

“I hated politics and politicians,” said Italo Balbo. Like many Italian veterans of World War I, he had come home to a land of economic chaos and political corruption. Italy’s constitutional government, he felt, “had betrayed the hopes of soldiers, reducing Italy to a shameful peace.” Disgusted and angry, Balbo rallied behind a fiercely nationalist leader, Benito Mussolini. Mussolini’s rise to power in the 1920s served as a model for ambitious strongmen elsewhere in Europe.



>> Mussolini and the National Fascist Party led the March on Rome in October 1922. Fewer than 30,000 men participated in the march, but the king feared a civil war and asked Mussolini to form a cabinet.



Interactive Flipped Video

# Fascism Emerges in Italy

## The Rise of Mussolini

**Postwar Discontent** When Italy agreed to join the Allies in 1915, France and Britain secretly promised to give Italy certain Austro-Hungarian territories that had large Italian populations. When the Allies won, Italy received some of the promised territories, but others became part of the new Yugoslavia. The broken promises outraged Italian nationalists.

In the postwar years, disorders within Italy multiplied. Inspired in part by the Russian Revolution, peasants seized land, and workers went on strike or seized factories. Their actions frightened landowners and industrialists who had traditionally held power.

Amid the chaos, returning veterans faced unemployment. Trade declined and taxes rose. The government, split into feuding factions, seemed powerless to end the crisis.

**Mussolini and the Fascist Party** Into this turmoil stepped Benito Mussolini. The son of a socialist blacksmith and a teacher, Mussolini had been a socialist in his youth. During the war, however, he rejected socialism for intense nationalism. In 1919, he organized veterans and

### >> Objectives

**Describe** the rise of Mussolini.

**Summarize** Mussolini’s policies as leader of Italy.

**Identify** the characteristics of totalitarianism and fascism.

### >> Key Terms

Benito Mussolini  
Black Shirt  
March on Rome  
totalitarian state  
fascism

other discontented Italians into the Fascist party. They took the name from the Latin *fascēs*, a bundle of sticks wrapped around an ax. In ancient Rome, the *fascēs* symbolized unity and authority.

Mussolini was a fiery and charismatic speaker. He promised to end corruption and replace turmoil with order. He also spoke of reviving Roman greatness, pledging to turn the Mediterranean into a “Roman lake” once again. He held a great deal of power over crowds when he gave his rousing speeches.

[Only joy at finding such a leader] can explain the enthusiasm [Mussolini] evoked at gathering after gathering, where his mere presence drew the people from all sides to greet him with frenzied acclamations. Even the men who first came out of mere curiosity and with indifference or even hostile feelings gradually felt themselves fired by his personal magnetic influence. . .

—Margherita G. Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini* (tr. Frederic Whyte)

**Control by Terror** Mussolini organized his supporters into “combat squads.” The squads wore black shirts to emulate an earlier nationalist revolt. These **Black Shirts**, or party militants, rejected the democratic



>> The *fascēs*, a bundle of sticks wrapped around an ax, was an ancient Roman symbol of unity and authority. Fascists adopted the name and symbol for their party.

process in favor of violent action. They broke up socialist rallies, smashed leftist presses, and attacked farmers' cooperatives. Fascist gangs used intimidation and terror to oust elected officials in northern Italy. Hundreds were killed as new gangs of Black Shirts sprang up all over Italy. Many Italians accepted these actions because they, too, had lost faith in constitutional government.

In 1922, the Fascists made a bid for power. At a rally in Naples, they announced their intention to go to Rome to demand that the government make changes. In the **March on Rome**, tens of thousands of Fascists swarmed toward the capital. Fearing civil war, King Victor Emmanuel III asked Mussolini to form a government as prime minister. Mussolini entered the city triumphantly on October 30, 1922. Without firing a shot, Mussolini thus obtained a legal appointment from the king to lead Italy.

**?** **DRAW CONCLUSIONS** How did postwar disillusionment contribute to Mussolini's rise?

## Mussolini's Totalitarian Rule

At first, Fascists held only a few cabinet posts in the new government. By 1925, though, Mussolini had assumed more power and taken the title *Il Duce* (eel DOO chay), “The Leader.” He suppressed rival parties, muzzled the press, rigged elections, and replaced elected officials with Fascist supporters. In 1929, Mussolini received recognition from Pope Pius XI in return for recognizing Vatican City as an independent state, although the pope continued to disagree with some of Mussolini's goals.

In theory, Italy remained a parliamentary monarchy. In fact, it was a dictatorship upheld by terror. Critics were thrown into prison, forced into exile, or murdered. Secret police and propaganda bolstered the regime.

**The State Controls the Economy** To spur economic growth and end conflicts between owners and workers, Mussolini brought the economy under state control. However, he preserved capitalism.

Under Mussolini's corporate state, representatives of business, labor, government, and the Fascist party controlled industry, agriculture, and trade. This policy did help business, and production increased. This success came at the expense of workers. They were forbidden to strike, and their wages were kept low.

