

## CHAPTER 31

**Fascist Italy****TIME LINE**

- 1919 Benito Mussolini establishes the Fascist movement
- 1921 Thirty-five Fascists win election to the Chamber of Deputies
- 1922 The March on Rome results in Mussolini's appointment as Italy's premier
- 1923 The Italian parliament passes the Acerbo Law  
The Italians bombard and occupy Corfu
- 1924 Fascists murder Giacomo Matteotti, a Socialist deputy
- 1926 The Italian government organizes thirteen syndicates  
Italy establishes a protectorate over Albania
- 1929 The Lateran Accord ends the conflict between the Italian state and the papacy
- 1931 Pope Pius XI criticizes Mussolini's regime in the encyclical letter *Non abbiamo bisogno*
- 1938 The Chamber of Fasces and Corporations replaces the Chamber of Deputies

*Following World War I, the liberal politicians who ruled Italy offered few solutions to the nation's difficult economic and social problems. Benito Mussolini, the leader of the new Fascist movement, took advantage of the country's mounting chaos to force his way into the premiership in 1922. Once in office, he moved quickly to establish his dictatorship.*

*Mussolini promised to provide efficient and honest government for Italy, to deal with the country's problems, and to promote Italian influence and prestige in international affairs.*

**Postwar Italy**

Italy was among the victorious Allies in World War I, but the Italian army had won little glory on the battlefield. While the Paris Peace Conference awarded Italy some territory from the dismembered Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy's claims for Dalmatia, the Adriatic port of Fiume, and territory in the Near East and Africa were rejected. As a consequence, Italians had a sense of national frustration.

**Fiume**

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In 1919, Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863-1938), a poet and extreme nationalist, led a force of war veterans in seizing Fiume. D'Annunzio ruled Fiume for slightly more than a year. Under the terms of the Treaty of Rapallo, signed by Italy and Yugoslavia in November 1920, Fiume became a free city.

### **Economic and Social Problems**

The war exacerbated Italy's already serious economic and social problems. The country emerged from the war with a huge national debt, runaway inflation, and massive unemployment.

Between 1919 and 1921, social unrest mounted, as angry industrial workers seized factories and impoverished peasants occupied land owned by the great landlords. The factory owners' and landlords' fear of social revolution grew.

In this crisis situation, the liberal politicians who dominated the government failed to provide effective national leadership, while King Victor Emmanuel III (r. 1900--1946) proved weak and ineffective. The political drift led to two parliamentary elections and four premiers between June 1919 and March 1922.

### **Socialists and Popolari**

The Socialist Party and the Popolari, the Catholic party, offered possible alternative leadership for the government. In November 1919, the Socialists won 160 seats, giving them a plurality in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Italian parliament.

At this time, however, the Socialist Party suffered from deep divisions. One faction of the party, inspired by events in Russia, wanted to join Lenin's new Communist International (the Comintern) and convert the party into the Italian Communist Party. Other Socialists favored a more moderate course. As a result of this internal conflict, the Socialists were unable to take advantage of what appeared to be an intensifying revolutionary situation. In 1921, the Italian Socialist Party split, with the radical faction becoming the Italian Communist Party.

The Popolari also made a strong showing in the November 1919 election, winning 103 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. While the Popolari were united in their support of the Catholic Church, the party was deeply divided on the critical issues of economic and social policy. The Popolari thus failed to offer a coherent program of reform to meet Italy's pressing needs.

## Benito Mussolini (1883-1945)

The Italian political vacuum offered an opportunity to Benito Mussolini. Born in the Romagna, an area of central Italy with a long tradition of political radicalism, the young Mussolini followed the example of his blacksmith father and became a Socialist. He worked for a time as an elementary school teacher and then became a Socialist journalist. In 1912, he was named editor of *Avanti* (“Forward”), the chief newspaper of the Italian Socialist Party.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the Socialist Party opposed Italian intervention. Before long, Mussolini, who was more a lover of action than a truly committed Socialist, called for Italian participation in the war on the side of the Allies. Consequently, he lost the editorship of *Avanti* and was expelled from the Socialist party. He founded a new pro-interventionist newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia* (“The People of Italy”), which subsequently became the official newspaper of the Fascist movement.

