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Fascist Italy

Italy before 1919

Italy achieved her unification in 1870. She had a constitutional monarchy like that of Great Britain. But democratic traditions failed to develop in Italy because the government was controlled by corrupt politicians, called the party bosses. They controlled the elections by bribing the voters. Once they were in power, they were more interested in making personal gains for themselves than in solving the social and economic problems of the people. As a result, by 1914 Italy remained a poor and backward country. The franchise was limited to 2.5 per cent of the population until after the election of 1913. Industrial progress was slow. Moreover, Italy was poor in natural resources and lack of fertile land. Many of the farm labourers were landless and were often unemployed. Thus millions of Italians were forced to emigrate abroad.

The foreign policy of the Italian governments also lacked the grandeur the days of the Caesars. Although Italy tried to raise her own international prestige by acquiring overseas colonies, she met with no success. She was defeated by Abyssinia, an African state, at the battle of Adowa in 1896. Because of its lack of success in both domestic and foreign affairs, the parliamentary government became a symbol of decadence and corruption— it was neither trusted nor respected by the people.

New Problems After The First World War

The government was faced with many new problems after the First World War. The first one was the Italian dissatisfaction with the territorial settlement made at the Paris Peace Conference. Most of the Italians had expected big territorial gains when they entered the war. According to the Treaty of London, Italy was promised Trentino, Trieste, Southern Tyrol, Istria, Dalmatia, the coastal districts of Albania, a share in the division of the Ottoman Empire and of the German colonies in Africa. Although the Italians fought bravely and lost 600,000 men, the territories ceded to Italy in the Paris Peace Conference were not as many as she had originally been promised. Italy was given Trentino, Trieste, Tyrol and Istria, but she did not get any former German colonies nor any land in Asia Minor, Albania and Dalmatia. There was much resentment against the weak and unsuccessful foreign policy of the Italian government. In September 1919, a band of alien patriots, under Gabriele D'Annunzio, took Fiume, a port on the Dalmatian coast, by force in defiance of the decision of the Paris Peace Conference. But the Italians could not enjoy their victory for long because in November 1920 the Italian government had signed the treaty of Rapallo with Yugoslavia, by which Fiume became a free city under the League of Nations and Italy renounced Dalmatia as her sphere of influence. In January 1921, the Italian troops drove D'Annunzio and his followers from Fiume. Many Italians were deeply disappointed with their government which seemed to be too weak in its foreign policy.

The second problem was general economic distress. Italy was a poor nation. She could only support her war effort by obtaining foreign loans. Immediately after the war, as Europe was exhausted by the war, the Italian tourist trade and export trade came to a standstill and there was large-scale unemployment throughout the country. The problem of unemployment was aggravated by the return of millions of ex-soldiers to Italy and a new immigration law of the U.S. government which restricted entry of immigrants. Moreover, runaway inflation added to the sufferings of the Italians. The lira had only one-fifth of its pre-war value. Encouraged by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the unemployed workers and peasants stirred up riots and strikes throughout the country.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Rise of Fascist Dictatorship in Italy

- [The Red Menace \(#red-menace\)](#)
- [Rise of Mussolini \(#rise-mussolini\)](#)

- [New Strength For The Fascist Movement \(#new-strength\)](#)
 - [The Seizure of Power by the Fascists \(#seizure-power\)](#)
 - [March On Rome \(#march-on-rome\)](#)
-