**Loyalty to the State** To the Fascists, the individual was unimportant except as a member of the state. Men,

women, and children were bombarded with slogans glorifying the state and Mussolini. "Believe! Obey! Fight!" loudspeakers blared and posters proclaimed. Men were urged to be ruthless, selfless warriors fighting for the glory of Italy. Women were pushed out of paying jobs. Instead, Mussolini called on women to "win the battle of motherhood." Those who bore more than 14 children were given a medal by Il Duce himself.

Shaping the young was a major Fascist goal. Fascist youth groups toughened children and taught them to obey strict military discipline. Boys and girls learned about the glories of ancient Rome.

Young Fascists marched in torchlight parades, singing patriotic hymns and chanting, "Mussolini is always right." By the 1930s, a generation of young soldiers stood ready to back Il Duce's drive to expand Italian power.

**Building a Totalitarian State** Mussolini and the Fascist Party built the first modern **totalitarian state**. In this form of government, a one-party dictatorship regulates every aspect of the lives of its citizens. Fascist Italy served as a model for fascist rule in other European nations. Still, Fascist rule in Italy was never as absolute as those imposed by the communists in the Soviet Union or the Nazis in Germany.

Mussolini's rule was fascist in nature, as was Hitler's. However, totalitarian governments rise under other kinds of ideology as well, such as communism in Stalin's Soviet Union.

All of these totalitarian governments shared common features. They were single-party dictatorships in which the state controlled the economy. The party was led by a dictator, who used police spies and terrorism to control the people and demanded unquestioning obedience. The government controlled the media and enforced strict censorship. It used every means possible to indoctrinate, or mold, its citizens' ideas and thoughts.

**IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS** How did the Fascist party transform Italy's government and economy?

## Characteristics of Fascism

Historians still debate the real nature of Mussolini's fascist ideology. Mussolini coined the term, but fascists had no unifying theory as Marxists did. Today, we generally use the term **fascism** to describe any centralized, authoritarian government that is not communist whose policies glorify the state over the individual and are destructive to basic human rights.



>> Mussolini viewed children as the Fascists of the future and took great interest in education and the youth program. Boys were taught to be strong soldiers and girls were taught to be strong, nurturing mothers.

 **Interactive Gallery**

In the 1920s and 1930s, though, fascism meant different things in different countries.

**Features of Fascism** All forms of fascism, however, shared some basic features. They were rooted in extreme nationalism. Fascists glorified action, violence, discipline, and, above all, blind loyalty to the state.

Fascists also pursued aggressive foreign expansion. Echoing the idea of "survival of the fittest," Fascist leaders glorified warfare as a noble struggle for survival. "War alone," declared Mussolini, "brings to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon peoples who have the courage to face it."

Fascists were also antidemocratic. They rejected the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and the concepts of equality and liberty. To them, democracy led to corruption and weakness. They claimed democracy put individual or class interests above national goals and destroyed feelings of community. Instead, fascists emphasized emotion and the need for individuals to serve the state.

**The Appeal of Fascism** Given its restrictions on individual freedom, why did fascism appeal to many Italians? First, it promised a strong, stable government and an end to the political feuding that had paralyzed



>> This poster depicts Mussolini working alongside Italian builders. Like much Fascist propaganda, it was designed to convey a sense of purpose and strength.

 **Interactive Chart**

democracy in Italy. Mussolini projected a sense of power and confidence at a time of disorder and despair. His intense nationalism also revived national pride, which helped further the shift of political thought throughout Italy.

At first, Il Duce received good press outside Italy. Newspapers in Britain, France, and North America applauded the discipline and order of Mussolini's government. "He got the trains running on time," admirers said. Only later, when Mussolini embarked on a course of foreign conquest, did Western democracies protest.

**Fascism and Communism Compared** Three systems of government competed for influence in postwar Europe. Democracy endured in Britain and

France but faced an uphill struggle in hard times. In Italy, fascism offered a different option. As the Great Depression spread, other nations—most notably Germany—looked to fascist leaders. Communism emerged in Russia and won support elsewhere.

Fascists were the sworn enemies of socialists and communists. While communists called for a worldwide revolution of the working class, fascists pursued nationalist goals. Fascists supported a society with defined classes. They found allies among business leaders, wealthy landowners, and the lower middle class. Communists touted a classless society. They won support among both urban and agricultural workers.

Despite basic differences, in practice these two ideologies had much in common. Both flourished during economic hard times by promoting extreme programs of social change. In both communist Russia and fascist Italy, dictators imposed totalitarian governments in order to bring about their revolutions. Both encouraged blind devotion to the state or a charismatic leader. Both used terror to guard their power. In both, a party elite claimed to rule in the name of the national interest.

**? COMPARE POINTS OF VIEW** Describe the similarities between fascism and communism.

**ASSESSMENT**

1. **Identify Cause and Effect** What problems did Italy face after World War I, and how did these problems help Mussolini win power?
2. **Summarize** Describe one of Mussolini's economic or social goals, and explain the actions he took to achieve it.
3. **Compare and Contrast** List two similarities and two differences between fascism and communism.
4. **Explain** Why is control of the media important in a totalitarian state?
5. **Contrast** How did fascist values differ from democratic principles and goals?