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**DEFENDING
MUSSOLINI**

DIE-HARD FASCISTS THAT PROTECTED HIM TO THE END



By 1943, Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini was at war with his own people. STEPHEN CULLEN exposes the legion of die-hard Fascists who defended him until the very end.

Defending Mussolini

In the late afternoon of Sunday, 25 July 1943, Benito Mussolini, Il Duce, arrived at the Villa Savoia for his weekly audience with King Vittorio Emanuele III. The audience had been brought forward a day, following the previous day's long and tense meeting of the Fascist Grand Council. At that meeting, Mussolini had attempted to convince the Fascist leaders, the 'gerachs', that, despite the continuing success of the Allies

in Sicily, and despite the widespread bombing offensive against Italy, the war could still be won.

But Mussolini was now surrounded by plotters, the most notable of whom was Count Dino Grandi, who wanted Italy to make a separate peace with the Allies, and to declare war on Germany. Grandi was the key conspirator with the King, and it was their aim to remove Mussolini from power by 'constitutional' means. The King was willing to act against

Mussolini, whom he had happily supported for the lifetime of the Fascist regime, but only with the backing of other erstwhile Fascists.

This backing came when a majority of the gerachs at the 24 July meeting supported Grandi's motion condemning the dictatorship – and with it, Mussolini. The next day, Mussolini was delivered, by the King, into the hands of 50 carabinieri, who took Mussolini away 'for his own protection'. The coup de

main was successful – now the King and his new head of government, Marshal Badoglio, had to manoeuvre Italy on to the side of its former enemies

Mussolini escapes

One of Badoglio's first pronouncements was that the war against the Allies would continue. But both the King and the new Badoglio government wanted Italy out of the war, and into an alliance with Germany's enemies. Yet the new government delayed putting this plan into immediate effect – thereby giving a furious Hitler the chance to reinforce the German presence in Italy, and prepare for the occupation of the country. Meanwhile, fearing an attempt to liberate Il Duce, the new government moved him around, eventually, on 28 August, imprisoning him in one hotel, then another, the Campo Imperatore, on the Gran Sasso mountain in the Apennines.

The Badoglio government began secret negotiations with the western Allies, while most Italians sat on the fence awaiting developments. Despite the large number of Italian troops under arms – over a million in Italy and with nearly 900,000 on occupation duties elsewhere – no orders were issued to these men concerning any change in national policy. When the Italian surrender to the Allies was broadcast on 8 September 1943, there was no action taken to protect Italy, or Italian troops from the Germans, and nearly 700,000 Italians were taken prisoner by them. These men were not treated as PoWs by the Germans, who shipped many of them to forced labour in Germany.

Worse was in store for those who had fought back against the Germans – Italians captured in these circumstances were usually executed by the Germans, who saw them as deserters from the Axis. The worst atrocity came on Cephalonia, where the German army executed, on Hitler's personal order, 5,000 captured Italians, while another 3,000 died when ships taking them to labour and concentration camps were sunk by mines. In all, 9,406 Italians from the 11,700 of the Acqui division perished.

Two days after the Italian surrender, German troops occupied Rome, but not before Badoglio and the King had escaped to Brindisi and safety. On the 12 September, SS special forces, under Sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny, overwhelmed Mussolini's guards on Gran Sasso, and spirited him away

to Hitler. By the end of September, Mussolini was installed at the head of a new state – La Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI), the Italian Social Republic – headquartered in the hotels of the resort of Salo on Lake Garda. The stage was set for war and civil war in Italy.

Die-hard Fascists

Mussolini's new republic represented a complex mix of competing interests, all grouped under the umbrella of German military and political power. There were those Italians who were primarily loyal to Mussolini, those who sought to develop a revitalised form of Fascism, military personnel (mainly from the air force and parts of the army) who wished to continue to fight alongside their German allies, and those who saw themselves as Italian patriots, rather than Fascists. These factions found that the chaotic nature of governance in what was, essentially, a German occupied country, enabled the development of a wide range of military and para-military forces.

