

CH. 2 - ORIGINS AND GROWTH OF THE
FASCIST REGIMES IN EUROPE

*Origins And Growth Of
The Fascist Regimes In Europe*

Learning Intentions

In this section, you should understand:

- The causes of Mussolini's rise to power (the rise of Fascist regimes, including Hitler later).
- Mussolini's rule in Italy.
- Church-state relations under Mussolini.
- Mussolini's foreign policy.



THE GROWTH OF **THE GROWTH OF** *OF* **DICTATORSHIPS** *S*

The Growth of Dictatorships

Many dictatorships were established in European countries between the First and Second World Wars, from 1918 to 1939. Most of southern and eastern Europe was ruled by **dictatorships**. Only in countries in western Europe, and in two in central Europe, did democracies survive.

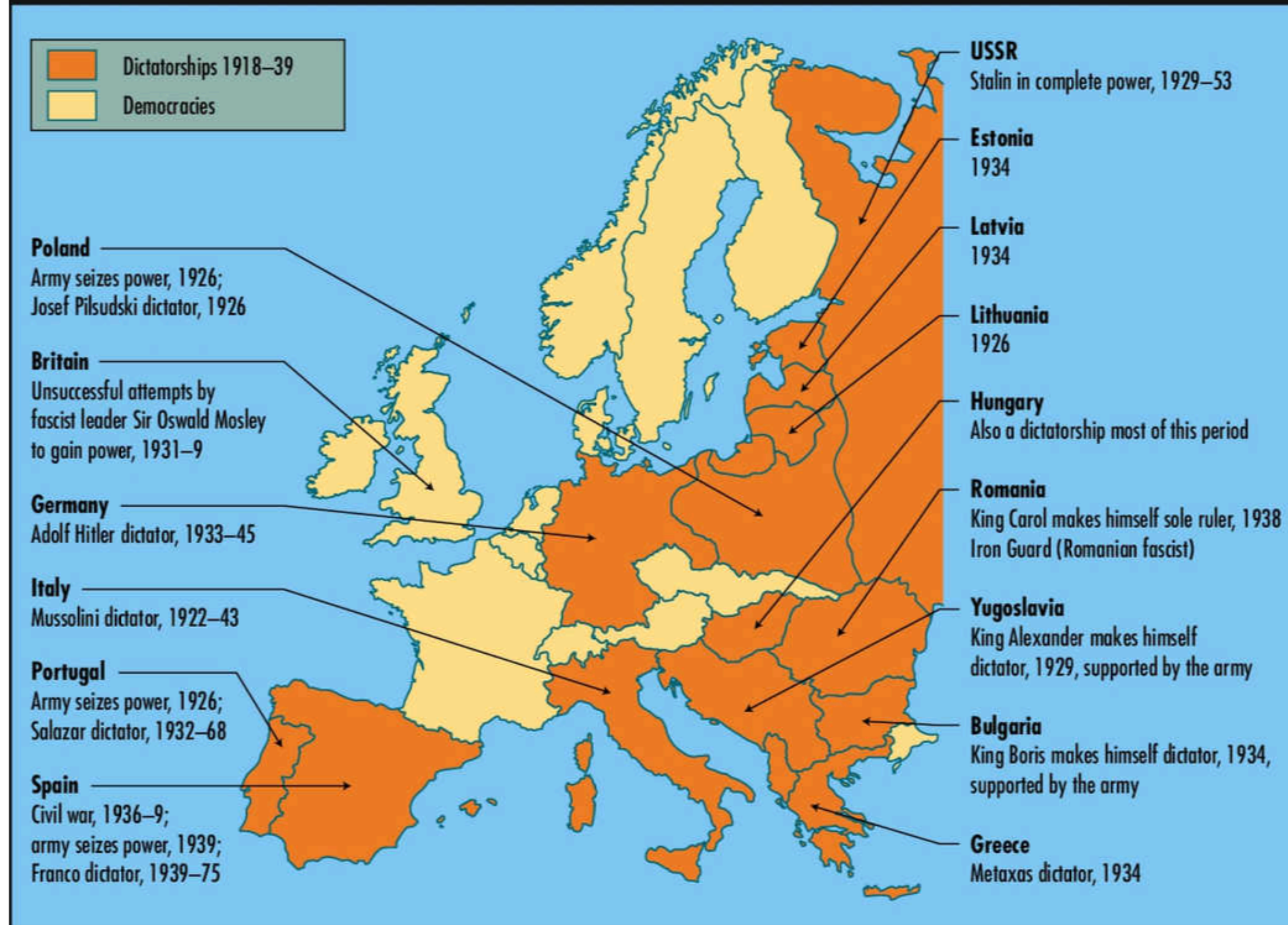
The style of government in a dictatorship differed greatly from a democracy. Most of the European dictatorships followed these features. Sometimes the word **authoritarian** is used to describe their rule, such as **Franco's** dictatorship in Spain and **Salazar's** in Portugal.

