

Mussolini &

Their Little-Known Personal Correspondence Before—

Here is a shocker: Winston Churchill¹ carried on personal correspondence with his “deadly enemy,” Benito Mussolini, not only before but during World War II. More extraordinary still, just wait till you learn the contents of those remarkable letters.

BY MARC ROLAND

Although still a popular controversy in Italy and, to a lesser degree, Britain and the United States, personal correspondence Winston Churchill carried on with Benito Mussolini before and during World War II is virtually unknown to the rest of the outside world. While such communication between two international statesmen who, publicly at any rate, were deadly enemies may not seem all that significant or even extraordinary, the supposed content of their letters makes them potentially significant in the extreme.

The letters are said to have revealed in part that during May 1940, shortly after he became prime minister, Churchill tried to buy Italy’s co-belligerence against Hitler by bribing her with the territories of other peoples, some of whom—like France and Greece—were allied with Great Britain. The following October, he allegedly wrote to Mussolini requesting personal protection from Axis leaders in the event of Britain’s surrender.

Before year’s end, Churchill proposed in another letter to



In 1952 Luigi Carissimi-Priori was offered 100,000 pounds by British sources for photocopies of correspondence between Mussolini (left) and Churchill (right).

the Duce that Britain and Italy conclude an armistice in North Africa, then join Finland for an invasion of the Soviet Union.

Of all allegations made for the contents of Mussolini’s papers, Churchill’s suggestion that Britain and Italy conclude a peace for the specific purpose of jointly invading the Soviet Union is at once the most shocking and best documented. It was verified by a number of observers and participants, including: an officer in the elite Decima Flottiglia MAS, Sergio Nesi; his superior, Valerio Borghese, the “Black Prince” himself; Pietro Carradori, the Duce’s or-

Churchill

**“History shall be kind to me, because I intend to write it.”
—Winston Churchill**

and During—World War II

derly; and other, credible eyewitnesses. They testified that World War II’s strangest and most secret gathering took place on November 16, 1944, at Montorfano, the Decima base near the shores of Lombardy’s beautiful Lake Iseo, not far from the city of Bergamo.

Inside the headquarters building, surrounded and secured by a unit of heavily armed Decima sailors, Commander Borghese chaired a meeting attended by representatives of the Italian Social Republic (RSI) government (Francesco Maria Barracu), army (Gen. Giuseppe Violante) and Ministry of the Navy (Capt. Fausto Sestini). The German ambassador to Italy, Rudolf Rahn, appeared with *Obergruppenfuehrer SS* Karl Wolff, in charge of all German forces in Italy and a close confidant of Hitler himself.

Across the table from these high-ranking Axis leaders sat plenipotentiaries for U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the head of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, Gen. Dwight David Eisenhower. Beside them were senior British army officers representing Marshal Bernard Montgomery and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill, who had called the covert meeting to discuss his four-point proposal:

- Official British-U.S. recognition of the RSI and an immediate armistice between all Axis and Allied states;
- Participation of the U.S. Fifth Army and British Eighth Army on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union;
- The cooperation of Wehrmacht troops in Italy transferring Allied forces to the fighting in Russia;
- Inclusion of the Italian divisions Littorio, Monterose, San Marco and Italia, together with the Decima MAS, in



Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) was the founder of a new political movement called “Fascism.” In 1932 he wrote an entry for *The Italian Encyclopedia* on the definition of Fascism: “[T]he Fascist accepts life and loves it . . . he . . . conceives of life as duty and struggle and conquest, but above all for others—those who are at hand and those who are far distant, contemporaries and those who will come after. . . . Fascism [is] the complete opposite of . . . Marxian Socialism. . . . Fascism, now and always, believes in holiness and in heroism . . . in actions influenced by no economic motive. . . . And above all, Fascism denies that class-war can be the preponderant force in the transformation of society. . . . After Socialism, Fascism combats the whole complex system of democratic ideology, and repudiates it. . . .”

the Russian campaign.