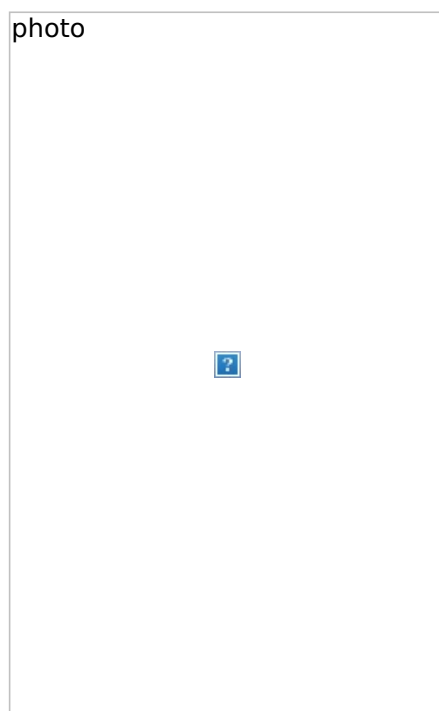
The Red Menace

As the government became increasingly unpopular, many Italians turned to support the Socialist Party and the Catholic Popular Party in the elections of 1919. The Socialist Party won more than one-third of all votes and became the largest single party in the Chamber of Deputies. They were followed at a distance by the Popular Party which won one-fifth of all votes on a platform of social reform. The ruling parties (the Liberals and Democrats) lost heavily.

Encouraged by the success of the general election, the Socialists were prepared to make more strikes. Socialist agitation reached its climax in September 1920 when the General Confederation of Labour called for a general strike. During the strike the workers took over more than six hundred factories and established soviets on the Russian model to rule a number of industrial towns in northern Italy.

Although the Socialists had established their control over a number of towns in the North, they failed to seize power in Italy. There were two reasons which might explain their failure to seize power: (1) The leaders of the General Confederation of Labour were chiefly interested in the improvement of workers' livelihood. When the Italian government promised a 20% wage increase to the workers, the Confederation was satisfied and decided to call off the strike. (2) The Socialists lacked the support of the peasants because they proclaimed socialization of all land. Early in 1921 the Socialist threat was over. The Socialist Party also split into several factions. About one-third of the members withdrew to form a Communist Party.

Rise of Mussolini - His Background



The 'Red Menace' alarmed the industrialists, landlords and other property holders, while many Italians were discontented with the government which drove D'Annunzio from Fiume. The fear of revolution and the desire for national glory were manipulated to the advantage of a new political group, the Fascists, led by Benito Mussolini.

Benito Mussolini was born in 1883. His father was a blacksmith and also an anarchist. His mother was a schoolmistress. His birthplace, Romagna, was known in the 19th century for its rebellious spirit. In his youth, Mussolini did not make much achievement in education.

From 1902 onwards, he picked up socialist ideas, particularly the syndicalism of Sorel. After 1904, he became a famous socialist agitator and journalist. His literary and speaking ability made him the editor of a socialist newspaper, *Avanti*. It is important to note that Mussolini was never a convinced socialist. The views expressed in his newspaper were not consistent. When anarchism was popular among the Italian workers, Mussolini advocated anarchist ideas in his newspaper. This seemed to indicate that he was an opportunist, very interested in winning followers and power for himself.

In 1915, Mussolini was attacked by the Socialist Party for favouring war on the side of the Allies. He left the party and served as a soldier until he was wounded. After his recovery, he returned to Milan as an editor of his own newspaper 'The People of Italy'. By the end of the war, through his

own experience as an editor, Mussolini had learnt the power of propaganda in mustering support from the masses.

In March 1919, he formed the Milan fascio. It had no clear-cut programme except a belief in action. It only had vague ideas about radical reforms. For propaganda purpose, Mussolini advocated universal suffrage, the abolition of the Senate, land for the peasants, improvement of workers' conditions and a strong foreign policy. It seemed that Mussolini had not completely discarded his early socialist thought. The property class did not like his radical party programme. In the elections of November 1919 for the Chamber of Deputies, Mussolini and one of his close associates failed to win a seat for themselves.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

New Strength For The Fascist Movement

The turning-point for the growth of the Fascist movement came by the end of 1920. Three important events were chiefly responsible for bringing new strength to the Fascist movement. The first event was that after D'Annunzio and his followers were driven from Fiume by the end of 1920, many Italian nationalists took Mussolini as their leader for he had always advocated a strong foreign policy and the annexation of Fiume and Dalmatia. The second event was that during 1919-1920, governments in Italy changed rapidly and yet all of them failed to find effective solutions to the most urgent problems of the day—the problems of economic inflation and social unrest. The third event was that after the General Strike in 1920, as stated earlier, the property class became haunted by the spectre of a Communist revolution and wanted a strong government to restore law and order in the country.

