



Italy Divided

The Last Days of Mussolini & Fascist Italy

BY JOAQUIN BOCHACA

IT WAS A TRAGIC TIME IN HISTORY, the Italian civil war of 1943-45. The bitter struggle was between the Fascist Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI), allied to the Axis, and a mixed bag of Communist partisans and monarchist soldiers on the other hand. After the RSI surrendered, as many as 30,000 Italians were rounded up and murdered by the Communists. Here Catalan-Spanish author Joaquin Bochaca offers this recounting of the tragicomic collapse of Fascism in Italy after 1943.

Italy was a special case—a case apart—a case that, had it not been so tragic, would have been more than comical. Not even Luigi Pirandello, the Nobel prize-winning Italian playwright of multiple realities, would have been capable of inventing a more convoluted plot, in which wickedness, love of conspiracies, treachery and slapstick were mixed in equal parts. We will deal with Italy as expeditiously as possible, without being cruel to the country.

The purge in Italy began with the arrest of *Sua Eccellenza Benito Mussolini, Capo del Governo, Duce del Fascismo e Fondatore dell'Impero* (“His Excel-



Facing page: Benito Mussolini and his wife Rachele with three of their five children (left to right)—son Romano, daughter Anna Maria and son Bruno. Daughter Edda, the eldest, and son Vittorio are not pictured. **Above:** *The New York Telegram* announces the surrender of Italy, a bit prematurely. Mussolini was ousted in a coup in July 1943, and the new government surrendered in September. Mussolini was taken to the Abruzzi Mountains by the coup leaders as a prisoner. But Germany reacted swiftly, and the Allies were unable to gain much advantage from their surprise invasion. On September 12, the Germans rescued Mussolini and helped him set up a new state in northern Italy.

PHOTO ON PAGE 4: IDDPAPHOTOS/NEWSCOM

lency Benito Mussolini, head of government, leader of Fascism and founder of the empire”) in July 1943 after he had been removed from office by his own Fascist Grand Council. Nineteen of its members voted for his dismissal and for restoring supreme command of the armed forces to the king. Seven voted the other way, with one abstention.

Mussolini did not pay much attention to this Grand Council, all of whose members had been personally chosen by the Duce: The power of the council was viewed by Mussolini as being solely advisory. For this reason, when, after this adverse vote, the Duce went to call upon the king, who had commanded his presence, Mussolini was not particularly afraid. But King Victor Emmanuel III told him that he had decided to replace him as prime minister with Marshal Pietro Badoglio, 1st duke of Addis Ababa, 1st marquis of Sabotino.

Upon leaving the palace, the perplexed Mussolini was detained by Italian police. He was conducted to the Gran Sasso d’Italia, at 9,554 feet the highest mountain in central Italy.

The purge began, then, in Italy, with the arrest of the man principally responsible for the fate of the country. When the news was learned, there were explosions of popular joy all over the Italian peninsula: If the Duce had been removed from power, that was an unmistakable sign peace was near, and the Italian people were tired of war. The betrayal by the Fascists in high positions, of a leader to whom they owed everything, was imitated by the majority of the members of the party.

Here is what Mussolini himself had to say about it:

Starting at dawn on July 25 the mob, surrounded and protected by the carabinieri, trooped through the streets of Rome, pillaging the headquarters of all the Fascist organizations, smashing the pavilions of the lictors on their way, abusing any Fascists they encountered and destroying, with a stupid iconoclasm, everything that reminded them of Mussolini and Fascism. While busts and portraits of me flew from windows by the thousands, the shop windows were adorned with images of Victor Emmanuel and Badoglio.¹

Mussolini’s removal carried with it, as a logical consequence, that of his most faithful followers. The daily papers began campaigns of denunciations, demanding that “purification” committees be formed. The king prevented this, fearful these committees would get out of hand and extremism would take over the country. On Sept. 8 Victor Emmanuel and Badoglio signed a statement of capitulation to the Allies. The Germans reacted quickly, occupying all parts of the peninsula that had not fallen into the hands of the enemy.

If the king and Badoglio expected a German response, what they could not have expected was the incredible audacity with which German paratroopers succeeded in liberating the Duce [in September 1943]. As soon as he was freed, Mussolini met with Adolf Hitler and decided to resume his functions, creating the Italian Social Republic, whose unofficial capital was established

in the far north, at Salo, on Lake Garda. The Italian Social Republic was no small thing but included most of Italy, extending south almost to Rome on the mainland and taking in the Adriatic coastal territories.

