilized values in a revitalized Italian democracy. Instead of “civil war,” Quazza used the term “war for civilization,” a battle in which the partisans fought to destroy the forces of evil embodied in the “brutal” Pact of Steel signed between Italy and Germany on 22 May 1939. The RSI, in his view, was part of Hitler’s imperium, in which Italians were doomed to be an underclass.<sup>3</sup>

Nuto Revelli, among the old guard of former partisans, declared that the conflict waged in Italy between 1943 and 1945 could not be considered a civil war “because the fascists were foreigners as much, and maybe more, than the Germans, which denied the RSI its support and identity as fellow countrymen.”<sup>4</sup> These authors and their comrades in the resistance generation treated as unthinkable the notion that the RSI might have had any real popularity or considerable following. For them, the idea of “civil war,” with its connotations of a fratricidal bloodbath, was strictly taboo.

The well-known journalist and historian Angelo Del Boca, who has written extensively on Fascist war crimes, undertook a tortuous odyssey. After a few months of draft dodging, he answered the RSI’s call on 11 January 1944 for military service. Swearing allegiance to the regime, he departed for Germany to train in the *Monte Rosa* Alpine Division. On his return to Italy in the summer of 1944, viewing with horror the blood-thirsty behavior of the Fascist militants engaged in violent *rastrellamenti*, he had serious second thoughts. After having been captured by the partisans, Del Boca repudiated Fascism. Eventually, he became one of Italy’s outstanding scholars in the vices of Fascist imperialism.<sup>5</sup>

The Italian historian Claudio Pavone, in a series of magisterial studies, presents a more textured reading of the years 1943–45 by taking into account the manifold diversity in philosophy and background among those who made up the RSI *classe dirigente* (power elite). He further argues that Italy was divided by three different wars occurring simultaneously: a civil war, fought between various partisan formations and Italians

<sup>3</sup> Guido Quazza, “Introduction,” in Massimo Legnani and Vendramini Ferruccio, eds., *Guerra, guerra di liberazione, guerra civile. Atti del convegno di Belluno, 26–30 October 1988* (Milan: Angeli, 1990), pp. 13–22.

<sup>4</sup> Guri Schwarz, “The Moral Conundrums of the Historian: Claudio Pavone’s *A Civil War and its legacy*,” *Modern Italy* 20, 4 (2015), p. 430.

<sup>5</sup> Angelo Del Boca, *La scelta* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1963), p. 41.



who remained loyal to Mussolini and Fascism; a class war, which involved widespread strikes and ongoing ideological strife between leftist and rightist factions; and a patriotic war, aimed at the country's liberation from the occupying Germans. In comprehending these complications, Pavone was able to sort out and analyze the various strands of the partisan resistance.

Moreover, in Pavone's view, the followers of the Salò government were not robotic believers in a hateful creed, or merely a ragged band of angry Fascists, but included a lot of decent Italians who genuinely believed that the RSI incorporated values that deserved to be defended. Pavone was careful to give a day in court to the "boys of Salò,"<sup>6</sup> those who supposedly had voluntarily served the regime with honor, faith, and sacrifice. According to Pavone, therefore, Italy was not victimized by a Manichean struggle between light and darkness, good partisans versus evil Fascists. Ambiguities and imponderables abounded.

Still, Pavone clearly eschews any suggestion of "equality" or moral equivalency between partisans and Fascists, for he never loses sight of the underlying "morality" of the resistance activists, some of whom embraced a life of adventure, and others who more cautiously participated in the resistance as a matter of duty. Pavone clearly had the ability to transcend polemics and make unbiased judgments while still holding fast to enlightened values. But if the anti-Fascist war was basically a just war in which virtue triumphed over evil, it was nevertheless a civil war marked by many shades of grey. By rising above the dichotomy of "partisan patriots" versus "RSI slaves" of the Germans, Pavone has broken what had been an unease with nuance by encouraging others to undertake sophisticated and searching research on a profusion of subjects regarding the RSI.

The Italian scholar Luigi Ganapini, through a careful analysis of the military, political, and administrative structures of the RSI, discovers a variety of ideological shadings on the part of Fascists living in the Salò regime. With equal industry he describes the reasons why major sectors of the lower classes of central and northern Italy threw in their lot with the

<sup>6</sup>Giorgio Pisanò, an RSI veteran who had been an officer in the Decima Mas, describes RSI soldiers as "the boys of Salò," normal easy-going regular guys who fought the good fight. Angelo D'Orsi, "Dal revisionismo al rovescismo," in Angelo Del Boca, ed., *La storia negata: Il revisionismo e il suo uso politico* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2009), pp. 341–42. Luciano Violante, a former member of the Communist Party, utilized the term "the boys of Salò" to extend the values of the resistance to the nation as a whole in order to repair the lacerations of the past. Philip Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 174.

RSI.<sup>7</sup> The Italian historian Dianella Gagliani has recently written a book on the *Brigate Nere* (Black Brigades [BB]), where she unerringly describes the progressive “nazification” of the Fascist Party that was prompted by the BB’s growing use of violence and zealous support of the most extreme wing of the Fascist Republican Party.<sup>8</sup>

The above richly researched books on the RSI have regrettably found only a small audience. The general Italian reading public, unwilling to tackle such long and erudite studies, has instead bought up sensationalized and easy-to-read books that preclude any real and profound understanding of the historical course of events regarding the RSI. Immediately after the war, RSI survivors launched a strident campaign to prove that they were the true guardians of the country’s honor against the betrayal of the king and Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who became head of the government after Mussolini’s overthrow on 25 July 1943. To prove this point, they singled out the partisans, and above all the Communists, as the culprits responsible for unleashing civil war against a “legitimate” Salò government packed with heroic patriots.

The door had swung open for Salò’s ex-Fascists to shower the book market with a profusion of memoirs and “historical studies” that concentrated on what they considered to be justifiable reasons for supporting the RSI regime. In this more hospitable political climate, the neo-Fascists were emboldened to regard a simple pardon as not enough. In the unfolding Cold War, they demanded thanks for defending the country’s honor and civilization against Communism. Immediately after the amnesties, they set about removing the historical record of the intolerable deeds committed by Mussolini and Fascism. As romantic heroes, they claimed to have suffered untold sacrifices in an already lost war to save the nation’s honor. Once they had experienced defeat, continued this narrative, the partisans had sought revenge by massacring scores of the enemy and sending the rest to cold and inhospitable jails. This work of historical falsification, which they felt proved the political and moral legitimacy of the RSI, would be passed on to future generations.

These Fascist polemicists also argued that the RSI had provided a shield that impeded the Germans from avenging themselves on Italians after the “betrayal” of 8 September.<sup>9</sup> Marshal Graziani during his postwar trial in

<sup>7</sup> Luigi Ganapini, *La repubblica delle camicie nere* (Milan: Garzanti, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Dianella Gagliani, *Brigate nere: Mussolini e la militarizzazione del Partito fascista repubblicano* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> The Salò press in autumn 1943 had already started to propagate the theme of the republic as a “shield” against the “furor teutonicus.” After the war, the ex-hierarchs of the RSI, and

1946 declared: “I assumed a duty, and in this duty I saw a mission, within the limits of my possibilities, to prevent as much as possible those misfortunes that the German, the true enemy, could inflict on the Patria.”<sup>10</sup> The apologists’ story continued: Mussolini hated Hitler and the Germans but sacrificed himself to salvage his fellow Italians. As men of integrity, they rallied around Salò to save the country betrayed by the about-face of Badoglio and Victor Emmanuel III. However, when Fascism’s warriors enthusiastically hastened to fight the Allied enemy on the Apennine front, they unexpectedly got entangled in a civil war triggered by Communists. Fighting against fellow Italians turned their stomachs. Despite the many cowardly shootings in the back by cold-blooded partisans, Mussolini did everything imaginable to bring vendettas to a halt.

In this re-writing of history, the Fascists adroitly exploited the new climate of postwar Italy gripped by growing anti-Communism. As the Cold War settled in, this neo-Fascist narrative persuaded many citizens that the RSI had not worsened the internecine strife among Italians.

One cannot deny that there was a civil war or that massacres were committed by both sides. In doing their part, the Communist-inspired GAP aimed through well-timed assassinations to destroy whatever spirit of collaboration Mussolini and Salò Fascism had sought to foster among their “moderate” enemies. The Fascists, as expected, answered with a surfeit of vendettas. The regime’s sympathizers argue that when faced by these lethal *Gappisti* provocations, Mussolini and his supporters had no other recourse but robust retaliation. For Graziani, the Communists sought to provoke wide-ranging strife and plunge the Italian bourgeoisie into a bloodbath.<sup>11</sup> Franz Turchi, an ex-provincial head of the RSI, held that the civil war was instigated by the partisan assassination on 13 November 1943 of Igino Ghisellini, the *federale* of Ferrara.<sup>12</sup> The same idea was affirmed by Giorgio Pini, according to whom the death of Ghisellini triggered the outbreak of general conflict. Concetto Pettinato was hardly alone in defining partisans as “brigands and thieves.”<sup>13</sup>

in particular, many journalists, vied with each other in justifying the republic’s positive contribution to Italian history by employing the argument of the “shield.” Bruno Spampanato (the director of the Rome daily *Il Messaggero*, and then official newspaper head of the X Flottiglia Mas), and Piero Pisenti, minister of justice, who entitled his memoir *Una Repubblica necessaria*, stand out as primary examples.

<sup>10</sup> *Processo Graziani*, I: 213.

<sup>11</sup> Canevari, *Graziani mi ha detto*, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Turchi, *Prefetto con Mussolini*, p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> Pettinato, *Tutto da rifare*, p. 226.

A typical example of Fascist-mangled history is the story of Via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine, which held the partisans primarily responsible for these tragedies. In the aim of deepening hatred between Italians and Germans, who until then were acting correctly, say these Fascist writers, partisans had gunned down Wehrmacht soldiers on the Via Rasella indifferent to the inevitable massive reprisals against innocent people bound to follow.<sup>14</sup> If they had any honor, the GAP assassins should have turned themselves in, thus sparing the RSI and the German ally the onerous duty of compiling a list of victims at random. Hence, the Fascists, who for decades had reveled in unabashed and triumphant violence, now were suggesting that they were the sacrificial lambs of violence.