Four divisions of a new Italian army were raised from Italians held by the Germans, new conscripts and volunteers. This army took the title of the Esercito Nazionale Repubblicano (ENR), was trained in Germany, and saw some action in Italy. A new Republican air force was created, and despite temporary grounding and attempted incorporation into the Luftwaffe, saw action as the l'Aeronautica Nazionale Repubblicana (ANR).

Finally, the new republican navy, whose most effective units were land-based marines, was also formed. Alongside these regular units, a variety of other Italian units were established, and it was these that fought against the partisan movement that slowly emerged in the northern zone of Italy. The intention here is to examine three of the most heavily politicised and important of these groups: two key anti-partisan units backed by the Fascist Party; and the Auxiliaries – the first women to be incorporated into the Italian military

Die-hard Fascist leaders in the new Republic were keen to establish a politicised military force, rather than rely on a reconstituted Italian army. Their argument was that the army had shown itself loyal to the King, not Mussolini, or Italian Fascism. There had, of course, been a Fascist militia – the Milizia Volontaria per la

'Worse was in store for those who fought back against the Germans'



Disquieting image from the period of a very young child as a Fascist mascot. He appears to be wearing Black Brigade insignia, collar patches and arm shield, on his miniature collarless tunic. Both the Fascists and their partisan opponents recruited large numbers of teenagers to their ranks.



Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana (GNR) militiaman displaying the fasces and red 'M' collar patches.



GNR militiaman giving a dagger salute. The Black Brigades veteran, Carlo Mazzantini, said that just as the Sten gun was the defining symbol of the partisans, so the dagger was that of the Fascists.



Reproduction GNR collar patches of the type that replaced the fasces and 'M' version.

Sicurezza Nazionale (MVSN) – which had provided largely low-grade units under the old system, but this, too, had not rallied around Mussolini in July 1943. Nonetheless, the supporters of a politicised force to defend the new Republic welcomed the creation, on 20 November 1943, of the Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana (GNR), under the command of the former Fascist youth leader, Renato Ricci. This new Fascist militia would quickly grow, according to the Italian historian Renzo De Felice, to about 140,000 effectives. The primary role of the GNR was to provide a politically loyal internal security force to buttress the Social Republic's control of the northern zone of Italy.

The old Fascist party – the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) – was replaced under the new regime by the Republican Fascist Party, the Partito Repubblicano Fascista (PRF). Whereas membership of the old PNF had been expected of almost every state employee, and many others,

with the result that nearly 22 million Italians were members in 1940, the PRF represented a much smaller cohort of dedicated Fascists. However, the numbers were still relatively large, with 50,000 joining the PRF in Milan alone. Many of these men and women saw themselves as returning to 'the principles of the first hour' of Fascism, the period of social radicalism that had characterised the very early days of the Fascists in 1919.

Mussolini duly provided them with a new party programme – 'The 18 Points of Verona'. This programme included an infamous article, number 7, which identified all Jews as foreigners for the duration of the war. Ten further articles focused on social matters, and created the theoretical foundations for a 'socialised' Italy. In addition, article 8 called for a European Community made up of a federation of different nations. If the ideological baggage of Italian Fascism had revived that of the early years of the movement, so, too, in the summer of 1944, was yet another early

innovation revamped for the war against the partisans – the Fascist squads.

One of the keys to the success of the original Fascists had been armed, mobile, para-military squads, which had attacked their enemies across Italy. As it became clear that the GNR alone could not neutralise the partisan threat, so Mussolini permitted Alessandro Pavolini, the Secretary General of the PRF, to raise new squads from the ranks of the party. Pavolini announced the formation of the Black Brigades, the *Brigate Nere* (BN) on 25 July 1944. The BN would, at their height, have a membership of 110,000 organised in 39 brigades. They quickly earned a reputation for violence and fanaticism that matched that of Pavolini, 'the little Fascist Robespierre'. They would be a formidable enemy for the partisans, but an enemy that created hatred as well as fear. Between them, the GNR and the BN would field, at their height, 250,000 active, mobile, and well-armed men to fight the partisan war.

