Italy and Germany 1936 to 1940

After the rebuff Italy experienced after her invasion of Abyssinia, the only choice of allies left for Mussoliniwas Germany and Franco’s Spain.

In July 1936, a civil war broke out in Spain between the Republicans and the Nationalists lead by the army General Franco. The Republicans got support from various groups throughout Europe. Stalin of Russia sent aid and troops though they were referred as “volunteers” so not to offend the League of Nations. This in itself tended to condemn the Republicans in the eyes of many in Europe as Stalin and the communist regime in Russia still terrified many. Mussolini and Hitler sent support and “volunteers” to Franco.

Franco did not believe in parliamentary government. He did not lead a dictatorship in 1936 – in the sense that he did not yet have power in Spain but this was to come. Mussolini saw Italian involvement in Spain as yet another opportunity to expand his power and influence.

Not all Italians were pro-Franco. Some Italians who had moved abroad during Mussolini’s time in power, formed the Garibaldi Brigade. They fought on the Republicans side. At the Battle of Guadalajara, Italians fought Italians – something people in Italy had dreaded. In this battle the Republicans won. Mussolini was furious that his ‘volunteers’ had been beaten but blamed the Garibaldi Brigade. Three months after the defeat at Guadalajara, the leader of the Garibaldi Brigade, Carlos Roselli, was found murdered. Mussolini’s secret agents had done this.

The Spanish Civil War was deeply unpopular in Italy, as many people there could not see what it had to do with them. Also, the Italian involvement was hardly a success.

This apparent alienation in Europe drove Mussolini even further to Hitler. Mussolini referred to Italy and Germany being the most influential countries in Europe and that all the rest of Europe would revolve around this “axis”.

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Hitler and Mussolini

In September 1937, Mussolini visited Germany. Hitler put on a major display of military power for Mussolini and by the end of the visit, Mussolini became convinced that Germany was the power he should ally with. He was sure that an alliance with Germany would lead to Italy becoming more powerful throughout Europe.

As Germany had left the League of Nations in 1933, so Mussolini left the League in 1937 after the League had imposed economic sanctions on Italy for the invasion of Abyssinia.

In 1938, Germany occupied Austria in the Anschluss (forbidden by Versailles). Hitler did not forewarn Mussolini about what he was going to do and this upset Mussolini’s belief that he was an equal partner. However, there was nothing Mussolini could do about the Nazi occupation of Austria and it was clear from 1938 on that Mussolini was definitely the minor partner in the relationship.

However, Mussolini achieved real fame for the part he played in the Munich agreement of September 1938. War seemed a real possibility in the autumn of 1938. The major powers took the opportunity to meet in Munich – an idea suggested by Mussolini. The outcome was the “Piece of Paper” which at the time seemed to everyone to guarantee European peace. Mussolini got the credit for this. After Munich, Mussolini’s reputation was at its peak. To many he seemed to be Europe’s saviour – a reputation that he assumed made him Europe’s premier statesman.

Hitler’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 angered Mussolini because it was clear that Germany was carving out its own empire and Italy was not.

To compensate for this, Mussolini took over Albania on Good Friday 1939. To him, this was a sign of Italy’s expanding power in Europe. King Victor Emmanuel was offered the title of King of Albania. Italian propaganda made a great deal out of this but in reality Albania had been under the influence of Italy for years and this was barely an Italian military success.

Mussolini made it clear to Hitler that he expected Italy to have the Adriatic Sea as a sphere of influence.

In May 1939, the Germans and Italians cemented their friendship with the Pact of Steel. This pact committed both countries to support the other if one of them became involved in a war. The Italian Foreign Minister, Galleazo Ciano, Mussolini’s son-in-law, realised that this pact was potentially very damaging for Italy but Mussolini was more concerned with the prestige of allying with Europe’s most potent power rather than the politics of it.