With some support from the property class, Mussolini formed the National Fascist Party in 1921. In the elections of May 1921, Fascists were able to gain 35 seats out of 355 - a tremendous gain in contrast to their total failure only 18 months ago.

The Seizure of Power by the Fascists

From May 1921 to 1922, Mussolini changed his tactics to suit the different circumstances with the aim of seizing political power as soon as possible.

After his initial success, Mussolini became more violently anti-Bolshevik than ever in order to win more support from the property class. He stopped attacking the monarchy, the Catholics and capitalists. He promised a strong government which could suppress the socialists' disturbances and a strong foreign policy which could bring national glory to Italy. Economically, he championed economic liberalism and an improvement in the conditions of the workers. As a result of Mussolini's new tactics, finances poured in from the industrialists. Fascist membership jumped up from 20,000 in 1920 to 248,000 in 1921, and to 300,000 in 1922.

From the early spring of 1921, the Fascists, the Black Shirts, carried out a systematic terrorist campaign against the Socialist and Communist groups. During 1922 the Fascists and Communists fought bitter street battles against each other. The government army officers were friendly to the Fascists and equipped the Fascists with arms. Very soon, armed Fascists were ruling some small towns with tacit approval from the government and the property class.

To counteract the growing influence of the Fascists, the Socialists and Communists declared a general strike in August 1922. The strike was ill-prepared. It was suppressed by the government troops in cooperation with the Fascists. After the second general strike, the property class relied more and more upon the Fascists to defeat Socialism and Communism by force.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

March On Rome

On October 26, 1922, Mussolini decided to exploit the chaotic situation to seize power. He threatened a 'March on Rome' if he was not accepted into the cabinet. Bands of armed Fascists marched to Rome from various parts of the country. This threat caused genuine alarm to the politicians in Rome, who failed to deal with the emergency. The Liberal Premier resigned almost at once. King Victor Emmanuel refused to call out the army to resist the Fascists partly because he was anxious to avoid civil war, and partly because he wanted a strong government to restore law and order. The King asked Mussolini to form a new government. On October 31, Mussolini became Prime Minister in a coalition government of Fascists, Nationalists, Catholics, and right-wing Liberals. Power was thus put into Mussolini's hands.

There were a number of **reasons** which might **explain the rapid rise of Fascists to power**:

- (i) the constitutional government was disliked by the Italians long before the First World War;
- (ii) there was increasing discontent with the Italian government after the First World War because

of its failures in both foreign and domestic affairs;

(iii) the threat of a socialist revolution made many Italians desire for a strong government which could impose law and order in the country;

(iv) Mussolini was an opportunist and he could always change his party programme to win favour from the people—particularly the property class; and

(v) the Liberal government and King Victor Emmanuel feared Fascism less than Socialist revolution and they capitulated at the threat of a 'March on Rome'.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

The Meaning Of Fascism

The word Fascism has a dual origin. It comes in part from the word 'fasces', a bundle of rods round an axe carried by the magistrates in ancient Rome as a symbol of power and authority. It comes also from the Italian word, fascio, meaning band or group. The basic concept of Fascism, as elaborated by Mussolini, was that the State was absolute before which individuals and groups were all relative.

Politically, to the Fascists, parliamentary democracy could only lead to inefficiency and corrupt government; and so the whole parliamentary system must be discarded. In the words of Mussolini, national strength was conceived qualitatively and not quantitatively. For the strength of the nation, it should be ruled by a well-disciplined party elite, which, under the guidance of an inspired and unquestioned leader, would restore order and stability for the nation and lead it forward to greatness.