Fighting Partisan War

It was not until after the King's coup against Mussolini that anti-Fascist resistance in Italy began to take shape. At first, the armed threat to the new Fascist Republic, and the German armed forces, was minimal. Indeed, it was not until 22 September 1943, that the Wehrmacht made first mention in its despatches of 'bandits' in the Friuli region – close to occupied Yugoslavia, where Tito's Partisans provided a clear model for would be partisans. Armed resistance in Italy grew slowly and, in the winter of 1943-4, it was unlikely that there were more than 4-9,000 armed fighters, mostly in remote mountainous areas in the Alps, and the Apennines. Small numbers of armed Communists in the cities – the *Gruppi d'Azione Patriottica* (GAP)—also carried out attacks on German forces, and RSI personnel.

Although around half of the partisans were Communists, organised in the Garibaldi Brigades, partisan groups were formed by most of the new anti-Fascist political parties. These were parties that supported the southern-based Committee for National Liberation (CLN), and, from January 1944, the clandestine CLN Alta Italia (CLN Northern Italy). Partisans supporting the Actionist Party were known as the 'Justice and Freedom' brigades; and Catholic partisans were 'The Green Flames'. In addition, there

were autonomous, independent groups, surrounding particular local leaders, and, as usual, there were opportunistic gangs, motivated by criminality. There were, as in other resistance movements, tensions between the different partisan groups, which occasionally led to clashes between them. The most notorious example in Italy was the massacre of dozens of anti-Communist partisans from the Osoppo brigades by Communist Garibaldi partisans at Porzûs in Friuli on 7 February, 1945.

By the spring of 1944, armed partisan numbers had reached around 12-13,000 fighters, backed by unarmed supporters who provided intelligence, and logistical support. The numbers were relatively small, but the vicious low-level war between the partisans, the Germans, and the RSI was intensifying. On 18 April 1944, Mussolini reported to his Council of Ministers that the partisans had killed 1,023 members of the PRF, and 535 members of the GNR. What was more significant than the numbers killed was the nature and impact of what was a dirty guerrilla war, which, depending on one's standpoint, looked to some like terrorism. And that terror was met, particularly by the Germans, with even greater terror. A Communist bomb attack on German soldiers in Rome in March 1944 killed 33 soldiers and seven civilians. In reprisal, the occupying Germans shot 335 Italians in caves in Rome called the Fosse Ardeatine.