After having heard the proposal translated, Commander Borghese asked the Allied representatives why Italy's Co-Belligerent Government of the south had been left out of the proposal. The British replied that the post-Badoglio Cabinet was itself largely Communist, and composed of untrustworthy schemers more interested in plunder and bloody vendettas than civil order. All four RSI officers welcomed a unified defense of Western civilization, as did the Germans, who promised they would urge the Fuehrer to seriously examine the plan put forth by the prime minister.

The Americans, on the contrary, refused to even consider Churchill's suggestions, which were categorically spurned by both U.S. representatives. Their unalterable rejection caused the meeting to be broken up without any further discussion of an Anglo-American alliance with the Axis powers against the USSR.

Churchill arranged another, almost identical meeting with different and, hopefully, less adamant plenipotentiaries for Roosevelt and Eisenhower at Porto Ceresio, a small *comune* or municipality on Lake Lugano bordering Switzerland. Results were identical to the Lake Iseo conference, however, and no further attempts were made to forge an alliance of enemies against Stalin.

During a telephone conversation between Mussolini and his German ally late in the war, Hitler wondered about the British: "Aren't they aware of the Russian colossus?"

"Actually," the Duce replied, "Churchill had forecasted that danger many years ago. But, Fuehrer, you are aware of this."

"Yes, I know," Hitler said, dejectedly. "I know all the details."²

What were they? "Details" of Lake Iseo's meeting that came to nothing just six days before their telephone conversation of November 22? In any case, Mussolini made a direct reference to Churchill's Allies-Axis proposals when he wrote to Marshal Graziani on January 9, 1945. "At this



WHERE WAS MUSSOLINI DURING THE MEETING HELD AT LAKE ISEO?

BENITO MUSSOLINI was absent from the covert Italo-Allied meetings for the same reason Churchill kept his distance: to allow their delegates to sort out all possibilities for an armistice and military cooperation without the personal pressure of either personality, and to preserve the secrecy of the proceedings. The Duce and the prime minister would be called upon to appear only after mutual agreements had already been authorized conjointly by the Italians, British and Americans.

time, I feel it is extremely important to put these papers in a safe place," referring to his high-level correspondence, "first of all, the

exchange of letters and the *agreements* [emphasis added] with Churchill."³

The renowned American historian Peter Tompkins, who was an agent of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services in Rome during the war, wondered: "Why must an agreement between Churchill and Mussolini, which had been reached during the meetings at Porto Ceresio and on Lake Iseo, be so radically erased as to require the killings of Mussolini and Claretta Petacci? Churchill's reputation would have been seriously damaged had it become known that he was plotting with the Duce of Fascism and a few Nazi generals in Italy in order to have Italian and German forces join the Western Allies to fight the USSR together. . . ."⁴ Churchill was, after all, to stand for reelection in 1951.

Mussolini supposedly preserved additional correspondence with Churchill's predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, who is believed to have written similar sentiments he expressed to U.S. Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, in early 1941, to the effect that Britain would have never gone to war against Germany "without the urging of William C. Bullitt," Franklin D. Roosevelt's representative in Europe immediately prior to the start of World War II, "and the American Jews." In fact, Chamberlain's statement was quoted by James Forrestal in his memoirs as the U.S. secretary of the Navy.⁵

Two or three letters from Roosevelt himself allegedly described the American president's desire to have the British empire in Africa replaced "by Italy's more humane form of imperialism."⁶ Other topics discussed in the correspondence, mostly by Churchill, included 1938's Munich Crisis, Italy's entry into the war, and her 1940 invasion of Greece—all portrayed in language radically at odds with official Allied positions publicly taken on these historical events.

Additional and, in Mussolini's view, yet more damaging, disclosures appeared in the letters. "Churchill knows I have

ammunition,” he told his armed forces chief of staff, Gen. Rudolfo Graziani, in February 1945, and referred to the prime minister’s October 1940 letter as “one he would regret. This correspondence is from heads of states, representing delicate and explosive documents.” Two months later, he stated that “these documents are worth even more than if we had won the war.”⁷ If so, it is difficult to believe that a few political indiscretions on Churchill’s part could have been so valuable.

