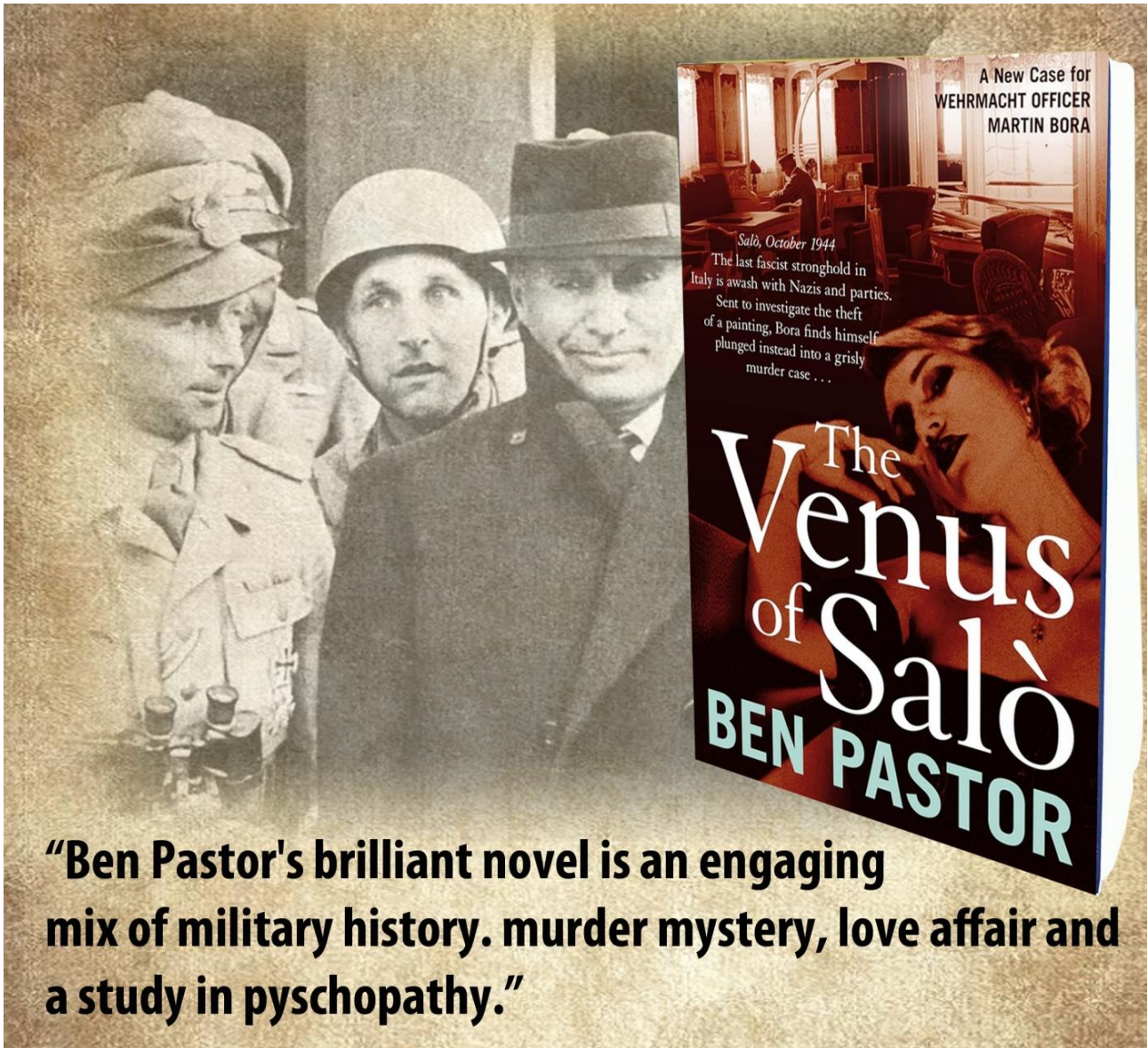


THE VENUS OF SALO . . . Between the covers



**“Ben Pastor's brilliant novel is an engaging mix of military history, murder mystery, love affair and a study in psychopathy.”**

The Venus of Salò **BEN PASTOR**



BITTER  
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PRESS

**Not for the first time**, I am a late arrival at the party. This is the eighth book in a series featuring Wehrmacht soldier, Colonel Martin Bora. We find him in the north of Italy, in October 1944. It is a strange time in Italian history. The Allies have, at huge cost, breached the various German defensive lines, even the formidable Gothic Line. But winter, with its rain and snow, is not far away, and the fighting in late 1943/early 1944 was a brutal and sapping experience the Allies are unwilling to repeat. In the far north, there is a last pocket of Fascism. This time line of that eventful period may provide a useful backdrop.