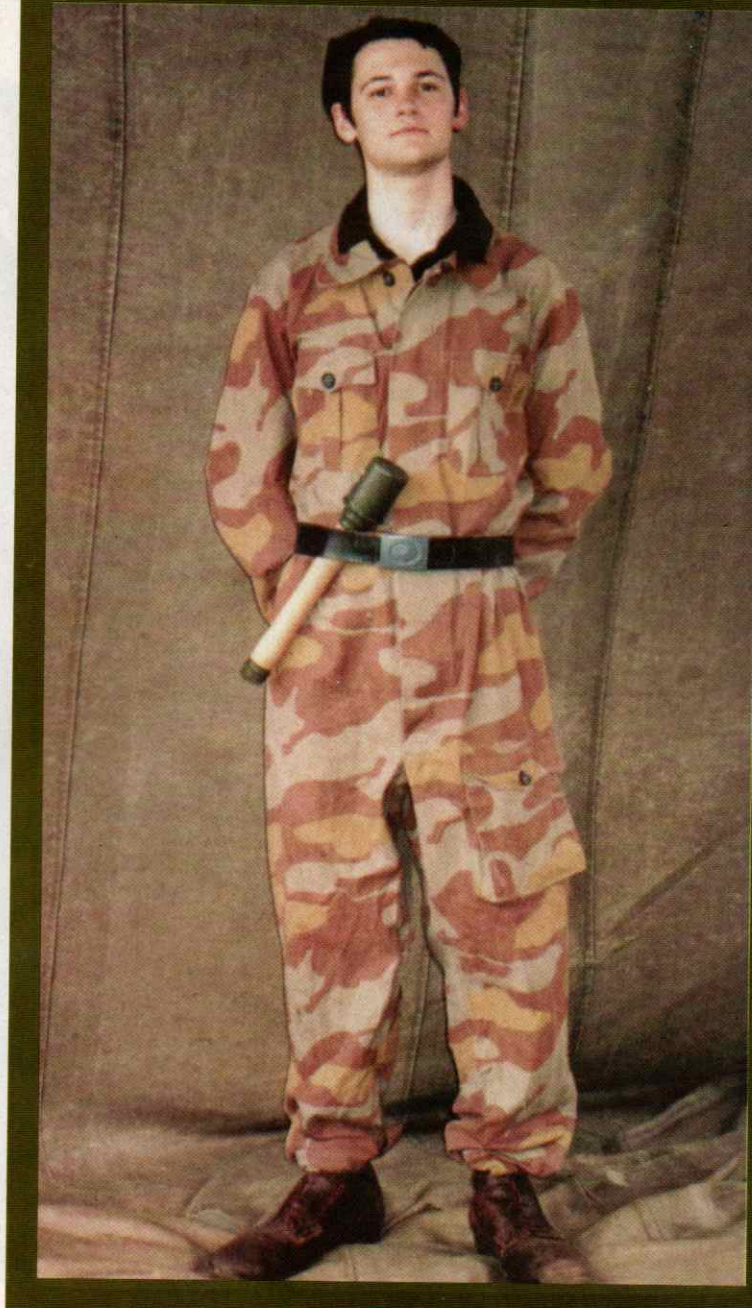
This pattern of terror hardened attitudes on all sides among Italians, and by late summer 1944, the partisans numbered around 80,000. And the BN were now active, executing, for example, 15 political prisoners in a public square in Milan on 10 August 1944, following the killing of nine German soldiers and eight civilians by Communist partisans. Carlo Mazzantini's memoir of service with the Black Brigades, 'In Search of a Glorious Death', gives a vivid picture of this civil war among Italians. Mazzantini's account of his service, as a 17-year-old, with the BN, is built around the familiar pattern of counter-insurgency warfare. It is characterised by confusion, sudden ambushes, widespread fear among the civilian population, assassinations, terror, reprisals, and a growing sense of nihilistic desperation among the ranks of the Black Brigades, as they raced from one armed clash to another.

The partisans received a boost

to their numbers in the summer of 1944, as thousands of men fled from conscription into the ENR, or the labour drafts for Germany. By June, the RSI government estimated that they were facing around 80,000 partisans. The partisan movement also expected the Allies to break through the Gothic Line, and break out into northern Italy, bringing Liberation from the RSI and the occupying Germans. This combination of greater numbers, and hopeful expectations led to improved partisan morale and increasing numbers of attacks on the RSI, its military forces, supporters and physical infrastructure. Their attacks on lines of communication were increasingly problematic, and led to the expected German response of severe reprisals against both the innocent and the guilty.

Mussolini's complaints about the counter-productive nature of these

typically German tactics fell on deaf ears. Not only did the atrocities undermine support for the RSI, but they also helped push the partisans to establish 'Free Zones' in areas of northern Italy. In June 1944, the first two 'Free Zones' were created by the partisans – at Montefiorino in the Apennines, and in the eastern part of Friuli. Other areas followed, such as the short-lived 'Republic of Carnia'. But the expected Allied breakthrough into the north failed to materialise, and in August, the Germans and the RSI's forces began assaults on the 'Free Zones'. The battles for the 'Free Zones' involved thousands of men, armour, and air support, and by December 1944, all the zones had been bloodily retaken. The 'Free Zone' strategy had been a classic error by emboldened irregular forces who had misread the capabilities of their Allies in the conventional war



Re-enactor portraying a GNR militiaman. He wears a black fez, and combat overalls in M1929 camouflage material, his black shirt is worn outside the overall collar. Illustrating the often close local ties with German units, this militiaman wears a Luftwaffe belt, and carries a German M1943 stick grenade.