The letters and documents must have contained something more “explosive,” and Mussolini did tell his closest confidants that they featured certain “agreements” he made with the Allies that would prove immensely surprising to a world audience. Their contents have never been disclosed, but only surmised, based on hardly more than a few hints from Mussolini and a few other sources. Moreover, no references to his end of the correspondence survive. How he might have responded to the alleged letters from Churchill, Chamberlain and Roosevelt is unknown.

Was the Duce only bluffing, as part of a vain effort to buoy up the flagging morale of his followers in the last days of the RSI? Or did he actually possess highly incriminating evidence with drastic repercussions for the postwar world? Mainstream historians insist Churchill wrote to Mussolini on only one occasion, in a public telegram just before the start of hostilities, pleading with him to turn away from war. As the price for Italy’s alliance against Germany, as supposedly cited in Mussolini’s secret documents, Churchill was willing not only to give up Malta and Gibraltar, but to sell off the territories of foreign peoples, even those of his own allies, with or without their consent; specifically, France’s Savoy, Tunisia and Nice, plus Yugoslavia and Greece, as part of the bargain.

In Churchill’s own published memoirs, no mention is made of any friendly correspondence with the Italian dictator, portrayed instead as the evil antithesis of everything decent and civilized. Yet, Churchill was an outspoken admirer of his alleged nemesis since 1922, after the Fascists came to power in their “March on Rome.” He was quoted by all leading British newspapers at the time as having said, “If I were an Italian, I would proudly wear a black shirt. I am all for Fascism in Italy.”⁸

Shortly thereafter, he prepared excerpts from his World War I history for publication in Mussolini’s own newspaper, *Il Popolo di Italia*, which ran 16 installments throughout



What Was *Decima Flottiglia MAS*?

The most advanced naval unit of its kind during World War II was the “10th Assault Vehicle Flotilla,” Fascist Italy’s *Decima Flottiglia MAS*—the *Decima Flottiglia Mezzi d’Assalto*, or X^a MAS. Comparable to the U.S. Navy SEALs, this was an elite corps equipped with midget submarines operated by frogmen. They achieved extraordinary success against the Western Allies in the Mediterranean theater from Gibraltar to Suez, between 1940 and 1945, sinking in excess of 130,000 gross register tons of enemy vessels, including more than 20 merchant ships.

The most outstanding single operation undertaken by X^a MAS sailors was their sinking of the British battleships *HMS Valiant* and *HMS Queen Elizabeth*, plus a Norwegian tanker, the *Sagona* (the destroyer *HMS Jervis* was also severely damaged) inside the Royal Navy’s fleet headquarters at Alexandria on December 31, 1941.

In September 1943, after Benito Mussolini’s rescue from captivity and his establishment of the Italian Social Republic—the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*—most 10th Assault Vehicle Flotilla veterans joined him in the north, where they saw extensive action against Communist partisans until the end of the war.

Far fewer X^a MAS men who sided with the puppet Allied Italian Co-Belligerent Government (*Governo Italiano Cobelligerante*; ICBG) of Pietro Badoglio were drafted into the ICBG navy’s assault unit, the *Mariassalto*, from which most defected when ordered to support Tito’s Communist takeover of Italian holdings in Yugoslavia.

Above, a two-man submersible craft like that used by the Italian *Decima Flottiglia* to attack Allied vessels.