Belonging to a movement rife with anti-Semitism and with a long history of collaboration with Nazi Germany, postwar Fascist-leaning writers had no answer when the full story of the Holocaust catastrophe began to be told. As the Nuremberg trials ran their course, former RSI devotees could no longer credibly claim ignorance, given the arrests and deportations that took place under their watch. And it was not possible to deny the anti-Semitic legislation as revealed in the *Carta di Verona*, which had been published and openly accepted. When confronted by these embarrassing realities, postwar Fascists generally kept mum. Occasionally, certain writers actually tried to play down Fascist persecution of the Jews. Spanpanato, for example, treated Article 7 of the *Carta di Verona* as a “religious problem” rather than a racial one. Marco Tarchi heaped blame for anti-Semitism wholly on Preziosi.<sup>15</sup> For Vincenzo Costa, Fascists were never anti-Semitic.<sup>16</sup> Glauco Guidi, the son of Guido Buffarini Guidi, attempting to defend the memory of his father in a book called *La vera verità*, makes the patently false statement that the RSI Order of Police no. 5 was served to give the Jews protection from the Germans, and that, therefore, the father had defended the persecuted. Clearly, such refusals to face facts revealed a level of absurdity.

Among the main pleaders of the RSI cause were the contemporary journalists Edmondo Cione and Ernesto Amicucci, later joined by many others,

<sup>14</sup>This thesis has been rehashed on numerous occasions by neo-Fascist publications. An example can be found in Pierangelo Maurizio, *Roma '44. I signori del terrore* (Rome: Maurizio, 1997), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Tarchi, *Teste dure*, p. 48. Tarchi insisted that he had refused the villa formerly belonging to the Jew Jarach and claimed to have helped several persecuted Jews.

<sup>16</sup>Costa, *L'ultimo federale*, p. 158.

such as the vocal former Fascist combatant Vincenzo Costa.<sup>17</sup> According to Cione, ministers such as Pisenti, Romano, Biggini, and Zerbino worked tirelessly for a policy of reconciliation.<sup>18</sup> This vision of a “benign” Fascist regime open to collaboration among all Italians of good will was taken up during and after the war by ex-Fascist “moderates,” many of whom were well-known journalists such as Giorgio Pini,<sup>19</sup> Bruno Spampanato,<sup>20</sup> Ermanno Amicucci,<sup>21</sup> Concetto Pettinato, and even the so-called fence builder Carlo Silvestri.<sup>22</sup>

But were they really moderates? Surely not Pini, who, in his journal *Resto del Carlino*, constantly advocated the delivery of Jews to the Nazis, nor Spampanato, who utilized his paper *il Messaggero* to forge goodwill toward the Nazi occupation. Amicucci, however, the editor of the *Corriere della Sera* who wanted to win over the conservative bourgeoisie to the RSI cause, can fairly be described as a “moderate.” One who actually stands out for courage in expressing criticism of the regime was the stalwart Fascist Concetto Pettinato, the editor of the influential *La Stampa* of Turin. On more than one occasion he reprimanded the RSI for a variety of sins, which frequently landed him in trouble with the regime’s high inquisitors. All these journalists were subjected to grueling trials for a variety of Fascist misdeeds, and all were eventually amnestied.

Others in positions of responsibility claimed that they had pursued a policy that would attract middle-of-the-road Italians. The uncompromising Fascist Filippo Anfuso emphasized how he and other sane Italians did not object to the waning of extremist ideology and worked to steer free of the *nazifascismo* brand. Luigi Bolla, a lesser figure in the Salò Republic’s Foreign Office, has left us with perhaps the most sophisticated defense of a moderate Fascist’s adherence to the RSI. In his book *Perché a Salò*, Bolla viewed himself as having worked for his nation, the RSI, in spite of the great odds stacked against an Axis victory over the Allies. He deprecated Germans and suffered the received illusion of many moderates that the Salò government could block a takeover by radical Fascists and prevent

<sup>17</sup>Edmondo Cione, *Storia della Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Caserta: Il Cenacolo, 1948); Ernesto Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini* (Rome: Faro, 1948); Vincenzo Costa, *L’Ultimo federale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006.)

<sup>18</sup>Cione, *Storia della Repubblica Sociale Italiana*.

<sup>19</sup>Pini, *Itinerario tragico*.

<sup>20</sup>Bruno Spampanato, *Contromemorale* (Rome: “Illustrato,” s.d.).

<sup>21</sup>Amicucci, *I 600 giorni di Mussolini*.

<sup>22</sup>Pettinato, *Tutto da rifare*.

Germans from exercising *carte blanche* in “zones of military operation.” But since one of his favorite mottos was “A diplomat should only open his mouth when he has nothing to say,”<sup>23</sup> he carefully avoided indiscretion. In claiming that he and his colleagues had held steady in maintaining the professional integrity of the foreign ministry, Bolla dismisses the charge that they played a “double game,” even after party members, “dark figures,” and spies had penetrated their ranks.<sup>24</sup> Yet he was able to admit failure, such as the disintegration of central authority over time. Who was responsible for this? Not Mussolini, not the Salò government, he wrote, but the yesteryear Fascists who were dishonest and of bad faith, as well as Badoglio and the king. Bolla’s description of the latter two: “bestial!”<sup>25</sup> Still, he solemnly soldiered on until forced out of the fascistized Foreign Ministry in early August 1944.<sup>26</sup> He repaired to the quieter sanctums of the personnel office until the Duce met his bloody end.

If most of the books written by Fascist contemporaries who lived through the time of the RSI are polemical or downright mendacious, a few can be consulted for an understanding of this period: Giorgio Pini and Duilio Susmel, *Mussolini: L'uomo e l'opera*; Giovanni Dolfi, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*; and Attilio Tamaro, *Due anni di storia*.<sup>27</sup> Still, these authors advance the blown-up claims that partisans and their allies slaughtered around 300,000 people in April 1945 alone (the Interior Ministry in 1946 came up with a much lower figure of approximately 9,000 Fascists killed on or around the liberation in April and May 1945).<sup>28</sup> They fail to consider the 45,000 partisans supposedly killed by Fascists during the war—thus suggesting that the resistance was full of villains while the Fascists consisted of sacrificial lambs.<sup>29</sup>

Just as scandalous, many Fascist newspaper correspondents and hierarchs have endeavored to defend Mussolini’s reputation (and therefore their own) by recounting conversations with the Duce that they never had. These falsehoods appear perhaps most glaringly in the case of the

<sup>23</sup> Bolla, *Perché a Salò*, p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213–14.

<sup>27</sup> Pini and Susmel, *Mussolini, L'uomo e l'opera*, IV: *Dall'Impero alla Repubblica*; Dolfi, *Con Mussolini nella tragedia*.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini: Italy, the Italians, and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 218.

<sup>29</sup> Lowe, *Savage Continent*, p. 159.

journalists Bruno Spampanato and Yvon De Begnac, and party functionaries such as Pino Romualdi and Vincenzo Costa, who have included in their memoirs descriptions of a direct relationship with the dictator that are complete fabrications. This fact can be verified by a perusal of the papers of the Segreteria particolare del Duce that contain all the “Audiences” of Mussolini from 1923 to 1945.<sup>30</sup>

In recent times the most prominent warden of Mussolini’s reputation and the mission of the RSI is the prolific writer Renzo De Felice, renowned author of a multi-volume biography of the Duce. Supported by a large school of followers, De Felice holds that Mussolini should be acknowledged as a patriot for stoutly defending Italians against the worst of Nazi Germany.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, De Felice believes that Mussolini through thick and thin had scuffled with friends and foes alike in order that some form of revolutionary Fascism would live on in the future. But while fanatics and cynics brawled with one another in their unrewarding conflict, the populace at large, argues De Felice, took refuge in a “grey zone”—not caring who won. Longing to stay out of the conflict, they aimed simply to survive and prayed for an end to the killing. By assuming this view, De Felice denies the resistance’s claim to have been a mass movement.<sup>32</sup>

Lightly handled in De Felice’s account is Mussolini’s promotion of radical Fascism and his role in the brutalization of the war against both fence sitters and partisans. Nor does he adequately come to grips with Mussolini’s objective of carving out a role for the RSI on the European Continent in a coalition guided by the Third Reich.

In recent times, Giampaolo Pansa has been one of the most popular writers in the burgeoning revisionist school. His books, full of titillating anecdotes, are unfortunately devoid of footnoted archival sources. As an exponent of revisionism,<sup>33</sup> Pansa, in one of his most recent volumes, *La guerra sporca* (*The Dirty War*),<sup>34</sup> claimed that partisans and Fascists were similarly guilty in fighting a foul civil war replete with atrocities. Millions of defenseless people, in his view, were caught in a vise between two pitiless factions. Another of Pansa’s books, *Sangue dei vinti* (*Blood of the Defeated*), tabulates the postwar violence perpetrated against Fascists by

<sup>30</sup> Osti Guerrazzi has organized and catalogued these “Audiences” in a data-base located in the German Historical Institute in Rome. They can be obtained on line.

<sup>31</sup> De Felice, *Rosso e Nero*, pp. 114–15.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 55–56.

<sup>33</sup> Giampaolo Pansa, *Il revisionista* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Giampaolo Pansa, *La guerra sporca dei partigiani e dei fascisti* (Milan: RCS, 2012).

mainly Communist partisans in the immediate aftermath of the war.<sup>35</sup> In Pansa's view, the RSI consisted of administrators, patriots, cautious defenders of Italy's good name, and apostles of law and order.

Certainly, Pansa is to be commended for having given a voice to those who sided with and fought for Salò. He finds that Italians who joined Mussolini in the fledgling Italian Social Republic were neither few nor unimportant. Nor were they simply cowering German puppets and obsequious servants of Mussolini. Instead of depicting wicked people, Pansa describes Salò followers as individuals capable of a mix of strength and human folly no different from their adversaries. Nonetheless, Pansa is seen by many serious historians as having gone overboard in his defense of the RSI.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, the ensuing controversy has further assured him a secure place in the public eye.

