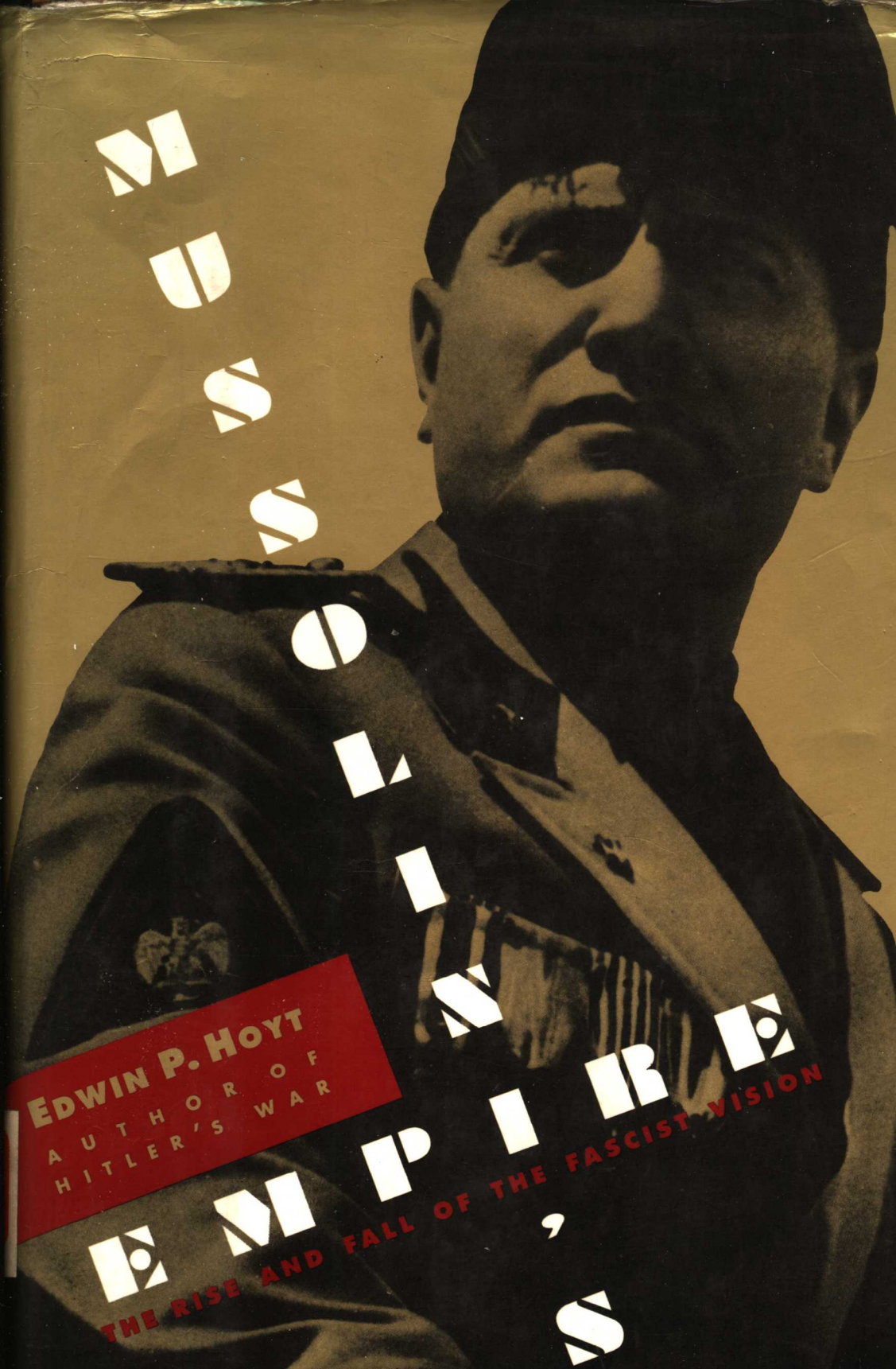
MUSSOLINI'S EMPIRE
THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FASCIST VISION
EDWIN P. HOYT
AUTHOR OF HITLER'S WAR

Mussolini's Empire

The Rise and Fall of the Fascist Vision

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This book is for Merrill and Donna Needham,
who sheltered me in a time of need.

