

Mussolini, Benito

(1883-1945), Italian dictator from 1922 until the end of World War II.

Before World War I, Mussolini was a radical Socialist, and during the war he was anti-German. After the war, he founded the Fascist movement, based on a platform of Italian nationalism and anti-Communism. In October 1922 Mussolini and his followers took control of the Italian government, and by 1925, Mussolini became Italy's dictator, calling himself *Il Duce*---the Leader.

Mussolini was not strongly antisemitic. He had close ties to Italian Jews, including several early founders and members of the Fascist movement. He was also strongly affected by two Jewish women: Angelica Balabanoff, from Russia, and Margherita Sarfatti, an Italian. After Mussolini rose to national power, he reassured Italian Jewry of their safety in an interview with the Chief Rabbi of Rome. From 1922 to 1936, Mussolini summed up his policy towards the Jews in his country with the statement: "The Jewish problem does not exist in Italy." However, off the record, Mussolini verbally attacked Jews and Zionism. During Italy's war against Ethiopia in 1935-1936, Mussolini ranted against "international Jewry." Finally, when Germany and Italy started getting friendly in 1936, Mussolini began rethinking his Jewish policy. At first, he tried to deal with the Jews by forcing them into becoming Fascists; in 1938 he decided to issue racial laws in an attempt to remove Jews from public life in Italy. However, he refused to implement the brutal anti-Jewish measures used by the Germans, and even allowed Jews a safe haven in areas of Europe controlled by Italy.

Until 1943, Hitler allowed Mussolini to shape Italy's racial policy without any interference. However, in September 1943 Mussolini's Fascist Grand Council decided to make peace with the Allies. They overthrew and imprisoned Mussolini. At that point, Hitler jumped in. The Germans rescued Mussolini, and made him the head of a puppet government in the parts of Italy occupied by Germany. Heinrich Himmler was charged with implementing the "final solution" in those areas. At the end of the war, Mussolini tried to escape the country, but was caught and killed by Italian Partisans.