'The war against the partisans was characterised by small-scale clashes, raids, reprisals, ambushes, and routine brutality'



Re-enactor portraying a GNR militiaman armed with the famous Beretta M1938/43 submachine gun.

with the Germans. In other occupied countries, too, similar mistakes were made. In France, the maquis of the Glières plateau, and of Vercors, both suffered similar fates in 1944.

Severe blow

Following the crushing of the 'Free Zones', partisan numbers fell to 50,000, most of whom would spend the winter of 1944/45 in the struggle to survive in harsh mountainous conditions. Although the Allies signed an agreement with representatives of the partisans in December, leading to greater levels of supply and support for them, they also sent mixed messages to the hard-pressed partisans. In November, the Allies had, reacting to the military defeat of the 'Free Zones', and fearful of Communist strength among the partisans, told the partisans to disband for the winter. This was quickly recognised, however, as a severe

blow to their already weakened morale, and the Allies tried to restore faith in them by continuing to provide weapons and other supplies.

The RSI's war against the partisans continued throughout the winter of 1944/45, characterised by small-scale clashes, raids, reprisals, ambushes, and routine brutality. The majority of Italians followed a policy of 'attendismo', the entirely understandable approach of 'wait and see', and hoped to survive. The events of 1944 had shown that the partisan movement was not strong enough to defeat the forces of the RSI and the German occupiers. The key events were to take place on the frontline between the Allies and the Germans. In March, 1945, as the Allied offensive re-started for the last time, the partisan movement suddenly experienced huge growth. For the first time, the numbers with the partisans began to approach the figures

for those who had fought for the RSI. By the beginning of April, there were around 100,000 partisans, by the end of the month, 250-300,000, a dramatic rise compared with the 50,000 of three months earlier.

Black shirts

There was an astonishingly wide variety of uniforms worn by the GNR. Summer and winter uniforms were issued, both battledress and camouflage clothing were worn, and unique uniforms were created for particular specialist units, like the GNR tank group. Initially, the GNR seem to have largely been issued with the M1940 grey-green wool tunics, and breeches worn with puttees. Black shirts, with the collars outside the tunic, were worn, although jerseys and grey-green shirts were also seen. Later, the grey-green collarless M1941 tunic and the M1941 baggy, ski type, trousers became more popular. GNR troops were

also issued with camouflage jackets, trousers and overalls, all in the famous Italian M1929 camouflage pattern.

Specialised units received particular clothing issues. The armoured car and tank crews of the GNR tank group, 'Leonessa', wore all-black uniforms, reminiscent of the German armoured troops' uniforms, including a double-breasted jacket. GNR mountain troops, such as the 'Cacciatori degli Appennini' (Apennine Hunters) wore German style mountain reversible windproof smocks and trousers in grey-green/white. The GNR summer uniform was in sand-khaki cotton drill, and consisted of shorts, or baggy trousers, worn with the collarless tunic, over a black shirt. GNR headgear came in the shape of a soft black fez, with a long tassel, which was worn on the back of the head. Alternatively, the M1942 bustina in grey-green or black was worn, or a large black beret pulled back on the head. Additionally, the M1933 steel helmet was widely worn.

Always fascinated by symbolism, the Fascists developed a new range of badges to advertise their allegiance to their new Republic. At first, the GNR used old MVSN collar patches. These either featured a silver-coloured fasces or, alternatively, red enamelled letter 'M's, interlaced with old style fasces (the axe head protruding from the side of the bundle of rods) on a backing of stylised black flames. The old style fasces were then replaced by new style Republican fasces, with the axe head emerging from the top of the bundle of rods. Both these versions of collar patches were, in turn, replaced by angular, lightening-like double 'M's, in silver metal or thread, on the black flame backing.