Economically, Mussolini preferred state control to laissez faire. Labour and capital must work together under the direction of the state.

Socially, Mussolini condemned Marxism for dividing the nation into classes and causing class war which would sap the strength of a nation. Thus he demanded that the people should subject themselves to the absolute authority of the state. People could find their own worth only when they were serving the state. As a result, freedom of assembly and thinking were wiped out in Italy.

In foreign policy, since Fascism promised national glory, it was natural for Mussolini to adopt an expansionist foreign policy from the beginning of his rule. Mussolini's ultimate goal was to revive the glories of the old Roman Empire.

In short, a Fascist state was a totalitarian state, controlling all the political, economic and social activities of its people. Mussolini always proclaimed, "Everything within the state, nothing against the state, nothing outside the state." The masses should only "believe, obey and fight."

N.B. It must be emphasized that Fascism was an opportunistic philosophy. In its early days 'action' was the only watch-word. Mussolini could always adjust his philosophy to appeal to all discontented groups.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Political Dictatorship Under Mussolini

Politics from 1922 to 1929

Mussolini was not satisfied with a coalition government. He aimed to be the ruler of one-party totalitarian state. From 1922 to 1929, slowly but gradually, he destroyed all effective opposition at home.

From, 1922 to 1923, Mussolini steadily built up his own power in the government. He placed loyal Fascists in key government positions, created the Voluntary Fascist Militia for National Security, and promoted the Grand Council of Fascism (the highest authority of the Fascist Party) into an organ of state.

In July 1923, Mussolini was able to secure a new electoral law from the parliament. The new law provided that any party, having 25% of the votes in a general election, should receive two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Mussolini immediately arranged for elections to the Chamber of Deputies in April 1924. In an atmosphere of intimidation and violence, with the Fascist Militia using strong-arm methods, the 'National List' presented by the Fascists obtained 63% of the votes. In June 1924 when the new Parliament convened, the Socialist leader, Giacomo Matteotti, denounced the Fascists of the use of force in the recent elections. He was immediately murdered by the Fascists.

Matteotti's murder led to an outcry against Mussolini. The parties in opposition to Mussolini's government withdrew from the parliament. This was called the Aventine Secession. The Aventine Secession only strengthened Mussolini's determination to use force to wipe out all his opponents. In 1926, a law on association outlawed all political opposition, and a secret police force was established to arrest political opponents. In 1925-26, more than ten thousand anti-fascists were arrested, sentenced to death and exiled. To strengthen his control of the country, the workers' unions were dissolved and opposition newspapers were closed. In 1928, a new law abolished universal suffrage and restricted parliamentary elections to candidates officially nominated by the Fascist Grand Council. In the 1929 elections, an all-Fascist Parliament was elected. In the same year, Mussolini, the Duce (the leader) was given power by the pro-Fascist parliament to govern by decrees. He issued a series of decrees which transferred to him complete legislative authority. The King had to accept Mussolini as the permanent Prime Minister of Italy. From this time onwards, all other ministers were appointed, and dismissed by and directed to work under Mussolini alone.

Politics from 1929 to 1939

From 1929 to 1939, Mussolini completed the building-up of the totalitarian state.

In 1938, the Fascist Grand Council abolished the Parliament, and set up in its place an Assembly of Corporations which consisted of representatives from twenty-two industrial and professional corporations. In other words, the parliamentary system in Italy came to an end. In 1939, though Italy remained, in name, a monarchy, Mussolini, as the Duce of the Fascist Party, was the uncrowned King of Italy. He was always right and no one dared to oppose him.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Economic And Social Life Under Mussolini

Mussolini was concerned with the total activities of his people. There was much state regulation to control the economic and social activities of the Italians.