In Italy, then, after autumn 1943, there were two governments: that of Badoglio, recognized by the Allies and almost all neutral countries, and that of Mussolini, recognized by Germany and its allies. We must recognize

that the immense majority of the Italian people favored Badoglio, for the sole reason that they were convinced that the Allies would win the war. But Mussolini, it is true, succeeded in rekindling the enthusiasm of a number of Italians in the north.

The first concern of both Italian governments was to organize a purge. Mussolini wanted to limit it to the principal traitors (from the Fascist point of view) of September 1943. Two admirals who had handed over the Italian fleet to the Allies and five members of the Grand Council who had instigated Mussolini’s fall were condemned to death and shot. Among these last were the Duce’s son-in-law and ex-foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano. That was the main purge by the Italian Social Republic.

There were no excesses in the streets of the North, nor summary executions. And not because the mobs of the Social Republic were any better than those of the

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new liberal monarchy, but because instead of being encouraged to commit atrocities they were sternly told that anyone who went beyond the limits of the law would be punished accordingly.

There is nothing secret about the occurrence of mob excesses in the South, except whether they were opposed or supported by the anti-Fascist government. We have already spoken briefly of the abuses committed against Fascists in the southern half of the country where, officially at least, the king and Badoglio ruled. In addition to the world war that was now being waged on her soil, Italy was thus doomed to suffer the effects of civil war as well.

The partisans began by indulging in crimes against elements considered to be Fascist or simply right wing. They also murdered German soldiers in isolated and individual actions. The Germans then proceeded to conduct reprisals, which put into play the infernal mechanism of terrorism/counterterrorism/new terrorism, with the violence spiraling in ever-wider circles.

Since the advance of the Allies was much less rapid than had been expected, the prolongation of military operations was accompanied throughout the peninsula by widespread resistance. All over the zone occupied by the Allies, courts-martial were created to suppress initiatives by Fascist elements. In Sardinia, Naples and Sicily, 15 were sentenced to death and more than 200 to prison, for having attempted to construct "lictors' barracks." Moreover, a decree signed by Victor Emmanuel provided for the creation of new district tribunals specifically intended for the punishment of Fascists.² The members of the jury had to be:

... appointed from among citizens whose aversion to Fascism is manifested by an irreproachable life and by the political conduct that they have adopted since October 28, 1922, when Mussolini was selected by the king as prime minister.

This seems to me simply delicious. Except, perhaps (I am not sure) in tribunals of kaffirs or Kikuyus, jury members are normally supposed to be chosen by drawing lots, and once chosen, those persons are eliminated who for whatever motive or circumstance might be suspected of a predisposition against the accused—who, in principle, and until proven otherwise, are presumed to be innocent.



Top: troops led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio on the march. King of Italy Victor Emmanuel III (lower left photo) fired Mussolini and replaced him with Badoglio. Mussolini's former sidekick, his own son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano (lower center), supported the coup, but ultimately paid for his treason with his life. Mussolini was escorted by police to a waiting ambulance and taken straight to jail. His Fascist Party was also disbanded. Hitler acted decisively, pulling Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS divisions from Russia, France and southern Germany and rushing them into Italy, quickly disarming the whole Italian army, then occupying the northern two-thirds of the country, including Rome. Months passed in a stalemate. The American commander, Gen. John Lucas, cautiously halted and went on the defensive even though there were no German troops around. The Germans soon attacked, gathering up all of their forces in the region to hit the Allies with a force twice their size. Hitler was able to hold off the Allies in Italy for the war's duration, while inflicting 300,000 Allied casualties. On Hitler's order, Mussolini himself was freed from Italian captivity. In September 1943, a commando detachment led by SS master spy Otto Skorzeny (lower right), glided into the mountaintop location where Mussolini was imprisoned, scared away the local police, put the Duce in a small plane and flew him off to freedom. Mussolini then proclaimed the new Italian Social Republic, to be led by the new Fascist Republican Party.

Generals of the first category are all protected by the House of Savoy; others have publicly stained the dynasty with treachery and ignominy.

The democratic decree of Victor Emmanuel dogmatized that the jury members should be “selected.” Among whom should they be selected? Oh yes, among those citizens whose aversion for Fascism has been manifested. In other words, if you did not show an aversion to Fascism you did not lead an irreproachable life. Where? Obviously, in Italy. Since when? Victor Emmanuel had an answer for everything: Since Oct. 28, 1922. What happened on that date? Why, on Oct. 28, 1922, Benito Mussolini had been called upon to form a government by no other than his majesty, Victor Emmanuel III. . . .

Prof. [Mario] Vinciguerra of the University of Naples called for Fascists who had occupied a position in the administration, no matter how unimportant, to be deprived of their political rights for 20 years.