Cap badges varied, with metal skull and crossbone badges being worn on all types of headgear. In addition, a new system of coloured winged fasces was developed for wear on the bustina. These were in gold for officers, silver for NCOs and red for other ranks. Rank was also displayed on both tunic cuffs, and consisted of a combination, for officers above the rank of brigadier, of bars, fasces and diamond; for other officers, of bars and diamond; with bars for senior NCOs, and chevrons for junior NCOs. The GNR reintroduced helmet stencils, which had been discontinued by the old Royal Army in 1940. GNR helmet stencils featured Republican fasces, stylised double 'M's, bustina type rank stencils on the front,



Reproduction GNR collar patches, illustrating the Republican fasces.

and unit stencils, usually on the left side of the M1933 helmet only.

The Brigade Nere were, from the outset, a party militia. All members of the PRF under the age of 60 were eligible to join. The minimum age for enlisting was 18, but the BN were characterised by large numbers of much younger boys who had grown up under Mussolini's regime, and now sought to fight 'for the honour of Italy'. Local PRF branches organised Action Squads in direct imitation of the original squads of the immediate post-First World War period, and these squads, varying greatly in size, were combined into 'corps', which were then brought together into the Black Brigades. The territorial and party nature of this organisation meant that there was little consistency in the size of the 'brigades', which varied from hundreds to thousands.

Each brigade took the name of a Fascist hero for its title, with, for example, the Milan-based 8th BN being named after Aldo Resega, the head of the PRF in Milan, who was assassinated by the GAP on 18 December, 1943.

The basic initial uniform for the BN was some variety of black shirt, mixed with grey-green, sand, or grey trousers. The black shirts were worn open at the neck, with black ties, as sweaters with half zips, and as black roll and crew neck sweaters. The BN were also issued with the grey-green M1940 tunics, the M1941 collarless tunics and ski-style trousers, with cotton duck grey-green windproof jackets, short battledress style black jackets, and M1929 camouflage trousers, jackets and overalls. The insignia worn by the BN was even more varied, with combinations of the skull and crossbone emblem, Republican fasces, lightning flash Ms, the gladio (a short Roman sword) badge on an oak leaf wreath, and a variety of Roman wolves and eagles, along with the Italian colours of red, white and green. One badge common to most BN was the rectangular unit badge, worn on the left breast. These badges were usually, though not always, divided diagonally, red over black, and bore the legend 'Brigata Nera' in silver script on the red half, above the unit title, for example,



Luftwaffe auxiliary poster. Not all pro-Mussolini Italians served with RSI formations, with the Germans recruiting heavily. For example, some 50,000 joined Luftwaffe units, while over 6,000 fought in the Waffen SS.



Recruiting poster for the Servizio Ausiliario Femminile, showing the RSI's battle flag of an outstretched eagle carrying a fasces on the Italian tricolour. The SAF's beret displays the SAF unit badge, in 'other ranks' red.

Aldo Resega, on the black portion. These unit badges were in enamelled metal, or were machine woven.

Fascist Party Women

The widespread difficulties faced by Mussolini's Republic meant that by 1944, pressure from Fascist women to take a greater part in the war than merely propaganda or relief work, found a newly sympathetic hearing in the RSI government. The first meeting of the Fascist Republican Women had taken place in December 1943, and in January 1944, the first women began to join auxiliary groups in Milan and Turin. One of the first groups was raised by the frontier police (possibly the GNR frontier unit), who recruited 50 women that February, while the historian Luisa Quartermaine reports that, at the same time, 'five female squads, equal in rights and duties to other soldiers, were trained to assist in battle', presumably also by the same unit. These were the first women volunteers, indeed the first women, to form part of the Italian armed forces.

