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# Mussolini, Benito

By [Brian R. Sullivan](#)

Mussolini, *Benito* Amilcare Andrea  
Newspaper editor, agitator, political leader  
Born 29 July 1883 in Dovia, Predappio, Italy  
Died 28 April 1945 in Giulino di Mezzegra, Como, Italy

**Italian Socialist Benito Mussolini envisioned war as the prerequisite for revolution. He helped push Italy into World War I. After combat service and medical discharge in 1917, he demanded war until victory. In 1919, he founded the Fascist movement. Using veterans to smash political opposition, he seized power in October 1922.**

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## Frustrated Revolutionary

World War I rescued Socialist revolutionary Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) from frustration. Editor of the Milan-based Italian Socialist [newspaper](#) *Avanti!* from November 1913, he realized bourgeois party leaders rejected [revolution](#). He watched army, police and nationalist vigilantes crush worker revolt during the “Red Week” of June 1914. That July, he witnessed the Second International failure

to stop European war, then division along national lines.

Italy remained [neutral](#). In mid-September, Mussolini told the *Avanti!* staff that war alone could bring Italian revolution. After his late October editorial demanded Italian intervention, Socialist outrage prompted Mussolini's resignation. When his pro-interventionist newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, appeared in mid-November, the party expelled him. Mussolini concealed its funding by industrialists, the French, his wealthy lover [Margherita Sarfatti \(1880-1961\)](#) and possibly Russian agents.

For six months, through editorials and demonstrations, he promoted the Interventionist movement, collaborating with Syndicalist [Filippo Corridoni \(1881-1915\)](#). Mussolini demanded war against Italy's allies, [Germany](#) and [Austria-Hungary](#), to demolish bulwarks against European revolution. A victorious war would forge a national mass movement demanding political change. If the [government](#) rejected war, Mussolini threatened revolution. Most Italians favored peace, but [Vittorio Emanuele III, King of Italy \(1869-1947\)](#) forced a war declaration on 24 May 1915.

## At the Front

Mussolini was mobilized in August, reaching the front in mid-September 1915. He spent seventeen months in 33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 11<sup>th</sup> *Bersaglieri* Regiment. His ejection from officer training, seemingly for his radicalism, probably saved him. Reserve [infantry](#) subalterns suffered atrocious [losses](#).

Mussolini received generous leave time for medical and political reasons. It seems likely that the king and government knew, or at least suspected, that Mussolini was syphilitic.<sup>[1]</sup> Nevertheless, they were still content that Mussolini, a militant Interventionist in the trenches, would continue to direct *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

In Mussolini's early war diary excerpts published in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, he depicted himself as a Nietzschean *Übermensch* among submissive comrades. However, Mussolini's health and spirit gradually declined. He escaped the [Isonzo Battles](#) and the mid-1916 [Trentino](#) operations. Nonetheless, he endured miserable [attrition warfare](#) in the badly led, poorly equipped Italian army. Unlike [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#), he enjoyed neither army life nor war. In late 1916, Mussolini's unit moved to the dangerous Carso plateau. The 33-year-old Mussolini's unpublished diary entries reveal his increasing demoralization, remorse over [interventionism](#), even despair. He implored [Leonida Bissolati \(1857-1920\)](#), an ex-reform Socialist and minister-without-portfolio, to arrange his release from service.

## War Propagandist

That effort failed. But a late February 1917 training explosion caused Sergeant Mussolini's medical evacuation. Although lightly injured, he remained hospitalized until August. Mussolini required recuperation from right tibia surgery to remove syphilitic tumors. He received one year's convalescent leave, extended for six months, resuming resident editorship of *Il Popolo d'Italia*.

Following the October 1917 Italian defeat at [Caporetto](#), the British Secret Service paid Mussolini 100 pounds weekly to support his pro-war newspaper and organize veterans' attacks on peace demonstrations. In January 1918, Margherita Sarfatti's son [Roberto \(1900-1918\)](#) died in combat. Mussolini exalted him and Corridoni as symbols of youthful sacrifice demanding struggle until victory. Afterward, their comrades, "the aristocracy of the trenches," would transform Italy.

## Neither Left nor Right

Weeks after the armistice, Mussolini briefly visited Berlin. Revolutionary German veterans dominated the capital, reinforcing Mussolini's vision of Italian soldiers, returning home to become a militant political force. Unlike radicalized workers, their protests would express wounded patriotism and righteous indignation against weak bourgeois government and socialist anti-militarism. The war had been only the first stage of revolution.

Mussolini inaugurated his [Fascist](#) movement on 23 March 1919 before an audience including veterans (some from the black-shirted assault troops, the [Arditi](#)), Futurists, ex-Socialists, Syndicalists and Interventionists. He advocated a republic devoted to class cooperation. A national assembly of corporations would represent economic groups, promoting cooperation among workers, managers and capitalists, as well as among farm workers, overseers and land owners. Society would be organized into units like an army.

## Arms and the Man

Mussolini's followers formed a few *Fasci di combattimento* ("Combat groups") to battle resurgent postwar Socialism. They adopted the black shirts of the *Arditi* as uniforms. But a platform fusing revolutionary Socialism, Syndicalism, republicanism, extreme nationalism and imperialism brought the Fascists only 4,800 votes in the November 1919 parliamentary elections. Seventeen months passed before the violence of the 1919-1920 *biennio rosso* ("The Two Red Years") revived Mussolini's movement. The army and police proved unequal to peasant and worker strikes and unrest. Coalescing around a core of ex-officers and NCOs, the *Fasci* multiplied, bringing government forces welcome reinforcement. Official toleration and Mussolini's skills helped him lead such groups to power in October 1922.

Despite his painful 1915-1917 experiences, Mussolini decided that only war could create the revolution he sought. The Fascist regime Mussolini erected glorified violence. He led Italy into several wars, another world conflict and catastrophe.

Brian R. Sullivan, Independent Scholar

Section Editor: [Marco Mondini](#)

## Notes

1. † For the argument that Mussolini suffered from syphilis, see Sarfatti, Margherita: *My Fault. Mussolini as I Knew Him*, trans. and ed. Brian R. Sullivan, New York 2014, pp. 12-13, 34-37, 94-99, 174-76, 183-85, 289, 299.

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