1927. Even after the Ethiopian War, Churchill continued to publicly refer to Mussolini as “a Roman genius.”⁹

There is no doubt that correspondence between the two men did indeed go on throughout the war. A German report for September 25, 1943 stated that Gestapo agents recovered literally dozens of Churchill’s communications with Mussolini, even long after the war began, all of them expressing admiration for Italian Fascism, and hopes for cooperation with the British empire. Such correspondence no doubt did exist, because Mussolini showed it to virtually everyone in his immediate circle—literally hundreds of persons—including his wife, Rachele. She responded to questioning by British historian, David Irving, that she saw the files containing the Churchill letters, but refused to comment on their contents.¹⁰

For his 1994 book on the controversy, *Careggio segreto*, “The Secret Correspondence,” investigator Fabio Andriola traced 30 persons who personally saw the communications from Churchill, some of them dated as late as the winter of 1944-45.¹¹ Among those eyewitnesses was C.A. Biggin, the Salo Republic’s minister of education, and Gen. Graziani, both of whom testified to the documents’ existence after the war. Andriola’s investigation was preceded by a number of Italy’s leading historical researchers, among them, Giorgio Cavalleri, whose *Ombre sul Lago*, or “Shadows on the Lake,” reproduced the Duce’s printed command to the head of the republic’s film department, ordering him to photocopy “certain letters of top priority.”¹²

As part of his order, he asked if the filmmaker had anyone in his agency who was fluent in English. But Mussolini really needed more than a translator, because he wanted someone with connections in the British government.

In January 1945, he secretly summoned John Amery to join him at his Milan headquarters. Until then, the 33-year-old expatriate was busy organizing the British Free Corps, a unit of fellow countrymen recruited from German prisoner-of-war camps to fight as volunteers under the *Waffen-SS* on the eastern front against the Soviets. Previously, Amery made a series of broadcasts on Berlin Radio condemning the Western Allies for supporting Communist Russia, earlier serving the Nationalist cause in the Spanish Civil War, when he was awarded a medal of honor by the Italians.

More important to Mussolini at the moment, John was the son of Leopold Charles Maurice Stennett Amery, then a high-ranking member in Churchill’s Cabinet and one of the most influential politicians in Britain. Father and son were not estranged, despite their polar opposite destinies and ideologies, and it was through John that Mussolini hoped to personally liaison with Leopold and the British government, either for the presentation of his “explosive documents,” or the guarantee of a public trial.

While he endeavored to contact the British authorities under the very noses of the German SS, John Amery made public speeches and radio broadcasts for the Duce until the end of the war. How successful Mussolini was in these covert efforts is not known, but the fate of his young go-between indicates perhaps something about them. After the RSI’s collapse, John Amery was arrested by Communist partisans, who turned him over to the British. Arraigned on

charges of treason, he was condemned to death in record time—eight minutes after appearing in front of the bench, in what seems to have been an official attempt at permanently silencing him before he could give testimony potentially embarrassing or even harmful to the powers that be.

But John Amery was not the only person aware of Mussolini’s papers to have been promptly silenced. Robert

L. Miller, in his foreword to *Mussolini, The Secrets of His Death*, writes that more than 500 northern Italians who knew at least something about the documents in various ways were killed at war’s end.¹³ Among the victims was Claretta Petacci herself, shot to death by a British agent, according to the local partisan commander in charge of her and Mussolini after their arrest, Bruno Giovanni Lonati.

In April 1945, Mussolini summoned a carpenter to make three watertight cabinets specifically for storing photocopies of the Churchill letters and other documents he considered very valuable. One set was presented to his wife, Rachele, and another sent ahead to Switzerland, where a British government contact he knew near Basel awaited their delivery. He kept one set, along with the originals, next to his own person. In addition to these cabinets filled with sensitive correspondence was another, separate collection of related documents kept in large, leather bags and transported in an Alfa-Romeo truck, as part of Mussolini’s small

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convoy heading for the Swiss border.

Better than making a last stand for Fascism and going out in a blaze of glory might be his exposure of the Churchill correspondence, which, he deeply believed, would vindicate himself before history. Retreating SS officers warned him repeatedly against his change of plans, arguing that he would never make it to Switzerland, because of widespread partisan activity in northern Italy. They nevertheless provided him with a small escort, after he proved obdurate to their pleas for reason. Before getting under way, he collared Franz Spogeler, an SS captain and personal friend, to whom he entrusted a last letter, written on April 23, to Churchill, asking: “Can I count on you to get this to him?”