KEY CONCEPT DEMOCRACY

Democracy is government by the people or elected representatives. There are regular elections with many different political parties. Decisions are usually arrived at by majority vote.



Dictatorships and Democracies in Europe, 1918–39



Fascist Dictatorships

In many European countries, Fascist parties were popular. Mosley's Blackshirts in Britain, Belgium's Rex Party and the Falange in Spain were examples of these. However, very few Fascist parties came to power and established dictatorships. Of the few who took over government, only two lasted for any significant time. These were **Mussolini's Fascist Party** in **Italy** and **Hitler's Nazi Party** in **Germany**. They advocated a new political idea called **Fascism** or **Nazism**.

What was Fascism?

The word **Fascist** was Italian in origin. It was used by Mussolini to describe his party, the Fascist Party. It was derived from the Ancient Roman **fascēs** or bundle of rods and axe which symbolised authority there.



Totalitarian Dictatorships

The dictatorships of Mussolini and Hitler were also **totalitarian**. In this way they were similar to Stalin's dictatorship in Soviet Russia. They believed that they should control all aspects of a person's life - social, economic, political, cultural and religious. They wanted to create a new person.

Characteristics of Fascism	Characteristics of Totalitarianism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-democratic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single ideology (set of political beliefs) that everyone must follow.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti Treaty of Versailles, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single party led by a dictator.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-semitic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control of propaganda (all means of communication).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-communist 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme nationalism (the individual was subject to the nation; the nation must expand and conquer); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control of police and army and the use of terror.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cult of the leader (everything depended on a wise leader, he must be obeyed); 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of Violence (to achieve power, the strong rule over the weak); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central control of the economy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racialism (the people of the nation must be kept pure) 	

What Caused the Rise of Fascist Regimes?

The stories of the rise to power of Mussolini and Hitler differ in some respects but there were many common factors in explaining their rise to power. These were:

- The effects of the First World War.
- Economic depression.
- Unstable government and weak democracy.
- Fear of Communism.
- Strong leadership.
- Use of violence and propaganda.



Mussolini and Fascist Italy

Mussolini became leader of Italy in 1922. His rise to power was rapid and he controlled Italy for over 20 years, until his downfall during World War II. **How can we explain his rise to power?**

KEY CONCEPT: COMMUNISM

Communists believed that the working class would revolt against the middle class who controlled industry. This would result in a Communist society where private property was abolished, government would run the land and the factories for the benefit of the people and everybody would be equal.

KEY CONCEPT FASCISM

Fascism believed in nationalism, dictatorship, racism and the use of violence. It was against democracy and Communism.



What Caused Mussolini's Rise to Power?

1. Post-war Italy

At the end of the First World War (1914-18), there was great dissatisfaction in Italy with the war. Italians had joined the war in the hope of gaining more land from the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the **Paris Peace Conference**, Italy gained most of the land but failed to get **Dalmatia** and the city of **Fiume**. Italian nationalists now claimed that Italy had won the war but lost the **mutilated peace**, as they called it.

D'Annunzio, a nationalist poet and war hero, took action by capturing Fiume with a small revolutionary group. Nationalists throughout Italy supported him. But he soon turned many people against him. After 15 months in Fiume, he was expelled by the Italian army. His failure led to increased **nationalist bitterness**.

