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Key Facts

- Benito Mussolini was appointed Prime Minister of Italy after his 'March on Rome' in 1922. He was a fascist leader.
- Hitler and Nazism considered Italian fascism as a right-wing nationalist ideology, which paved the way for Nazism.
- Mussolini, however, viewed Hitler in a different light. He had low regard for Hitler and Nazism as he thought they were uncultured and simplistic.
- A cautious alliance was made regardless, and they met several times, even signing the Pact of Steel in 1939.
- Mussolini refused to help Hitler during his impromptu invasion of Poland in September 1939. He claimed that Italian industry and military production was not yet ready.

Italy was Nazi Germany's obvious political and military ally in Europe. Benito Mussolini, the Italian fascist, had been governing Italy since 1925 and Hitler acknowledged the role played by Italian fascism in starting Nazi Germany. The relationship between them, however, was bumpy and complex. As a result, the alliance formed was not as firm as many anticipated. Despite being military allies by the late 1930s, Germany and Italy still had their own priorities and national interests and were cautious in supporting the interests or ambitions of the other. This alliance between Nazi Germany and fascist Italy was formed out of convenience and experience.

The Formation of the Alliance

Hitler was a great admirer of Mussolini especially in his early years as leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), which was basically the Nazi Party.

Hitler especially admired Mussolini's 'March on Rome', which was a protest in 1922 that saw thousands of fascists and fascist supporters walk to the Italian capital in order to force Mussolini's appointment as prime minister. They succeeded. Hitler first wrote to Mussolini about the 'March on Rome' in 1923. In an attempt to emulate Mussolini, Hitler staged the Munich putsch. The Nazis were also given some financial support by Mussolini from the late 1920s. The Sturmabteilung, which was a paramilitary wing of the Nazi party, benefited from this as their brigade was allowed to train with his own paramilitary brigade, the Blackshirts. When Hitler finally ascended into power in the 1930 German election, he was publicly praised by Mussolini, who hailed it as a victory for his own fascist ideology and he began giving Hitler advice on tactics.

This was just for the cameras, though, because in private Mussolini criticised Hitler and his party. He described them as "boring" because of their "unrefined" and "simplistic" ideas. Mussolini was known to be self-obsessed and an egomaniac. He also thought that his ascension to power was more glorious than Hitler's. The first meeting between Mussolini and Hitler, held in Venice in June 1934, was a disaster. Mussolini showcased his arrogance as his German was not fluent, but he refused to use a translator. Out of pride, he refused to admit that due to Hitler's heavy Austrian accent, he could not fully understand what he was saying. Hitler engaged in long monologues, and Mussolini soon became bored. This meeting only served to worsen the relationship between them, even though Nazi and Italian fascist propaganda of the 1930s suggested a close working relationship.

They also had different views on race. Both considered white Europeans as the founders of civilization and culture, but they differed on anti-Semitism and eugenics. Mussolini was an Italian nationalist who usually glorified ancient Rome for its triumphs. He was, therefore, conservative of Hitler's belief in Aryan supremacy. He took a swipe at the Nazis in one of his speeches describing it as a "pity" how the Nazi's expressed their racial views since the Germans were "the descendants of those who were illiterate when Rome had Caesar, Virgil, and Augustus."

Out of convenience, Hitler and Mussolini managed to put their differences aside, and a degree of co-operation was achieved. In the Abyssinian crisis of the mid-1930s, Germany offered support to Rome. Mussolini wanted to replicate the glory of ancient Rome by building a new Italian empire. To kick-start his vision, he wanted to conquer Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia), one of the few African kingdoms not yet under European control. In October 1935, Italian troops invaded and occupied much of Abyssinia. The league of nations criticised Italy. This move was backed by Hitler even though Germany had pulled out of the League of Nations in 1933. In 1935, however, the Germans secretly supplied arms to Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie for defence against the Italian invasion. German-Italian relations were further improved by their joint involvement in the Spanish Civil War in 1936. In January 1936, Mussolini told a German envoy of how Nazi Germany and fascist Italy shared 'a common destiny' and later in November changed his view on Hitler and Germany. Mussolini described them as the 'axis' around which Europe would revolve.

When visiting Germany in September 1937, Mussolini was greeted with a long parade of troops, artillery and military equipment. This show of German might was obviously set up to impress the Italian leader, and it worked. Two months later, Italy joined Germany and Japan in the Anti-Comintern Pact, which was an agreement to resist the expansion of the Soviet Union and control the spread of communism through invading Austria in March 1938. After this invasion, Germany had become the dominant partner in the relationship as the German army was perched on the Italian frontier.

The alliance was bolstered by Mussolini's Manifesto of Race signed on July 1938. Hitler's influence on Mussolini had grown a great deal. In this largely unpopular manifesto, the government stripped Italian Jews of their citizenship and ensured that Jews did not hold any government positions. Mussolini was part of the four-nation summit held in Czechoslovakia that aimed to resolve the crisis and the Munich Agreement was signed in September 1938.

To return the favour, Hitler visited Rome on May 3, accompanied by Nazi officials Goebbels and Ribbentrop. They were also accompanied by five hundred party officials, diplomats, security guards and journalists in three trains. As a token of appreciation of his previous visit, Mussolini had a special station built for the Germans. On arrival, they were greeted by Mussolini and King Victor Emmanuel. Mussolini outdid himself. Rome was adorned with decorations including swastikas (the Nazi party's official symbol), and a new street was named after Adolf Hitler. The German leader was escorted to the Quirinal Palace, where he stayed as a guest. The next day was dedicated to tours of Rome followed by two private meetings between Hitler and Mussolini. They later reviewed the Italian fleet in Naples.

At a state banquet on May 8th, Hitler and Mussolini made speeches of German-Italian solidarity and Hitler announced that Germany regarded the Italian frontier as 'forever unchangeable'. This led to the signing of a pact of friendship in May 1939, extending the Nazi-fascist alliance between Germany and Italy. This pact, informally known as the 'Pact of Steel', was a ten-year agreement that committed Rome and Berlin to supply each other with military and economic aid if either nation was at war. Secret preparations were made in case a European war erupted along with agreement on a rapid increase in German-Italian trade and military cooperation. Both nations secretly agreed to avoid waging war without the other until 1943.

In September 1939, however, Hitler ignored this decree when he ordered German troops to invade Poland. Mussolini informed Hitler that he would not be able to provide him with the support he needed as Italy would not be ready for war until late 1942 due to a decreased rate of industrial growth and military production. After this waiting period was over, in June 1940, Mussolini declared war and helped Germany with its conquest of Western Europe. Mussolini's main war aim was to seize control of British and French

colonies in northern Africa. Mussolini would live to regret this decision as, by late 1941, most Italian troops in Abyssinia had been defeated. The Allies from the West invaded Italy in July 1943, leading to the expulsion of Mussolini from power and the formation of a new government that surrendered to the Allies in September.

Hitler and Mussolini's deaths

After Italy's surrender in September 1943, the former fascist Italian dictator was captured and executed in April 1945. His body was suspended on meat hooks as he was stoned. Two days later, Hitler committed suicide in Berlin.