“All I can promise is that I shall try,” said Spogeler, and he made his way to the British occupation forces in southern Germany with the confidential missive. In it, Mussolini requested an opportunity to defend himself in an international court of law, to which he would voluntarily entrust his fate, and ended with a pointed but non-specific reference to “documents you will no doubt find interesting and useful.”¹⁴

In 1944, after learning of the Allies’ determination to put the Axis leaders on trial for “crimes against humanity,” he stated publicly, “I declare that I, and I alone, assume the political, moral and historical responsibility for all that has happened. If Fascism has been a criminal association, the responsibility has been mine.”¹⁵ This same sentiment, if not

Communist partisans in Italy killed many a Christian. Fr. Don Umberto Pessina was murdered in what became known as the “triangle of death”—a zone around the cities of Reggio Emilia, Ferrara and Modena. In this zone the Reds slaughtered 21 Christians, including a seminarian, age 16, Rolando Rivi, kidnapped and murdered on April 13, 1945, just because he was wearing a cassock. The boy, forced to dig his own grave, was shot in the head by Giuseppe Corghi, commissar of a Red unit. Also horrifying were, to mention just a few, the murder of Don Ernesto Tale and his maid, the killing of Don Giuseppe Tarozzi, the murder of Don Luigi Lenzini, 60, whose skull the partisans smashed with rifle butts during the night of July 25, 1945, and the death of Don Francesco Venturelli, murdered during the night of January 15, 1946.

these exact words, were part of the missive he had dispatched to Churchill.

However, Spogeler was arrested shortly after crossing the Bavarian frontier, where British authorities confiscated the letter, which subsequently disappeared. Likewise vanished was the set of photocopied documents sent ahead to the British government contact in Switzerland. Precisely who this official may have been is not known, but Mussolini trusted him enough with the valuable correspondence. He apparently believed these and related documents were so crucially important he was willing to stake his life on them. But it seems precisely because of their explosive nature that

the British were determined he would never be allowed to present them anywhere, under any conditions.

When Mussolini was arrested outside the northern Italian town of Dongo, four bags of correspondence and the Alfa-Romeo carrying additional documents were seized by the partisans. They sold the vehicle's contents, except the leather bags, to the British Foreign Office, whose London headquarters disclosed the sale in a paper trail open to public scrutiny. The Neville Chamberlain and Franklin Roosevelt letters were supposedly "pruned and combed" out of the collection; i.e., destroyed, per orders from the BFO's head, as stated in the public record.

Urbano Lazaro, the partisan who arrested Mussolini, had the four bags of documents placed in the safekeeping of a local bank at Da Maso. He recalled later that a fellow Communist, code-named "Renzo," went through the third bag, in which he found a number of files headed "Churchill." After Communist Party leader Dante Goreri arrived to order Mussolini's execution, he photocopied the contents of the four bags. The original documents were sold to a pair of British agents from the Field Security Service, and have since vanished.

The photocopies were entrusted to another "resistance" member with the code name of "Cavaliere," who refuses to make them public until a specified period after his death. At this writing, Cavaliere is still alive, although his family has expressed reluctance to disclose the documents at any time in the future.

Whether or not Churchill read the Duce's April 23 request for a fair trial is not known. In any case, the prime minister never entertained any intention of allowing Mussolini a public forum in a court of law, and relished the thought, as he expressed himself to President Roosevelt during their Casablanca Conference in 1943, of having the Italian leader strangled to death in the Roman Forum as soon as he was captured. That sentiment was underscored by Italy's most acclaimed postwar historian, Renzo de Felice, in his 1995 book about the last year of the war, *Red and Black*.¹⁶

Felice was able to trace an agency in the British government, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), headed by Max Salvatore, commissioned to assassinate the Duce on sight. This secret order contravened the terms of the Italian armistice, signed by Badoglio in Sicily on September 3,

1943, which specified that Mussolini must be taken alive and turned over the U.S. XVth Army Group Command, headed by Gen. Mark Clark.

