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Professor's suspense novel reveals secrets of the Fascist Regime

Top 10 Facts You Always Wanted To Know ABOUT MUSSOLINI On the 60th Anniversary of His Execution April 28, 1945

LEAGUE OF SHADOWS

by Ron Terpening

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- **The family man: What would Mussolini do when his children pushed the wart on his neck?**
He would chime “drin-drin,” the Italian for “ding-dong.”
- **The soldier: How was Mussolini wounded in World War I?**
Though a Socialist jailed for his opposition to Italy’s invasion of Libya in 1911, Mussolini broke with the party when he advocated entry into the war. He enrolled but was wounded during a training accident when a dropped grenade exploded. He served in the war and eventually gained the rank of corporal.
- **The fastidious dictator: What did Hitler and Mussolini have in common?**
They were both vegetarians. In addition, Mussolini never drank coffee and rarely wine. He ate spaghetti, but only with butter and cheese. His favorite vegetables were broccoli and zucchini. As for his health, he hated the smell of perfume, which gave him headaches. He did away with the handshake because the Roman greeting was “more hygienic, more tasteful, and wastes less time.”
- **The target: Didn’t anyone ever try to assassinate Mussolini?**
Yes, four people in 1926 alone, including Violet Gibson, a 62-year-old English woman. She fired a revolver from the middle of a crowd, grazing Mussolini’s nose. His response after one attempt? “The bullets pass, Mussolini remains.” Nothing was more useful to justify the necessity of totalitarian measures than assassination attempts.
- **The prisoner: After his fall from power, how was Mussolini rescued from his hotel-prison on top the Gran Sasso d’Italia, the highest mountain in the Appennines?**
Under the direction of General Student of the German Air Force, flying ace Colonel Otto Skorzeny led twelve gliders holding twenty-six SS troops to the mountain resort. The Germans had first seized the senior military police officer in Rome, General Soleti, who tried to commit suicide, and forced him into the lead glider. At 2 o’clock on September 12, 1943, eight gliders landed safely, one crashed, and three missed the landing area. General Soleti jumped out, told the Carabinieri not to shoot, and a light reconnaissance plane landed to transport Mussolini to freedom. Skorzeny went along for the ride and his weight, on takeoff, almost caused a disaster in the thin mountain air. Mussolini called his rescue “the most romantic escape in all history.”
- **The pawn: What did Hitler tell Mussolini at the German general headquarters in Rastenberg near the end of World War II, after over twenty years of Fascist domination?**
“Duce, you are too kindhearted. You’ll never make a dictator.”

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- **What did Churchill, visiting Rome in 1927, have to say about Mussolini?**

“What a man! I have lost my heart! . . . Fascism has rendered a service to the entire world. . . . If I were Italian, I am sure I would have been with you entirely from the beginning of your victorious struggle against the bestial appetites and passion of Leninism.” Mussolini’s wife, Rachele, said that her husband exchanged secret correspondence with Churchill, letters he was carrying with him when he fled Italy. After Benito was executed, the letters disappeared. Rachele claimed that the reason Churchill came to Lake Garda (the area of Mussolini’s final government) for his first vacation after the war, supposedly to paint, was actually to remove any trace of his contacts with Mussolini.

- **What was Mussolini carrying during his final escape attempt, and what happened to it?**

In the final days of the war Mussolini tried to escape to Switzerland. The Duce was carrying a portfolio of documents and three suitcases packed with banknotes and 65 kilos of gold bullion, the total value estimated at the time to be around 90 million dollars. Both the documents and the gold disappeared following his capture. After the war, the communists were blamed. A trial was held in Padua with 35 defendants and almost 400 witnesses, but the men who personally knew about the affair had been killed in mysterious circumstances. Near the end of the trial, one of the jurors committed suicide and a mistrial was declared.

- **Why was Mussolini hung upside down from the rafters of a garage in Milan?**

After Italian partisans captured and shot Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci on April 28, 1945, at Giulino di Mezzegra near Lake Como, their bodies and those of 15 Fascist hierarchs who had been executed at Dongo were taken to Piazzale Loreto in Milan, site of a Fascist atrocity. Nine months earlier, on August 10, 1944, Fascist militia under German orders had taken fifteen antifascists from prison and shot them in the piazza as a reprisal for attacks that killed two Germans. The victims were left exposed on the pavement for 24 hours. In retaliation, Mussolini and his henchmen suffered the same fate, but several, including Mussolini and his mistress, were strung from rafters to keep the crowd from wreaking havoc on the bodies. In the Middle Ages, assassins were executed by being hung upside down.

- **After the last of his three autopsies, what happened to Mussolini’s brain and body?**

Mussolini and Claretta were secretly buried in Musocco Cemetery near Milan in paupers’ graves marked only with the numbers 166 and 167. Two vials of brain tissue and two sets of microslides were sent to the Army Institute of Pathology in Washington DC where neuropathologist Maj. Webb Haymaker found his brain to be “normal.” When Mussolini’s widow, Rachele, learned of this classified information in 1966, she requested and received the return of her husband’s brain matter, which is now in a box next to a marble bust on top his tomb. Neofascists, led by Domenico Leccisi, stole the Duce’s corpse in 1946. After several months, police traced the body to the Franciscan monastery of the Angelicum in Pavia (19 miles south of Milan), where it was found beneath an altar. Authorities had the corpse reinterred in a rural Capuchin monastery at Cerro Maggiore (15 miles northwest of Milan). Finally, in 1957, the Italian government allowed 67-year-old Rachele to bury the body in the family vault at a cemetery near Predappio (60 miles east of Bologna), Benito’s birthplace. Today, Neofascist skinheads guard the tomb.

Want more? Contact Professor Ron Terpening, author of LEAGUE OF SHADOWS, at 520-572-1597 or by email: terp@u.arizona.edu, and visit www.ronterpening.com

— World War II —

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