The war also affected the **Italian economy**. By 1919 the economy was in a **depressed** state. Soldiers were demobilised and there were 2 million unemployed. **Inflation** had risen by over 500 per cent between 1914 and 1920, and this wiped out wages and savings. Italians, from all different classes, felt betrayed that their sufferings during the war did not lead to improvements after the war. These conditions caused great dissatisfaction in Italy. Mussolini was able to use this dissatisfaction to gain popularity.



What Caused Mussolini's Rise to Power?

2. Social and Political Discontent

There was widespread discontent in Italy because of the economic depression. In the **towns and cities**, there were large-scale strikes and workers occupied factories. They wanted higher wages and factory councils. They were inspired by socialist and Communist leadership. There was also widespread conflict in the **countryside** where peasants (farmers) and labourers took over land, often supported by priests.

Industrialists and landlords reacted angrily against these actions. They believed this discontent was due to the spread of Communism. They were disappointed at the failure of the Italian governments to stop the lawlessness, so they organised groups of their own to attack workers and peasants, and they got the help of Fascist squads.

KEY CONCEPT INFLATION

Inflation is an increase in the prices of products, usually a large increase.

What Caused Mussolini's Rise to Power?

3. Weak Government

The two largest parties in Italy, the Socialist Party and the Catholic Popular Party, failed to agree so Italy was ruled by **five** different **coalition governments** between **1919 and 1922**.

The Italian governments were shown to be weak on many occasions. They failed to control the lawlessness and to solve the political, economic and social problems. **Democracy** seemed to be failing in Italy so many people looked for a **strong leader**. Mussolini portrayed himself as that strong leader who would solve Italy's problems.

KEY CONCEPT DEPRESSION

Depression is a term used to describe when an economy is doing badly; industrial production declines, factories and businesses close and there is widespread unemployment.

What Caused Mussolini's Rise to Power?

4. Mussolini's Fascist Movement

In March 1919, Mussolini founded his first **combat group** (or **fascio di combattimento**) in Milan. They were also known as **Blackshirts**. Soon other groups were set up in cities in northern and central Italy. At first they had a socialist programme but Mussolini changed that quickly after gaining only 2 per cent of the vote in elections in Milan in November 1919.

When Mussolini changed his policies to supporting the monarchy and dropping anti-clericalism (against the power of the Church in politics), he gained support. The **Fiume affair** also helped. D'Annunzio's adventure was very popular throughout Italy and Mussolini gained from his support for it.

With a more conservative and nationalist policy, Mussolini's Fascist movement grew more rapidly. By 1922 the Fascists had 3,000 groups and over 250,000 members. The membership was made up of war veterans and ex-officers, professional and landowning sons, and middle class and better-off peasant families. Mussolini got financial support from large manufacturers such as the Pirelli tyre company and the Fiat car company.



What Caused Mussolini's Rise to Power?

5. March on Rome

In May 1921, Mussolini's Fascists gained 35 seats in parliament and later that year he formed the **Fascist Party** out of his combat groups. Mussolini's next success was the crushing of socialist-led strikes in August 1922. It appeared as if Mussolini and the **Fascist squads** saved the country from the **red threat** while the government was helpless. This success encouraged him and his fellow leaders to organise a **March on Rome** in October 1922.

Fascist groups approached Rome from three directions. As 25,000 **Blackshirts** gathered on the edge of Rome, the Italian government was divided on what to do. But by now **King Victor Emmanuel III** was tired of all the changes in government and he also feared a civil war. He refused to bring in the army and the Prime Minister resigned. The King was left with no alternative but to appoint Mussolini as **Prime Minister**. At 39, he was the youngest Prime Minister in Italian history.

Two days after Mussolini's appointment as Prime Minister the March on Rome went ahead. It was more of a **victory parade** than a march. But Mussolini gave the impression that he had come to power in a **coup d'etat** (takeover of the state).



What Caused Mussolini's Rise to Power?

6. Mussolini's Role

Mussolini had played an important role in his own rise to power. Mussolini changed his policies to gain popularity. He believed that Fascism was not a system of unchanging beliefs but a **path to political power**. He made use of the discontent of the soldiers after the war. He was also a **clever propagandist** and a very able speaker. When he was offered a place in the Italian government he refused it because he knew there was no alternative to making him Prime Minister.