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Introduction

This is the story of one of the most powerful and interesting men of the twentieth century: Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini, son of an Italian peasant blacksmith, radical, womanizer, politician, dictator, and, finally, political philosopher. The mark he left on the century was profound; he was the inventor of a totalitarian political system that brought Italy out of poverty and depression to a position of world leadership. His fascism was a model for Adolf Hitler and General Francisco Franco of Spain. Hitler was in awe of him all his life, even after Mussolini's dreadful error of dragging Italy into a war that the Italian people neither wanted nor were capable of fighting. If fascism was the bête noir of the Western democracies in the late 1930s and 1940s, that fact was ignored in the 1920s when such men as Winston Churchill came to pay their respects to Mussolini. Churchill said that if he had been an Italian in these years, he would have been a Fascist. Even Mahatma Gandhi called him "one of the great statesmen of all time."

From the beginning Mussolini was ruthless in his political life. He began as a rebel against his society, with an overweening hatred of the rich and powerful. He joined the socialist movement and rose high in its ranks. But he then discarded socialism as an Italian nationalist, because the Socialists opposed Italy's entry into World War I, and Mussolini believed the only way Italy could emerge as a power was to fight and help the Western allies win the war. He formed his own political party, which was dedicated to state socialism, through which he hoped to level income and wealth in Italy. He never cared for wealth; power was his God, and when he achieved it, his worst sin was to abuse it and create a dictatorship that developed into the one-man rule over a

nation of forty million people. Yet, although he was the son of an atheist, he was deeply religious at times and, on behalf of the people of Italy, healed a long-standing breach between the Church of Rome and the government of Italy. He came to power in a bloodless coup d'état occasioned by the collapse of representative government in Italy. But all during his twenty-one years of leadership of Italy, he ruled within the limits of the Italian Constitution; his extraordinary powers were given to him and repeatedly endorsed by the King, to whom he reported weekly.

Mussolini began his political life with great respect for France and England, Italy's allies of World War I, but he became disillusioned and was driven from them by their failure to respond to the aspirations of Italy, their greed in cutting up Europe and Africa, and their harsh dealing with Germany in the Treaty of Versailles. Italy had been induced to join the war on the side of the Western democracies by promises of an empire, which were forgotten when the peace was made. Britain and France trampled Germany in the dirt and then expressed surprise in the 1930s when Hitler was brought to power by a resentful people. Once Hitler achieved power he set out to right the wrongs of Versailles, but then he went much further. It was Mussolini who singlehandedly stopped him in 1934, when the French and British refused to act to prevent the rape of Austria. At that time, Mussolini proposed an equal alliance of all the major powers of Europe, including Germany, but the plan was torpedoed by the arrogance of France and Britain, and Mussolini was shoved by them into the arms of a Hitler he never liked.

His character was quixotic in the extreme. He could be generous, as when he would give all the money in his pocket to an unfortunate he met on the street. "I have been hungry," he said sometimes. "I know the look of a hungry man when I see one." But he could also send his best friends to prison for failing to honor his fascist principles; it is certain that in the early years of his power (1923–24) he established a *cheka*, "the squadraccia of the Viminale," a small terrorist group of high-level Fascists who operated from the building of the Ministry of Interior to frighten Mussolini's enemies, and to punish them physically. This group administered beatings, dosed its victims with castor oil, and committed acts of vandalism. One of its most publicized adventures was to invade and vandalize the home of former Prime Minister Francesco Nitti. The group was also responsible for the death of Socialist Deputy Giacomo Matteotti, who was kidnapped and killed in

1924, providing the most celebrated case ever publicized against Mussolini's method of ruling. But what is almost never mentioned in judgment is how little of this violence there was in comparison with other dictatorial and oligarchic governments.

Mussolini's twenty-one-year rule was marked infrequently by acts of violence, much less often than the regimes of Stalin, Hitler, or Generalissimo Franco. As dictators went, Mussolini was *very humane,* and there was far less brutality in Italy than in Soviet Russia, Germany, or Spain. This can be attributed in part to the nature of the Italian people, long suffering and willing to live under whatever establishment is in control. Despite his intense radicalism, Mussolini was that way himself, and even at the height of his power he communicated to the Italian people that what he was doing, he was doing for Italy. At the end he sacrificed himself for Italy, knowing full well that his Salò Republic was a charade, but knowing better than anyone else that if he did not conform to Hitler's wishes, the wrath of Germany would descend on his Italian people.

