

February 6, 1937: p. 16

Benito Mussolini



Mussolini: "I Was Not a Good Boy"

Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini was born on July 29, 1883, in the Po valley district of northeastern Italy which is called The Romagna. In his autobiography (1928) the Fascist leader recollects the region's grape-scented breezes and beautiful evenings. The political atmosphere of the time, however, was one of revolution.

Alessandro Mussolini, the dictator's father, was a blacksmith by trade and a political agitator by preference. He spent most of his time away from his smithy at Dovia in drumming up a Marxist following among the desperately poor peasants and workers of The Romagna. Twice he was jailed as a dangerous radical.

Benito's mother, born Rosa Maltoni, taught school close to Dovia in the hamlet of Varano di Costa, where Mussolini was born in the family's stuccoed hovel. Her husband beat Benito with a leather belt. She herself spoiled the child with motherly indulgence of his unruliness.

YOUTH: "I was not a good boy," Mussolini wrote years later. His only friend was his younger brother Arnaldo. By the time he was 15 he had earned a reputation as an incorrigible ruffian—he had already stabbed one boy with a knife and beaten another nearly to death with his fists.

When he was 18 he received his teacher's certificate from the normal school at Forlimpopoli. He managed a class room in a school at Gualtieri for only a year before he impatiently gave up teaching as worrisome.

For a time he returned to his home district, where his father had opened up a tavern and called it L'Agnello. L'Agnello served wine, but it was also the headquarters for all the political radicals in The Romagna. Mussolini grew a horrendous black mustache and learned to drink as hard and talk as wildly as any of his father's cronies.

At 20, to avoid compulsory military training, Mussolini fled to Switzerland on a forged passport. For two years he lived in the grimmest poverty. Sometimes he worked as a mason's assistant. Sometimes he begged. His association with Russian anarchists

Benito Mussolini



Il Duce's Theatrics: A Booming Voice, Flying Gestures and a Jutting Jaw

paralyzed the nation's factories. The Reds threatened to sovietize Italy.

FASCISM: To keep industrial wheels turning, Mussolini organized a Fascio di Combattimento (Combat Group). Composed of ex-soldiers, it forced dissatisfied workers to stay at their posts, or supplied men to fill empty factories.

Fascists were organized as a political party in 1919. Industrialists, in spite of Mussolini's vague threats against capital, were only too glad to supply the strike-breaking squadristi with arms and money. By 1921, 35 Fascist deputies sat in Parliament at Rome and there were 300,000 armed blackshirts with arsenals and headquarters in every part of Italy.

Sporadic and miniature civil wars continued to rage between Socialist-Communist strikers and Mussolini's flying squads. Socialists were slugged, shot and beaten. Quart doses of castor oil were poured down protesting throats until the staunchest labor supporters were helpless.

COUP D'ETAT: In October, 1922, at a party congress in Naples, Mussolini called for a counter revolution against the Reds, although actually by this time labor troubles had begun to subside of their own accord. The monarchy was weak, and a secret arrange-

Benito Mussolini

ment was made whereby neither the army nor the police were to offer any resistance.

Fascist troops swarmed into the largest Italian cities. Mussolini was hurriedly appointed Prime Minister. In late October an army of 50,000 Fascisti marched into Rome without a finger being lifted against them.

In April, 1924, were held the first elections since the March on Rome (which Mussolini made by sleeping car from Milan). Il Duce was still not sure of his power. Out came the castor oil bottles again, objectors were cruelly dosed, and the Italian electorate was "persuaded" to give Mussolini's candidates over half the total vote.

Mussolini's new strength was quickly shaken by the mysterious but undoubtedly Fascist murder of Giacomo Matteoti, leader of the opposition party at Rome. Il Duce quickly hushed the whole affair. A trial of the murderers was not held until March, 1926, two years later, in an obscure Abruzzi village. The chief assassin, a St. Louis, Mo., gangster named Dumini, was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment but was soon released.

National resentment was cooled, however, by four attempts made on Mussolini's own life within the period of a year. Each time Il Duce escaped as if by a miracle. Italians were vastly impressed, and since the would-be murders of 1925 and '26, he has been a national hero.

THREE THINGS: Today Mussolini is three things. As Capo del Governo he is (1) head of the state, responsible to the King, and unique among dictators in that he has preserved a symbol of power above him. As Il Duce he is (2) the head of the Fascist party and (3) chairman of the Fascist Grand Council, which controls all elections and all government business.

Mussolini's character has undergone an inevitable change since his accession to power. The former anarchist-socialist is now the ruler of a corporate state which dictates to Italians the smallest particulars of their lives.

A promiscuous lover of student and Swiss days, he is now married to his former mistress. He is the proud father of five children, three boys and two girls. His son-in-law, Count Ciano, may some day succeed him as Il Duce.

Mussolini, who once had to use a knife when he fought with boys his own size, is now a man of tremendous energy. When he makes his frequent appearances before his people, his platform presence fairly crackles. The Fascist salute sends his hand into the air so abruptly it seems that it must surely go flying off; his voice booms fearsomely; his barrel chest protrudes practically to bursting, and his jutting jaw overshadows almost everything.

Benito, the tavern-rioter, has become a Spartan. He eats simply—"Fruit, fruit and more fruit." From the most undisciplined of youths, he has come to be the most efficient of dictators, working six hours a day on a schedule planned to the minute.

Eleven prison terms have inspired in him a terrible fear of confinement and small spaces. His residence in Rome, the Villa Torlonia, is a great, pink and yellow palace surrounded by acres of terraced gardens. His office in the Palazzo Venezia is 60 feet long, 40 feet wide and 40 feet high, big

Benito Mussolini

enough for six ample living rooms.

He is perhaps the best-educated of dictators. He reads constantly, and is well acquainted with the accomplishments of Americans, admiring particularly Roosevelt I and Roosevelt II. His early teachers were the economists Marx and Sorel. Significantly, his god is Nietzsche, the German philosopher who wrote: "Might makes right."



OldMagazineArticles.com