

Rise of Fascism in Italy

A general mood of dissatisfaction permeated Italy after the war. Although it had fought on the side of the Allies, Italy did not gain all that the Allies had promised. It had expected to receive huge portions of territory from the Central Powers. Instead, it only gained a small piece of Austrian territory, leaving many Italians with bitter feelings.

The war had also aggravated Italy's economic woes. War debts were staggering. When millions of Italian soldiers returned home, they found no jobs. The nation's industries lacked raw materials. But even if it had possessed the materials, Italy had no market for its products. Its best customers, Germany and Austria, had no money to buy anything.

Conditions were perfect for an opportunistic leader, and one soon emerged on the political horizon. His name was Benito Mussolini (MOO-suh-LEE-nee). Born in 1883, Mussolini came from a working-class family. As a young man, he worked as a journalist and was active in Socialist politics. But after the war, he attacked the Socialists for failing to put forward a policy of social reform. He eventually abandoned socialism and became an ardent nationalist.

Mussolini formed a new political party in 1919

called the *Fasci di Combattimento*, or Fascist party. Scism (FA-SHIN-zuhm) is a political philosophy that advocates the glorification of the state, a single-party system with a strong ruler, and an aggressive form of nationalism. Like communism, fascism was a totalitarian system of government, meaning that it gave the state absolute authority. But fascism defended private property and the class structure. According to its principles, the cause of the nation was to be advanced at all cost. War and conquest were glorified to achieve national goals.

Mussolini's Road to Power

Conditions in Italy continued to deteriorate in the months following the war. The value of the lira declined steadily, the price of bread rose, and a shortage of coal hampered industrial production. To express their dissatisfaction, workers staged a series of strikes that paralyzed the country. In September 1920, workers in Lombardy and Piedmont took over the factories. Mussolini showed his support for the strikers in a speech at Trieste: "I demand that the factories increase their production. If this is guaranteed to me by the workers in place of the industrialists, I shall declare without hesitation that the former have the right to substitute themselves ... [for] the latter."

The unrest spread to rural Italy. Peasants seized land from wealthy landowners, and tenant farmers refused to pay their rents. The situation was so chaotic that the middle and upper classes feared a Communist revolution. Ever the politician, Mussolini offered "a little something to everyone." To appease the landowners, he vowed to end the unrest and protect private property. To woo the workers, he promised full employment and workers' benefits. He pleased nationalists by pledging to restore Italy to its former greatness.

By 1921 fascism had become a major political force in Italy. But the Blackshirts, as Mussolini's followers were called, did not rely on verbal assaults alone to achieve their goals. They physically attacked political opponents in the streets and drove elected officials from office.

Believing that fascism was a useful way of controlling the Socialists and workers, the democratic government did nothing to stop the Blackshirts. As a result, Mussolini grew bolder. In October 1922 the Fascists staged a march on Rome. Mussolini waited in Milan to see how the government would react. Believing that the Fascists were planning to seize power, the cabinet asked King Victor Emmanuel III to declare martial law. The king refused, and the cabinet resigned. Instead of calling for new elections, the monarch named Mussolini prime minister.

Mussolini's Dictatorship

Mussolini quickly put an end to democratic rule in Italy. In a 1924 election, Blackshirts used their now familiar brutal tactics to make sure that Italians voted for Fascist candidates. As a result, Fascists won a majority of seats in the Italian parliament. The Fascist-controlled parliament gave Mussolini sweeping new powers. After this election Mussolini began calling himself *Il Duce* (eel DOO-chay), "The Leader."

To consolidate his power, Mussolini reorganized the Italian government and established a corporate state. Under the corporate state, Mussolini hoped to bring workers and employers together and consequently to end the political quarreling that he associated with a democratic, multiparty system. To this end, he banned non-Fascist parties and ordered that unions, or corporations of workers and employers, be formed in each industry. Each syndicate sent representatives to a legislature in Rome that set policies on wages, production, and distribution. In theory, the corporate state was a new form of democracy; in practice, it was a political tool expressly designed for strengthening Mussolini's power.

Many Italians bitterly opposed fascism. They mourned the loss of democracy and individual freedoms. The Fascists arrested, assaulted, and murdered any who dared speak out against the abuses. "The masses must obey," thundered Mussolini. "They cannot afford to waste time searching for truth."

A majority of Italians, however, supported Mussolini. They believed he had done Italy a great service by preventing a Communist revolution and had brought order to the nation. After all, they said, he "made the trains run on time."

By building up Italy's armed forces, Mussolini did solve the unemployment problem. Even more important, he rekindled the feelings of patriotism and nationalism that had lain dormant in the Italian people. He made it clear to Italians that it was in their destiny to recapture all the greatness that had made the glory of ancient Rome. He would use all the economic and human resources available to make Italy a great power again.