

3. THE INTERWAR WORLD

The Rise of Fascism

Although Italy had fought on the side of the Allies in World War I, the Italians did not feel victorious after the war. They had expected both the size and the economy of their country to grow after the war and neither did.

In the secret treaty the Italians signed to enter the war, they were promised great territorial gains if the Allies won. After the war, however, Italy's expansionist aims conflicted with Woodrow Wilson's ideas of popular sovereignty. At the Versailles peace conference, the Allies refused to give the Italians all they had been promised.

One area that Italy wanted to expand into was Fiume, a port city on the Adriatic Sea that had a largely Yugoslavian population. In 1919, while negotiations about the status of Fiume were taking place at the Versailles peace conference, an Italian Nationalist named Gabriele D'Annunzio organized a group of volunteers and took over the city.

In 1920 the Italian government negotiated an agreement with Yugoslavia to make Fiume an independent city-state. D'Annunzio's group was driven out of the city. His movement, however, showed that Italians were upset enough about the peace negotiations to fight them.

During this same time period, Italy's economy, like those of many other nations, faltered. Inflation shot up and the value of the Italian *lira* decreased drastically.

As a result, the Italians felt isolated and beaten in the postwar years. The Italian people lost confidence in the European state system and in the effectiveness of their own parliamentary government. Strikes and riots broke out across the country.

Italian political leaders worked desperately to adapt their country's political system to the times. The Socialist party organized Italian workers and farmers and pushed for reforms. The Catholic church, always a major political force in Italy, founded the Catholic People's party in 1919. This party soon competed with the Socialists for the votes of the Italian masses.



At the same time, a former Socialist named Benito Mussolini organized groups called *fasci di combattimento*, "groups for combat." The *fasci di combattimento* were extremely conservative Nationalists who wished to destroy left-wing political movements in Italy. They gradually came to be called *Fascists*.

Mussolini founded the National Fascist party in 1921. He later used his party to march on Rome to pressure the king to appoint him prime minister.

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At first, the Fascists were merely an extremist group. Mussolini's militaristic followers were mainly disaffected young people who believed that they had to protect Italy from Socialist or Communist revolution. Their fears were probably unfounded. The leftist parties in Italy were relatively moderate, and the danger of revolution in Italy was never very high.

Still, the Fascists played up the threat of "Bolshevism" and led many Italians to believe that only their group was capable of keeping Italy from revolution. The Fascists played a prominent role in putting down small Socialist and Communist riots in Italy in 1920 and 1921.

In early 1920, Mussolini's Fascists numbered about 30,000. A year later, more than 100,000 had joined the group. By the fall of 1922, the Fascists had more than 300,000 members. As their numbers grew, their actions became more widespread and more brutal. Some Italians began to fear the Fascists' power.

The Fascists became a political party in 1921. In May of that year, they won thirty-five seats in the 560-member Italian parliament. From that time on, the Fascists worked to gain control of the Italian government.

In the fall of 1922, Mussolini led the Fascists in a "March on Rome" to demonstrate their strength and to demand a stronger voice in the Italian government. From all parts of Italy, Fascists converged on the city.

Italian moderates asked King Victor Emmanuel I to declare martial law so that the Italian army could disband the Fascists. The king refused either because he feared Mussolini's power or because he believed that the Fascist movement was not necessarily dangerous.

The Fascists quickly demonstrated that they had massive popular support. Mussolini then increased his demands, insisting that the king name him prime minister of Italy.

Victor Emmanuel, still believing that he and the other Italian political parties could work with the Fascists, agreed to Mussolini's demands. On October 29 Mussolini arrived in Italy and was named prime minister.

Mussolini soon showed, however, that

he was not willing to work with either the other parties or the king. He quickly moved to turn Italy into a Fascist state.

First, Mussolini convinced the Italian parliament to grant him the power to rule as a dictator for one year. In that time, he strengthened the army and placed Fascists in important government positions. At the end of the year, a new voting law was passed insuring that the Fascists would remain in power.

There was little organized opposition to Mussolini. Many Italians admired the way he had established firm control over Italy's government and society.

On the surface, the Fascists simply appeared to be governing the country more efficiently. The riots stopped, workers returned to their jobs, and businesses expanded. Foreign visitors noted that Mussolini had managed to get the Italian trains to run on time.