Italy, of course, would have been left without functionaries, and would have had to import hundreds of thousands of them, from judges to jailors, from bailiffs to gravediggers, from bureaucrats to street sweepers, and from night watchmen to professors like the intrepid Vinciguerra, appointed to his post by a Fascist government.

As Pierre-Antoine Cousteau, brother of the famous explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau, said, humorously, “Everybody is somebody’s fascist.” This would be experienced very soon, in their own flesh, by the parties of the right and left, architects of the maneuvers that had overthrown Fascism in the country’s south.

The conservative elements were very concerned with seeing how the Communists and socialists claimed a monopoly of anti-Fascism. And in fact the left, for its part, passed rapidly from anti-Fascism to anti-monarchism.

The animosity between the two factions reached its peak during the trial of Gen. Varboni, a member of the National Fascist Party and also—naturally, in secret—of the Socialist Party. When the Italian government signed the peace agreement with the Allies and declared war on Germany, Varboni, who had made it known to anyone who would listen that he was a “lifelong socialist,” was appointed by Badoglio as military governor of Rome. When the Germans showed up there, he abandoned the capital without firing a shot and fled to the

mountains to organize the partisan resistance. At least, so he said.

Badoglio was not convinced, and brought him before a military tribunal, charged with desertion. (By the way, it seems to me exquisite that Badoglio had the gall to accuse anyone of desertion.) The socialist daily *Voce Repubblicana*

[“Republican Voice”] published the following about their socialist favorite:

They are persecuting the only general who remained in Rome and who, when the city fell, went to the Abruzzi to organize the resistance. . . . And the king? The king has not abandoned his post. He is covered by the official truce that he has sworn to maintain. Very good! . . .

Badoglio, who escaped by following the king’s ship, has not abandoned his post. [Gen. Vittorio] Ambrosio, who fled with Badoglio, with [Gen. Mario] Roatta and with the king, has not abandoned his post either. Thanks to the candor of President [Ferruccio] Parri, the sad characters in the palace and the Ministry of War are coming to understand the following rules of jurisprudence: Those who run away terrified, leaving the army without orders, and flee headlong from Naples to Brindisi are not abandoning their posts; but he [the socialist Varboni] who, having remained in Rome, sets up a command headquarters outside the normal control [in the Abruzzi Mountains], is a traitor and a deserter.

Generals of the first category are all protected by the House of Savoy; those of the second have publicly stained the dynasty and its military court with treachery and ignominy.³

Such criticisms in the leftist press indicate quite clearly that the purges were not limited to the Fascists, but could rapidly spread to officials of the provisional regime and even reach the monarchy itself, if leftist parties achieved dominance in the country. And, in fact, that is what happened. Committees of partisans, armed by the Allies to fight the Germans, hardly bothered with them, but eliminated Fascists and democrats in abundance.

In Italy, then, everyone was purging everyone else. The liberals and monarchists purged the Fascists; the Communists purged the Fascists, the liberals and the monarchists; the partisans in the north murdered Fas-



cists and whoever else was around, and when they came upon an occasional German soldier, alone and off his guard, they mutilated him. Then the Germans or the blackshirts would order the execution of hostages; then, in reprisal, the partisans would plant a bomb in the orphanage at Cuneo.

In the midst of this indescribable chaos, Germans and blackshirts fought against soldiers of five nationalities, including Italians. In the Vatican the pope invited everyone to calm down, meditate and pray. But what the Italians did do was rob, murder and rape. Never had there been so much rape in Italy, nor in any part of the world, as then. Did Giovanni like Rosetta? Well then, he would copulate with her, either consensually or by force, and declare her to be a Fascist, a monarchist, a reactionary, an atheist or whatever label was convenient.

Count [Carlo] Sforza, whose life and estate the Fascists had respected, and whom Victor Emmanuel had appointed minister of justice, announced in the summer of 1944 that 1,350 people were to appear before the

Mussolini's Legend Refuses to Die

Not long before the end, a haggard Benito Mussolini, tired and wet from rain, stops to chat with a young soldier of the Republican National Guard. On April 28, 1945, Mussolini was murdered by Communist Walter Audisio, on the orders of the British Secret Services MI5, because Mussolini had in his possession many letters of Winston Churchill, and these letters would be very embarrassing for Churchill (TBR September/October 2010). Despite the best efforts of his enemies, however, it seems Mussolini is immortal in the hearts of Italians. Unlike modern politicians, his speeches continue to inspire the masses, and reportedly a collection of Mussolini speeches has become the second-most-downloaded item on Apple's iTunes website in the land he once ruled. His granddaughter Alessandra Mussolini is a popular politician in Italy today and is also a successful entertainer.

