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THE FALL OF FASCISM: WHEN THE CARABINIERI ARRESTED THE DUCE ON 25 JULY 1943 / 5 SEPTEMBER 2024

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Abstract

Abstract: The Invasion of Sicily on 10 July 1943 was among the causes of the fall of the fascism in Italy. After the Great Council of the fascism vote against the war conduct under the duce between 24 and 25 July, Mussolini met the king of Italy to re-obtain his full support. On the contrary, the king dismissed him to the role he played for about 20 years; going out to the royal residence the Carabinieri escorted him outside *Villa Savoia*. They “arrested” Mussolini and he was under Law Enforcement Agencies (Royal Carabinieri and later National Police) control. On 12 September 1943, the Nazis freed him, and they brought Mussolini to Germany. The role of the Royal Carabinieri was very complicated because the new republican fascist party established by Mussolini in the Central-Northern part of Italy under the puppet state called *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*.

Keywords: Second World War; Law Enforcement; fascism; Mussolini; Kingdom of Italy.

Introduction

For Fascist Italy, 1943 was a terrible year, the most dramatic since the beginning of the war. A tormented and devastating season began in March 1943, in Russia, with the

dramatic epic of the ARMIR (the Italian Army in Russia) inexorably played out;⁽¹⁾ on May 13, General Giovanni Messe, commander of the 1st Army in Tunisia, had surrendered to Allies, the African campaign ended;⁽²⁾ on June 12, the Allies occupied Pantelleria. The population was exhausted, put to the hard test of the bombing of the cities.⁽³⁾ Forced to tighten their belts, the Italians said that they had reached the last hole, the “Mussolini hole”. Furthermore, three events occurred in July that definitively pulverized the small and feeble hopes of success in the conflict that Mussolini retained by relying on the power and solidity of his German ally. On July 10, the Anglo-Americans landed in Sicily, conquering it entirely in just twelve days;⁽⁴⁾ on July 19, Mussolini during the meeting with Hitler received his accuses of poor war capacity of the Italian army and in the same moment, Allied bombardiers dropped their bomb load of death to the capital of the Italian kingdom. More than 1.500 people died at the end of the day and 11.000 remained wounded. The Carabinieri Commanding General and his Chief of Staff died as well.⁽⁵⁾

The political situation

The situation was very critical. At 17.15 of the 24 July 1943, the *Gran Consiglio del Fascismo* (Great Council of the fascism) meeting started with Mussolini and the 28 members around the table⁽⁶⁾. At 2 o'clock of 25 July, Mussolini asked for the vote of the agenda Grandi: 19 in favour, 7 contrary, 1 abstention. The Government crisis started in that moment. It is true the vote had no real implications, because of the consultative role of the Great Council but the king had a different view. The request posed by Grandi e the others was to give back the full constitutional power to the king in order to change the political course of the war.

In the late afternoon of the 25 July, Mussolini went to Villa Savoia, the king residence in Rome, to discuss with him with the certain to receive his appreciation and to continue to keep the political situation in his hands. The talk with the king was different.

1. Many scholars studied the presence of the Italian Army in Russia. On the Italians at war during fascism, see Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008.

2. Luigi Emilio Longo, *Giovanni Messe l'ultimo Maresciallo d'Italia*, Roma, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 2006.

3. On the bombing of Italy, see Nicola Labanca (edited), *I bombardamenti aerei sull'Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012.

4. Regarding the role of the Italian Army during the war period July – September 1943, see Alberto Santoni, *Le operazioni in Sicilia e in Calabria (luglio – settembre 1943)*, Roma, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito - Ufficio Storico, 1989.

5. The allied bombardments of Rome in Umberto Gentiloni Silveri and Maddalena Carli, *Bombardare Roma. Gli Alleati e la «Città aperta» (1940-1944)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007. The death of the Carabinieri Commanding General and his Chief of Staff in Flavio Carbone e Ciro Niglio, *Fantasmì sotto le bombe. Indagini su un autista*, in *Notiziario Storico dell'Arma dei Carabinieri*, a. VIII (2023), n. 4, pp. 16-27.

