

# Documents from the Salò Republic

Special Collections featured item for July 2008 by  
Fiona Barnard, Rare Books Librarian.

**Documents from the Salò Republic (MS 1724). Collection held at the University of Reading Special Collections Service.**



*Coat of arms of the Italian Social Republic*

The Republic of Salò, or the 'Italian Social Republic', marked the final years of Fascism in Italy, and also the final demise and fall of the Italian Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini (1883-1945). After the Allies invaded Italy in 1943, towards the end of the Second World War, a number of leading Fascists of the Grand Council voted against the *Duce's* continuing control of the war effort. By this time, the monarchy, a number of members of the Fascist government and the Italian people in general, had grown weary of Italy's futile war effort, which had forced the country into a position of subordination and subjugation under Nazi Germany. Following the vote against Mussolini, King Victor Emmanuel dismissed him from office, and had him arrested.



*Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler during an official visit to occupied Yugoslavia.*

Mussolini was held in detention in a hotel in the Abruzzi mountains. However, on 12 September 1943, a German air-force unit rescued the imprisoned *Duce*, and later took him to Germany for an audience with Adolf Hitler. The German *Führer* still appeared to have some personal affection for Mussolini (shown above, with Hitler), and declared to him that they were the ‘two best hated men in the world’. In the face of an imminent defection of Italy to the Allies, Hitler had seized control of northern and central Italy, and instructed Mussolini, now in Hitler’s debt following his rescue by German troops, to head a new Fascist mini-state in German-occupied Italy. The new regime was not to be based in Rome, as the Allies would have taken it within weeks, but in various Northern Italian cities. The Ministry of Finance was based in Brescia, the Ministry of Public Works was at Venice, and Mussolini himself, as Head of State and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was installed at the Villa Feltrinelli in Gargnano on Lake Garda.



*The town of Salò*

However, the regime was to become known as the 'Republic of Salò' as it was in this small town, also on Lake Garda, that the Ministry of Popular Culture was set up, which was significant as one of the main functions of the Republic was as a source of propaganda.



*Letterhead from unused writing paper in the Salò archive for the Ministry of Popular Culture*

Mussolini was initially reluctant to accept the role of a mere puppet ruler. The image of the all-powerful *Duce* that Mussolini had once projected of himself was fading rapidly. He was now an old man, exhausted and suffering from poor health and, as time went on, as the historian Roy Palmer Domenico points out, "the *Duce* himself represented the pallor that tinged the whole regime". However, he soon changed his mind and accepted the position, and even managed to resurrect some of the revolutionary fervour of his youth.

On 18 September, Mussolini made a hesitant initial broadcast back to Italy, announcing that he had resumed control over the country. He declared that the new regime 'will be national and social in the fullest sense of the words. It will thus be Fascist in a way that takes us back to our origins'. Mussolini tried to appeal to the working classes with an emphasis on a more left-wing, worker-orientated ideology, calling for an end to the monarchy, but this programme was never realised.

The stamps (not for postage) shown below from the Salò Republic archive at the University of Reading were issued as propaganda, with slogans encouraging work for the benefit of both Italian citizens and Italy.



One of the main aims of the Republic was also to seek revenge against those who had voted against Mussolini in July 1943. These individuals included Mussolini's son-in-law, the former foreign minister Count Galeazzo Ciano, who, along with five others, was tried by a Fascist court and shot by a firing squad.



*Italian propaganda poster 'Germany is truly your friend'*

However, although the Republic exercised official sovereignty in northern Italy, as a puppet regime it had no power and was dependent on the German military to maintain control. The German government had control of almost everything, controlling the Salò government's telephones, censoring letters and giving orders to the Republic's army and police. Although Mussolini claimed power over all of Italy, the actual boundaries of the state were those of the German-occupied zone, being the stretch of plain on either sides of the River Po. The regime relied on German rather than popular support, as the Italian people showed a preference for the resistance movement, an uprising against Nazi occupation of most of Italy, and against the Salò Republic as a regime controlled by Germany. The German forces had little respect for the Republic, and saw it as simply a means of maintaining order by repressing Italian partisans and persecuting Italian Jews.



