

Duce's Berlin-Ruled 'Ovra' Can't Even Trust Own Men

By EDWARD D. KLEINLERER

The writer of this story was a correspondent in Italy and Italian colonial possession for 20 years. After being expelled from Italy, he traveled extensively in the Middle East, studying dissemination of Fascist propaganda in that area.

pm Mussolini issued this communique the other day:

"Il Duce has received the Leaders of the Ovra and has expressed satisfaction with their work."

This might have been worded:

"The people of Italy are sick and tired of the Axis. Increased terrorization of the population accordingly becomes necessary."

The Ovra is Italy's secret police, now practically under the guardianship of the Gestapo. The announcement that Mussolini had received the Ovra higher-ups, given front page treatment throughout the controlled Fascist press, was a reminder to all, particularly the underground. In Italy the people know how to read between the lines.

When all goes well, dictators do not advertise the existence of their secret police. But all is not going well in Italy. Simultaneously with the special Ovra publicity, Mussolini announced a sweeping purge of the Fascist party, dismissal of some 70,000 members. Purges of that magnitude are an infallible sign of internal disorder in totalitarian lands.

'Ovra' an Abbreviation

"Ovra" is an abbreviation formed from the initials of the Italian words: *Organizzazione-Vigilanza Repressione Antifascismo*, or Vigilance Organization for Repression of Anti-Fascism. It is little known outside of Italy. More recently it has been taking orders from Heinrich Himmler's Gestapo.

The man who built up the Ovra, Arturo Bocchini, tried to resist orders from Berlin, but he was overruled. He died of "influenza," according to the official statement of the case. In Rome everybody knew that the Germans had ordered Bocchini's removal.

At first, Himmler moved into the Ovra through the use of so-called liaison officers of the Gestapo. At the outbreak of war he dispatched 600 of his agents as "technical advisers" to vital war sites such as Terni, Torino, Sanpieroarena, Congiliano Ligure and Livorno, where sabotage and revolt were most to be feared.

After Mussolini's last meeting with Hitler in Salzburg, when more men were demanded of Italy for the Russian front, Himmler sent 800 additional liaison officers into Italian territory, most of them with assignments on the politically inflammatory island of Sicily. Sicilians and German troops do not get along, and Italian knives have been known to be lodged between the shoulders of Nazi soldiers.

Evidence of Pressure

Recent arrests of Italian aristocrats, "dissident" Fascists, leaders of local sections of Catholic Action, and small business men and professionals here and there are evidence of German pressure on the Ovra. At German insistence, the Italian police prefects, answerable to the Ovra, were made the real bosses of the provinces, with the local Fascist secretaries subordinated to them. Measures of this kind are designed to tighten the German grip on the land.

No Italian knows whom he can take into his confidence. Everybody is suspect. Agents of the Ovra operate within the cells



The Gestapo spies on Mussolini's Ovra and the Ovra spies on itself. (Story <)

of the Fascist organization—they are in farming villages as well as the mills; they hold posts in Army and Navy; they work as servants in households. They are everywhere.

The personnel of the General Staff of the Ovra is a secret. It meets at irregular periods and at varying places. No Italian ever was nominated to a position of any importance, either at home or abroad, before a detailed political "portrait" was submitted by the Ovra.

Not least feared are those agents of the Ovra who charge innocent persons with crime and sedition solely to win personal prestige, or to blackmail them, or to force them to contribute to local Fascist graft. Many cases are known where Ovra informers denounced individuals they never had met, so that they might claim cash rewards for their services. This type of villainy has become so commonplace that the Ovra headquarters had to check its own informers to establish whether they actually had personal contact with those whom they betrayed.

Founded in 1930

It is now known that the two chiefs of the Ovra in the U. S. A. were Signor Cavaradossi, Italian Vice-consul in New York, and Angelo Flavio Guidi, an Italian newspaperman with headquarters in Manhattan. Guidi, who served as contact man between Rome and the Fascist network in North America, left this country a few days before Mussolini attacked France. He now works for the Ministry of Press and Propaganda in Rome as a special expert on America.

Arturo Bocchini founded the Ovra in November, 1930, at a time when anti-Fascism swept through Italy and threatened to gather enough momentum to overthrow Mussolini. The poverty of the Italian masses was seized upon by anti-Fascist leaders, who pointed to the high living of the Fascist bosses in Milan, Turin, and other industrial centers. Underground branches of the movement called "Liberty and Justice" sprang up everywhere.

Old-line Fascists, graduates of the School of Fascist Mysticism founded in Milan by Il Duce's brother, Arnaldo Mussolini, and any stool pigeon willing to betray his friends and relatives for a few lire, were the chief recruits for the Ovra. The most favored agents were the so-called *Fascisti ante-Marcia*, the Fascists who were with Mussolini before the march to Rome.