Most Italians, then, were willing to overlook some of the Fascists' excesses. This allowed Mussolini to establish his dictatorship more firmly.

In 1924 an opponent of Mussolini named Giacomo Matteotti was murdered. Believing that the Fascists were involved, most of the members of parties who opposed the Fascists in the Italian parliament seized the opportunity to announce that they would not cooperate with Mussolini. In response, Mussolini refused to allow opposition groups to meet. Later he declared that the opposition members who had not cooperated had forfeited their seats in the parliament.

Mussolini then worked to make his dictatorship permanent. He established strict controls over the Italian press and set about removing all non-Fascists from the government. Italians who dared oppose Mussolini were imprisoned or killed.

Next, Mussolini announced that all political parties except the Fascist party were illegal. The powers of the parliament were gradually eliminated. A Great Council of the Fascist party, consisting of thirty of Mussolini's most loyal followers, took control of the Italian government. The Great Council was led by Mussolini himself, who served as both chief executive and party leader. Secret police were used to make sure that all effective

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opposition to the new system was silenced.

Mussolini also worked to change the Italian economic system. He tried to turn Italy into a "corporate state" in which all sectors of the economy worked for the common good. In theory, this meant that employers and employees in each industry would form a corporation and make decisions together.

In reality, the Fascist government tended to side with big business leaders, and workers lost power. With the help of the general European economic recovery of the 1920s, however, unemployment went down and Fascist policies stayed popular.

In 1929 Mussolini moved to reconcile the Fascist government with the Roman Catholic church. He had long considered the support of the Catholics essential to his regime.

In the Lateran Treaty of 1929, the Catholic church promised to keep out of political matters and to allow the Fascists to govern the country. In return, the Fascists recognized the authority of the pope over the small territory of Vatican City and made Catholicism the state religion of Italy.

The Lateran Treaty was one of Mussolini's most significant accomplishments. It signaled that his control of Italy was complete.

Having established himself at home, Mussolini next wanted to make Italy the world power he believed it deserved to be. In the 1930s, he greatly expanded the Italian military and took an aggressive stance in international relations. Mussolini believed that Italy could not survive without becoming a world power.

Eventually, though, this desire for expansion drove Mussolini and the Fascists right into the arms of Hitler and the Nazis. As much as the Italian economy had grown, Italy could never stand alone economically. There were simply not enough raw materials in the country. The Italians would always need the support of some other power or powers.



As World War II neared, Mussolini became aware that Italy could no longer depend on western European countries for that support. His decision to turn to Hitler for help was crucial in determining the course of World War II.

Italian Expansion Under Mussolini

Italian territory, 1935
Italian expansion under Mussolini

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A. People

DIRECTIONS: Match each phrase to the person it describes.

- a. Gabriele D'Annunzio
- b. Benito Mussolini
- c. Victor Emmanuel
- d. Giacomo Matteotti

- _____ 1. leader of the Fascists
- _____ 2. Italian nationalist who led the group that took over Fiume
- _____ 3. king of Italy
- _____ 4. opponent of the Fascists who was murdered in 1924

B. True or False

DIRECTIONS: Read each of the following statements. If the statement is true, mark "T" in the space provided. If the statement is false, mark "F" in the space and change the statement to make it true.

- _____ 5. The Italians felt isolated and beaten in the postwar years.
- _____ 6. Gabriele D'Annunzio organized the *fasci di combattimento*.
- _____ 7. Benito Mussolini was a former Socialist.
- _____ 8. The Fascists wanted to destroy right-wing political movements in Italy.
- _____ 9. The Italian government granted Mussolini the power to rule as a dictator.
- _____ 10. Under the Italian "corporate state," workers gained power.

C. Short Answer

DIRECTIONS: Answer each question in the space provided.

- 11. Briefly explain why the Italians felt isolated and beaten in the postwar years.

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12. What events in Italy caused the Fascist movement to become popular?

13. How did Mussolini manage to become prime minister of Italy?

14. Why was there little organized opposition to Mussolini and the Fascists in Italy?

15. Why did Mussolini have to turn to Hitler for support before World War II?