Mussolini also considered that Hitler’s Non-Aggression Pact with Communist Russia meant that somehow that involved Italy and he saw it as a three-nation treaty though Italy never signed it (nor was Italy even told that it was going to take place).

On September 1st, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. Hitler had informed Mussolini what his plans were and fully expected Italian help. Mussolini, for all his boasts, realised that the Italian Army was not up to fighting in September 1939. Therefore, the Italians did not join in the German attack despite the Pact of Steel.

Italy did join the war on June 10th 1940. Why? He feared that Germany might get all the spoils of war as she was completely successful up to this date. To Mussolini, it was only a matter of time before Britain surrendered and he saw Europe as rich for easy pickings. His nearest rival geographically, France, was on the verge of surrendering. On June 17th, the date France sought surrender terms from Germany, Mussolini ordered an Italian invasion of southern France. The invasion grabbed a small piece of land but the French put up fierce resistance and a full-scale invasion of southern France never occurred.

In September 1940, Italy attacked the British troops based in Egypt. This was the start of a war that was to be disastrous for Italy.

**Mussolini’s Dictatorship**

[Mussolini’s](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/benito_mussolini.htm) road to a dictatorship took much longer than [Hitler’s](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm) in 1933. Hitler was appointed chancellor on January 30th 1933. By April 1st 1933, his power was such that, after the Enabling Act, Hitler could only be seen as the dictator of [Nazi Germany](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm) regardless of Hindenburg’s presidency. [Mussolini’s](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/benito_mussolini.htm) public posturing and boasts did not guarantee loyalty in Italy – hence why it was so important for him to establish a relationship with the[Roman Catholic Church](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/mussolini_roman_catholic.htm). He only gained what could be described as dictatorial powers after the [Lateran Treaty](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/mussolini_roman_catholic.htm)whereby he could guarantee loyalty from those Catholics who may well have not been supporters of the fascist state in Italy.

Mussolini took years to achieve what could be defined as a dictatorship. He achieved some semblance of power after the [March on Rome](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/march_on_rome.htm) in 1922 when he was appointed Prime Minister of Italy. But his government contained a mixture of men with different political beliefs – similar to Hitler’s position in January 1933.

But his time in power almost collapsed after the murder of Matteotti when great anger gripped Italy. If he had been a true dictator in 1922, then such an uproar would never have happened as his enemies and the Italian people in general would have been cowed into submission.

Mussolini started his time in power by buying support from both the working class and the industrial bosses.

The workers were promised an eight hour day while an enquiry into the profits made by the industrialists during[World War One](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm) was dropped. The rich benefited from a reduction in death duties – now, under Mussolini, more of what someone had earned during their lifetime, went to their family and not the government. To get support from the [Roman Catholic Church](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/mussolini_roman_catholic.htm), religious education was made compulsory in all elementary schools.

These policies can be seen as an attempt to ‘buy’ support. As an example, in 1933 Hitler introduced workers holidays into Germany (similar to a bank holiday). This was very popular. He then almost immediately banned trade unions which protected workers rights. Any protests over this were banned as a result of the Enabling Act – Hitler did not bargain with anyone. Mussolini was not in a position whereby he could assert his authority and it is probable that the extent of his dictatorial powers never did equal those acquired by Hitler.

Mussolini had never intended to share power with the liberals who were in the government. He introduced a Fascist Grand Council which would decide policy for Italy without consulting the non-fascists in the government first.

In February 1923, Mussolini and the Fascist Grand Council introduced the **Acerbo Law**. This law changed election results. Now if one party got just **25%** (or more) of the votes cast in an election, they would get **66%**of the seats in parliament.

When it came for Parliament to vote on the Acerbo Law, many politicians agreed to a law that would almost certainly end their political careers if they were not fascists. Why did they do this?

The gallery in the hall in which the politicians voted was filled with armed fascist thugs who had a good view of anybody who spoke out against the law. The threat was clear and real. If you voted for the law, you would be fine. If you did not, then you were certainly in danger from fascist thugs.