*Postcard of German and Fascist troops from the Salò archive*

Despite Mussolini's initial aspirations, the Republic failed to rule Italy and to either look after its people's needs or protect them from outside forces. In particular, it failed to maintain public order, partly through inadequate policing, but also because of the large numbers of 'outlaws' who were roaming the countryside. In September 1943, large numbers of ex-soldiers, without orders, but still armed, were at large. There were also an estimated 50,000 escaped British, Greek and Slav prisoners-of-war. Many of these individuals formed 'armed bands' of partisans living in the hills and woods of central and northern Italy. When the Republic tried to increase its army by calling up three more age-groups, only a small

percentage responded. Many escaped to the hills to avoid the call-up, and also the German forces, who were deporting thousands of young Italian men to work as forced labourers in Germany and elsewhere. By June 1944, it was estimated that there were 82,000 'rebels'. The Germans not only rounded up thousands of Italian Jews to be sent to the concentration camps, but also carried out brutal massacres of Italian civilians and partisans, during the German occupation of Italy in response to partisan activity against the occupying forces.

The German army corps in Italy surrendered to the British and American allies in the spring of 1945, before the war in Germany had ended. The Salò Republic disappeared without trace after a mere one and a half years in existence. Most of the ministers of the Republic were shot by partisans. Before the German surrender, Mussolini attempted to escape with his mistress, Clara Petacci, but they were caught by Communist partisans on the shore of Lake Como, at Dongo, and shot on 28 April 1945. Their bodies were taken to Milan, and were hung upside down in the Piazza Loreto as proof of the death of the *Duce*.



*Postcard cartoon of allied leaders destroying Italy from the Salò archive*

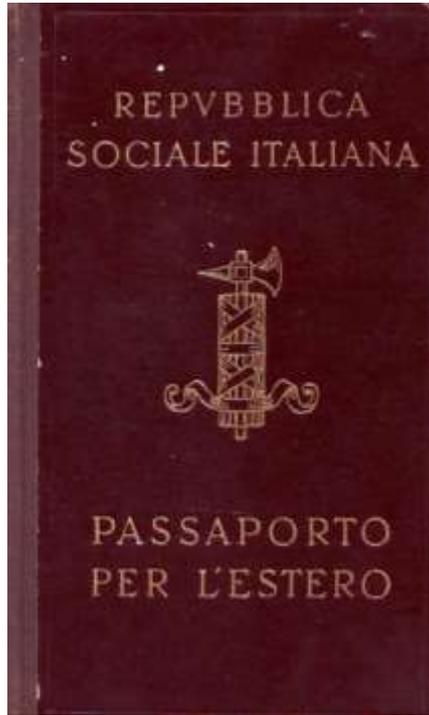
The collection of documents from the Salò Republic held at the University of Reading Special Collections Service comprises one box containing about 500 items. The collection, which is accompanied by a handlist, includes material from a number of different administrative departments. One group of files from the Ministero degli affari esteri contains around 350 documents pertaining to the requisition of properties for government use. Other sections include orders from the Ministero delle forze armate: Sottosegretariato di Stato per la marina, vehicle and travel permits from the Guardia del Duce.

One of the most interesting aspects of the collection is a small collection of anti-Allied and pro-Fascist propaganda postcards from the Ministero della cultura popolare, examples of which are shown above and below.



*Postcard of civilians fleeing from an allied air raid from the Salò archive*

Also of particular interest are three passports issued by the Salò regime, one of which is shown below (front cover, first page and personal information and photograph).



There are also around 40 intercepted radio messages from Allied broadcasts, including from Reuters and from the Vatican radio, and twenty bulletins issued by the regime's news agency, the Agenzia Stefani.



*Letterhead for the Agenzia Stefani from unused paper in the Salò archive*

As a whole, the collection represents a fascinating insight into a small chapter of a significant part of twentieth century history.

Other archive collections relating to Italian history held at the University of Reading Special Collections Service include the papers of the Italian Refugees' Relief Committee (MS 943), which was organised between 1927 and 1930 to help Italian exiles in France, and the papers of Cecil Sprigge (MS 1703), a journalist and writer on Italian affairs whose jobs included that of Reuter's chief correspondent in Italy from 1943 to 1946.

## References

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*Letterhead from the Salò archive*