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'Mussolini Died Badly'



Italians in Milan revile the battered bodies of Mussolini and his mistress

Five thousand screaming men and women of newly liberated Milan last week mobbed eighteen disheveled corpses strewn in the muddy town square—kicked and trampled them, spit at them, cursed them. All the dead were hated Fascists, but one was the greatest and most hated of all. In the filth, with a shattered skull, lay Benito Mussolini.

Since his rescue by German paratroopers in September 1943, Mussolini had led a wraith-like existence in Northern Italy as a Nazi puppet ruler without power. When the Wehrmacht collapsed, Italian Partisans ran down the Duce near Lake Como and captured him and the latest of a long line of mistresses, a young brunette named Clara Petacci.

A Partisan leader who called himself "Eduardo" sent a squad for Mussolini. "Eduardo" described what happened on the afternoon of April 28 to James E. Roper of the United Press:

"When he saw the Italian officers coming toward him, he thought they had come to free him and he threw his arms happily around the woman. When he was told he would be tried he was shocked. But our men under an officer gave them both a trial and condemned them to death . . . Mussolini and Petacci were shot together at the cottage. When the soldiers were about to shoot, Mussolini cried, 'No! No!' Those were his last words . . . Mussolini died badly."

Duce in the Discard: The bodies were all dumped into a closed furniture van for a slow 25-mile haul through pouring rain to Milan, where the Duce once edited a Socialist newspaper. At the Piazza Loreto—recently renamed Piazza Quindici Martiri in honor of fifteen patriot "martyrs" executed there by Fascists—the corpses were unceremoniously unloaded.

Mussolini

Mussolini, clad in a Fascist militiaman's uniform—muddy black boots, gray-green battle jacket, and gray riding trousers with a long red and black stripe—was stretched out at one side. His bald head rested on the breast of the mistress he had met at a beach in 1939 and tried to make into a movie star. Clara, who had lived in a luxurious villa the dictator built her outside Rome, lay with dark curls falling over her forehead and blood staining her lace-ruffled white blouse. Nearby sprawled the bodies of other Fascists, including Alessandro Pavolini, former Fascist Party Secretary, Paolo Zerbini, former Interior Minister, Fernando Mezzasoma, Propaganda Minister, Francesco Barracu, Cabinet Vice Chairman, and Geoffredo Coppola, Fascist dean of the University of Bologna.

The news of what was in the square sped through Milan. Fifty Partisan guards fired into the air to hold off the huge crowds that gathered. But the peculiar violence that the sight of corpses seems to bring out in Italian crowds aroused the mob. They shoved and yelled in an attempt to attack the bodies. One youth got through a kick at the Duce's jaw and the once-famous chin caved in.

Next the mob tied wire around the ankles of the Duce and his mistress, hoisted them head down from the roof of a nearby gasoline station, pulled off Clara's skirt, and reduced what remained of Mussolini's face to an unrecognizable pulp. Finally, the bodies were hauled down and carted off to the city morgue. There they were laid on tilted metal slabs, facing the still derisive crowd. And thus ended the last shameful rites of the man who would be Caesar.