- [The Creation of a Corporate State \(#creation-corporate\)](#)
 - [Other Economic Reform \(#econ-reform\)](#)
 - [An Assessment of the Reforms \(#assess-reform\)](#)
 - [Social Policy \(#social-policy\)](#)
 - [The Lateran Agreements \(1929\) \(#lateran-agreement\)](#)
-

The Creation of a Corporate State

The basic aim of all economic measures was to bring economic prosperity to Italy. Since 1921 Mussolini continued to adopt the high tariff policy to protect the home market from the competition of foreign goods. The most important economic reform was, however, the formation of the **Corporate State**.

On April 21, 1927 the Labour Charter solemnly expressed the ideas of Fascist Corporate State. According to the Charter, the government would bring both employers and employees of the same trade into one confederation.

In 1934 twenty-two corporations were formed. Each corporation consisted of employers' and workers' representatives. The government also sent its representatives to participate in the administration of the corporations. All the corporations were put under the supervision of a National Council of Corporations, of which Mussolini was the Chairman.

These Corporations provided accident, unemployment and health insurance for workers. But the workers' strikes were forbidden. Workers could appeal to the Labour Courts of the Corporations if they had any disputes with the employers. The employers were urged by the government representatives of each corporation to improve the conditions of the workers—there should be no lockouts of workers by employers.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Other Economic Reform

Besides the system of corporations, Mussolini helped the industries with financial subsidies. The state would buy the national products even though their prices were higher than the foreign products.

There were also the improvement of transport and the development of hydro-electricity in the North so as to help the industrial progress of Italy.

In agriculture, the most famous reform was the 'Battle of Wheat' : — this was an attempt to make Italy self-sufficient in food. There was also the big land reclamation project in the Pontine Marshes near Rome to provide more farm-land for the peasants.

An Assessment of the Economic Reforms

In spite of all his efforts Mussolini clearly failed to give economic prosperity to Italy and a real improvement in the standard of living of the workers and peasants.

First of all, the corporations benefited only the employers. Workers' interests were sacrificed in the name of national good. To the workers, no strikes were permitted. If they had a wage dispute, they could only appeal to the Labour Courts of the Corporations. But these Labour Courts were dominated by the employers and the state officials who always sided with the employers. Thus workers were forced to work without protest.

In agriculture, the Battle of Wheat did increase wheat production. But the cost was uneconomic since wheat could have been brought from the U.S.A. at a much cheaper price. Moreover, land suitable for the growing of other crops such as olive and fruits were used for the growing of wheat. As a result, Italian agricultural production generally declined (except wheat) and people must eat less.

To sum up, Mussolini gave to most of the Italians not economic betterment but a decline in their standard of living.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Social Policy

If economic distress could breed discontent, discontent would lead to social unrest. But social unrest was not possible under Mussolini's regime.

In social policy, as narrated in the above paragraphs, the workers' unions were replaced by the Corporations, directly controlled by the replaced by National Council of Corporations. Thus the workers could not organize any political movements against the government.

The population as a whole was subject to control by the government through various channels: (i) The secret police was given wide powers. Even the bandits which had been rife in the south for decades were suppressed. (ii) Through education, school children were indoctrinated with Fascist ideas. They were told that "Mussolini is always right. Millions of them were recruited into the youth organizations of the party. In 1931, university professors were forced to swear an oath of loyalty to fascism and to teach according to its principles. (iii) The mass media. — the cinema, the radio, the press, the books and the magazines—were all strictly censored by the government.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

The Lateran Agreements (1929)

Mussolini wanted to secure the support of the Catholics for his regime because most of the Italians were Catholics. Mussolini understood that if he wanted to win over the support of the Catholics, he had to heal the dispute between the Papacy and the Kingdom of Italy.

Origin of the dispute between the Papacy and the Italian government

The dispute between the Papacy and the Italian Kingdom began in 1870. In that year, when the unification of Italy was achieved, the Papal Kingdom was confiscated by the Italian Kingdom, so the Pope refused to recognize the Italian Kingdom, or to step outside the Vatican City.

After long and difficult negotiations between Mussolini and the Pope, the Lateran Agreements of February 1929 were made. They consisted of a Treaty, a Concordat, and a Financial Convention.