Giorgio Pisanò, another well-known revisionist writer, who served as a leading figure in the Italian Social Movement, has spent a lifetime seeking to rehabilitate the memory of Fascism. He holds that Communist partisans incited widespread violence in the immediate postwar era with the single-minded purpose of seizing power by revolutionary action and bringing about a Stalinist dictatorship whatever the cost.<sup>37</sup>

The journalists Mario Avagliano and Marco Palmieri have written the most recent book on the RSI, published in 2017, entitled *L'Italia di Salò 1943–1945*.<sup>38</sup> Through consultation of such contemporary sources as testimonials and posthumous memoirs, they endeavor to elicit the reasons why Italians decided to go along with Mussolini's RSI—the “*parte sbagliata*” (wrong side). In discussing their reactions, which ranged from fanatical belief and enthusiasm to reluctance and resignation, the two

<sup>35</sup> Giampaolo Pansa, *Il sangue dei vinti* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> The historian Ilenia Rossini, having subjected Pansa's books to profound scrutiny, has demonstrated a far-reaching misuse of source materials. See her “il sangue dei vinti e il caso Vezalini. Omissioni, distorsioni e uso pubblico della storia,” *Giornale di storia contemporanea* XI: 2 (dicembre 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Giorgio Pisanò, *Gli ultimi in grigio verde: Storia delle forze armate della Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Milan: FPE, 1967–69). To the end, Pisanò proudly proclaimed his Fascism. See his *Io fascista* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1997) and *La generazione che non si è arresa* (Milan: Pidola, 1964). Other writers who fit the revisionist mold include Carlo Mazzantini, *A cercar la bella morte* (Milan: Mondadori, 1986). For further discussion on this theme, see Simonetta Bartolini, “La memoria rimossa: voci e atmosfere della RSI,” in S. Bartolini, L. Ganapini, A. Giannuli, G. Parlato, A. G. Ricci, M. Tarchi, eds., *Le fonti per la storia della RSI* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 2005), pp. 53–66.

<sup>38</sup> Mario Avagliano and Marco Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2017).



authors illuminate the panoply of motivation and ideology that dictated their responses to the regime. But Avagliano and Palmieri do not go beyond this limited purpose, thereby stopping short of a comprehensive and searching analysis of the nature, structure, and practice of the Salò Republic.

The many RSI exponents who insist that they have written a “balanced” history hold that dogmatic anti-Fascists unfairly dismiss the RSI as a *repubblica nera* (black republic) consisting of a minority of evil combatants abusing a disgruntled captive population. To counter this narrative, they have produced inventive histories of the regime, in which they endeavor to transcend bitter historical memories by recounting positive deeds that at the very least equaled those of the resistance movement.

This re-evaluation has made inroads in the thinking of recent Italian scholars. Elena Aga Rossi writes: “The stigma of Fascism has blocked peoples’ minds and prevented them from a fair discussion. The historiography of the Resistance strains to break free of its myths.”<sup>39</sup> Leo Valiani, a resistance hero, noted: “To the war-fallen, honors should always be rendered no matter on which side they fought. They should be paid tribute for their sacrifices, but not necessarily for their ideas, or for their actions. I am quite aware that many who in autumn 1943 took up arms on the side of the occupying and invasive Nazis did so for patriotic reasons.”<sup>40</sup>

Adding his voice to the discussion, the historian Roberto Vivarelli, a political liberal and supposedly strong supporter of democracy, wrote a memoir that recorded his willing participation, as a youth, in the Fascist Black Brigades during the war.<sup>41</sup> Vivarelli explained that he was bound by a moral imperative to defend the fatherland. “For us,” Vivarelli writes, “Fascism was a myth that had filled our lives and to which we had given our fervid devotion with a rigor and coherence that only the enthusiasm of adolescents can explain. We were instructed to ‘believe, obey, fight,’ and now we continued to believe with blind faith, we were ready to obey. And fighting was our highest aspiration.”<sup>42</sup> The RSI, having a popular base, he contends, cannot be dismissed as a mere puppet state or as unmitigated evil.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Giampaolo Pansa, *La grande bugia: Le sinistre italiane e il sangue dei vinti* (Milan: Sperling Paperback, 2006), p. 363.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Roberto Vivarelli, *Fascismo e storia d'Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), p. 213, n. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Roberto Vivarelli, *La fine di una stagione: Memoria 1943–1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–19.

<sup>43</sup> Vivarelli, *Fascismo e storia d'Italia*, pp. 283–84.

Vivarelli's justification for his participation in the RSI provoked an outcry. What most surprised and shocked many people was this statement: "I do not regret my choice. On the contrary, I would repeat it."<sup>44</sup>

Italian writers who are bent on discrediting critics of the Salò Republic share the view that most Italians in 1943 were appalled at how their country had fallen into disgrace. To overcome this dark cloud on their country's reputation, they have pursued the recovery of honor and the cult of the *patria*. This reading of history clearly has the aim of de-fascistizing the RSI in favor of an *afascita* and apolitical image that would invalidate the accusation that they supported collaboration and *nazifascismo*. Not far behind in number are Fascist writers who place high priority on revolutionary aims such as Socialization. Common to all is the conviction that only Mussolini could put Italy back on its feet and keep the Germans from reducing the country to rubble and catastrophe. Most of the Duce's followers, who had been close to the centers of power, record fairly accurately what they saw. But when it comes to interpretation, these scribes descend into the same pitfalls found in the typical ruminations of the RSI survivor. In defending and justifying the Fascist experience, and therefore of themselves, they write fiction.

RSI followers, as well as many non-Fascists, shared powerful feelings of betrayal and vengeance. Ongoing deception by Italian politicians incited outrage, which triggered many accusations: Fascists betrayed Mussolini in the Grand Council vote; King Victor Emmanuel deceived his subjects by slipping in Badoglio in place of Mussolini; Badoglio betrayed the nation by changing sides on the sly; and the generals handed over the armed forces to the Wehrmacht. Moreover, during World War II, as in the Great War, Italy abandoned the German ally by crossing over to the side of the Allies. Italy's honor, duty, loyalty, and self-sacrifice having been repeatedly sullied, patriotic Fascists, Italian nationalists, and a variety of ordinary people thought it high time to step up and redeem their country's besmirched soul by heroically hurling themselves against both Italian "betrayers" and slanderous critics in the "plutocratic" West. In reckless abandon they thought of themselves as enacting a sacred drama.

These sentiments lay behind the argument of former RSI devotees, post-war defenders of the regime, and historians writing that Italy was locked in a "civil war" between two equally legitimate sides. No matter the winners

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Alexander Stille, "The Battle over the Past," in Stanislao G. Pugliese, ed., *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy: 1919 to the Present* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), p. 300.

and losers, reconciliation should obtain. Instead of treating those who did not win like pariahs, the victors should tender them peace offerings. If, however, the two sides remained at loggerheads, ongoing enmity would continue to fracture the nation in search of a government based on democratic principles, which required agreement and respect for the opposition.

But these RSI custodians refuse to acknowledge that many regime loyalists were not, as a whole, high-minded dutiful servants of the state, or unquestioned patriots. Rather, many were delinquents and shady characters who do not deserve indulgence for their many transgressions. And one vital question is overlooked: what would have happened to Italy, and the world, if, as accomplices of the Nazis, they had contributed to Hitler's winning the war? Not taken into account either was that both Mussolini and the Fascists running the RSI had simply not bothered, or were too imperceptive, to plumb the nature of the Nazi ally to which they had committed themselves unto death. With a few notable exceptions, the Salò Fascists had exhibited an egregious misunderstanding of the exterminationist fanaticism poisoning the minds of Hitler and the rest of the Nazi leadership, as had the Italian SS. And those who were in the know enthusiastically applauded and joined in, or slipped into a cocoon of denial.

Bearing amnesties and pardons, neo-Fascists sallied forth into the political arena. In December 1946 former RSI stalwarts founded a new party, the MSI, a thinly disguised neo-Fascist party. Graziani became honorary president of the party in 1953. Displaying a radical flair, the MSI, because of its supposed concern for the social welfare of Italians, portrayed itself as more the ideological heir of Salò than of the *ventennio*. From 1948 its representatives began to crowd into the Italian parliament. Their way back into prominence was smoothed thanks to a decisive change in the country's political conversation. When Italy headed into NATO as part of team USA's strategy to check Soviet expansion, anti-Communism replaced anti-Fascism as the preeminent issue dominating postwar politics.

The former National Alliance Party leader Gianfranco Fini, whose sponsor was the noted RSI Fascist Giorgio Almirante, loomed in the postwar era as the most prominent neo-Fascist politician. In 1992 he proclaimed: "After almost half a century, the idea of fascism is alive." Two years later: "Mussolini was the greatest Italian statesman of the twentieth century," and "Fascism has a tradition of honesty, correctness, and good government."<sup>45</sup> In 1994, however, he moved toward a more traditionally conservative position. He proceeded to criticize Mussolini's racial laws

<sup>45</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gianfranco\\_Fini](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gianfranco_Fini).

and alliance with Hitler's Germany. He even recanted his praise of Mussolini.<sup>46</sup> But at the Fiugi Congress in January 1995, when the MSI merged with conservative elements of the disbanded Christian Democrats to form the National Alliance, Fini showed reluctance in making a clean break with the Fascist past. Instead, he intended to bury the hatchet: "Fascism and anti-Fascism are a couple that is indissolubly united: they live and die together." However, since "anti-Fascism has survived for fifty years after the death of Fascism thanks to international and domestic reasons that no longer apply today ... it is time that anti-Fascism holds out a hand to Fascism so that they can together thrash out a common understanding of history."<sup>47</sup> Fini was not the only neo-Fascist who has sought to propagate the view of an equivalency between Fascism and anti-Fascism, a clever way of denying responsibility for misdeeds on the part of Mussolini and his entourage. In an act of resolute forgetfulness, he and his ilk hoped to bury an unpleasant and compromising historical past.

When the media mogul Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister in 1994, he included four members of the MSI Party in his cabinet. Portraying his country as victim was thereby eased. Joined by Foreign Minister Fini, Berlusconi orchestrated a day of remembrance at a military ceremony in Trieste on 10 February 2005 dedicated to the Italians buried in the *foibe*. His was a deliberate attempt to obscure Fascist maltreatment of people by commemorating Italians victimized by a Titoist territorial seizure of the country's territory. On a related matter, Berlusconi told a British interviewer: "Mussolini never killed anyone. Mussolini used to send people on vacation in internal exile."<sup>48</sup> On Holocaust Remembrance Day on 27 January 2013, he declared that, while the Racial Laws were Mussolini's 'worst mistake,' the Duce had done the right thing for Italy in allying with Hitler as it was obvious that Nazi Germany was on its way to victory."<sup>49</sup> No surprise, therefore, that Berlusconi would single out Mussolini as the greatest Italian of the twentieth century, which further allowed the imitators of the RSI to steal their way into high positions in the government.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Stille, "The Battle over the Past," in Stanislaw G. Pugliese, ed., *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and the Resistance in Italy: 1919 to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 297.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Guglielmo Epifani, "Prefazione," in *La RSI: La Repubblica voluta da Hitler*, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Cited in Moseley, *Mussolini*, p. 360.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Stanislaw G. Pugliese' introduction to Pavone's book, *A Civil War*, pp. xxiii.