6. Emilio Gentile, *25 luglio 1943*, Roma, Laterza, 2020 and Dino Grandi, *25 luglio*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2023, edited by Renzo De Felice.

The so-called arrest of Mussolini

In the morning of 24 July general Castellano a strict collaborator of general Ambrosio the General Chief of Staff asked the Royal Carabinieri Commanding General Angelo Cerica, in charge for 2 days to prepare a plan to “arrest” (non in the criminal law sense of course) the duce⁽⁷⁾.

Angelo Cerica, up to 22 July was second in command in the Carabinieri corps but during the Rome bombing of 19 July, Azolino Hazon the first in command died under the bombs. Both Carabinieri officers since the First World War, they had a clear understanding of the war situation and their loyalty to the king and to the State was not in discussion.

The Royal House Ministry, a strict collaborator of the king, proposed that the Royal Carabinieri should conduct the “arrest” of Mussolini. No one had doubts that in the current situation the Carabinieri Corps was the most appropriate institution in order to guarantee the execution of the orders.

Cerica prepared a plan based on the trust he had of three officers under his command: Lieutenant Colonel Giovanni Frignani, Captain Raffaele Aversa and Captain Paolo Vigneri. All three were on duty in Rome commanding the Carabinieri Group of Rome and two of the Carabinieri territorial companies.

Like every plan, there are some problems. The request of Mussolini for an audience with the king in the afternoon of 25 July created some problems and the Commanding General of the Carabinieri decided to change the plan consequently at noon, after an interview with the Royal House Ministry, the duke Pietro d'Aquarone.

All the Carabinieri personnel remained on duty in the barracks waiting for orders (about 8.000 men). An ambulance was prepared ready to pick up the former duce, 50 Carabinieri and three robust NCOs remained in a truck close to Villa Savoia in case of needs. Frignani, Aversa e Vigneri organised the forces under their command.

Therefore, Mussolini went to the king to discuss the situation, but Victor Emmanuel III spoke briefly with him and then dismissed the former duce after 20 minutes dialogue. Lately, Mussolini resumed the content of the discussion: “Dear Duce, things are no longer going. Italy is in touch. The Army is morally down [...] the vote of the Grand Council is terrible [...] at this moment you are the most hated man in Italy”.⁽⁸⁾

7. Marco Riscaldati, “L’Arma dei Carabinieri Reali dall’arresto di Mussolini alla sua liberazione”, in Flavio Carbone (edited), *Numero Speciale I Carabinieri del 1943, Rassegna dell’Arma dei Carabinieri*, Special Issue, (2023), pp. 85-103, Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini e il Fascismo - Crisi e agonia del regime*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990 e 1996, Vol. VII, 2015, ibidem, *Mussolini e il Fascismo - La guerra civile 1943-1945*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997-1998, Vol. VIII, 2015.

8. “Caro Duce, le cose non vanno più. L’Italia è in tocchi. L’Esercito è moralmente a terra [...] Il voto del Gran Consiglio è tremendo [...] In questo momento voi siete l’uomo più odiato d’Italia”, in Benito Mussolini, *Storia di un anno: il tempo del bastone e della carota*, Firenze-Roma, La Fenice, 1984, p. 68.

Going out the residency of the king (Villa Savoia), the three Carabinieri officers blocked Mussolini: “Duce to this side” and led him to an ambulance with four armed NCOs to escort him in a safe and secure area: he was “arrested”. The first place of detention was a Carabinieri barracks in Rome, “Podgora” from the name of the Mount that the Carabinieri regiment tried to reach during the First World War. No one was informed of the presence of the now-ex-duce so, once the column arrived inside some officers started to salute him in a formal way, knowing nothing about the situation. In short, most of the Carabinieri officers in Rome was informed where Mussolini was. Therefore, Frignani decided to move him to the Victor Emmanuel Barracks, the Carabinieri Cadet legion headquarters. Less people informed and the three officers involved in the situation checked the security. One officer was in a room close to his bedroom (the office of the legion commander) and three Carabinieri on guard in front of the door. He was under strict control.