**25th July 1943**, Mussolini dismissed by King Victor Emmanuel III and arrested.

**12th September 1943**, Mussolini rescued from imprisonment by German special forces.

**23rd September 1943**, Italian Social Republic created, with its capital at Salò.

**29th September 1943**, the rest of Italy surrenders to the Allies.

**28th October 1943**, National Republican Army (Esercito Nazionale Repubblicano) created, loyal to Mussolini.

**8th December 1943**, Republican National Guard created, loyal to Mussolini.

**4th June 1944**, Allies enter Rome.

**20th July 1944**, Hitler survives the von Stauffenberg assassination attempt.

**14th October 1944**, Rommel commits suicide. Announced as death from complications from an earlier road accident.

**Most of the action** takes place in and around Salò, a town on the shores of Lake Garda. In the mountains and valleys around, German forces and Italian troops loyal to Mussolini are fighting a savage war against Italian partisan groups. Martin Bora, a veteran of campaigns including a spell on the Eastern Front, has been driven by Gestapo agent Jacob Mengs to Salò, where he is told to investigate the theft of a priceless Titian painting, known as The Venus of Salò. It had been 'borrowed' from its owner – Giovanni Pozzi – a rich Italian textile magnate, and was hanging in the HQ of the local German army commander when thieves created a diversion, and cut it from its canvas.

**In the novel**, everyone is at each other's throats. The ENR can't stand the RNG (see the timeline), the SS and the Gestapo loathe the regular German army, and the German high command have scant respect for their Italian allies. Even the Italian partisans – divided into communist and royalist bands – are at daggers drawn with each other; both however are contemptuous of local farmers and peasants, especially those they suspect of being collaborators.

**As Bora investigates the theft of the painting**, there are three deaths which puzzle him. First, a music teacher hangs herself. Then, the maid of a renowned soprano apparently shoots herself with a pistol given to her by an RNG captain, and a seamstress is butchered with a razor-sharp blade. While trying to work out how the three deaths are connected, Bora is entranced by his own flesh and blood 'Venus' in the shape of Annie Tedesco, widowed daughter of Giovanni Pozzi. What Bora doesn't know (but we do, of course) is that all the while he is being set up by the Gestapo and SS. Orchestrated by Jacob Mengs, a dossier of Bora's apparent disloyalty to the Third Reich is being prepared and, in the wake of the July plot.

**Most of the book's characters are fictional**, with the exception of a few more exalted figures (left to right, below), such as SS *Obergruppenführer* Karl Wolff (Himmler's adjutant), Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, head of Italian troops loyal to Mussolini, *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring, and top SS man Herbert Kappler.

**The notion**, in WW2 fiction, of 'the good German' as a central character, is certainly not new. Perhaps the best known of these characters is the late Philip Kerr's **Bernie Gunther**, but there is also a good series by Luke McCallin featuring Hauptmann **Gregor Reinhardt**. The 'good German' as a concept in real history is much more complex; at a senior level, Rommel was forced to commit suicide over his alleged involvement in the von Stauffenberg plot, and Admiral

Wilhelm Canaris, chief of the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence), was hanged for treason by the SS just weeks before Hitler committed suicide. Shamefully, Albert Speer, after his release from prison in 1966, made a decent career – lasting almost twenty years – as a media personality and TV ‘talking head’ on the Nazi era.

**Ben Pastor’s brilliant novel** is an engaging mix of military history, murder mystery, love affair and a study in psychopathy. Beyond the fiction, however, she reminds us that, for the Allies, the fighting continued almost to the proverbial eleventh hour – the surrender of German forces was formally accepted on 2nd May 1945. The carnage in Italy cost the German army between 30K – 40K dead. The allies suffered more grievously, with deaths estimated as 60K – 70K. ***The Venus of Salò*** is published by Bitter Lemon Press and is out now.