Despite these comments by Italy's leading current politicians, "reconciliation" based on the attribution of equal moral standing to both sides of the 1943–45 civil war soon turned sour. Claudio Pavone, placing "moral equivalency" under careful scrutiny, cut through the general collective amnesia regarding the past and accurately pointed out that the political right "says they want pacification whereas the sentiment that inspires them is revenge." An essential truth could no longer be denied: Italians were originally the perpetrators of outrages rather than the victims, thanks to Mussolini's numerous wars of aggression, draconian occupation policies, and deadly alliance with Hitler's Reich.

Both sides of the Italian civil war, although continuously engaging in heated ideological controversy, eventually adapted, in the postwar era, to a democratic framework of government that has survived scandal, blurred ideological visions, ongoing party strife, and an abbreviated coup d'état or two (e.g., rightist bombs hurled at a Bologna railroad station). RSI civil servants who were not enamored of Fascist ideology rallied to the republic, hardly missing a beat. *Raison d'état* easily replaced Mussolini's *l'état est moi*. In the absence of a meaningful postwar purge, Italy emerged with a markedly corrupt political system, consisting of an opportunistic *classe dirigente* burrowed into the Christian Democratic Party, which dominated politics for forty-five years. Former well-known Fascists have been welcomed back into the fold, no questions asked. If political moral standards have been brazenly flouted, for the most part the killing has stopped. Over the past few decades, the Italian people, left pretty much on their own, have begun to enjoy an uneven prosperity by dint of hard work. Yet, if true that Beppe Grillo of the Five Star Movement has been able to capture the imagination of many Italians, they remain estranged from government—even a sane one under Matteo Renzi—sick of politics, as ever.

Remarkably, neo-Fascists to this day still brood over their dark and foreboding cosmos, hailing heroic death and transfiguration. Their political vision is of men fighting a doomed but valiant struggle against the materialism of modernity embodied in a democracy manipulated by plutocrats and decadent hedonists. Disillusioned strangers in their country, feeling marginalized by a so-called Communist hegemony over Italian political culture, they cling to funereal symbols and an iconography of sacrifice of self for nation. In dwelling on a warrior's martyrdom, neo-Fascists have totally forgotten that their "heroes" in RSI times frequently tore each other apart in the brutal chaos of Darwinian warlordism.

The memoirs and histories of the Salò survivors that create this fictitious scenario are valuable from a historiographical perspective as expressions of the various strands of Fascist thinking. They have in common the main vice of bending ideology and facts to the demands of the post-Nuremberg world, a world that would no longer be swayed by core Fascist beliefs such as glorification of violence, imperialism, and xenophobia. To make their appeal more palatable to people living in a democratic age, the ex-Salò defenders have begun to leave out of their accounts basic Fascist canon such as hatred of partisans, Jews, and redemptive violence. Downgraded are virulent nationalism and implacable anti-Marxism.

There are still many who brush aside reliable historical evidence to argue that Mussolini's RSI regime had actually worked to do great things for the Italian people only to be foiled by the Teutonic furies. Moreover, Mussolini's model of authoritarian rule and swaggering charisma is hardly dead. His example of a demagogue who shrewdly legitimized hate and revenge to incite mobs to violence, as well as his efforts to defame democratic principles and institutions, is alive and well in the behavior of well-known leaders in countries great and small. His go-it-alone diplomacy and brazen deceit have found pride of place around the world. Benito Mussolini has left behind an alarming legacy of persuasive emotive dictatorship.

## APPENDIX: CASUALTIES OF THE RSI PERIOD

According to an official report of the Ministry of Interior, Fascists killed during the savage postwar violence numbered about 8000 (a figure thought plausible by writers on the subject),<sup>1</sup> out of a total 12,000 to 20,000—mainly men in the BN and militia squads who had undergone summary trials without any legal basis.<sup>2</sup>

The gendarmes of revisionism tell a different story. The noted revisionist historian Giorgio Pisanò places the number of RSI adherents killed at 34,000.<sup>3</sup> Basing his evidence on the recollections of unverified individual accounts, the proto-Fascist Giampaolo Pansa arrives at a figure of 20,000 who fell in the settlement of accounts.<sup>4</sup> The German historian Hans Woller more accurately claims that between 1943 and 1946 between 10,000 and 12,000 RSI Fascist adherents lost their lives.<sup>5</sup>

The number of partisans killed by Germans and RSI Fascists between September 1943 and April 1945 were higher, in the neighborhood of

<sup>1</sup> Mirco Dondi speaks of 9,911 deaths in his *La lunga liberazione*.

<sup>2</sup> Lowe, *Savage Continent*, p. 150; Morgan, *The Fall of Mussolini*, pp. 167, 216–18.

<sup>3</sup> Del Boca, *La storia negata: Il revisionismo e il suo uso politico*, p. 25; Giorgio Pisanò, *Storia della guerra civile* (Milan: Eco Edizione, 1999), 3 vols, estimates that around 45,000 among military and various corps and civilian men and women were killed.

<sup>4</sup> Pansa, *Il sangue dei vinti*, p. 371.

<sup>5</sup> Woller, *I conti con il fascismo*, p. 390.

30,000. About 10,000 to 15,000 civilians were killed in the massacres and execution of hostages, to whom should be added 21,168 partisans and 412 civilians mutilated and disabled.<sup>6</sup> In research undertaken by the Istituto nazionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione in Italia (L'Insmili), and the Associazione nazionale partigiani d'Italia (L'Anpi), entitled *Atlante delle stragi naziste e fasciste in Italia 1943–1945*, nazifascists massacred at least 23,662 unarmed Italian civilians during 5626 violent and criminal episodes—65 percent by the hand of the Nazis, 21 percent by RSI Fascists, and 14 percent in joint operations.<sup>7</sup>

General Kesselring had at his disposal in April 1944 approximately 600,000 soldiers, of which 160,000 were Italian. At the end of the war, there were 440,000 German soldiers still on Italian soil; about 110,000 had fallen in battle or had been captured. The troops comprising fifteen divisions were able to withdraw from Italy at the end of the war.<sup>8</sup> But the Wehrmacht had to leave behind some troops, mainly of Austrian origin, who had defected to the partisans.<sup>9</sup>

Altogether, Italian losses in the Second World War came to 444,523, less than combatant fatalities suffered in World War I. No doubt the human cost in Italy was high. But the country's loss in human life paled in comparison to the rest of the Continent, where well over fifty million people perished.<sup>10</sup> Heavy damage was inflicted on the transportation system, less so on industrial plants, which demonstrates that the RSI made efforts, with the assistance of many owners, in salvaging manufacturing factories. The unwillingness of both Allies and Italians to purge the *classe dirigente* and the captains of industry enabled the postwar governments to utilize their know-how in bringing about economic recovery.

<sup>6</sup> Rapporto della Commissione storica italo-tedesca insediata dai Ministri degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Federale di Germania il 28 marzo 2009, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Avagliano and Palmieri, *L'Italia di Salò*, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Rapporto della Commissione storica italo-tedesca insediata dai Ministri degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Federale di Germania il 28 marzo 2009, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Pavoni, *A Civil War*, p. 495.



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# INDEX<sup>1</sup>

## A

Abetz, Otto, 68

Action Squads

action against partisans, 118, 182,  
184, 186

nature of, 183

Aga Rossi, Elena, 5n2, 7n6, 8n9,  
32n2, 302n4, 329

Alexander, Field Marshal Sir Harold

German surrender in Italy, 180

liberation of Rome, 179

surrender negotiations, 274

Alfieri, Dino, 143

Altenburg, Günther, 68

Alto Adige, 18, 22, 46, 79, 128, 280

Alvaro, Corrado, 10, 11n20

Ambrosio, General Vittorio, 8, 32

military demands on Germany, 8

Amicucci, Ermanno, 28, 29n57,

30n64, 37n20, 46n46, 50n60,

52, 52n67, 53, 53n70, 56n85,

107, 107n24, 137n31, 179n18,

185n44, 261, 325, 325n21

Anfuso, Filippo

ambassador to Berlin, 87, 143

foreign undersecretary, 201, 277

Klessheim conference, 79, 209

Mussolini and, 66, 71, 79, 85, 196,

203, 204, 205n63, 206, 207,

209, 210, 212, 214, 215n36,

221, 272, 277, 279, 281–283,

311

on German situation, 204, 210, 281

report on Italian internees, 85, 203,

207, 215

Verona trial, 56

Apollonio, Eugenio, 218, 219

Ardeatine Caves massacre, 176, 304

Armistice of Cassibile (8 September  
1943)

Fascist revival triggered, 39

formation of RSI and, 39, 195

German reaction to, 39, 113

Army group Liguria, 225

*Attesismo*, 41, 184

and the RSI, 41

<sup>1</sup> Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

Avagliano, Mario, 32n1, 110n36,  
146n17, 149n36, 233n25,  
282n55, 301n1, 328, 328n38,  
329, 336n7