Another reason for his humanness was that for much of his political regime, the majority of the Italian people were solidly behind him: first, because of their disgust with the inanity of their parliamentary democracy, and, second, because his government brought Italy out of the depths and gave her factories that ran, trains that met their schedules, and better living conditions. All of this came to an end when Mussolini forced Italy into World War II. Thereafter, his popularity descended steadily and rapidly, as millions of Italians saw their sons killed or captured by the enemy. One whole Italian army, sent to fight in Russia, simply disappeared, ground up in the battle of Stalingrad; virtually none of the survivors ever reached home again.

As a political figure Mussolini combined great sagacity with acts of complete blindness. His success was due to his early realization that the parliamentary democracy of Italy had run its course and was incapable of governing. His great mistake was to force Italy into World War II when it was totally unnecessary for Italy's survival or prosperity and served only to maintain his own illusion of creating a new Roman Empire. Some called him nothing but a ham actor, and the portrayal of him on the American screen by comedian Jack Oakie in the movie *The Great Dictator* has more than a grain of truth. He was a strutting, vain, and sometimes laughable creature. But even in his playacting as leader there was method. He recognized in his audience, the Italian people, a love for the dramatic. The newsreels were full of him, threshing grain

in the field. But, through just such performances, the "Battle of the Wheat" was won, and Italy's production increased enormously.

Personally he was very brave, although many in the end, including his daughter Edda, called him a coward. His abandonment of Count Galeazzo Ciano to the vengeance of the Germans can be put down to cowardice, but his own estimate was that he was serving the greater good of Italy, which at that moment was supine at the feet of Hitler. The German dictator had already threatened to destroy industrial north Italy if Mussolini refused to form the Salò Republic, and Mussolini knew Hitler was capable of turning his V-2 missiles on Milan, Turin, and Genoa, as Hitler intimated he would do.

Mussolini never had any illusions about himself or the Italian people. Although for a time he thought he could make Legionaries out of his soldiers, he was soon convinced that his Italians were not good cannon fodder. He called them "a nation of sheep," but his answer was that one has to drive sheep. In his early years, he was a real leader and never lost his gift for the spectacular oration. He communicated his hope for Roman greatness to his people and had them thinking in the 1930s that Italy was the leader of nations. In a way there was substance to the claim; for example, Italo Balbo, an aviator and Minister of Air, impressed the world with his development of air routes and long-distance flights, paving the way for commercial air operations. The Italian merchant navy was one of the best in the world.

Mussolini's personal characteristics—his forcefulness, and a "little-boy" air—made him enormously attractive to women, and his affairs of the heart were almost countless. Claretta Petacci, the mistress who followed him and died with him before the firing squad of the partisans, complained about his unfaithfulness to her. And his wife Rachele suffered through Clara and a dozen other mistresses of whom she was aware (in the end she pleaded with him to flee and save himself, which he refused to do).

As far as the outer world is concerned, Mussolini's prime claim to greatness occurred in 1933 and 1934 when he saw a Germany emerging from the ashes of World War I. Despite a vengeful and selfish France and a confused Britain, Mussolini attempted to forge a four-power European alliance that would effectively maintain the peace and curb Hitler's ambitions. At the time Hitler welcomed the pact, but it was so mangled and manipulated by the British and French, it became meaningless even before it was signed. This was really a last chance to safeguard the peace by negotiation. That year, Hitler attempted a coup d'état to take over Austria and would have succeeded had not Mussolini

sent forty thousand troops to the Brenner Pass to warn Germany. Hitler then pulled back, but two years later he tried his muscles again, this time marching into the demilitarized Rhineland. Italy had no direct stake there and no way of interfering, and the French simply lay down and let the Germans walk in. Hitler later admitted that had they moved a muscle he would have drawn back.

