

Chapter 3: Fascist Italy (1920-1945)

Introduction

Fascism emerged in Italy after **World War I**, fuelled by economic hardship, political instability, and fears of communism. **Benito Mussolini** founded the **National Fascist Party (PNF)**, promising to restore Italy's greatness. He used violence, propaganda, and strategic alliances to gain power. Once in control, Mussolini dismantled democracy, ruled by decree, and pursued expansionist policies that ultimately led Italy into **World War II**.

1. The Conditions That Led to Fascism in Italy

Post-War Discontent (1919-1922)

- Italy felt betrayed by the **Treaty of Versailles**, receiving fewer territorial gains than expected (*Italia Irredenta* - 'unredeemed Italy').
- **650,000 Italian soldiers died**, and **over a million were wounded** in World War I.
- **Debt rose to 85 billion lire**, causing inflation and economic instability.
- **Unemployment reached 2 million** by 1919, leading to widespread worker strikes.
- Fear of communism spread as **socialists and communists occupied factories and farmlands**.
- The **government was weak**, with frequent changes in leadership and ineffective coalitions.

Mussolini's Early Career

- Benito Mussolini, originally a socialist, was expelled from the **Italian Socialist Party (PSI)** in 1914 for supporting Italy's entry into **WWI**.
- **1919**: He founded the **Fasci di Combattimento** (Fascist Combat Groups).
- **1921**: Created the **National Fascist Party (PNF)**.

2. Mussolini's Rise to Power

Blackshirts and the March on Rome (1922)

- Mussolini's paramilitary force, the **Blackshirts (Squadristi)**, attacked socialist groups and trade unions.
- **October 1922**: Mussolini organised the **March on Rome** with 30,000 Blackshirts, demanding control of the government.
- **King Victor Emmanuel III refused to use the army against Mussolini**, fearing civil war.
- Mussolini was invited to form a government, becoming **Prime Minister on 30 October 1922**.

Securing Power Legally (1922-1925)

- **1923 Acerbo Law:** Gave two-thirds of parliamentary seats to any party winning over 25% of the vote.
- **1924 Elections:** Fascists won **64% of the vote**, helped by intimidation and violence.
- **1924 Giacomo Matteotti Murder:**
 - Socialist leader Matteotti accused Mussolini of electoral fraud.
 - He was kidnapped and murdered by **Fascist secret police (Ceka)**.
 - Public outrage forced Mussolini to take full control, eliminating remaining opposition.
- **1925:** Mussolini **declared a dictatorship**, calling himself **Il Duce (The Leader)**.

3. Mussolini's Domestic Policies

The Fascist State

- **One-party rule:** All political parties except the Fascists were banned.
- **Censorship:** Newspapers, radio, and films were controlled by the state.
- **Secret police (OVRA) monitored dissent**, leading to thousands of arrests.
- **Propaganda glorified Mussolini**, presenting him as Italy's saviour.

The Corporate State

- **Trade unions were banned (1926).**
- **Workers and employers were organised into state-controlled 'corporations'.**
- **Economy focused on autarky (self-sufficiency) and heavy industry.**

Economic Battles

- **Battle for Grain (1925):** Aimed to reduce food imports by increasing wheat production.
- **Battle for Land (1928):** Drained marshlands for agriculture, e.g., **Pontine Marshes reclamation.**
- **Battle for the Lira (1926):** Revalued the currency, making Italian exports expensive and hurting trade.
- **Battle for Births:** Encouraged large families, but birth rates continued to decline.

4. Mussolini's Relationship with the Catholic Church

The Lateran Treaty (1929)

- Ended the conflict between Italy and the **Vatican**, unresolved since 1870.
- **Vatican City became an independent state.**
- **Catholicism was recognised as Italy's official religion.**

- The **Church agreed not to interfere in politics**, in exchange for financial compensation and control over education.
- Relations later soured due to Mussolini's **attempts to control Catholic youth groups and introducing anti-Semitic laws (1938)**.

5. Mussolini's Foreign Policy

Early Diplomacy (1920s-1935)

- **Locarno Treaties (1925)**: Secured European borders.
- **Corfu Incident (1923)**: Showed Mussolini's aggressive nationalism.
- **Stresa Front (1935)**: Italy, Britain, and France opposed German expansion.

Italian Expansionism

- **Invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) (1935-1936)**:
 - Mussolini sought colonial expansion.
 - The League of Nations imposed sanctions but failed to stop Italy.
 - Abyssinia was annexed into Italian East Africa.
- **Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)**:
 - Mussolini sent **75,000 troops and weapons** to help Francisco Franco's fascists.

Alliance with Nazi Germany

- **Rome-Berlin Axis (1936)**: Mussolini aligned Italy with Hitler.
- **Anti-Comintern Pact (1937)**: Italy joined Germany and Japan against communism.
- **Pact of Steel (1939)**: Formal military alliance with Germany.
- **World War II (1940)**: Mussolini hesitated but joined Hitler after early German victories.

6. Mussolini and World War II (1940-1945)

Military Failures

- **Invasion of Greece (1940)**: Defeated until Germany intervened.
- **North African Campaign (1940-1943)**: Italy struggled against British forces.
- **Operation Barbarossa (1941)**: Sent 250,000 Italian troops to fight USSR, suffering heavy losses.

Downfall of Mussolini

- **1943**: Allies invaded Italy, Mussolini was dismissed and arrested.
- Germany rescued him, making him leader of the puppet 'Italian Social Republic' (1943-1945).
- **April 1945**: Mussolini was captured and executed by Italian partisans.

Conclusion

- Mussolini rose to power due to **economic instability, fear of communism, and weak democracy.**
- He established a **dictatorship using propaganda, repression, and a controlled economy.**
- His foreign policy aimed to create a **new Roman Empire, leading to alliances with Hitler and entry into WWII.**
- **His failures in WWII led to his downfall and execution.**

Key Terms

- **March on Rome (1922):** Mussolini's coup that led to his appointment as Prime Minister.
- **Blackshirts:** Mussolini's paramilitary force.
- **Acerbo Law (1923):** Electoral law giving Fascists majority power.
- **Lateran Treaty (1929):** Agreement between Mussolini and the Catholic Church.
- **Autarky:** Economic self-sufficiency.
- **Rome-Berlin Axis (1936):** Alliance with Nazi Germany.
- **Pact of Steel (1939):** Formal military alliance with Hitler.