By the time Salvatore caught up with the founder of Fascism in April 1945, Mussolini had already been arrested by Communist partisans, who were holding him for the arrival of their local leader, Goreri. Judging it more politically expedient for Italians to do the killing than a foreign invader, Salvatore returned to the SOE only after having seen Mussolini's mutilated corpse strung up by its heels in Milan's public square. De Felice's reconstruction of events has been substantiated by veteran partisans who witnessed Mussolini's last days. "The documents in my possession lead me to draw one conclusion," he stated. "Mussolini was killed by a group of partisans from Milan upon the request of the British secret services. . . . Their national interest was at stake, tied to the explosive compromises in the correspondence that the British prime minister was thought to have exchanged with Mussolini before and during the war."¹⁷

Thereafter, Churchill apparently set himself a three-part agenda for 1945: Win the war, win re-election and find every scrap of his incriminating correspondence with the dead Duce. Victory in Europe was not followed by success at the polls, however, and, in

their first opportunity to elect or dump Churchill, British voters turned him out of office in July. Pursued by the "black dogs" of depression, he traveled to northern Italy's Lake Como, ostensibly to paint and forget his disappointment. He had long admired the tactic of hiding in plain sight; to conceal one's real intentions under some public diversion. While newsreels showed him peacefully daubing his canvasses at seaside, he was out and about from September 1 to 17, visiting all the places where the late Italian dictator spent his final days.

He sought out and met with the carpenter ordered by Mussolini to build the three cabinets for the photocopied documents and letters. The carpenter told Churchill he did not know anything about the documents themselves, nor what became of them.

Later, Churchill "had tea" with Romano Tebezi, director of the Da Maso Bank, at the same local branch in which the partisans Urbano Lazaro and "Renzo" deposited the four

Urbano Lazaro, the partisan who arrested Mussolini, had four bags of documents—a large number headed 'Churchill'—placed in the safekeeping of a local bank at Da Maso.

bags of correspondence (one with files marked “Churchill”) they took from Mussolini when they arrested him. During a summer 1945 visit to Lake Como, Churchill stayed at the British Secret Service headquarters, located in the former villa of Guido Donegan, once a prominent industrialist and close friend of the Duce.

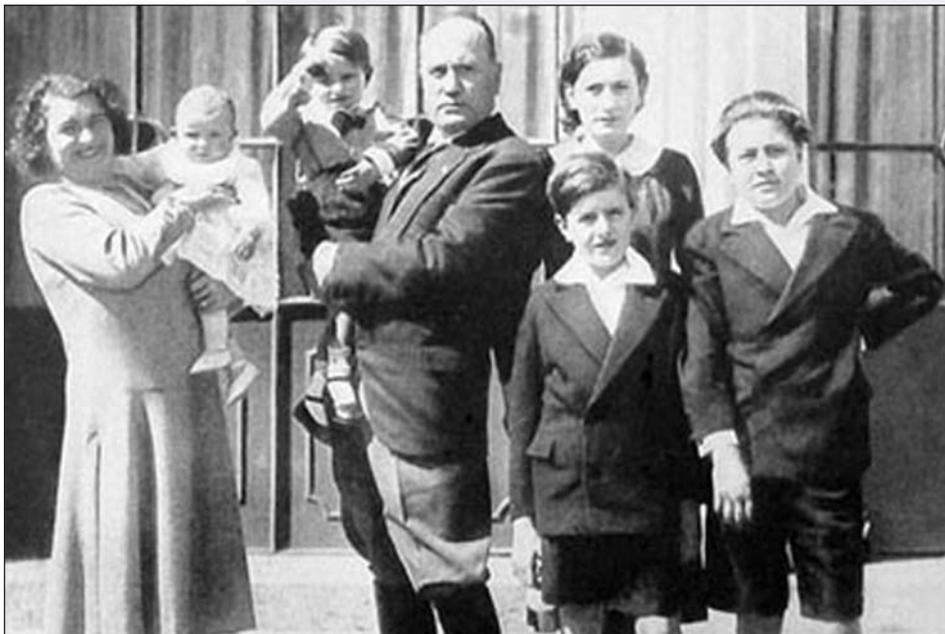
Imprisoned immediately after the war, Donegan told a fellow prisoner, once a high-ranking Fascist Party functionary, about the Churchill correspondence. Unbeknownst to either of them, their conversations were monitored, and Donegan was whisked