By 1936 Mussolini had assessed the governments of Europe and found no strength in France or England. After their abortive and timid attempts to interfere in Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia, he had no further affection for them, and little respect. As he saw the countries lining up, he found no more virtue in Western capitalism than he ever had. So he lined up with the other "have not" nations: Japan and Germany.

Mussolini played one other role in the attempt to secure the peace of Europe, in 1938. Hitler was poised to attack Czechoslovakia. France was so morally corrupt she could not act, and Britain was too divided to take strong action, so the British appealed to Mussolini to intervene with Hitler, which he did, stopping the wheels of the war machine, and giving the Western Allies another chance for peace. At Hitler's request, Mussolini managed the Munich Conference. He had no stake in the outcome and he cannot be blamed for the failure of the Western powers to stand up to Hitler. But seeing the performance of Britain and France, and the successes of Germany and Japan, he felt that he was about to be isolated by an unfriendly West; thus, he went into the alliance with Germany in the spring of 1939 that became the Tripartite Pact. The rest is the history of World War II.

At the end, having become a political philosopher, Mussolini knew that fascism had failed and why: His excesses had deprived the movement of its virility and the party's excesses had driven it to corruption, which cost fascism the faith of the people. He saw the new Western Allies, America and Britain, planning to remake the world once again and predicted their clash with Stalin. His only error was one of degree; he expected a third world war, not knowing that the second war had so destroyed Britain's virility that the clash would end up being a standoff between the Russians and the Americans. He had none of the myopia about a "brave new world" that afflicted most other countries.

Toward the end Mussolini assessed himself in an interview with the wife of the German press attaché at Lake Garda. He told her that he realized that he should have curbed his ambitions after establishing his empire in Africa and strengthening it with the addition of Albania; that he should have foresworn ambition and devoted himself to

strengthening his government and bringing about the social changes he wanted to equalize incomes and social status of all Italy. But, he asked in a burst of self-revelation, did anyone ever know of a dictator in history who could practice moderation?

His last two years were spent in full realization that he had failed Italy, and that he had failed in his own attempts to save the Italian people from the wrath of Adolf Hitler. But really, in this, he succeeded as well as any man could have by sacrificing himself and his ego for the Italy that he had tried to make into something she was not and did not want to be. In essence, *Mussolini's Empire* is the story of an intelligent and charismatic leader gone wrong. He deserves a better rating by history than he has yet been given in the West. Perhaps in the twenty-first century, the patina worn from the age of the British Empire and the age of America, he will receive a new consideration for his real attempt to preserve the peace and stability of Europe in the 1930s.

Edwin P. Hoyt
Tokyo, 1993

PART I

The Formative Years

CHAPTER 1

Boy of Predappio

In the summer of 1883 in the hamlet of Varano de Costa, above the village of Dovia in the county of Predappio in Romagna in northeast Italy, stood an old stone palazzo. It was three stories tall and still bore a certain faded elegance with its mossy walls and balustraded staircase. Here, on the afternoon of July 29, a male child was born to Alessandro Mussolini and his wife Rosa. Like everything else about this child, and later this man, the circumstances of the family are surrounded in conflict and nothing is as it appears on the surface.

The Mussolinis were so different from each other in virtually every way that it seems almost unbelievable that their marriage survived. Rosa's life was not an unhappy one. She was a devout Roman Catholic and a primary school teacher. Her father had been the Forlì veterinary surgeon, and so she grew up in more than modest circumstances. She studied at the Forlì schools and was given a diploma qualifying her to teach the first three grades of elementary school. While teaching at Dovia, a nearby village, she met Alessandro and married him in 1882 over the objections of her parents.

Alessandro was a child of a once-prominent Romagna family that had fallen on hard times. Many years later his son, then dictator of Italy, unearthed a family coat of arms—six black figures in a yellow field—symbols of valor, courage, and force, all qualities that Mussolini lived by.

In the thirteenth century Giovanni Mussolini had ruled Bologna, but later the family was exiled to Argelato and afterward scattered over northern Italy. Alessandro's branch of the family became farmers in Predappio and he was trained as a blacksmith, which is how he earned

his living in that principally farming community. Rural Romagna was a center of radical republicanism, a political philosophy that was in keeping with the people's rugged individualism and opposition to the established order. "When they start a new town in Romagna they first throw up a monument to Garibaldi and then build a church, because there is no fun in a civil funeral unless it spites the parish priest. The whole history of the province is concerned with spite of this kind." So wrote a nineteenth-century Italian critic about these nonconforming northerners.