Mussolini did say in the spring of 1924 that “a good beating did not hurt anyone.”



**Mussolini as he wished to be seen – in military uniform and a formidable figure**

[Hitler](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm)used very similar tactics when the vote for the Enabling Act was taken at the Kroll Opera House in Berlin – SA thugs gathered outside the Opera House while the SS lined the corridors to the main hall where the voting was to take place. Again, the threat was clear to any politician who was brave enough to protest against the law.

In the March election that followed the Acerbo Law, the Fascist Party got 65% of the votes cast and, therefore, easily got the 2/3rds of parliamentary seats – a clear majority. That people were intimidated into voting for the Fascists or that the Fascists took ballot papers from those who might have voted against Mussolini were brushed aside. The Fascists who were elected were bound to support Mussolini. In this sense, the Acerbo Law was an important move to dictatorship in Italy.

However, unlike Hitler, even after the Acerbo Law was passed, Mussolini still faced open criticism in Italy. The fear element that Hitler had created in [Nazi Germany](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm) by April 1933, was still not in place in Italy.

Blackshirt thugs did beat up critics but that did not stop Giacomo Matteotti from publicly condemning Mussolini. Matteotti was murdered almost certainly by fascists and Mussolini was held responsible for this. There was overwhelming public outrage at the murder as Matteotti was Italy’s leading socialist Member of Parliament. Newspapers and wall posters condemned Mussolini and in the summer of 1924 there was a real possibility that Mussolini would have to resign.

A number of non-fascist politicians walked out of Parliament in protest at the murder. This gesture only served to play into Mussolini’s hands as it got rid of more parliamentary opposition. The protestors – named the Aventine protestors – appealed to the king, Victor Emmanuel, to dismiss Mussolini but the king disliked the protestors more than Mussolini because they lent towards republicanism and he refused to take action.

With this royal support, Mussolini felt strong enough to take on his opponents. Any critics of Mussolini were beaten up and newspapers that were not supportive of the Fascists were shut down. In January 1925, Mussolini said the following:

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| **“I declare….in front of the Italian people……that I alone assume the political, moral and historic responsibility for everything that has happened. Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary.”** |

After surviving the Matteotti affair, Mussolini slowly introduced the classic features of a dictatorship. But this was now nearly three years after the [March on Rome](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/march_on_rome.htm).

In November 1926, all rival political parties and opposition newspapers were banned in Italy.

In 1927, a secret police force was set up called the**OVRA** and it was lead by **Arturo Bocchini**. The death penalty was reintroduced for “serious political offences”. By 1940, the OVRA had arrested 4000 suspects but only 10 people from 1927 to 1940 were ever sentenced to death – much smaller than in [Nazi Germany](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm).

Mussolini also changed Italy’s constitution. He introduced a **diarchy**. This is a system whereby a country has two political heads. In Italy’s case, it was Mussolini and the king, Victor Emmanuel. This system put Mussolini in charge of Italy simply because Victor Emmanuel was not the strongest of men and rarely felt able to assert himself. Though he disliked Mussolini bypassing him at every opportunity, he did little to challenge this.

Mussolini appointed members to the Fascist Grand Council and from 1928, the Grand Council had to be consulted on all constitutional issues. As Mussolini appointed people onto the Council, logic would dictate that those people would do what Mussolini wished them to do.

The electoral system was changed again in 1928. Mussolini said after the change:

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| **“Any possibility of choice is eliminated…..I never dreamed of a chamber like yours.”** |

Workers and employers unions (now known as corporations) were entitled to draw up the names of 1000 people they wanted considered for parliament. The Grand Council selected 400 of these names i.e. people they would approve of. The list of 400 names was presented to the electorate for approval. They could only vote for or against the whole list – not the individual candidates. In 1929, 90% of the electorate voted for the list and in 1934, this figure had increased to 97%. However, all those on the list were Grand Council approved so they were no more than ‘lap dogs’ for Mussolini with no real political power. In 1939, Parliament was simply abolished.