*Avanguardia*, 292, 296, 297

Azzolini, Vincenzo, 127, 128n2

## B

Backe, Herbert, 65

Badoglio, Marshal Pietro

armistice, 7, 10, 40n24, 195, 302

flight from Rome, 8, 10

forty-five days government and, 144

head of government at Brindisi and,  
302, 303

surrender to Allies and, 7

Balisti, Fulvio, 51, 56

Barbarossa, Operation, 235

Bardi, Gino, 119, 249

Barracu, Francesco Maria, 25, 25n36,  
187, 273

Mussolini and, 25, 186, 187

Basile, Carlo Emanuele, 98, 190, 191

Bastianini, Giuseppe, 242

Battaglia, Roberto, 135n20, 275n15,  
319, 319n2, 320

Beetz, Hildegard Burkhardt, 55

Bellotti, Felice, 21n9, 21n11, 23,

23n28, 24, 24n32, 25n38,

25n39, 28, 28n56, 95, 188,

188n60, 196, 217n50, 238n10,

281n44, 292

Berenson, Bernard, 156

Berger, Gottlob, 87

Berlinguer, Mario, 306

Berlusconi, Silvio, 332

Bertoldi, Silvio, 25n35, 47n47,

95n51, 117n60, 122n88,

123n89, 127n1, 134n17,

152n50, 168n12, 169n13,

169n15, 170n16, 183n35,

187n51, 209n5, 250n24,

252n30, 252n31, 256n50,

265n23, 283n58, 307n29, 308,

308n31

Best, Werner, 68

Bettini, Alberto, 245–248, 261, 264

Bicchierai, Don, 282

Biggini, Carlo Alberto, 24, 25, 35, 37,  
44, 258, 260, 262–264, 308, 325

Black Brigades, 173–191, 271, 281,  
292, 313, 329

Blackshirts, 6, 24, 42, 47, 60, 83, 90,  
93, 119, 183, 185, 203, 228,  
253n40, 279, 290, 306

Bocca, Giorgio, 21n13, 22n16,  
29n59, 34n7, 35n11, 42n29,  
49n56, 61n7, 63, 63n19, 79n80,  
96n55, 96n58, 114n48, 115n53,  
116n56, 133n11, 135n26,  
166n4, 182n33, 183n34,  
185n43, 187n56, 187n57, 195,  
195n7, 196n18, 218n51,  
218n54, 232n24, 246n5, 261,  
261n12, 278n31, 307n29

Bolla, Luigi

criticisms of and concern for

Mussolini, 331

dislike of Vittorio Mussolini, 202

hatred of Germans, 217

Bombacci, Nicola, 51, 56n87,

130–132, 137, 137n30, 221, 258

Bonfantini, Corrado, 261, 262, 267

Bonino, Antonio, 266

Bonomi, Ivanoe, 303–305, 309

Borghese, Junio Valerio, Prince, *see* X  
*Mas Decima Flottiglia Mas*

Borgongini Duca, Monsignor, 166

Bormann, Martin, 15, 78

Borsani, Carlo, 50, 51, 56, 137, 138

Boßhammer, Friedrich Robert, 154,  
154n63

Bottai, Giuseppe, 26n42, 50, 238

Bova-Scoppa, Renato, 193

Brindisi, 27, 29, 39, 84

- Britain, 2–4, 198, 242, 243  
 Buffarini Guidi, Glauco, 324  
 Buffarini Guidi, Guido  
     dismissal, 218  
     measures against Jews and, 119  
     Minister of interior, 21, 88, 119,  
         217, 274  
     Mussolini and, 21, 25, 53, 66, 119,  
         217, 289  
     reform of police and, 119, 274  
     trial and execution of, 53  
 Buhle, Walter, 87, 89, 90
- C**
- Calvi di Bergolo, Carlo, 9, 32  
 Canevari, Emilio, 84, 84n4, 84n5,  
     85n6, 86–91, 87n13, 87n16,  
     87n18, 88n21, 89n27, 89n30,  
     94, 94n48, 95, 109, 323n11  
     dismissal of, 89  
 Carabinieri, 5, 17, 78, 90–93, 102,  
     106, 107, 116, 118, 119, 149,  
     155, 161, 180, 305, 310  
 Carboni, Giacomo, 7, 9  
 Carità, Mario, 119–122, 124, 149,  
     248, 249, 308  
 Carloni, Mario, 225  
 Caruso, Pietro, 122, 150, 153,  
     176, 304  
 Catholic Church  
     anti-Fascism of, 168  
     anti-Semitism of, 161  
     neutrality and ambiguity, 165, 169  
 Cerruti, Eugenio, 185, 189, 251  
 Churchill, Winston  
     German surrender talks and, 276  
     Mussolini exchanges and supposed  
         correspondence with, 276  
 Ciano, Count Galeazzo  
     arrest, trial, and execution, 54, 55  
     Claretta Petacci and, 53  
     diary of, 55  
     help from Beetz, 55  
     Mussolini and, 52–55  
     “treachery” against Mussolini, 288  
 Ciano, Edda, 53, 55  
 Cione, Edmondo, 258–262, 259n3,  
     260n7, 261n11, 264–267,  
     264n20, 292, 324, 325, 325n17,  
     325n18  
 Civil war  
     anti-Fascist attitudes toward, 321  
     class war, 321  
     Fascist ideology, 35  
     RSI and, 190n78, 263  
 Coceani, Bruno, 76, 77, 77n72  
 Collaboration  
     Fascist, 294, 313  
     nature of, 15, 16  
     punishment for, 312  
 Collotti, Enzo, 61n9, 62n14, 64n24,  
     65n27, 66, 66n29, 66n31,  
     66n33, 69n42, 70n46, 73n57,  
     74n58, 74n60, 76n68, 106n21,  
     128n2, 135n22, 135n24,  
     188n59, 200n38  
 Collotti, Gaetano, 75  
 Colombo, Franco, 116–118, 245,  
     246, 253, 308  
*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*  
     (CLN), 45  
*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*  
     *dell’Alta Italia* (CLNAI), 262  
 Concordia, Germinale, 261, 265  
 Constituent assembly  
     contemplated by Fascist republican  
         govt, 49–50, 182, 208  
     discarded in favor of party  
         congress, 46  
 Cordova, Filippo, 152  
 Corporatism, 46, 50, 129–131, 137,  
     138, 142, 238  
*Corrispondenza Repubblicana*, 85,  
     104, 165, 179, 220, 235, 258,  
     263n17

Costa, Vincenzo, 11n21, 118, 182,  
188, 188n62, 260, 264, 264n20,  
278n30, 280n41, 324, 324n16,  
325, 325n17, 327

Croce, Benedetto, 35, 259

*Crociata italica*, 168, 169, 169n13

Curtius, Ludwig, 61

## D

Dalla Costa, Cardinal Elio, 120

Dannecker, Theodor, 147, 148,  
151, 152

D'Annunzio, Gabriele, 2, 23

De Agazio, Franco, 263

Deakin, Franklin W., 7n5, 8n11, 9n12,  
22n19, 24n29, 29n59, 56n84,  
64n21, 66n30, 70n49, 86n12,  
87n15, 88n25, 108, 132n9,  
180n20, 182n28, 185n46,  
186n48, 205n60, 210n10,  
210n11, 217n48, 221n72,  
224n5, 225n7, 260n6, 267n28,  
270n2, 272n6, 273n12, 277n25,  
279n39, 280n43, 282n49

De Bono, Emilio, 38, 52

De Caprari, Vittorio, 11

De Felice, Renzo, 7n7, 11n22, 23n26,  
24n30, 25n37, 36n16, 44n38,  
51n65, 128, 128n2, 128n3,  
142n3, 143n7, 144n12, 156n71,  
159n89, 164n103, 327, 327n31

De Gasperi, Alcide, 310, 311, 316

De Gaulle, Charles, 27

Degrelle, Léon, 291

Del Boca, Angelo, 320, 320n5,  
321n6, 335n3

Delasem, 143

Desertion

draft dodging, 96, 97, 118, 150

from Fascist divisions in the Italian  
army, 180

RSI punishment for, 38, 108

Dieckerhoff, Hans Heinrich, 60

*Direzione Generale degli Italiani  
all'Estero* (DGE, Director General  
of the Italians abroad), 199

Dolfin, Giovanni, 201n44, 326

cites Mussolini on hatred of Italians,  
157, 208

records Mussolini's complaints  
about Germany, 91, 208, 209

relations between Mussolini and  
Ciano, 53, 54

Dollmann, Eugen

Hitler and, 21, 86, 211n16

Mussolini and, 27, 72, 86, 114

Wolff and, 21, 28

Domenico, Palmer, 303n5, 303n8,  
303n10, 304n12, 304n15,  
305n20, 306n23, 308n35,  
311n40, 313, 313n47, 316n51

Dönitz, Karl, 16

## E

Eco, Umberto, 37, 37n19

Eichmann, Adolf, 148, 154, 156

Eisenhower, Dwight

armistice terms and, 7

Italian peace terms and, 7

Salerno landings and, 7

Esposito, Giovanni, 74, 75

## F

Facchini, Eugenio, 173

Farina, Amilcare, 228, 229

Farinacci, Roberto, 21, 28, 38, 39, 46,  
47, 56, 95, 116, 132, 137, 168,  
247, 258, 265, 266, 291, 308

Fascist Grand Council, 1, 24, 26,  
52, 141

Fascist Party Militia

army distrust of, 91

basis of new Republican Guard, 91

difficulties in recruiting for, 109  
Mussolini's reconstruction of,  
85, 157  
Fascist Republican Army  
anti-partisan measures of, 177, 183,  
186, 214, 225, 230, 231, 293  
desertions from, 178  
difficulties in creation, 186  
German reluctance to use, 95  
Graziani's report on, 178, 184, 215  
Militia as basis of, 335  
Mussolini's aim to form, 3, 178  
training of, 85, 86, 94, 231  
Fascist Republican Government,  
182, 208  
Fascist Republican Party  
action against "traitors", 41  
Black Brigades and, 184  
formation of new Republican Party  
and, 22, 104, 322  
Hitler's aims to restore, 78  
Verona Conference and, 48  
Fascists  
8 September collapse and, 40  
attitude to war, 244  
betrayal by, 35, 53, 77, 84, 91, 112,  
188, 204  
brutality and, 174, 182  
civil war and, 18, 19, 35, 137, 159,  
174, 193, 201, 291, 323, 327  
conciliation with anti-Fascists, 48  
Germans and, 63, 251  
glorification of death, 334  
moderates and fanatics, 173  
relations with Catholic Church,  
111, 168  
revival in the post-war era and, 170,  
264, 328, 331, 333  
RSI and, 37, 41, 139, 286, 289,  
295, 299, 301, 305, 331,  
335, 336  
the "new man" and, 142