The Treaty, the Concordat and the Financial Convention:

By the Treaty, the state recognized papal sovereignty over the Vatican City, with full diplomatic rights. The state also recognized Catholicism as the national religion. In return, the Papacy declared that it recognized the Kingdom of Italy as the legitimate regime of Italy and surrendered its claim to the greater part of Rome.

By the Concordat, the Papacy sought to regulate its relations with the state, such as the appointment of Bishops, marriage laws and education.

Finally, by the Financial Convention, the Pope was compensated with ninety million dollars for the loss of Papal territories since 1870.

The effects of the Lateran Agreements

The Lateran Agreements between the Pope and the state were at best a compromise. But they were beneficial to both sides.

For the Pope, the Agreements raised his political prestige in Italy and in the world at large. The King and Queen of Italy visited the Pope. The Pope could also send his ambassadors to various parts of the world.

For Mussolini, it was a great personal triumph. By healing the wounds between the Italian Kingdom and the Papacy, Mussolini could get support from the Catholics — they gave support to Mussolini's regime until his fall from power. As the Pope regarded Mussolini as "a man of Providence", this also helped to raise Mussolini's prestige in the eyes of the world.

In short, Mussolini, by the Lateran Agreements, had obtained the much-needed support from a broad section of the Italian people for his dictatorial regime.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Mussolini's Foreign Policy

During his rule Mussolini pursued a vigorous foreign policy. The army nearly doubled in size—from 175,000 men to 275,00 men.

There were several reasons for this vigorous foreign policy:

- (1) Mussolini wanted to establish in the Mediterranean a modern Roman Empire, rivalling that of the ancient Caesars.
- (2) A successful foreign policy might distract the Italians from their miserable conditions at home.
- (3) Like most of his countrymen, Mussolini was disappointed with the small territorial gains following the First World War and the humiliating treatment by the powers at the Paris Peace Conference.
- (4) Mussolini wanted more territories to settle the surplus Italian population and to acquire raw materials for her industries.
- (5) Fascist doctrines preached national glory. Italians should expand to show their national greatness.

Mussolini pursued his aggressive foreign policy rather cautiously up to the end of the 1920's because he did not want to arouse great opposition from the Big Powers, France and Britain.

In 1923 Mussolini provoked the Corfu Incident. In 1924 he obtained the port Fiume by a treaty with Yugoslavia. In 1926 he began the policy of infiltration into Albania. He made loans to Albania in order to obtain oil concessions. He also sent military advisers to organise the Albanian army. (The climax of all these moves came in April 1939 when the Italian troops overran the country.)

Throughout the 1920's, Mussolini also tried to repulse any French attempts to make alliances with Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia but he was unsuccessful.

Italian foreign policy was more aggressive in the 1930's because the rise of Nazi Germany had weakened the relative strength of the democratic states.

Mussolini first invaded Abyssinia in 1935. This was followed by the formation of Rome-Berlin Axis in November 1936. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) Mussolini also gave almost unlimited support to Franco. In 1940, Mussolini declared war on Britain and France. The Italian forces soon met with defeats in their encounters with the Allied forces and suffered heavy losses in their invasion of Libya and East Africa.

In 1943, Mussolini was forced to resign by a coup led by King Victor Emmanuel.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)

Fascist Italy: Conclusion

Fascism arose in Italy because the liberal parliamentary regime could solve almost none of the perplexing problems arising from the First World War. Under the stress of economic hardships and social unrest, the propertied class turned to support the Fascists.

After Mussolini had seized political power in 1922, he maintained himself in power by imposing a strict control of the political, economic and political social life of the Italian people. During the rule

of Mussolini (1922-1943), dictatorship Italians enjoyed a long period of stable government but they were deprived of political liberty and economic advancement. Italy remained a poor and backward country. It is no wonder that Italy met with defeats in the Second World War and Mussolini's regime was overthrown by the Italian people in the midst of the war.

[\[Go Top \(#top\)\]](#)



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