The power of the Fascists was even felt at regional and local level where mayors, who had been very powerful at a local level, were replaced by magistrates appointed in Rome and answerable to Rome alone.

**Italy’s foreign policy**

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Italy’s foreign policy under [Benito Mussolini](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/benito_mussolini.htm) had to be robust to show the world how powerful Italy was under his leadership. As leader of Italy, Mussolini wanted to re-establish the greatness of the Roman Empire.[Mussolini](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/benito_mussolini.htm) believed that conquered foreign territory was the sign of a great nation and a great power – hence the rationale behind the invasion of [Abyssinia](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/aby1.htm).

Mussolini had grievances shared by many Italians after the [Treaty of Versailles](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/treaty_of_versailles.htm) was announced. He believed that Italy should be allowed a sphere of influence in the Mediterranean Sea as he believed that Italy was the most powerful of the Mediterranean countries. Mussolini referred to the Mediterranean Sea as “**Mare Nostrum**” – the same as the Romans had done when they dominated Europe. “Mare Nostrum” translates as “Our Sea”.

However, the nation that effectively dominated the Mediterranean was Great Britain as Britain had strong naval bases in Malta, Gibraltar and Cyprus. Britain also controlled the Suez Canal, along with the French. Therefore, there was a non-Italian presence that undermined Italy’s standing in the Mediterranean. Britain could control the Mediterranean Sea – something Mussolini wished to do.

Mussolini made it clear where his foreign policy would take Italy:

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| **“My objective is simple. I want to make Italy great, respected and feared.”** |

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| **“The Twentieth Century will be a century of Italian power.”** |

 When Mussolini gained power in 1922, Germany was not considered a European power. [Hitler’s](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Nazi%20Germany/Adolf_Hitler.htm) drive for power had yet to come. Italy herself was still recovering from [World War One](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/index.htm). Therefore, Mussolini was not in a great position to demand more from the two main powers of Europe – Britain and France. For this reason, between 1922 and 1933, Italy did little to destabilise Europe. [Fiume](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Europe%201919/league_of_nations.htm) barely concerned anyone and was settled with relative speed. As Italy did not appear to be a threat in the same league as [Russia](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russia_1917_to_1939.htm), her calls for more influence in Yugoslavia did not cause too much concern. All this changed in 1933 – the year Hitler got power in[Germany](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Nazi%20Germany/Nazi%20Germany.htm).

In 1933, Mussolini saw [Hitler](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/adolf_hitler.htm)as a junior partner in the relationship between the two dictators. He also saw Hitler as a potential rival especially as Hitler had made it clear that he wanted a union with Austria – forbidden by [Versailles](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/treaty_of_versailles.htm). Austria had a common border with Italy and such a move by Germany would have alarmed Mussolini – if Hitler was a rival.

Mussolini tried to keep on good terms with France and Britain as well. In June 1933, he invited representatives from France, Germany and Britain to a meeting in Rome. They signed the **Four Power Pact**. This, according to Mussolini, was a sign of the growing power Italy had: these countries came to Rome; Italians did not have to go to a venue out of Europe. Mussolini, so he claimed, was providing Europe with leadership.

In 1934, Mussolini met Hitler in Venice. The meeting did not go well. For some reason, Mussolini would not use his translator and he was not fluent in German. Secondly, Hitler kept quoting “Mein Kampf” which bored Mussolini – or the parts he could understand. It was after this meeting that Mussolini referred to Hitler as “a silly little monkey”. Mussolini met Hitler in military uniform. Hitler, on a rare foreign venture, wore civilian dress which would have been normal for a state’s leader. The impact of military uniform was not lost on Hitler again.

Relationships between Hitler and Mussolini reached a low when Dollfuss, leader of Austria, was murdered by Austrian Nazis.