*Fasci all'Esero*-Fascists Living  
Abroad, 199  
Federzoni, Luigi, 38  
Fence-sitting, 293  
*See also Attesismo*  
Ferrini, Ferruccio, 113, 114  
Finzi, Gianfranco, 331, 332  
Finzi, Aldo, 159n88, 160  
*Foibe*, 316, 332  
Fondelli, Piera Gatteschi, 233  
Fossoli, 152, 153, 153n58, 155,  
156, 204  
France, 2-4, 6, 68, 85, 128, 144, 146,  
147, 170, 217, 269, 274, 282,  
294, 311  
Franco, General Francisco, 4, 55, 195  
Franzini, Mimmo, 20n7, 54n78,  
88n22, 200n40, 276, 276n22,  
293n15

## G

Gagliani, Dianella, 15n1, 39n23,  
41n26, 120n78, 123n90,  
181n23, 181n25, 184n38,  
184n39, 185n45, 189n65,  
248n17, 249n23, 252n33,  
287n2, 322, 322n8  
Galbiati, Enzo Emilio, 6n4, 44  
Gallarini, Gino, 118  
Gambara, General Gastone, 27, 90,  
95, 95n53  
Ganapini, Luigi, 74n59, 78n77,  
104n9, 104n14, 106n22,  
117n59, 117n61, 118n63,  
118n66, 128n6, 186n50,  
191n79, 201n45, 211n14,  
245n1, 250n25, 251n29,  
252n35, 254n41, 254n43,  
255n44, 321, 322n7, 328n37  
GAP (Gruppi d'Azione Patriottica),  
117, 122, 173, 176, 323, 324

- Gemelli, Bruno, 200
- Gentile, Carlo, 12, 18n6, 174n5, 178n14, 180n19, 185n42, 188n61, 228n15, 270n1
- Gentile, Giovanni, 35, 35n14, 173, 292
- German capture and internment, 10, 86, 92, 94
- German denigration and humiliation of, 254n42
- German denigration and humiliation of, 254n42
- German occupation, 10, 16, 32, 46, 66, 71, 101, 119, 156n74, 196, 295, 301
- as "occupying power" of Italy, 293
- Ghisellini, Igino, 48, 173, 323
- Giaccone, Leandro, 9
- Giobbe, Mirko, 56, 137, 263, 266
- "Giramondo", 136, 137, 137n31
- Giuriati, Camillo, 193
- Globočnik, Odilo, 72, 76, 76n67, 77
- Goebbels, Joseph
- derision of Italians, 59
- Hitler and, 15, 21, 60, 72, 221
- Göring, Hermann, 16, 25, 65, 97, 224
- Gorrieri, Gastone, 261, 263, 264
- Gorsky, Jonathan, 161, 161n94
- Gothic Line, 223, 226, 228, 229, 270, 272
- Gottardi, Luciano, 52
- Grandi, Dino, 24, 38, 53, 54
- Gray, Ezio Maria, 263
- Graziani, Marshal Rodolfo
- anti-partisan measures, 230
- disputes over nature of the armed forces and, 85
- father of republican army, 85
- pleas for more German help, 178
- Rahn and, 26, 27, 27n46, 90, 95, 195, 232, 273, 281, 289
- rivalry with Ricci and, 93
- War Minister in Salò govt, 195, 288
- Grazioli, Emilio, 73, 75
- Great Britain, 2, 198, 205, 242
- Grillo, Beppe, 333
- Guardia di Finanza, 102n1, 129
- Guardia nazionale repubblicana* (GNR, Italian National Republican Guard), 23, 24, 90, 92–94, 96, 102, 104, 106–109, 114, 117–119, 121, 129, 174, 175, 177, 178, 180, 182, 184, 185, 188–191, 215, 219, 223, 233, 246, 251, 254, 256, 262, 265, 271, 278, 305, 309, 313
- Gueli, Giuseppe, 17, 75, 77n72
- Guerra, Nicola, 110, 111, 111n42
- Guidi, Glauco, 324
- Gustav Line, 20, 179
- ## H
- Harster, Wilhelm, 65, 95, 122
- Himmler, Heinrich
- on control of anti-rebel operations, 24
- plans of, 109
- Hitler, Adolf
- admiration for Mussolini, 287, 332
- antipathy to Mussolini, 85, 323
- Ardeatine massacre and, 159n88, 176
- assassination attempt on, 186, 187, 215
- Badoglio and, 6
- death of, 283
- dispute over Italian armed forces, 86
- European order and, 292
- German armed forces and, 18
- Graziani and, 26, 85, 86, 95, 108, 203



Italian internees and, 85, 95  
 Jews in Italy and, 147, 159, 160  
 Kesselring and, 19, 21, 272  
 massacre of Italian troops, 176  
 meeting with Mussolini at  
     Klessheim, 209, 237  
 meeting with Mussolini at Wolf's  
     Lair, 86, 215  
 Mussolini's criticism and protests  
     to, 64  
 occupation of Rome, 21  
 on Ciano's arrest, 53, 54  
 on Mussolini's return, 1  
 Pope and Vatican and, 277  
 Preziosi and, 21, 157  
 Rahn and, 16, 19, 63, 67  
 reprisal orders by, 176  
 Republican army and, 85, 216  
 retreat from Italy and, 19  
 Salò Republic and, 279  
 secret weapons of, 220  
 SS atrocities and, 269  
 Wolff and, 282  
 Hofer, Franz (Gauleiter of Tyrol),  
     29, 72, 73, 77, 78, 80,  
     210n11, 218  
 Holocaust, 143, 148, 160, 161n94,  
     164, 236, 243, 324, 332  
 Hoppe, Helmut, 60

# I

*Il popolo d'Italia*, 50, 143, 143n5  
 Innocenti, Marco, 23, 23n21, 47n48,  
     56n88, 128n4, 219n62  
 Interlandi, Telesio, 142, 160, 312  
 Isnenghi, Mario, 41n27, 124, 298n25  
 Italian armed forces and militias  
     atrocities committed, 190n78,  
     250, 275  
     Black Brigades and, 173–191,  
     250, 292

    deserters and draft dodgers, 96, 136  
     German reluctance to use, 95, 270  
     other militias and, 75, 96  
     recruitment and training, 27, 86,  
     95, 108, 185  
 Italian SS, 22, 64, 74, 97, 108–112,  
     121, 147, 150, 233, 256, 280,  
     296, 297, 308, 309, 331

# J

Jandl, Johann, 22, 24, 60, 92, 180  
 Jews  
     Catholic Church relations with,  
     147, 160  
     Fascist ideology and, 142,  
     162, 292  
     Italian people and, 68n41, 71, 142,  
     148, 163  
     Mussolini and, 119, 141, 143, 146,  
     152, 156, 158, 160  
     Rome pogrom of, 121, 122, 127,  
     146, 148, 156  
 Jodl, Alfred, 16  
 Jung, Guido, 131, 160  
 Jütter, Hans, 109

# K

Kamptz, Jürgen von, 180  
 Kappler, Herbert  
     Jews and, 122, 127, 147, 148,  
     151, 176  
     militias and, 247  
     role in Ardeatine Caves massacre,  
     121, 176  
     role in Via Rasella attack, 121, 176  
     trial of, 148  
 Keitel, Wilhelm, 16, 64, 87, 89, 91,  
     215, 224  
 Kemal, Mustafa, 2  
 Kesselring, 70

Kesselring, Marshal Albert  
 Ardeatine massacre and, 176  
 assumes command of Rome, 9, 106  
 conducts military retreat, 19, 231  
 declaration of Italy as "occupied territory", 65  
 defends Gothic Line, 230  
 German surrender in Italy and, 336  
 Hitler and, 19, 21, 272  
 Mussolini and, 19, 21, 29, 95, 225, 225n6, 271, 286  
 opposes Anzio landings, 225  
 overall conduct of war by, 187  
 Republican Army and, 178  
 role in atrocities, 286  
 war against Partisans and, 70, 187  
 Wehrmacht commander in Italy, 9, 19, 61, 69, 70, 106, 108, 187, 336

Klessheim (Salzburg) Conference (April 1944), 79, 214, 237

Klinkhammer, Lutz, 16n4, 59n1, 65n26, 65n28, 71n51, 87n17, 87n19, 89n29, 91n39, 97n60, 105n15, 108n32, 110, 110n37, 123n90, 124n92, 134n19, 135n23, 135n25, 136n27, 147n22, 152n54, 182n29, 187n58, 196n20, 200n37, 205n62, 241n21, 247n13, 248n16, 255n45, 255n47, 280n40, 295, 295n17

Koch, Pietro, 121–124, 149, 150, 150n37, 182, 246, 247, 252, 307

**L**

Lamb, Richard, 91n41, 108n30, 109n33, 115n51, 216n44, 218, 218n56, 224n4, 230n18, 230n20, 312n42

Laval, Pierre, 294, 297

Leto, Guido, 252

Leyers, General Hans Fritz, 64, 65, 71, 134, 134n16, 135, 157, 212

Ligurian Army Command, 186

Litorale Adriatico, 18, 19, 25n34, 49, 72, 73, 78–80, 113, 155, 207–211, 210n8, 216n40

Littorio Division, 224, 228, 232, 233

Lyric Theater, 49n58, 253, 261, 272, 291

## M

Magistrati, Massimo, 193

Malaparte, Curzio, 11, 11n22, 315

Mälzer, Kurt, 119, 176

Manunta, Ugo, 261, 263

Marinelli, Giovanni, 52

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, 35

Marzabotto massacre, 81, 269

Mauthausen, 147

Mazzolini, Serafino, 35, 65, 66, 79, 194, 195, 197–201, 205, 205n61, 206, 210, 215, 216, 273

Mellini, Ponce de Leon, Alberto, 194n6, 195n8, 201, 201n43, 201n46, 202, 206, 206n66, 210n8, 217n49, 218, 218n55, 218n57, 219, 219n61, 277n26, 279, 279n34, 279n37, 282n52

"Memoria 44", 7, 8, 10

Mezzasoma, Fernando, 23, 37, 38, 51, 56, 137, 137n31, 138, 182, 195, 257, 261, 263, 265, 266, 308

Michaels, Meir, 163

Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale (MVSN), 90, 93, 106, 107, 119