PHOTO: FEDERAL GERMAN PHOTO ARCHIVE

judge, accused of “collaboration with Fascism.” Collaboration with Fascism? Who in Italy had not collaborated with Fascism, which had governed the country for 21 years?

One of the main trials was that of the Fascist Gen. Roatta, who, three days before the beginning of the deliberations, managed to escape. Roatta was condemned to life imprisonment for contumacy; [Filippo] Anfuso, in Berlin from Italy, was sentenced to death. Minister [Fulvio] Suvich and the [Italian] viceroy of Albania, [Francesco] Jacomini, were condemned to 24 years in prison. It is interesting that the viceroy of Albania was condemned to 24 years imprisonment, particularly considering that the portrait of his superior in the hierarchy, the at-the-time king of Albania—Victor Emmanuel III—presided at the sessions of the tribunal.

In the midst of the collapse of the Italian front, when Mussolini, accompanied by some of his ministers and by his mistress, Clara Petacci, tried to escape to Austria, he was detained by bands of Communist partisans and executed. Also killed were Clara Petacci, the 16 government ministers and the president of the University of Bologna, Prof. [Goffredo] Coppola. The corpses were mutilated and hung upside down in a [Standard Oil/Rockefeller] gas station in Dongo.

For 15 hours the mob filed past the corpses, spitting at them, urinating on them and aiming kicks at them. The leader of the execution commando, Valerio Audisio, a member of the Communist Party, would later be elected to parliament having based his campaign on the “accomplishment” of having murdered a defenseless old man who offered no resistance.

I do not wish to continue. I will limit myself to mentioning that the number of deaths caused by the purges, according to a democratic Italian magazine of the time,⁴ was between 100,000 and 150,000; so say the most conservative estimates.

To this we must add some 12,000 Fascists killed by partisans during the civil war and more than 10,000 Italians of Venezia Giulia, Istria and Dalmatia, eliminated as Fascists by Yugoslavian partisans. According to the same magazine, which, let us not forget, was democratic, the anti-Fascist losses were some 29,000 persons,

The number of detainees confined in overflowing prisons or improvised concentration camps reached a half million in the ensuing chaos.

divided thusly: 6,000 partisans killed in combat, 13,000 shot in reprisal actions and another 10,000 shot by the Germans as punishment for conducting an irregular war.

These figures have been disputed by Neo-Fascists, who maintain that the maximum number of

anti-Fascist deaths was some 15,000 to 20,000—compared with at least 100,000 to 150,000 Fascist deaths.

The number of detainees confined in overflowing prisons or improvised concentration camps reached a half million, although it is difficult to obtain official figures given the chaos that reigned in Italy and lasted until at least 1947. Rachele Mussolini, the widow of the Duce, who was interned for five months in the British-improvised camp of Terni, wrote:

The prisoners were princesses, authors, duchesses, wives of illustrious men and of unknowns, women of the people and prostitutes. It was difficult to sleep in this concentration camp. From beyond the barbed wire, searchlights swept the camp pitilessly, illuminating the smallest corners, and as this light entered the shutterless windows, inexorably it found our beds. Sometimes we thought we were going crazy. . . . When at last the searchlights were turned out, the Sun was already rising, and a new day was starting.⁵ ♦

ENDNOTES:

1 Benito Mussolini, *History of a Year*.

2 It appears to be a political constant in this eventful century that when a dictator is succeeded by a democratic regime, embodied in a president or a liberal monarch, they engage in governance through self-enacted laws, decrees and personal appointments with a frequency far exceeding that of the preceding dictator.

3 Parri, a Christian Democrat, was a kind of civil co-president, appointed by the Machiavellian Victor Emmanuel III to counterbalance the figure of Marshal Badoglio.

4 *Orbis*, Rome, July 1945. French journalist Alfred Fabre-Luce, in his 1947 *Journal de l'Europe, 1946-1947*, asserts that there were around 300,000 victims of the anti-Fascist purge in Italy.

5 Rachele Mussolini, *Mussolini: An Intimate Biography*.

JOAQUIN BOCHACA, ESQ. is undoubtedly the premier Revisionist author in the Spanish-language world, which features Revisionist writers virtually unknown to English speakers. Bochaca, an attorney with a hard-hitting prose, is also a literary theorist and translator of Ezra Pound from the English and Hermann Hesse from the German. He also speaks and translates French, but above all else, this Barcelona resident is a lover of Catalan and of his native Catalonia. This and other valuable articles by Mr. Bochaca have been translated by MISS MARGARET HUFFSTICKLER, a talented linguist versed in several European languages. She is also a gifted vocalist.