

# BENITO MUSSOLINI

Benito Mussolini was a violent man. He liked to be a leader that everyone was afraid of. He is known for using extreme violence to gain and keep power in Italy before World War II.



## Conditions Under Which Mussolini Came to Power

Mussolini's father was a devoted socialist named Alessandro Mussoli. His mother, Rosa Maltoni, was a very devout Catholic. Mussolini was born in 1883 in a small town named Dovia di Predappio. Mussolini was a violent child. He was expelled from his first boarding school at age 10 for stabbing another student. He was removed from that school. He repeated this violent behavior at his second school. He stabbed another student when he was 14. But his teachers at this school appreciated his violent character. Even as a young man, he believed violence was okay to use to gain power. Even though he was violent, he was able to persuade people to follow him.

To avoid required military service in Italy, in 1902, he fled to Switzerland. He was arrested in Berne, Switzerland, because he supported a general strike. In 1903, he was deported back to Italy. He avoided actual removal by falsifying his papers. But in December 1904, he returned to Italy where he had been convicted for deserting the military. He was given amnesty for deserting. When he got back to Italy, he had to serve two years in the infantry.

## Use of the Military

Mussolini was a persuasive speaker. Even though his opinions often did not make sense, his dramatic talk made people change their minds. When World War I was over, Socialist Party members in Italy were elected and took over local governments. Socialists believed in democracy and equality. Wealthy Italians saw this as a threat to keeping their money and property. Mussolini decided to take the government away from the Socialist Party. He did this by sending his men into the villages where they beat and killed anyone who did not agree with him.

As early as February 1918, he asked the Italian people to choose him as their dictator. He told them he could fix the economic and political crisis in Italy. In 1919, Mussolini gathered together a group of men to help him. These men were known as the Italian Combat Squads. This was the beginning of the Fascist Party. This was a group of soldiers who used extreme violence against Socialists and other enemies.

In 1921, he turned his soldiers into a political party. He named the party after the Italian word for bundle—*fascio*. This word meant a "bundle of sticks." Mussolini said if one stick was strong, a bundle of sticks was stronger. Although the party was based on national unity, violence was used to keep the people in order.

## Methods Used to Acquire Territory and Power

Mussolini believed that the Socialists had not supported Italy during World War I. He and his group of soldiers thought the Socialists were cowards and traitors. This group was supported by wealthy landowners who wanted to protect their properties and their money. This group was known as the Blackshirts. Taking over cities, the Blackshirts burned down offices and homes of anyone who did not agree with them and violently killed anyone who got in their way.

In 1921, Mussolini was elected to Italy's parliament. By the next year, thousands of Fascists marched on Rome. Armed with guns and bayonets, they demanded that Mussolini be named Prime Minister. Italy's King at the time, Victor Emmanuel III, did not take them seriously. He refused to declare a state of emergency. He was then forced to dissolve the government. Mussolini was appointed Prime Minister

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and Interior Minister. At age 38, he was proud to be the youngest Prime Minister in Italian history. The Interior Minister appointment gave him control over the police. Being the Prime Minister gave him the power to take over the government. Within one year, he became a dictator.

Mussolini became Prime Minister in October 1922. He used his army to kill anyone who disagreed with him. Mussolini managed Italy with violence. His police had the power to arrest anyone who disagreed with him politically. Within five years after becoming Prime Minister, Mussolini created a government where his word was law. He was in complete control.

## Methods Used to Maintain Control

In June 1924, Mussolini sent assassins to kill the leader of the Socialist party, Giacomo Matteotti. Six months later, on January 3, 1925, Mussolini openly admitted in a public speech that he had ordered the assassination. He was not afraid to admit that he had ordered the murder.

In 1926, the Fascists took control of the Ministry of National Education. Mussolini wanted to make sure that he remained in control. He decided that he also needed to manage the children. Boys and girls were made to attend school. At first, attendance was voluntary. Later, attendance was made mandatory for boys between the ages of 6 and 18 and girls between the ages of 8 and 14. In 1936, children under the age of 6 were made to go to kindergarten. Students studied only military science and Italian history. Boys wore uniforms like those the Blackshirts wore. During military exercises, boys were given a gun and taught to shoot. Girls were trained to be good wives and mothers. Mussolini said that women should stay home, work in the fields, and have children.

Mussolini ruled as a dictator. He showed himself to be an all-powerful leader. His government eliminated everyone who disagreed with him. He did away with local elections and made the death penalty mandatory for political crimes.

Mussolini became more aggressive in his foreign policy. He continued to use violence to expand Italy's control. In 1923, Mussolini bombed and invaded Corfu to control the region. In 1935, the Italians invaded Ethiopia and Albania. Hitler was moving gradually west toward Italy. Mussolini hoped he could keep Italy separate from Germany because he did not like Adolph Hitler. However, in September 1937, Italy joined forces with Germany and Japan. By 1939, the combined armies of Germany and Italy moved across Europe. In 1940, Mussolini and Hitler met in Germany, and the two dictators joined forces. They now controlled 115 million Germans and Italians against the Western powers.

In June 1940, Mussolini declared war on France. After the battle, he was given a small portion of that country. He tried unsuccessfully to invade Egypt after France. In August 1941, both Germany and Italy invaded Yugoslavia. The American and British invaded Sicily and caused Mussolini to lose support of the people and members of his own political party. In July 1943, Italian leaders passed a vote to remove him from office, and he was arrested.

In September 1943, Mussolini was rescued by German paratroopers. He met with Adolf Hitler and was placed in charge of the Italian Social Republic. He ruled in German-occupied northern Italy until 1945. Then the Germans lost control of northern Italy. Mussolini attempted to run away to Switzerland. He was arrested and executed by Italians on April 28, 1945. Two days later, Adolf Hitler killed himself.

The Italians arrested Mussolini along with his mistress and other officials. Mussolini was executed. All of those who had been shot were hung upside down on the town square. Both he and his mistress were buried in an unmarked grave in the Musocco cemetery.