In March, the elite Decima Mas Division, which was, in effect, the private army of the renowned special forces commander, Prince Valerio Borghese, 'The Black Prince', began recruiting women into its own Auxiliary Corps – some 250 women. This was followed by the official founding, under the patronage of PRF secretary general Pavolini, on 9 March 1944, of the Servizio Ausiliario Femminile (SAF), the Women's Auxiliary Service. The commanding officer of the SAF was Piera Gatteschi Fondelli, who was given the rank of general. The SAF were integrated into the armed forces, given weapons training for self-defence, and wore military uniform. Four specialisations were established for the SAF women – military service support in barracks, depots and garrisons; hospital service; anti-aircraft radio, radar or telephonist roles; and catering. But women also joined the BN, where they undertook combatant roles, along with espionage and intelligence.

A year after the founding of the SAF, some 4,412 women were serving

as auxiliaries in the GNR, the BN, the ENR, Decima Mas, and other autonomous units. Although the total numbers of women joining the various auxiliary units were small, the significance was that they were the first women to be part of any state-sponsored military in Italy. In a mirroring of this, women also took part in the partisan movement, in support and, in some cases, in combat roles. The main historian of women in the SAF, Maria Froddosio, has argued that the key motivating factor underpinning these women's service was loyalty to Mussolini himself, and the desire to expunge what they saw as the shame of Italy having changed sides.

Froddosio quoted Luciana Cera, who was the 23-year-old deputy commander of the SAF Decima Mas. Cera said that she had not been consciously political as a girl, but had benefited from 'a feeling of well-being [over which] there reigned a mythical, reassuring father figure: Benito Mussolini. He was there, and everything was fine... He ruled my life. Later on, in the shameful

'For Fascist women, Mussolini existed as a mythical, almost religious figure, to whom they owed their lives'



Recruiting poster for the Fascist Auxiliaries raised by the autonomous Decima Mas division, which recruited 250 women into its ranks.

tragedy of 8 September 1943, I was not surprised to see that it was He who withstood the enemy and picked up the remnants of Italian honour. And as always, was behind Him.' For women like Cera, Mussolini existed as a mythical, almost religious figure, to whom they owed their lives.

The basic SAF uniform changed over the short life of the auxiliary units. The first pattern uniform consisted of an open necked four pocket tunic in grey-green wool, with integral fabric belt, a grey-green forage cap, white shirt, grey-green tie, and below the knee skirt, also in grey-green wool. The second pattern uniform introduced a simpler, two pocket tunic (the breast pockets having been deleted), and with a large grey-green beret replacing the original forage cap. In the summer, a collarless sand-khaki two pocket tunic was worn with sand-khaki beret and skirt. The distinctive SAF badge – a stylised 'A' combined with typically Fascist 'flames' – was worn in different rank colours on the beret, replacing an oval gladio and wreath badge found on the

forage cap. Rank distinctions were shown on small shoulder boards, being a system of 'pips' for officer ranks, for example, one pip for a group commandant, three for a provincial commandant, and bars for NCO and other ranks. On the summer uniform, these rank badges were displayed as a single 'biscuit' on the left upper chest. This uniform, and associated badges, seem not, however, to have been universal. Photographs show auxiliaries with the BN wearing summer uniforms of black shirts, with red collar fascies, and black below the knee skirts. In addition, SAF members also wore, like their male counterparts, grey-green roll neck, and crew neck sweaters.

Fascist Defeat

On 27 April 1945, Mussolini was

captured by partisans from the 52nd Garibaldi Brigade as he tried to flee Italy with a retreating German column. Despite the fact that the partisan group appears to have consisted of less than 19 men, the Germans made no attempt to fight to save their erstwhile ally. The next day, a partisan execution squad arrived, and by the late afternoon, Mussolini and his long-term mistress, Clara Petacci, had been killed. Arguments over the exact circumstances surrounding these events continue, as do those over the nature and importance of the partisan war in Italy, when far too many people suffered and died on all sides for the 'honour' of Italy •

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