How did Mussolini Establish Dictatorship?

Mussolini's new government had only four Fascist ministers so Italian nationalists hoped to tame him. But over the next few years, Mussolini used democratic and legal means to become a **totalitarian dictator**.

Parliament - Acerbo Law

Mussolini first set about destroying the power of parliament. He began by passing the **Acerbo Law** in 1923. This law proposed that the party which got the greatest number of votes in the next election should have two-thirds of the seats. In the general election the following year, Mussolini used his Fascist groups to ensure the Fascist Party got the greatest number of votes. He enrolled his Blackshirts into a **Volunteer Militia** and this made their violence legal. He also had success in foreign policy when he got Fiume from Yugoslavia. Not surprisingly, the Fascists won 65 per cent of the vote.

Matteotti's Murder and the Aventine Secession

One of Mussolini's fiercest critics was **Giacomo Matteotti**, a socialist member of parliament. He was kidnapped by a group of Fascists and brutally killed. There was widespread anger at the murder and Mussolini's position as Prime Minister seemed in great danger. However, two factors saved him. First, the socialists pulled out of parliament in protest, in what became known as the **Aventine Secession**. This only strengthened Mussolini's position and gave greater control to the Fascists. Second, King Victor Emmanuel continued to support Mussolini.

KEY CONCEPT: PROPAGANDA

Propaganda is spreading information to convince people of your point of view. Governments and politicians use propaganda to achieve or retain power.

KEY PERSONALITY: MUSSOLINI

Mussolini was born in northern Italy. His mother was a schoolteacher and his father was a blacksmith. Mussolini worked at different jobs - he was a teacher, a soldier and a journalist. He was a member of the Socialist Party and became editor of their newspaper, Avanti. He was expelled from the Socialist Party when he wanted Italy to join the First World War. He now became more nationalistic. After the war, he founded the fascio di combattimento (combat groups) in 1919, and later the Fascist Party. His rise to power was rapid. He became Prime Minister when the government failed to persuade King Victor Emmanuel to use the army against the March on Rome. After becoming Prime Minister, he established a totalitarian dictatorship. He set up the corporate state, built roads and drained marshes, and made the Lateran Agreement with Pope Pius XI. In foreign policy, he expanded Italy's power. After initial disagreement with Hitler, they grew closer through the Spanish Civil War, the Rome-Berlin Axis and the Pact of Steel. During the Second World War, the Italian army performed badly. After the Allies invaded Italy, Mussolini was deposed. Hitler rescued him, but when he was next caught, he was shot.

Four years later a new electoral law stated that the **Fascist Grand Council**, headed by Mussolini, would nominate members of parliament. The Council drew up a list of 400 people which the electorate would vote on as a group. In this way, Mussolini had **eliminated** the power of the democratic parliament.



Dictatorship

Over the next few years he took further steps to impose dictatorship. There were constant house-to-house searches, the free press was stopped, there was harassment of political opponents, political parties were banned and the secret police, **OVRA**, was set up. Mussolini also banned trade unions and strikes. But his most important step to dictatorship was the power to **rule by decree** which he got in 1926. Over the next 17 years Mussolini signed more than 100,000 decrees.

KEY CONCEPT TOTALITARIANISM

Totalitarian governments control all aspects of life, from the actions of people to their thoughts. These governments make great use of propaganda, secret police, terror and a strong political party.

KEY CONCEPT CULT OF PERSONALITY

In politics, the **cult of personality** is the worship of a leader. This involves the use of propaganda to create an image of the leader who is all-wise and powerful.



Totalitarianism - Propaganda and Terror

But Mussolini intended to establish not just a dictatorship, but also a **totalitarian dictatorship**. He wanted to control all aspects of the lives of the people, their thoughts as well as their actions. **Fascist propaganda** played a key role in this.