After Italy entered the war in 1915, Mussolini enlisted in the army and served at the front, where he was seriously wounded.

## The Fascist Movement

In 1919, Mussolini resumed his turbulent role in Italian politics, establishing the *Fasci di Combattimento* (combat groups) in the northern Italian city of Milan. The term “Fascism” is derived from the ancient Roman *fascis*, the bundle of rods surrounding an axe that was carried by Roman magistrates as a symbol of their authority.

## Mussolini’s Rise to Power

Mussolini was first and foremost an opportunist, more interested in power than in principles, and he was willing to change his positions on issues to meet the political needs of the moment. Although Fascism offered little in the way of a firm ideology or definite program, it did possess certain distinct characteristics. Fascism was intensely nationalistic, militaristic, and anti-Marxist. The Fascists denounced Marxism, with its emphasis on the class struggle, as a divisive force in national life. Fascism also repudiated liberal democracy, emphasizing the obligation of the individual to serve the state rather than the freedom of the individual. Mussolini talked in vague terms of economic and social reform, but he made few specific proposals. In addition, he used exciting words, speaking of youth, will, action, courage, sacrifice, victory. However dynamic the rhetoric, it was devoid of particular meaning. Above all, Fascism emphasized a cult of the leader and was designed to propel the movement’s Duce (“leader”), Mussolini, into power.

### **Growth of the Party**

Initially, the Fascist movement made little headway. During the labor and peasant unrest from 1919 to 1921, however, Mussolini portrayed Fascism as a bulwark against Communism, although the threat of a revolutionary seizure of power was, in fact, slight. A number of frightened industrialists and landowners began to provide the Fascists with financial support. Mussolini also won followers among disillusioned and frustrated Italians, including war veterans, the lower middle class, university students, civil servants, and army officers. In May 1921, Mussolini and thirty-four of his followers won election to the Chamber of Deputies.

Mussolini organized a Fascist party militia, the Black Shirts (*squadristi*), who terrorized Socialists, trade unionists, and other opponents. The clashes between the Black Shirts and their enemies resembled civil war.

### **The March on Rome**

In late 1922, Mussolini decided to take direct action. He called on his followers to march on Rome, demanding that he be named premier. In the March on Rome of October 28, 1922, several thousand Fascists demonstrated in the capital. On October 30, King Victor Emmanuel III appointed Mussolini to the premiership.

### **The Consolidation of Mussolini's Power**

Mussolini had to proceed cautiously at first. The cabinet he headed was a coalition. Of its fourteen members, only four were Fascists. Furthermore, there were only about three dozen Fascists in a Chamber of Deputies of 535 members.

On November 23, 1922, in an effort to restore stability, the parliament granted the cabinet dictatorial powers for one year. Mussolini used this authority to install Fascists in government posts and prevailed upon the king to appoint Fascist senators, giving the Fascists a majority in the upper house of parliament.

### **The Acerbo Law**

In November 1923, as the cabinet's dictatorial powers were about to expire, Mussolini pressured the parliament into approving a new electoral law, the so-called Acerbo Law. This law provided that two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies would be allotted to the party that polled the largest number of votes, with a minimum of 25 percent, in the parliamentary election. This would end the need for coalition governments.

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## Electoral Victory

The Acerbo Law proved unnecessary, however. Using a combination of effective propaganda, intimidation, and fraud, the Fascists polled 65 percent of the votes in the April 1924 election, winning 375 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Mussolini now formed a new cabinet, composed entirely of Fascists.

## The Murder of Matteotti

Giacomo Matteotti (1885-1924), a Socialist deputy, challenged the legitimacy of the Fascist majority in the Chamber of Deputies. On June 10, 1924, he was murdered by a group of Fascists.

