

Fascism, Mussolini, and the Corporate State

Fascists believe that liberal democracy is obsolete, and they regard the complete mobilization of society under a totalitarian one-party state as necessary to prepare a nation for armed conflict and to respond effectively to economic difficulties. Such a state is led by a strong leader—such as a dictator, and a martial government composed of the members of the governing fascist party and former military commanders—to forge national unity and maintain a stable and orderly society. Fascism rejects assertions that violence is automatically negative in nature, and views political violence, war, and imperialism as means that can achieve national rejuvenation. Fascists advocate a mixed economy, achieving absolute control through protectionist and interventionist economic policies.

The October Revolution of 1917—in which Bolshevik communists led by Lenin and Trotsky seized power in Russia—greatly influenced the development of European fascism. Communism strove for universal socialism and world wide support of the working class. In the years between World War I and World War II (1917 to 1940) each European nation (many still ruled by royalty) developed right wing parties to combat communism, of which the most extreme form is fascism.

Before World War I, Benito Mussolini had been the leading member of the Italian Socialist Party. He served in the Royal Italian Army during the war until he was badly wounded and discharged in 1917. World War I revised his thinking to a nationalist one. In 1919 he consolidated control over the Fascist movement in Italy. He pronounced “We declare war against socialism, not because it is socialism, but because it has opposed nationalism.”

The liberal establishment, fearing a Soviet-style revolution after the war, started to endorse the small National Fascist Party led by Mussolini. In October 1922 the Blackshirts of the National Fascist Party attempted a coup (the “March on Rome”) which failed, but at the last minute King Victor Emmanuel III refused to proclaim a state of siege and appointed Mussolini prime minister. Over the next few years, Mussolini banned all political parties and curtailed personal liberties, thus forming a police state. These actions attracted international attention and eventually inspired similar dictatorships such as Nazi Germany and Franco’s Spain.

Mussolini’s foremost priority was the subjugation of the minds of the Italian people and the use of propaganda to do so. A lavish cult of personality centered on the figure of Mussolini (Il Duce) was promoted by the regime. This cult attributed to him quasi-divine capacities. Under him Italy would become great again, as she had been in the days of ancient Rome.

The Fascist regime created a corporatist economic system in 1925, in which the Italian employers’ association and Fascist trade unions agreed to recognize each other as the sole representatives of Italy’s employers and employees. The Fascist regime created a Ministry of Corporations that organized the Italian economy into 22 sectoral corporations, banned workers’ strikes and lock-outs, and in 1927 created the Charter of Labour, which established workers’ rights and duties and created labour tribunals to arbitrate employer-employee disputes. In practice, the employee organizations were rarely led by employees themselves but instead by appointed Fascist party members.

Mussolini was a role model for Adolph Hitler. The two were often seen together in the 1930’s. Both these European nations wanted more territory. German military preparations dwarfed the efforts of Italy. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. In 1936 Germany remilitarized the industrial Rhineland; the region had been demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles which ended World War I. In 1938 Germany annexed Austria, and in 1939

invaded Poland which began World War II. Both England and France courted Italy, but in 1940, Mussolini joined Germany as the Axis (soon joined by Japan), after the surrender of France to Germany. Mussolini thought it would be a brief war.

Italy's role was to control the Mediterranean, including Libya and Egypt. But efforts by both Italian and German troops could not defeat British and later American forces. After 1942, the Axis forces began to falter. By 1943, after Italy had faced multiple military failures, culminating in the Allied invasion of Italy, Mussolini was removed as head of government and arrested on the order of King Victor Emmanuel III, who proceeded to dismantle the Fascist state and declared Italy's switching of allegiance to the Allied side.

Mussolini was rescued from arrest by German forces. As Allied troops fought their way up the Italian peninsula, Mussolini and his mistress were held up in various chateaus. On 28 April 1945, Mussolini was captured and executed by Italian communist partisans.

