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LETTER FROM ROME

'Mein Kampf': The Italian Edition

By LILA AZAM ZANGANEH

Were Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini ideological soul mates or uneasy allies? Did they share a vision of national and ethnic purity or was theirs a pact hardened in the crucible of political expedience? Although their formal partnership lasted only four years -- from 1939 to 1943 -- it has taken on an enduring afterlife, particularly among Italians, who have never quite settled the issue of just how ideologically connected the two dictators truly were.

This question is now the subject of fresh speculation, fomented by a provocative book, "Il Contratto: Mussolini Editore di Hitler" ("The Contract: Mussolini, Publisher of Hitler"). Released by Dedalo in Italy this summer, it was written by Giorgio Fabre, a journalist at the well-respected newsweekly Panorama and the author of several books on Italian Fascism. To research "Il Contratto," Fabre burrowed deep into Italian Foreign Ministry archives and emerged with evidence documenting a previously unnoted literary partnership between Hitler and Mussolini. It dates from February 1933, less than a week after Hitler had become chancellor of Germany, when two of his confidants, one of them Rudolf Hess, secretly traveled to Rome and asked Mussolini to buy the rights to Hitler's manifesto, "Mein Kampf."

First published in 1925 by the Nazi publishing house, Franz Eher Verlag, the book became a best seller in Germany, helping Hitler, a fringe extremist best known for staging a failed putsch in Munich, gain political clout. By 1933, with Hitler in power and a player on the world stage, foreign publishers were suddenly interested. The British house Hurst & Blackett paid the German publisher an advance of 2,611 marks ($1,000). In the United States, Houghton Mifflin & Company paid an advance of $500 on a first printing of 7,000 copies.

Mussolini, however, outspent them all. According to documents unearthed by Fabre and reproduced in the book, Il Duce ordered that 53,625 marks (about $20,000) be wired to Franz Eher Verlag, the highest fee paid for any foreign translation during those years in Italy. Why did Mussolini use the power of the state to buy "Mein Kampf" and why did he spend so lavishly? Because, Fabre argues, the purchase was in fact a campaign contribution to the Nazi Party made ahead of the legislative elections of March 1933, which would complete Hitler's "legal revolution," in the words of his biographer Joachim Fest.

Both regimes kept the deal utterly secret. Mussolini, who had been in touch with Hitler for several years, insisted the money be transferred "anonymously and in cash." Hitler, wary of appearing beholden to Mussolini, eventually declined to touch the money during the campaign.

It was only after the Nazis won the elections that the translation went forward. The Italian office of foreign affairs wrote up a contract, signed by the Germans on May 30, 1933, stipulating, among other things, that the Italian translator not be a Jew. The renowned publisher handling the project, Valentino Bompiani, was not told about this provision, and -- in one of the great ironies of the era -- hired Angelo Treves, a distinguished translator who happened to be Jewish. When the Germans objected, Bompiani allegedly removed Treves's name from the book when it was first published in March 1934 as "La Mia Battaglia," with a new introduction by Hitler. The book quickly conquered the Italian market, going into a third printing within six months of its release.

Had the episode ended there it would be merely a sordid footnote in the chronicle of a dark partnership.

But in Fabre's view, Mussolini's involvement with the "Mein Kampf" translation is part of a larger story. When I interviewed him in Rome, Fabre mapped out how the translation marked the beginning of a campaign of covert anti-Semitic measures within Italy, culminating in the racial laws of 1938, which effectively banned Jews from all public positions.

This remains a conspicuously shameful chapter in Italian history, but one whose complexities many in Italy have consistently played down. Mussolini, they say, was acting pragmatically and only doing Hitler's bidding, while he himself steered clear of ideological anti-Semitism. The late Renzo De Felice, the pre-eminent Italian biographer of Mussolini, has written that Mussolini deemed "Mein Kampf" "illegible," and thought its author was "literally sick with racist and anti-Semitic ideologies."

Fabre disagrees. He says the archival material proves that while Mussolini -- who knew German -- may not have read "Mein Kampf" cover to cover, he was shown a summary of its contents along with excerpts from the book's chilling racial theories, which he underlined in his own hand in late 1933.

Fabre argues that during his alliance with Germany, Mussolini was intent on fashioning his own brand of anti-Semitism, one more "political" and less overtly brutal than Hitler's.

As early as 1934, Mussolini removed several Jews from highly visible positions in government, finance and academia. He also had his alleged former mistress, Margherita Sarfatti, who was Jewish, dismissed from Il Popolo d'Italia, the Fascist Party newspaper, and forbade the Fascist Jewish journalist Anita Levi Carpi from representing Italy on an official trip to Japan. "One does not send a Jew around," Mussolini jotted in an official document Fabre quotes in the book. (Before the 1938 racial laws, many Italian Jews in fact belonged to the Fascist Party.)

Unsurprisingly, the Italian response to "Il Contratto" has fallen along political lines. Writing in Corriere della Sera, Italy's leading centrist daily, the well-known critic Dino Messina called Fabre's book "enthralling," and its archival findings "truly significant." He said that, as a result, Italians would have to reassess their history. But more conservative publications, including Il Domenicale, the weekly cultural newspaper started by a close political associate of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, have been skeptical of Fabre's conclusions, as have many scholars, politicians and journalists.

When I interviewed him in his elegant Roman apartment, Giano Accame, a historian and a founding member of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, a postwar neo-Fascist party, characterized Fabre's thesis as "exaggerated." "Mussolini surely did not share Hitler's opinions on the Jews," he said, as we sat in his study, which was adorned with a bust and an autographed picture of Mussolini. "But he realized that in striking an alliance with the Germans, he had made an enemy of Jews worldwide. At that point he made the contemptible decision to enact racial laws." As for Mussolini's decision to publish "Mein Kampf," it was "a diplomatic gesture of friendship" with Hitler.

Fabre, on the other hand, maintains that Mussolini was "a failed Hitler" who regretted never writing his own "Mein Kampf." Either way, the two dictators' collaboration set the stage for the 1938 racial laws. Five years later, Victor Emmanuel III, king of Italy, had Mussolini arrested and signed a hasty armistice with the Allies. Italy was soon occupied by the Nazis, who reinstated Mussolini at the helm of the puppet Republic of Salo. More than 8,000 Italian Jews were deported; 5,644 of them died at Auschwitz.

Fabre's work has doubtless shed new light on a sinister chapter of Italian history, one long distorted and dulled in the country's collective memory. Alessandra Mussolini, the dictator's granddaughter and a European parliament deputy from a far-right party, declined to comment on her grandfather's legacy and Fabre's book. "I don't want to say things that will get me in trouble later," she told me. Others have been almost as cautious.

Fabre is not surprised. "Once you begin investigating, you face a tremendous problem," he said. "A part of the ruling class completely falsified the truth after the war and refuses to this day to acknowledge the facts of the partnership between Mussolini and Hitler." "Il Contratto" is thus more than a provocative book: it is an invitation to come to terms with the demons of patriotic self-deception.

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