The cult of the leader: A cult of personality was developed around Mussolini. He was called **Il Duce (the Leader)**. Mussolini used photographs, newspapers, radio and newsreel film to create the image of the all-wise, all-talented leader. *'Mussolini is always right'*, was the motto. There was Mussolini the animal lover - he liked to be photographed with his pet lioness, **Italia**; Mussolini the sportsman - the skier, the horseman, the pilot; Mussolini the worker - the light was left on in his office all night; and Mussolini the ordinary man - he helped out cutting corn.

Mussolini's image as a superman was helped when he survived a number of assassination attempts. Mussolini's image in Italy was also helped by the praise he got from foreign leaders. Churchill, later Prime Minister of Britain, said he would have worn the Blackshirt had he been an Italian.

Education: For the Fascists, the main purpose of education was to teach children **the Fascist values** of **obedience** and **patriotism**. Children were taught that Il Duce would make Italy great again. Textbooks were changed and teachers critical of Fascism were sacked. History was rewritten to highlight the glories of the Roman Empire and only committed Fascists could teach the subject. Mussolini wanted boys to be ready for fighting and girls to be good mothers, in line with the Fascist slogan, *'War is to the male what childbearing is to the female.'*

Totalitarianism - Propaganda and Terror

Youth organisations: Young boys and girls had to join youth organisations outside school. From the age of four up to the age of 18, they progressed through a series of these organisations, such as the **Balilla**. After 18, the most dedicated members joined the **Young Fascists**. Fascist youth organisations concentrated on military training and Fascist ideology (beliefs), as well as sports, parades and camps. Girls' organisations were taught sewing, singing and child care in line with Fascist beliefs about the role of women in society.

Press and radio: No opposition press was allowed and the existing press and radio was made serve the Fascist regime. News reports highlighted Fascist events and successes, and Mussolini's speeches were broadcast in full. The number of radios increased from 27,000 in 1926 to over 1 million by 1939. The Fascists encouraged the production of low-cost radios because they believed the radio was an important means of maintaining contact with the people.

Sport: Sport was important to Fascists because it created fit young men and achievements in sport could be used for nationalist propaganda. Italy organised the **1934 World Cup** and won it, and retained it in 1938. In boxing, **Primo Carnera** became a national hero by winning the world Heavyweight championship.

The police state and terror: The secret police, the **OVRA**, was set up, along with a special court to try anybody critical of the Fascist state. Individual freedom was abolished, and political opponents were spied upon and beaten up. Over 4,000 were imprisoned and others were sent to remote islands, but only about 10 people were sentenced to death. While Mussolini's Italy was brutal and oppressive, it was not as murderous as Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia.



The Limits of Totalitarianism

There were limits to Mussolini's power. Even though Mussolini attempted to gain total control, many groups in Italy were able to hold onto much of their power. Very often he was satisfied by appearances. 'In reality, however, the Fascist regime fell well short of the totalitarianism claimed by its spokesmen... monarchy, industry, landowners, armed forces, and the church formed an integral part of Mussolini's regime, making it less profoundly Fascist.. and less totalitarian in scope than it pretended to be.' (M. Blinkhorn, Mussolini and Fascist Italy)



Church-State Relations under Mussolini

The Catholic religion was the religion of most Italians and the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, was based in Rome. However, relations between the Pope and the Italian state had been poor since Italy was united in 1870 and the Pope lost land to the new state. Relations between Mussolini's government and the Catholic Church improved during the 1920s.

Mussolini was anti-clerical (against the power of the Church in politics) but he knew he could not control the Church. On the other hand, the Catholic Church saw Fascism as the best hope of resisting the spread of Communism. Mussolini took a series of steps which **improved relations**:

- He brought back compulsory religious education in primary schools.
- Crosses were allowed in the classrooms.
- He had his own civil marriage blessed by a Catholic ceremony.



Lateran Agreements, 1929

Following on the improved relations came two years of negotiations which led to the **Lateran Agreements (Treaty and Concordat) of 1929**. Three documents laid out the terms of the agreement:

- The Pope recognised the **Italian state**.
- Italy recognised the Pope's control of the **Vatican City**.
- Italy paid £30 million **compensation** for taking Rome in 1870.
- In the **Concordat**, the Catholic religion was recognised as 'the sole religion of the state'.
- The Pope appointed all the bishops of Italy, subject to Mussolini's agreement.
- The government agreed to **pay** the salaries of bishops and priests.
- **Religious instruction** was to be given in public (state) schools.

