

# Mussolini, Briefly

1883: Born Predappio Italy, the eldest of three children. The father, Alessandro, was a blacksmith, a socialist and atheist. Against the mother's wishes Mussolini was never baptized.

1888: First brush with the law, age 8. Pulls a knife on a student who insulted him.

1901: Qualifies as elementary schoolteacher.

1902: Emigrates to Switzerland to avoid the military. Studies Marx and Nietzsche, trains as a journalist for an Italian paper. First political activities as secretary to a workers union in Lausanne.

1903: Arrested for organizing a strike, deported back to Italy.

1904—1909: Various activities as journalist and activist, in Trento and Milan.

1910: In Forlì editing *Lotta di Classe* (the Class Struggle). Also writes a novel *L'Amante del Cardinale* (The Cardinal's Mistress).

1911: Participates in riot, jailed for five months. Released and offered job editing yet another Socialist Paper — *Avanti*. In two years he boosts circulation from 20,000 to 100,000.

1914: War in Europe. Mussolini enlists, serves at the front and with honor, wounded during an assault.

1918: The war over and the country a mess, Mussolini resumes his preferred activities: journalism and firing up the working class. He has by this time become a national figure.

1922: The March on Rome. The country remains in turmoil with 5 governments in 7 years and the King, who controls the army, hands everything over to Mussolini. It's a revolution by default.

1923: A letter from Hitler requesting a signed photograph. Mussolini says: who is Adolph Hitler? The letter is consigned to the circular file.

1923—1934: Consolidation of power. Various projects and reforms helped along by a flood of propaganda to rally Italians to the Fascist party and gradually transform it from a political movement to a religion with Mussolini as its God.

1935: The invasion of Ethiopia. Britain has an empire, why not Italy? But Britain doesn't see it this way and relations between the countries begin a slide that is to prove fatal.

1938: Munich. The meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler that briefly pacifies Hitler and averts war. Mussolini, who speaks English and German, plays an important role. He is hailed as a moderating influence on Hitler. It's a fine moment, maybe his finest. After this it's all downhill.

May 1939: *The Pact of Steel*—the alliance between Germany and Italy. Mussolini has three choices: an alliance with England, an alliance with Germany, or no alliances—neutrality. Ciano, his son-in-law and Foreign Minister, who sees nothing to be gained by fighting Hitler's war, counsels neutrality. But neutrality is not Mussolini's style. And at this point Hitler looks unbeatable.

September 1939: Hitler invades Poland. World War 2 is off to a rousing start. Mussolini's feelings are divided. He wants war but Italy is ill-prepared to participate and he must remain on the sidelines to watch Hitler cover himself with glory. It's a torment.

February 1940: England installs Churchill as Prime Minister. Ciano says: "This means one thing. The war will be long and bitter and God help us if we lose".

May 1940: Hitler invades France. The war lasts 6 weeks. Mussolini decides he has no choice but to jump in at the end if he wants to share in the loot—a few leftovers. It's a poor move and he is vilified in the foreign press. In the United States Roosevelt says: "The hand that holds the dagger has struck it into his neighbors back".

April 1941: Mussolini invades Greece—or tries to. Mussolini's idea is to fight a "parallel" war in the Mediterranean. He will start with Greece and from there move on to drive the British from North Africa. Watching Hitler devour one country after another is humiliating and it's time to do some conquering of his own. But he has underestimated the Greeks and the invasion backfires. The Italians are driven back. Hitler, planning the war with Russia, is furious. He is obliged to intervene and clean up the mess.

June 1941: Hitler invades Russia. Hitler's great gamble that he almost pulls off. He makes it to the gates of Leningrad and Moscow but fails to beat the weather that hits 40 below. The Russians manage to hold on and launch a counterattack.

May 1942: North Africa. Mussolini, who has learned nothing from the Greek debacle, takes on the British over Egypt. The results are the same. There are some small victories but nothing decisive and at some point the tide turns. Hitler, for the second time is obliged to assist. He sends Rommel. Mussolini says to Ciano: "You cannot make a hammer out of a people who for 300 years have been an anvil".

January 1943: Stalingrad. The Russians inflict a crushing defeat on the Germans—a turning point in the war.

March 1943: A meeting with Hitler. There have been many meetings with Hitler and they are always the same. Hitler talks while Mussolini listens. But the war has reached a critical point and Mussolini is told by Ciano, along with the King and the Generals, that he must confront Hitler with a hard but obvious truth: the war in Russia is lost. He must cut a deal with Stalin and concentrate forces in North Africa and the Mediterranean where the allies are on Italy's doorstep. Mussolini knows it all. He also knows this one doesn't have a prayer. North Africa for Hitler is a sideshow. He is obsessed with Russia and will fight to the last man.

July 3, 1943. The Allies invade Sicily. Mussolini says to Ciano: "I am the most hated man in Italy". The truth of this statement is given proof 5 days later when Mussolini is arrested by the King. The King appoints General Badoglio to replace Mussolini as Prime Minister.

September 8, 1943: Italy surrenders to the Allies.

September 10, 1943: Hitler rescues Mussolini in a dramatic raid. He sends four divisions from the eastern front to occupy Rome and the northern half of the country. It's all over for Mussolini, no one knows it better than he, and his most pressing desire, now that he has flushed the country down the toilet, is to retire from public life and quietly disappear, along with some company, his mistress Claretta Petacci. But Hitler still thinks Mussolini can be useful to the cause and invites him, one way or another, to launch a new government at Salò on Lake Como, where Fascism, part 2, begins its brief life. But it's a government that rules no one and has no power. Mussolini is watched like a hawk by the Germans and everything he does or tries to do goes through them. On Hitler's orders he has various members of the Grand Council, including Ciano, shot for treason.

June 1944: The allies push north and occupy Rome. The Germans still control the northern half of the country but it's infested with partisans, well armed partisans, and the writing is on the wall.

May 1945: The end. The allies drive the Germans from Italy. Mussolini attempts to flee but is seized by partisans, along with Claretta Petacci. They are shot and their bodies strung up in Piazza Loreto in Milan.

Suggested reading:

*The Ciano Diaries*

Mussolini, Nicholas Farrell

*The Brutal Friendship*, F.W. Deakin