In the same time, Cerica the Carabinieri commanding General kept all the Carabinieri in Rome ready to react to every possible action against the king and to free Mussolini. Nothing happened the city remained silent and quiet.

In the late evening of the 25 July, at about 22.45 the EIAR, the Italian Official Radio Station referred the “Mussolini resignation” and the decision of the king to appoint Marshal Badoglio as first minister chief of the government. Two days later, under the escort of the Carabinieri Mussolini left the Cadet legion and was transferred to the isle of Ponza and then from 7 August the island of La Maddalena, in Sardinia. Even the second isle was not a secure environment for the presence of German sailors and for the info-gathering activities of the Germans who wanted to free Mussolini from the hands of the Carabinieri as Hitler in person asked. After 20 days, Mussolini moved under escort from Sardinia to the continent, as Sardinians call the Peninsula. Since this last transfer, a Police Inspector General (commissioner) took the responsibility of the security of the former duce. The first was Saverio Polito and then he was replaced by Giuseppe Gueli, once Mussolini arrived to Campo Imperatore where there is an Hotel in front of Gran Sasso Mountain in Abruzzo not so far from Rome. The Carabinieri officer who took the responsibility for the Carabinieri contingent was Alberto Faiola, a lieutenant well known and appreciated by Badoglio in person during the Ethiopian Campaign. 40 Carabinieri and 30 police guards (Corpo delle Guardie di Pubblica Sicurezza) assumed the security of Mussolini.

With the signature of the armistice on 3 September 1943, Badoglio requested Gueli to verify the security of the hotel and possible improvements. The commissioner answered that the place was unconquerable. On 8 September, the EIAR launched the Badoglio message informing the Italian population of the armistice signature. The Carabinieri and National Police personnel in Campo Imperatore was put in alert for possible reactions but nothing happened up to 12 September, when some gliders with German paratroopers

and a motorised German column reached Campo Imperatore. Commissioner Gueli gave orders to the security forces to avoid any fight and they did not react once the Germans arrived in front of the main door of the hotel. In few minutes, the Nazis freed Mussolini and conducted him in Germany to Hitler. The Germans of the motorised unit killed downhill one Carabiniere and a Forestry Guard, the sole victims of the operations.

The consequences for the nation

The so-called arrest of Mussolini was huge of consequences for the Italians. After a first period of joy and happiness because the fascism collapsed, tensions and problems erupted very quickly in front of population. The war was not over. The Italians continued fighting on their sole with Germans against the Allies moving along the Peninsula.

Only with the proclamation of the Armistice between the kingdom of Italy and the Allied Powers the situation changed dramatically. The pre-recorded speech of Badoglio by radio was not clear. The Italian units and the Italian commands even at higher level did not receive clear directions and guidance. Therefore, the Italian army dissolved in few days. Only few regiments fought against the Germans who had a clear plan to take the power and all the equipment and weapons, capturing the Italian soldiers.

In those days, the soldiers discovered the meaning of the acronym IMI (Italian Military Internees – Internati Militari Italiani)⁽⁹⁾. For this special category, the Germans did not recognised the Geneva conventions on war prisoners, so they lived and died under huge sufferance and pains. On the other hand, the civilians lived the German occupation of Italy and the nazi-fascists massacres all over the *Italian boot*.

The proclamation of the so-called Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI) was another consequence of the liberation of Mussolini. He accepted to regain the power (under the umbrella of the powerful German allied) and to create a Quisling-state, adding the Italian violence to the German against the population and the partisan movement.