Mischi, Archimede, 178, 185, 186, 188

- Moellhausen, Eitel Friedrich, 21,  
25n36, 26, 26n45, 27n47, 29,  
29n58, 64, 64n25, 67–69,  
67n35, 68n38, 68n41, 69n43,  
69n44, 72, 73n55, 107n25,  
114n46, 119, 119n73, 157,  
157n77, 158n82, 189, 190,  
190n71, 190n73, 190n75,  
195n13, 202, 202n48, 213,  
213n24, 215n35, 218, 218n52,  
271n3, 273
- Mollier, Madeleine, 272
- Montagna, General Renzo, 55n82,  
119, 138, 179, 191, 247,  
251–254, 253n40, 256, 264,  
268, 274, 307
- Monte Rosa Division, 225–231,  
233, 320
- Montesi, Eugenio, 35
- Montgomery, 194
- Montgomery, Bernard, 194
- Moroni, Edoardo, 65
- Mussolini, Benito, and Germany/  
Germans  
criticisms of Hitler and protests to,  
64, 145  
disputes with Hitler and Germans  
about Italian troops, 32n2, 86,  
95, 213, 223, 235, 273, 292  
Dollmann and, 53, 86, 114, 281  
encounter with Hitler after 20 July  
1944, 186, 215  
German denigration and humiliation  
of, 4, 10, 20, 36, 74, 187, 219  
German secret weapons, 214  
Hitler and, 1, 15, 32, 60, 85, 108,  
134, 141, 176, 197, 207, 225,  
235, 269, 286, 319  
Hitler's flagging respect for  
Mussolini, 214, 221, 287  
influence of Hitler's Jewish policy  
on, 148, 153, 155  
last meeting with Hitler, 159  
loyalty to Hitler and Germans, 66,  
137, 211, 221, 285  
Rahn and, 19, 29, 52, 56, 63, 66,  
67, 69, 71, 79, 80, 83, 90,  
121, 124, 128, 157, 179, 201,  
208n2, 212, 213, 218, 266,  
279, 282, 286  
rescued from imprisonment by  
Germans, 312  
Ribbentrop and, 15, 63  
set up as Germany's puppet, 1  
visits to Germany, 67, 291  
Wolff and, 54, 54n78, 61, 64, 69,  
110, 124, 201, 212, 218, 232,  
273, 281, 283
- Mussolini, Benito and Italy/Italians  
Anfuso and, 35, 56, 66, 71, 79, 85,  
196, 203, 204, 206, 209, 210,  
212, 214, 221, 272, 277,  
279, 311  
Ardeatine Caves massacre, 121,  
159n88, 176, 304  
attacks on Badoglio by, 27, 34,  
36, 112  
attitude of people toward, 72, 90,  
128, 132, 146, 163, 243  
attitude toward Communism, 41,  
131, 132, 239, 240, 275, 292  
Badoglio and, 5, 13, 33, 42, 44,  
116, 303, 330  
Bolla and, 22, 36, 203  
Buffarini-Guidi and, 21, 25,  
53, 66  
capture, execution and hanging,  
64, 96  
Churchill exchanges and supposed  
correspondence with, 276  
contempt of USA, 66, 117, 289  
criticism and appreciation of by  
Italians, 48, 168, 273  
De Felice on, 128, 327

Mussolini, Benito and Italy/  
Italians (*cont.*)

Dolfin and, 42, 48, 52–54, 85, 88,  
89, 93, 135, 157, 198, 208,  
212, 213, 219, 235, 237, 238,  
262, 290

enmity toward Britain, 331

Fascist Grand Council vote  
against, 24

Graziani and, 25–27, 83–90, 92,  
94, 95, 97, 178, 180, 185,  
218, 223, 224, 233, 271,  
311, 323

hatred of Italians for, 72, 78, 173

historical significance of, 24, 162

imprisonment of, 1, 167, 303

King Victor Emmanuel and, 5, 8, 9,  
35, 303, 330

Mazzolini and, 35, 65, 66, 79, 194,  
195, 197–201, 205

Mellini and, 201, 206, 218,  
219, 279

Mezzasoma and, 23, 37, 38,  
51, 56

on Fascists and Fascism, 4, 5, 15,  
17, 20, 31–57, 79, 85, 92, 94,  
104, 122, 129, 130, 132, 137,  
138, 142, 186, 193–206, 214,  
215, 243, 257, 268, 272, 290,  
326, 327, 330, 331

Partisans and, 31, 45, 115, 143,  
178, 188, 213, 260, 270, 274,  
283, 290, 322, 323, 327

Pavolini and, 22, 22n20, 23, 28, 34,  
35, 38, 43–46, 48, 51, 54, 56,  
57, 79, 90, 94, 103, 105, 151,  
156, 182–184, 193, 199, 211,  
217, 230, 253, 258, 276,  
278, 289

plans for last stand in Valtellina, 278

Preziosi and, 20, 25, 142,  
156–158, 237

punishment of deserters and draft  
evaders, 33, 177, 178

Ricci and, 24, 44, 89, 90, 92

Rome and, 28, 29, 32n2, 33, 43,  
122, 137, 177n10, 249

RSI and, 1, 19, 32, 60, 83, 106,  
127, 144, 167, 173, 194, 207,  
224, 237, 248, 266, 270, 288,  
301, 319

Salò Republic and, 1, 130, 279, 288

Schuster and, 167–169, 167n9,  
271, 277, 282

Silvestri and, 44, 45, 50, 131, 137

socialization projects, 77,  
127–139, 212

Spampanato and, 43, 44, 327

Zachariae and, 21, 28, 60, 239, 259

Zerbino and, 138

Mussolini, Donna Rachele, 53,  
177n10

Mussolini, Vittorio, 28, 261, 277

Muti Legion, 116–118, 167, 188,  
246, 253, 272, 280

## N

*Nazifascismo*, 288, 290, 292, 325,  
330

Nazism, 64, 66, 68, 76, 108, 160,  
220, 291, 293, 298

Nembo Division, 223, 223n1

Nenni, Pietro, 304, 309, 310

Nicchiarelli, Niccolò, 190, 191,  
262, 263

*Nuovo Ordine Europeo*, 290

## O

October 16, 1943, 122, 127, 148,  
156n74, 160

Orlando, Vittorio Emanuele, 37  
*Osservatore Romano*, 161, 162

## P

- Pact of London, 2  
 Pact of Steel, 4, 23, 71, 291, 320  
 Pagnozzi, Coriolano, 106  
 Palmieri, Marco, 32n1, 110n36,  
     146n17, 149n36, 233n25,  
     282n55, 301n1, 328, 328n38,  
     329, 336n7  
 Pannunzio, Sergio, 131  
 Pansa, Giampaolo, 23n23, 91n38,  
     94n47, 96n54, 96n56, 98n63,  
     107n26, 108n29, 229n17,  
     278n30, 307n26, 327, 327n33,  
     327n34, 328, 328n35, 328n36,  
     329n39, 335, 335n4  
 Pareschi, Carlo, 52  
 Parini, Piero, 138, 155, 155n70, 251,  
     257–259, 263  
 Parri, Ferruccio, 283, 305, 309  
 Partisans  
     assassinations by, 115, 245, 323  
     battles, 31, 150, 175, 229, 260,  
     290, 320  
     insurrections, 307  
     Mussolini and, 46, 115, 143, 178,  
     185, 188, 213, 273, 283, 290,  
     323, 327  
 Partito Fascista Repubblicano (PFR),  
     22, 34, 41, 56, 78, 90, 97, 138,  
     185, 198, 199, 254n42, 322n8  
 Pavelić, Ante, 75, 197, 297  
 Pavolini, Alessandro  
     Black Brigades and, 182, 256n49,  
     271, 281, 292  
     clashes with Graziani, 273  
     formation of Govt., 43  
     Mussolini and, 22n20, 43, 44,  
     46–48, 51, 53, 57, 90, 94, 103,  
     105, 124, 138, 156, 182–185,  
     189, 193, 199, 253, 265, 276,  
     276n18  
     provisional secretary, 22, 104, 183,  
     199, 261  
     radical Fascist in Salò Govt, 325  
     radical Fascist in Salò Govt., 249  
     role in militias, 47, 90, 116, 124  
     Valtellina redoubt and, 281  
     Verona Congress and, 49  
     Verona trials and, 56  
 Pavone, Claudio, 120, 167n6,  
     187n57, 226n8, 226n9, 320,  
     320n4, 321, 332n49, 333  
 Pellegrini Giampietro, Domenico, 25,  
     65, 127–129, 133, 158, 273,  
     311, 312  
 Petacci, Claretta, 53, 200, 209, 217,  
     272, 275n17, 276n19,  
     285, 288  
 Pettinato, Concetto, 35, 137, 138,  
     180–182, 181n26, 182n30, 252,  
     258, 261, 263–266, 323,  
     323n13, 325, 325n22  
 Picciotto, Liliana, 146n15, 151n47,  
     152n52, 155n68, 163,  
     163n101  
 Pièche, Giuseppe, 144, 144n11  
 Pietromarchi, Luca, 144, 144n12, 305  
 Pini, Giorgio, 35, 39, 44, 51, 52n66,  
     56, 135n26, 138, 149, 149n34,  
     187, 187n54, 220n65, 237,  
     237n7, 252, 263, 266, 277n27,  
     278n29, 282n51, 323, 325,  
     325n19, 326, 326n27  
 Pirelli, Alberto, 37, 37n18, 62  
 Pisanò, Giorgio, 321n6, 328, 328n37,  
     335, 335n3  
 Pisenti, Piero (Minister of Justice), 54,  
     138, 246, 263, 323n9, 325  
 Pius XII, Pope (Eugenio Pacelli)  
     aid to Jews, 160, 161  
     Germans and, 161  
     official Vatican neutrality and, 150,  
     160, 161  
     silence on fate of Jews by, 160, 163  
 Pollastrini, Guglielmo, 119, 174  
*Popolo d'Italia*, 50, 143, 143n5

Prealpi, 18, 19, 25n34, 49, 72, 77, 79,  
80, 113, 156, 207–210, 210n8,  
269, 273

Preziosi, Giovanni  
in neo-Fascist Govt., intrigues of, 25  
Mussolini and, 20, 25, 142,  
156–158, 237, 259

## Q

Quazza, Guido, 320, 320n3

## R

Rachele, Donna, 53, 177n10, 272,  
272n7, 272n8

Rahn, Rudolf von  
aims and methods of, 71  
formation of German  
administration, 68  
German ambassador to Rome, 195  
influence in German operational  
zones, 79  
relations with Mussolini, 19, 29, 66,  
67, 69, 79, 83, 90, 121, 124,  
128, 157, 195, 208n2, 212,  
213, 218, 266, 286  
rivalries with other German  
occupiers, 63  
secret peace moves with Allies,  
218, 280