Although Mussolini denied any involvement in the murder, there were calls for his resignation. In protest, anti-Fascist deputies staged a dramatic withdrawal from the Chamber of Deputies. This so-called Aventine Secession recalled an incident in ancient Roman history, when the plebeians protested the domination of the patricians. The Aventine Secession of 1924, however, had no useful effect. Once the anti-Fascist deputies had withdrawn from the chamber, the Fascists would not let them return. The Fascists now had solid control of both houses of parliament.

## Establishment of the Fascist Dictatorship

Mussolini moved to increase his dictatorial authority. Press censorship was tightened. All elected local government officials were replaced by *podestas*, who were appointed by the central government. Parliament granted Mussolini the authority to rule by decree. The Black Shirt militia was incorporated into the regular army. The secret police, known by its Italian acronym as OVRA, cracked down on political opponents of the Fascist regime. Opposition parties were eliminated, and Italy became a one-party state.

Nevertheless, Mussolini and the Fascists never fully succeeded in creating a truly totalitarian state. The Duce was unable to establish his dominance over the wealthy upper classes, the Catholic Church, and the army, and he often complained bitterly about his inability to secure complete obedience from the Italian people.

## Fascist Economic Policy

Mussolini had pledged to restore order to Italy's economic and social life. Fascist economic policy emphasized regimentation, with strict controls over the economy, while at the same time the interests of the capitalists were protected.

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Economic planning was instituted in an effort to promote increases in both agricultural and industrial production, and Italy strove to achieve economic self-sufficiency (autarky). This was an unrealistic goal, since a country as lacking in natural resources as Italy was could not hope to become self-sufficient.

The Fascist regime sponsored huge public works projects, which helped relieve the country's high rate of unemployment. The production of hydroelectric power was increased substantially, although Italy continued to be dependent on substantial imports of coal and oil.

### **The Battle of Wheat**

The Battle of Wheat involved large-scale land-reclamation projects, undertaken in order to make more land available for agriculture. Marshlands were drained, including the Pontine Marshes near Rome. However, Italy continued to import much of its food.

### **The Battle of the Lira**

Other efforts of the Fascist regime were less productive. The Battle of the Lira involved efforts to increase the value of the lira, Italy's unit of currency, in international exchange. Raising the value of the lira to an artificially high level served to make Italian products more expensive in the world market. As a consequence, Italy's exports declined.

### **The Corporate State**

Mussolini's creation of the corporate state represented an attempt to create a new system, superior to both laissez-faire capitalism and socialism.

### **Syndicates**

In 1926, the Italian government organized a series of syndicates for producers and workers in six major areas of the economy: agriculture, industry, commerce, sea and air transportation, land and inland waterway transportation, and banking. Another syndicate was established for professionals and intellectuals. The activities of the thirteen syndicates were directed by the new Ministry of Corporations, headed by Mussolini.

The old labor unions were abolished, and strikes and lockouts were banned. Labor-management relations were conducted within the structure of the syndicates, and disputes that could not be resolved by negotiation were submitted to compulsory arbitration. The Charter of Labor of 1927 reaffirmed the regime's support of private ownership of business and industry but insisted that the economy must serve the interests of the state.

## Corporations

In 1934, Italian economic life came under further regulation with the establishment of a system of corporations. Syndicates in several areas of the economy were joined to form twenty-two corporations that embraced the entire economy. The corporations were directed by the National Council of Corporations, which was in charge of promoting Italy's economic development. The system generally supported the interests of the capitalists, rather than the workers, and it did more to promote bureaucratic red tape than economic efficiency and increased production. Despite Mussolini's promises, Fascism failed to provide economic prosperity for Italy.