The consequences upon the Royal Carabinieri

The Royal Carabinieri, as a part of the Army at the time, remained on duty during the 45 days from the Gran Consiglio del fascismo meeting to the armistice. In that period, according to the law the Carabinieri arrested the most prominent fascists opening for them the gates of the prison. A small group of Carabinieri tried to arrest Ettore Muti former secretary of the fascist party, but during the operation, Muti died. On 9 and 10 September, the Carabinieri fought in Rome against the Germans to regain the stronghold n. 5 on the Magliana bridge and they succeeded⁽¹⁰⁾. Once Neapolitans

9. On the Internati Militari Italiani, see Gerhard Schreiber, *I militari italiani internati nei campi di concentramento del terzo Reich 1943-1945*, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, Roma, 1992; Mario Avagliano – Marco Palmieri, *Gli Internati Militari Italiani. Diari e lettere dai lager nazisti*, Torino, Einaudi, 2009.

10. Flavio Carbone, "Arma combattente. I Carabinieri Reali nella difesa di Roma", in Flavio Carbone (edited), *Numero*

rose up against the German occupation from 27 to 30 September 1943 many Officers, NCOs and Carabinieri were among the population directing it to kick them out⁽¹¹⁾. On 7 October, the Germans captured the Carabinieri on duty in Rome and deported them to Germany as IMI⁽¹²⁾. There was the fear that they could lead the insurrection in the Capital as they did in Naples and help Italian Jewish citizens to escape to the deportation of 16 October. Two of the three officers, Lt Col Frignani and Cpt Aversa died killed as executed in the Fosse Ardeatine massacre (335 persons died), the most important killing happened in a city in Europe.

On the other hand, the fascists once in power again with the foundation of the RSI started asking to erase from the territory of the self-proclaimed republic the Carabinieri, because of their loyalty to the king and the infidelity to the fascism. The Carabinieri personnel who remained on duty on the Northern part of Italy under the RSI was transferred in a new corps the Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana (Republican National Guard) together with the former Milizia and the Police of the Italian Africa⁽¹³⁾. The fusion did not bring any value and the former-militiamen hated the Carabinieri who refused to swear to Mussolini on 9 February 1944. The last Carabinieri on duty left the Northern part of Italy between 3 and 4 August 1944 in trains moving to Germany. The others were able to join the partisans' movements and fight for their freedom.

Conclusion

With the arrest of Mussolini, the Carabinieri became of the most preferred target of the fascists, especially after the birth of the Italian Social Republic in the Northern part of Italy.

On the other hand, we should consider that according with the general situation neither the national police, nor other police forces could deal with this very important task. The Carabinieri performed it properly. Two of the three officers paid their commitments with their death in the Fosse Ardeatine massacre. Therefore, the role of the Carabinieri remains important and shows the capacity to manage very difficult situation in an emergency, like what they did in the late afternoon of 25 July 1943.

There are some speculations regarding the reason why Carabinieri and national police did not react to the Germans from the Gran Sasso prison, but no documents.

Speciale I Carabinieri del 1943, Rassegna dell'Arma dei Carabinieri, Special Issue, (2023), pp. 105-124.

11. Vincenzo Longobardi, "1943: le quattro giornate di Napoli. I Carabinieri della Stazione di Napoli Porto", in F. Carbone (edited), *Numero Speciale I Carabinieri del 1943* cit., pp. 155-175.

12. Anna Maria Casavola, "La deportazione rimossa dei Carabinieri romani. 7 ottobre 1943", in F. Carbone (edited), *Numero Speciale I Carabinieri del 1943* cit., pp. 187-205 and A. M. Casavola, *7 ottobre 1943. La deportazione dei Carabinieri romani nei Lager nazisti*, Roma, Studium, 2008.

13. Massimiliano Sole, "Il grande inganno. I Carabinieri nella Guardia Nazionale Repubblicana", in F. Carbone (edited), *Numero Speciale I Carabinieri del 1944. Le Resistenze al regime collaborazionista, Rassegna dell'Arma dei Carabinieri*, Special Issue (2024), pp. 37-51.

They followed the orders and did not fight. The real problem was linked to the new tragic phase of the war once the former duce became free again. The foundation of the RSI created a very hard situation. Italians against Italians in a political war, a civil war where the fascists did not respect neither women, nor old people.

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