This agreement was a major achievement for Mussolini following a dispute which lasted for 60 years. The agreement increased his prestige in Italy and abroad. He became more acceptable to Catholics in Italy and in the rest of Europe. Some historians regard the Lateran Agreements as Mussolini's **greatest political success**.

Further Conflicts

However, the agreement did not end the conflicts between Church and state. Mussolini was jealous of the power of **Catholic Action**, a lay Catholic organisation, which had nearly 700,000 members in 1930. In 1931, he declared that Catholic Action groups should be disbanded. However, there was strong resistance from **Pope Pius XI** who condemned Mussolini's plans. Instead, Catholic Action announced it was founding a new organisation for university students. Fascist groups attacked some Catholic Action branches but a compromise was reached which limited Catholic Action to religious activities. Relations between Mussolini and the Catholic Church were helped by agreement on the role of the family, the role of women in society and the banning of contraception and abortion by Mussolini's government.

After that, relations between Mussolini and the Catholic Church remained steady until the late 1930s. Then the Catholic Church became **critical** of Mussolini's new anti- Semitic policy and his more aggressive foreign policy. By 1938, **Pope Pius XI** felt that Mussolini had misused the agreement with the Catholic Church. He prepared a statement that was critical of Mussolini's regime but he died before it could be issued. The new pope, **Pius XII**, wanted to keep Italy out of World War II, but Mussolini ignored his wishes. The Catholic Church also tried to protect Italian Jews by hiding them in convents and monasteries.

The strength of the Catholic Church in Italy shows the **limitations** of Mussolini's Fascism. While the Catholic Church did not openly oppose Fascism, it remained a separate organisation. Fascism was not strong enough to bring the Church under the control of the state.



Questions pg. 162 (Modern Europe, 4th Edition)

1. How and why did Mussolini improve relations with the Catholic Church in the 1920s?
2. What were the terms of the Lateran Treaty and Concordat?
3. What issues caused conflict between Mussolini and the Catholic Church in the 1930s?

EXAM QUESTION

How did Church state relations develop under Mussolini?

How did Mussolini Deal with the Economy?

The Corporate State

The idea of the Corporate State was influenced partly by Catholic teaching. Fascists believed that the class conflict between workers and employers should be replaced by **class co-operation**. Fascists also hoped the Corporate State would increase their control of the country.

A **Ministry of Corporations** was set up in 1926 but it took over 10 years to establish the Corporate State. The economy was divided into **22 Corporations**. Each Corporation represented a major area of economic activity such as agriculture, industry and the professions. Employers, workers and the government were represented on each Corporation. They decided wages and working conditions. Finally, Parliament was abolished in 1939 and replaced by a **Chamber of Fasces and Corporations**.

The Corporate State '*represented*,' as one historian said, '*a means of disciplining labour (the workers) in the interest of the employers and the state.*' It also added another layer of bureaucracy (officials and rules) and led to greater corruption and inefficiency.

Changing Economic Policies

Mussolini knew little about economics and Fascism was not an economic system like Communism. Between 1922 and 1925, Mussolini left the running of the economy in the hands of the Minister of Finance, **Alberto de Stefani**. He cut government spending, promoted free trade and benefited from the improved European economy of the time. Even though he successfully reduced unemployment to 120,000, de Stefani was fired by Mussolini and replaced with a financier and industrialist.



New Policies

This signalled a change in economic policy. **Protectionism** (duties or taxes on imports) was introduced to protect heavy industry and some agricultural products such as grain. Next, Mussolini revalued the currency to 90 lira to the £ Sterling (Quota 90). This was done for reasons of national pride but it made Italian exports dearer and damaged the economy.

By the early 1930s Mussolini was advocating a policy of **autarky** (economic self-sufficiency). This took the form of a series of **battles**. Already in 1925, Mussolini began the **Battle of Grain** - to increase grain production and make the country self-sufficient. Grain production increased steadily during the 1920s and 1930s, but often at the expense of other crops which would have been better suited to some of the land.