out of his confinement by a pair of British soldiers, who took him away in a jeep. To his astonishment, he was soon being interrogated by none other than Winston Churchill “about some missing letters.” Donegan was thereafter kept in solitary confinement until his mysterious death the following year.¹⁸

Despite Churchill’s efforts to conceal his true intentions, they aroused the suspicions of several Swiss newspaper reporters, who published various accounts of his strange behavior. The prominent Basel daily *Voix Ouvrière* headlined, *Les documents de Mussolini disparaissent et M. Churchill apparait* (“Churchill appears and the Mussolini documents disappear”) on September 18, 1945. Editor Leon Nicole wrote that Churchill was observed by his reporters burning large stacks of official-looking documents in a fire behind the Donegan villa.¹⁹

During early April 1945, Mussolini had entrusted one set of his photocopies to a lifelong friend, Tomasso David, chief of RSI intelligence and leader of the “Silver Foxes,” professional saboteurs. Throughout the immediate postwar years, David was unable to find employment due to his past involvement in the Fascist National Party and, later, the Salo Republic. He was arrested during 1951 for illegally trying to change his identity and, in view of his political record, given a lengthy prison sentence. While incarcerated, David contacted the Italian premier, Alcide De Gasperi, offering to barter the Mussolini documents in exchange for an early release.

Less than two years later, Churchill was in New York City for a highly publicized visit to the birthplace of his



What Happened to Mussolini’s Family?

Most of Mussolini’s family survived the war, and they were not shunned. In fact they were quite successful and some of Mussolini’s grandchildren are active in Italian politics today. Shown are his wife Rachele and their five children: Edda, Vittorio, Bruno, Romano and Anna Maria. Edda was the couple’s oldest child, in 1910. Her parents married in December 1915. After the family moved to Rome she married Galeazzo Ciano, count of Cortellazzo and Buccari. Her husband was appointed Italian consul in Shanghai. The family moved back to Italy in 1932, where Ciano became minister of foreign affairs. Vittorio Mussolini (born in 1916) became a pilot for the Italian air force during the Italo-Ethiopian War II, the Spanish Civil War and World War II. When peace came, he became a film critic and producer, and editor for the journal *Cinema*. In 1962 he married Anna Maria Scicolone, sister of Sophia Loren. They had two daughters, Alessandra and Elisabetta. Today, Alessandra Mussolini is a mother of three and leads a right-wing political party. Vittorio died of kidney failure in Rome in 1997. Romano was born in 1927. After the war, Romano was a musician playing jazz. By the 1960s he had formed the Romano Mussolini All Stars, one of Italy’s foremost jazz bands. He died in Rome in 2006. Youngest daughter Anna Maria was born in 1929 and had polio as a child; she limped slightly as a result. She married entertainer Giuseppe Negri. They had two daughters, Silvia (1961) and Edda (1963), both of them active in Italian politics representing neo-fascist parties. Anna Maria died in 1968. Bruno grew up to be another pilot and was considered a “serious” one. He died in 1941 test piloting a new four-engine Italian bomber.



Mussolini's relationship with the Catholic Church and the Vatican was rocky, at best. Here he is shown (center, front, with top hat) with several of his ministers and Catholic officials in the Vatican.

mother, Jenny Jerome, at 462 Henry Street. Like his sojourn to Lake Como in September 1945, his American appearance served as cover for an ulterior motive. In March 1953, he was hosted by Mayor Vincent Impalleri, who had extensive ties with the Italian government, including Premier De Gasperi, from whom he received Tomasso David's collection of Mussolini documents.