Alessandro Mussolini had little education but did have a burning desire to change the world. In the cellar of the palazzo under his blacksmith shop was buried his most cherished possession, a red silk flag of the international socialist revolution. Above the nuptial bed hung a likeness of Giuseppi Garibaldi, the leader in the movement for Italian unification and independence. Next to it Rosa had hung a portrait of the Virgin Mary. Their child was named Benito Amilcare Andrea in honor of his father's hero Benito Juarez, the Mexican revolutionary, and two revolutionary Italian Socialists, Amilcare Cipriani and Andrea Costa. Benito's younger brother was named for Arnaldo de Brescia, a local hero in the revolutionary struggle with the pope.

As small children, the Mussolinis were brought up in the church, a concession of the atheist Alessandro to his religious wife. Once Benito grumbled: "With so many prayers we'll go to heaven, even if we never get on our knees again in our lives." But as Alessandro had hoped, as soon as Benito was able he abandoned religion for socialist politics. In early childhood the boys had been steeped in socialism by their father and his friends. Alessandro's socialism was essentially benign: "Science illuminating the world, reason mastering faith; free thought overthrowing prejudice; free agreement among men to live a truly civilized life; true justice enthroned on earth; a sublime harmony of concept, thought and action." He established a local branch of the Socialist International. He drafted socialist manifestoes, wrote articles in the socialist magazines, attacked the bourgeoisie and the Catholic clergy, and took an active part in local government and politics. His son was brought up to be a Socialist and at an early age said he was. However, that was illusory, for Mussolini was a revolutionary, not a Socialist. He used the Socialists only as long as it benefited him, then abandoned them, founded his own revolutionary movement, and led Italy in his own way.

In later years Mussolini could say, although he never would, that he was born in a palace. But that, too, was illusory, for the Mussolinis

were dirt-poor and rented three rooms and the blacksmith shop in the building. The apartment housed the family, which included Benito's brother Arnaldo and sister Edvige and Rosa's mother. The boys shared a straw pallet in the kitchen of the apartment. Their noon meal was bread and vegetable soup, ladled out of the big stoneware tureen, and supper was salad. On Sundays the family ate meat, usually a cheap cut of boiled mutton.

As a baby, Benito was so slow to speak that his parents worried and took him to the local doctor. Looking at the stubborn face of the child, he comforted them by saying, "He will speak when he wants to. Perhaps then you will find that he will talk too much."

Benito's early memories were of playing on the stone steps of the palazzo. In the cold winter weather of the Apennine hill country he ran and skipped to keep warm. As soon as he was able, his mother taught him the alphabet, which he recalled as "my first practice in worldly affairs." He was enrolled in her school, where he often created chaos by pinching the other children and pulling the girls' hair. His own memory is of growing up a restless and unruly child. By the time he was eight years old he was an accomplished sneak thief, preying on the neighbors' gardens and orchards. He was always a loner; sometimes he would retire to the belfry of the church to read for hours. But, even as a boy, he was subject to fits of compassion. One day he saw an old neighbor named Filippino, sweating over his garden with a spade. He took the spade and dug the garden for the old man, who watched as he sat puffing on his pipe.

His one friend was his much gentler brother Arnaldo. They walked to school in Predappio, two miles away. There Benito usually got into fights with the other boys and was often beaten, but never beaten down. Arnaldo would sponge away the mud and try to hide the bruises that so upset their mother. Benito grew up with a fierce independence and hatred for wealth, but would become a lavish spender and lover of opulence. He wrote in his autobiography, "I detest those who live like parasites, sucking away at the edges of social struggles. I hate men who grow rich in politics."

He loved struggle for its own sake. Once, as a small child, an older boy took away his tiny wooden cart and Benito ran crying to his father. Alessandro gave him no sympathy. "Men have to defend themselves—not ask for pity," he said. "Don't come back to me until you've licked him." So Benito sharpened a flint rock, grasped it in his right fist, and attacked his enemy, leaving him bloody and beaten. This love of com-