## Political Reorganization

In 1928, the system of syndicates became the basis for a reorganized Chamber of Deputies. The national councils of the thirteen syndicates were authorized to nominate a total of 800 candidates for the Chamber of Deputies, while cultural and charitable foundations could nominate an additional 200. The Fascist Grand Council would then select a list of 400 candidates from the list of 1000, although the Grand Council could also make its own nominations. The Fascist Grand Council consisted of about twenty high-ranking party leaders appointed by Mussolini, and he acted as its chairman. The Fascist Party thus came to dominate the Italian government much as the Communist Party dominated the political structure of the Soviet Union.

The Italian electorate could vote yes or no on the entire list of candidates and could not reject individual candidates. In 1938, the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations replaced the Chamber of Deputies, creating the capstone of the corporate state. The new chamber included the members of the Fascist Grand Council and the National Council of Corporations.

## The Lateran Accord

In 1929, Mussolini found a solution to the Roman Question, the long conflict between the papacy and the Italian state, which resulted from Italy's seizure of Rome from the pope in 1870 (see Chapters 23 and 24).

The Lateran Accord of February 1929 consisted of three separate agreements. In a political treaty, the pope recognized Italy's possession of Rome. In return, Italy recognized Vatican City as an independent and sovereign state ruled by the pope. In a financial convention, Italy agreed to pay the papacy a substantial sum of money in settlement of any and all claims the papacy might have as a result of the Italian seizure of Rome.

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The third agreement, the concordat, defined the relationship existing between the Roman Catholic Church and the Italian state. The Roman Catholic religion was recognized as the official religion of the state. Religious instruction in the Catholic faith would be compulsory in all public schools, and the religious marriage ceremony was recognized as valid in civil law. For its part, the state secured a veto power over the pope's appointment of Italian bishops, and the church agreed to refrain from involvement in political issues.

Relations between the Fascist state and the church remained generally good, although there were some conflicts. In 1931, a crisis developed when the Fascists sought to dissolve Catholic youth organizations, which competed with Fascist youth groups. In response, Pope Pius XI (r. 1922-1939) issued the encyclical letter *Non abbiamo bisogno*, which condemned the Fascists for their "pagan worship" of the state. Church and government officials reached a compromise that allowed the Catholic youth organizations to function with some limitations, and the tension eased.

### **Mussolini's Early Foreign Policy**

The extreme nationalism of the Fascists expressed itself in a buildup of Italy's armed forces and a bellicose foreign policy. Mussolini's dream was to establish Italian dominance in the Mediterranean area, which he termed *mare nostrum* ("our sea"), thereby creating a modern version of the Roman Empire.

### **The Corfu Incident**

The first major assertion of Italy's power came in 1923, when bandits murdered four Italians who were working for the League of Nations in marking the border between Albania and Greece. In response, Mussolini bombarded the Greek island of Corfu, which was then occupied by Italian troops. Negotiations resulted in a Greek agreement to pay Italy an indemnity, and the Italians withdrew from Corfu.

### **Negotiations with Balkan Countries**

Mussolini's aggressive behavior in the Corfu incident evoked widespread international condemnation. For the next several years, he pursued a more moderate course. Negotiations with Yugoslavia led to a 1924 agreement providing for the Italian annexation of Fiume, while a 1926 treaty with Albania created a virtual Italian protectorate over that country.

Italy also moved to form what amounted to an association of nations discontented with the post-World War I peace settlement, signing treaties with Hungary in 1927 and Austria in 1930 and drawing Bulgaria into Italy's

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orbit through the 1930 marriage of an Italian princess to King Boris (r. 1918-1943).

*The record of Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship was a record of failure. In domestic affairs, the Duce's only enduring success was the Lateran Accord of 1929, which resolved the Roman Question. Despite Mussolini's much-heralded creation of the corporate state, he failed to deal constructively with the country's serious economic and social problems. He also failed to provide Italy with effective and honest government. And he failed even to establish his full dictatorial authority.*

*In foreign affairs, Mussolini's bellicose policy ultimately led him into an alliance with Adolf Hitler, the German dictator. Italy's failures in World War II brought the collapse of the Fascist dictatorship, the death of Mussolini, and national ruin.*