Mussolini was born in Predappio, near Forli, Romagna. He was the son of a blacksmith, and first worked as a teacher and a journalist. In 1902 he travelled to Switzerland, where he developed revolutionary beliefs, and in 1904 he returned to Italy. After a brief period of imprisonment for his political activities, he edited a socialist publication from Trento (which was then in Austria) and in 1912 became editor of the influential nationalist newspaper Avanti. He broke with the socialists when he refused to support their neutral stance in World War I, and founded Il Popolo d'Italia to publicize his belief that only by supporting the Allies could Italy retrieve the disputed Austrian territories.

Mussolini fought in World War I and was injured. In 1919 he founded the Fasci di Combattimento (Fascist Movement), ostensibly to serve the interests of neglected ex-servicemen, but in reality to promote the extreme form of nationalism to which he was now committed. The groups of fascist Blackshirts whose creation he encouraged were turned to his advantage against the Communists, and in 1921 he exploited his growing personal popularity to win election to the Chamber of Deputies; the following year his Blackshirts marched on Rome. He presented himself as the only man capable of restoring order to a country that seemed to be slipping ever more rapidly into political chaos. In October 1922 he was asked by Victor Emmanuel III to form a government.

In 1925 he took the title Il Duce ("the leader"). Using a mixture of intimidation, patronage and propaganda, he was able to turn Italy into a totalitarian state by 1929. Despite his early aggression over Corfu and his fierce nationalism, his foreign policy was not marked by overt expansionism or aggression until the mid-1930s. However, in 1935 he launched the Conquest of Abyssinia which was followed by large-scale intervention in the Spanish Civil War on the side of General Franco. During this period he moved increasingly towards co-operation with Hitler, which culminated in the 1939 politico-military Pact of Steel (signed by Galeazzo Ciano and Joachim von Ribbentrop) and eventually in the invasion of France in 1940. In 1939 Mussolini annexed Albania but the following year he failed to seize Greece. The arrival of German troops to assist in the conquest of Greece signalled the beginning of his dependence on Hitler, and from then on his actions were dictated largely by the needs of Berlin.

Dissatisfaction with this policy and a realization of the likely victory of the Allies persuaded many of his supporters to oppose him. After the allied landings in Sicily in 1942, even Mussolini's own Fascist Council turned on him, and he had to be rescued by German paratroops and taken to northern Italy in a doomed attempt to re-establish his authority. When that failed, he tried to flee the country with his mistress disguised as a German soldier, but was caught and unmasked by a member of the Italian resistance and summarily executed. His corpse was mutilated by the people after it was hung upside down in a public square in Como.

A translation of his Autobiography was published in 1928, and memoirs of his wife, Rachele, My Life

"If I advance, follow me. If I retreat, kill me. If I die, avenge me."

- Said to senior officials after an attempt on his life, 6 April 1926.
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