Once these were handed over to Churchill, who satisfied himself as to their authenticity, David was not only acquitted and freed from prison, but awarded Italy's highest military honor, the Republican Gold Medal, which included a life-long pension. For a former enemy leader, close confidant of the Duce and convicted criminal to have experienced such a dramatic reversal of fortunes seems inexplicable, given the anti-Fascist fervor of postwar Italy, unless he possessed some particularly persuasive material.

In his last days, the Duce may also have been trying to leave Italy with more than sensational documents, but rather something the Swiss, he hoped, would find especially interesting: 65 kilos of gold bullion (worth, today, at least \$5 billion U.S.). This hoard represented all the valuables taken from native and foreign Jews in Italy before their removal to German concentration camps until 1945. When Mussolini was arrested by partisans in April, they turned it over to their superiors in the Italian Communist Party, who used the windfall to achieve political power during the postwar period. None of the "Dongo treasure," as it was popularly known, ever found its way back to its original owners.

Along with gold bullion, the Italian Communist Party

would have also received the Mussolini papers. A partisan known only as "Guglielmo" took possession of all the Duce's effects and dutifully handed them over to his superiors. They knew Stalin wanted his Italian comrades purged, as he had been doing to high-ranking party functionaries everywhere, so, to curry favor with the West, they gladly handed over the compromising documents to Churchill. Having thus easily obtained the originals, he spent the rest of his time in Italy hunting for any and all facsimiles. Aware that he was trying to track down every scrap of the missing records, agents in the British Foreign Office notified him during 1954 that copies of his wartime correspondence with Mussolini were still circulating in Italy.

He scribbled over the report, "They are all forgeries," and returned it to the British Foreign Office. His choice of words was revealing.²⁰

"Forgeries" signifies bogus copies of originally genuine documents. If the whole lot was fake, he might have described the controversy as "fraudulent." In any case, he seems to have satisfied himself that by the mid-1950s all his incriminating letters had been accounted for and destroyed. He would appear to have done a very thorough job of it, and the only copies which may still survive are allegedly in the possession of the Cavalieri family, whose members refuse to disclose them.

Churchill undoubtedly sent communications to his Italian nemesis long before and during World War II. Less clear was the specific nature of their contents. Mussolini hinted at various "agreements" concluded between the two states-

men. Surely something more than a few political indiscretions would have been needed to so utterly persuade Mussolini that the documents he possessed could alter his fate and that of the postwar world, while sending Churchill on a long, personal quest to gather up every trace of their existence.

The enigma of Mussolini's documents boils down to a pair of alternative conclusions: Either they never existed—at least in the sense that they were paradigm-shattering materials—or Churchill succeeded in recovering and destroying virtually all of them, including their copies. That the Duce possessed at least some records he deemed uniquely important is beyond question. What precisely they contained, however, cannot yet be established with absolute certainty until either authenticated reproductions or the documents themselves come to light. Until then, the letters exchanged between both men remain one of the unanswered questions of World War II.

(This article is based on an extract from a new book, *Mussolini's War*, Helion Publishing, Ltd., UK, 2010, available in the U.S. at www.amazon.com) ♦

ENDNOTES:

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ABOVE: A cartoon poster depicts Hitler and Mussolini trying desperately to mend a symbol of the battered and broken Axis forces. **BELOW:** After Communist Italian partisans captured Benito Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci, both were shot according to martial law after a kangaroo trial. It's said that "Claretta" tried to protect Mussolini from the bullets with her own body. The bodies were brought to Milan the next day, violated and hanged upside down as a public display. Mussolini thus never got the formal war crimes trial in which he planned to explain his motivations and intentions for entering the war on the side of the Germans. Below photo snapped April 28, 1945.