Verona Congress and, 95, 154, 198

Rainer, Friedrich, 72–77, 209, 210n11

Rastenburg  
attempted murder of Hitler, 291  
Hitler-Mussolini meeting at (July  
1944), 291  
Hitler-Mussolini talks at (Sept.  
1943), 86

Regina Coeli, 304

*Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (Salò  
Republic)(RSI, Italian Social  
Republic)

armed forces, 83–99, 174n5, 191

attitude to partisans, 274

Catholic Church and, 169

civil war and, 18, 169, 170, 174,  
190n78, 195, 262, 263, 274,  
299, 301, 313, 319–323,  
330, 333

coexistence of violence and public  
order, 41, 167, 251, 254

collaboration with, 43, 70, 77n72,  
170, 293, 294, 303, 305, 307,  
324, 325, 330

dissolution of, 88

first cabinet meeting of, 101

formation of, 60, 184

German control in, 164

Germany and, 1, 60, 67, 96, 153,  
181, 185, 195, 196, 204, 214,  
270, 273, 287, 320, 324

Kingdom of the South and, 13, 31

ministerial appointments in,  
28, 158

nature and structure of, 321, 329

plots and crisis in, 55, 182

private armies and police  
forces of, 94

program of, 211

secretariat and regime, 1, 15–30,  
43, 59, 87, 124, 136, 154,  
163, 168, 188, 238, 263,  
284, 288, 294, 295, 299,  
322, 334

socialization programs and, 77,  
127–139

Verona trials of “traitors”, 56,  
254n40

*Repubblicchini*, 32, 39n23, 41n26

Republican National Guard-GNR  
*Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana*,  
23, 90, 157

Resega, Aldo, 38n22, 117, 173,  
246, 264

Revelli, Nuto, 301, 320

Ribbentrop, Joachim von, 15, 16, 63,  
64, 67–69, 132n9, 210, 277,  
278n28, 279

Ricci, Renato

commander of Militia, 24  
disputes with Graziani over creation  
of Army, 84, 91–93, 97,  
105, 185

member of neo-Fascist Govt., 24  
refusal to dissolve Militia, 89  
sets up Republican Guard, 91

Richtofen, Wolfram von, 224

Risiera di San Sabba, 76, 155

Roatta, Mario, 5, 7, 8, 305, 305n17

Rocca, Massimo, 15, 17, 166

Rogue militias

Carità band, 245, 249

De Sanctis band, 123

Koch band, 245, 246, 249

Muti legion, 116, 245, 249

“*reparti speciali*” of Pollastrini,

Guglielmo and Bardi,

Gino, 124

X Mas, 115, 116, 256

Rolandi Ricci, Vittorio, 35

Rome

a declared as “open city”, 9, 9n12

establishment of Fascist  
administration, 303

fall of, 70, 168

Fascist military collapse on 8  
September 1943 of, 23

Romeo, Rosario, 11

Rommel, Field Marshal Erwin, 19, 27,  
92, 194

Romualdi, Pino, 51, 52, 52n68, 96,  
96n57, 133n12, 233, 233n27,  
266, 327

Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 241,  
258, 280

Rossi, Enrico Adami, 12, 182n32,  
200n36, 200n41, 202n49

Rosso, Augusto, 193

Russia, 2, 11, 60, 143, 143n6, 143n9,  
235–237, 239–241, 291

## S

Saevecke, Theodor Emil, 117

Salerno, 7, 223

Salò Republic, *see* Fascist Republican  
Government

San Marco Division, 228

San Vittore prison, 155, 247, 308,  
311, 312

Santamaria, Camillo, 117

Sarfatti, Michele, 141n1, 142n4,  
146n17, 147n20, 149n31,  
151n48, 152n51, 153n56,  
154n61, 155n69, 158n85, 163,  
163n100

Sauckel, Gauleiter Fritz, 65, 70,  
72, 97

Schuster, Cardinal Ildefonso

Mussolini’s peace feelers  
and talks, 277

own peace initiatives, 277

Scoccimarro, Mauro, 304, 306

Scorza, Carlo, 26, 44

Secchia, Pietro, 306

Secretary general of the Fascists

Outside the Country and Overseas  
(*Segreteria Generale dei Fascisti  
all'estero e d'oltremare*), 199

Senise, Carmine (Chief of Police), 17

*Servizio assistenza internanti Italiani  
in Germania* (SAI), 215, 216

Sforza, Carlo, 306

*Sicherheitsdienst*, 64

Silvestri, Carlo, 44, 45, 50, 51, 131,  
137, 217, 218n51, 219,  
238, 243, 259, 262–264,  
267, 325

Skorzeny, Colonel Otto, 17

*Socializzazione*, 45, 46, 130, 131,  
132n10, 133–136, 138, 139,  
238, 240, 257, 268, 279  
Solaro, Giuseppe, 63n20, 138, 308  
Sorice, Antonio, 8, 9  
Spampanato, Bruno, 43, 44, 138, 258,  
323n9, 324, 325, 325n20, 327  
Speer, Albert, 62, 64, 65, 69, 70  
Spirito, Ugo, 50, 113, 238  
*Squadristmo*, 123  
SS (Schutzstaffel)  
Ardeatine massacre, 121  
atrocities by, 12  
ties with Italian rogue bands, 256  
treatment of Jews by, 145  
Stalin, Josef, 36, 50, 113, 205,  
235–238, 243, 275, 280, 282,  
296, 302, 314  
Starace, Achille, 51  
Stauffenberg, Claus von, 186  
Student, Kurt, 12  
Stuhlpfarrer, Karl, 21n12, 78n76,  
79n83, 80, 80n88, 86n10  
Süner, Ramón, 55  
Susmel, Duilio, 135n26, 220n65, 237,  
237n7, 277n27, 278n29,  
282n51, 326, 326n27

## T

Tamaro, Attilio, 23, 27, 27n49, 35n8,  
35n9, 45n40, 61n10, 90n33,  
133n11, 181n22, 182n31,  
185n44, 189, 189n68, 190n75,  
200, 200n39, 202, 217n49, 238,  
238n11, 266n26, 278n28, 326  
Tamburini, Tullio, 102, 104, 116,  
119, 121, 152, 153, 218, 219,  
250, 251  
Tarchi, Angelo, Head of Ministry of  
Corporate Economy, 62, 63,  
131–134, 145n14, 274, 278

Tassinari, Giuseppe, 15  
Tensfeld, Wilhelm, 117, 118, 186,  
188, 190  
Terrorism  
adopted by anti-Fascists, 123  
*gappisti* and, 173  
individual and mass action, 19,  
173, 189  
mountain and urban warfare,  
136, 189  
Tippelskirch, Kurt von, 227  
Todt organization, 62, 89, 224  
Togliatti, Palmiro, 184, 262, 302,  
303, 307, 309, 310, 313, 314  
Toussaint, General Rudolf, 16n2, 69,  
92, 124, 135  
Trabucco, Carlo, 11, 11n23  
*Trasformismo*, 49, 158, 177, 268,  
285, 314  
Tringali-Casanova, Antonio (Minister  
of Justice), 25  
“Tupin”, 309  
Turchi, Franz, 114n48, 323, 324n15

## U

Uccelli, Oscar, 117

## V

Vaccari, Marcello, 215, 216  
Valtellina, 278n30, 280–282, 280n41  
Vatican, 29, 131, 149, 150, 160–162,  
165, 168–170, 195, 282  
Venezia Giulia, 18, 19, 46, 75, 77n72,  
115, 197, 209, 211, 280  
Verona trials, 56  
Via Rasella attack, 121, 176, 177, 324  
Vichy government, 16, 195  
Victor Emmanuel III, King  
decision to remove Mussolini, 35  
flight from Rome, 8



Mussolini and, 5, 35, 323, 330  
 Vietinghoff, General Heinrich  
   von, 281  
 Vigorelli, Gabrielle, 261  
 Villa Triste, 122, 247  
 Vinci, Anna, 77, 77n73  
 Violence  
   anti-partisan, 183  
   banditry, 186  
   the church and, 168  
   deaths during Second World War  
     accruing from, 301  
   Fascist and, 23, 191  
   German and, 81  
   justification for, 210  
   means and ends of, 117  
   partisan-style, 48  
   Salò gov't monopoly, 84, 288  
   symbolic value of, 78  
   use of torture, 104  
 Vivarelli, Roberto, 37n17, 329,  
   329n40, 329n41, 329n43, 330

## W

Waetzoldt, Wilhelm, 61  
 Wehrmacht  
   attitude toward Mussolini's new  
     army, 225  
   defense plan in Italy, 20  
   nature of, 87  
   obstruction of Mussolini's  
     republic, 209  
   peace negotiations, 12–13  
   surrender in Italy, 235, 281, 308  
   war against civilians, 71  
 Westphal, Siegfried, 9  
*Wintergewitter, Operation*, 227, 229

Wittgens, Professor, 150  
 Wolf, Gerhard, 120  
 Wolff, General Karl  
   leader of anti-Partisan  
     operations, 186  
   Mussolini and, 28, 54, 61, 64, 69,  
     71, 108, 110, 124, 188, 201,  
     218, 232  
   SS Commander in German-occupied  
     Italy, 64  
 Woller, Hans, 302n4, 303n7, 304n11,  
   305n19, 305n21, 306, 335,  
   335n5  
 World War II  
   attitude of Italian people toward, 36  
   interpretation of, 330  
   number of deaths in, 294

## X

X Mas *Decima Flottiglia Mas*  
   follower of Italy and/or Fascism,  
     113, 115, 210, 256, 280  
   Junio Valerio Borghese as leader of,  
     210, 315

## Z

Zachariae, Dr. Georg, 21, 21n15, 28,  
   60, 239, 239n14, 240, 253n38,  
   259, 278n28, 281, 281n46  
 Zerbino, Paolo, 138, 174n5, 218,  
   246, 254, 255, 268, 274,  
   281, 325  
 Zimmermann, Paul, 135  
 Zuccotti, Susan, 144n13, 148n28,  
   153n59, 156n74, 161n91,  
   161n95, 162n97, 164, 164n102