The Battle for Land Reclamation - a scheme for reclaiming land for grain production, accompanied the Battle of Grain. Its greatest success was the draining of the **Pontine Marshes** near Rome, which added thousands of extra acres of land and reduced malaria.

There were other advances made by the Italian economy. Electricity production was increased significantly, so also was motor car production. New motorways (**autostrada**) connected Italy's major cities and towns, much of the railway system was electrified and the mainline trains ran on time. The Fascists made good use of **propaganda** to boast about these achievements.

State Control of the Economy

As the 1930s progressed, Mussolini was more conscious of the need for **economic self-sufficiency** in preparation for war. By 1939, the beginning of the Second World War, most of Italy's shipbuilding, shipping, iron and steel industries were controlled by the state. The state owned a greater proportion of industry in Italy than in any other country outside the Soviet Union.

Who Benefited?

Some groups benefited more than others from Fascist economic policies. In particular the industrialists and larger landowners and farmers benefited. The greatest losers were the working class in the cities and the labourers in the country, in spite of the **Labour Charter of 1927**. This was a list of workers' rights - the right to good working conditions and fair wages. But the workers had no trade unions, the right to strike was abolished and unemployment rose from 110,000 in 1926 to 1 million in 1933 due to the Great Depression.

However, workers did benefit from the **Dopolavoro** (After Work) which was set up in 1925 to control leisure time. It controlled athletic and sports clubs, choirs, bands, night schools and libraries. It sponsored day outings and tours, and it promoted cinema and theatre.



How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

Mussolini took a strong interest in foreign policy. As well as being Prime Minister, he was also Foreign Minister for much of the time between 1922 and 1939. His declared aims in foreign policy were: 'I want to make Italy great, respected and feared.' He wanted to expand the power of Italy around the Mediterranean Sea in imitation of the Roman Empire. The Mediterranean was to become **Mare Nostrum** (Our Sea).

Foreign Policy in the 1920s

Mussolini began his rule with a number of foreign policy successes. His first success was the **Corfu incident (1923)**. When four Italians were killed redrawing the Greek- Albanian border for the League of Nations, Mussolini took over Corfu, a Greek island, after the Greek government refused to pay 50 million lira compensation to Italy. Mussolini continued to hold Corfu until the League ordered Greece to pay the 50 million lira which was demanded. In his second success, he acquired Fiume in January 1924 after negotiations with Yugoslavia. However, after these initial successes, Mussolini spent the rest of the 1920s building up an image of an international **statesman and man of peace**. Mussolini attended the **Locarno Conference** (1925) at which Italy and other European powers, including Germany, agreed to the **Locarno Pact** which guaranteed Germany's existing borders with France and Italy. Three years later, Mussolini signed the **Kellogg-Briand Pact** outlawing war as an instrument of national policy.

How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

Fascism for Export - the 1930s

By the 1930s, Mussolini had established full control of Italy - now he could expand. He wanted to **found an empire and to win glory and power**. *'The growth of empire, that is to say, the expansion of the nation, is an essential sign of vitality,'* he said. His main areas of interest were the Balkans, southern Europe and Africa.

Mussolini and Hitler Disagree

However, the first problem he faced in the 1930s was the rise to power of Hitler in Germany. While Mussolini was delighted that Fascism, **his doctrine**, was in power in another state, he was fearful of the creation of a **Greater Germany** through the union of Germany and Austria (**Anschluss**). Mussolini wanted to ensure the independence of Austria so he helped the Austrian Prime Minister, **Dolfuss**, break up the Nazi movement in Austria. When Dolfuss was assassinated, Mussolini sent troops to the Austro-Italian border to stop Hitler's plan to unite Germany and Austria.

Mussolini then formed the **Stresa Front** with Britain and France to oppose the break-up of treaties *'which may endanger the peace of Europe'*. Mussolini hoped the Stresa Front would limit Hitler's ambitions and that he would be able to expand his own empire in Africa. However, Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia destroyed the Stresa Front and drove him into the arms of Hitler.

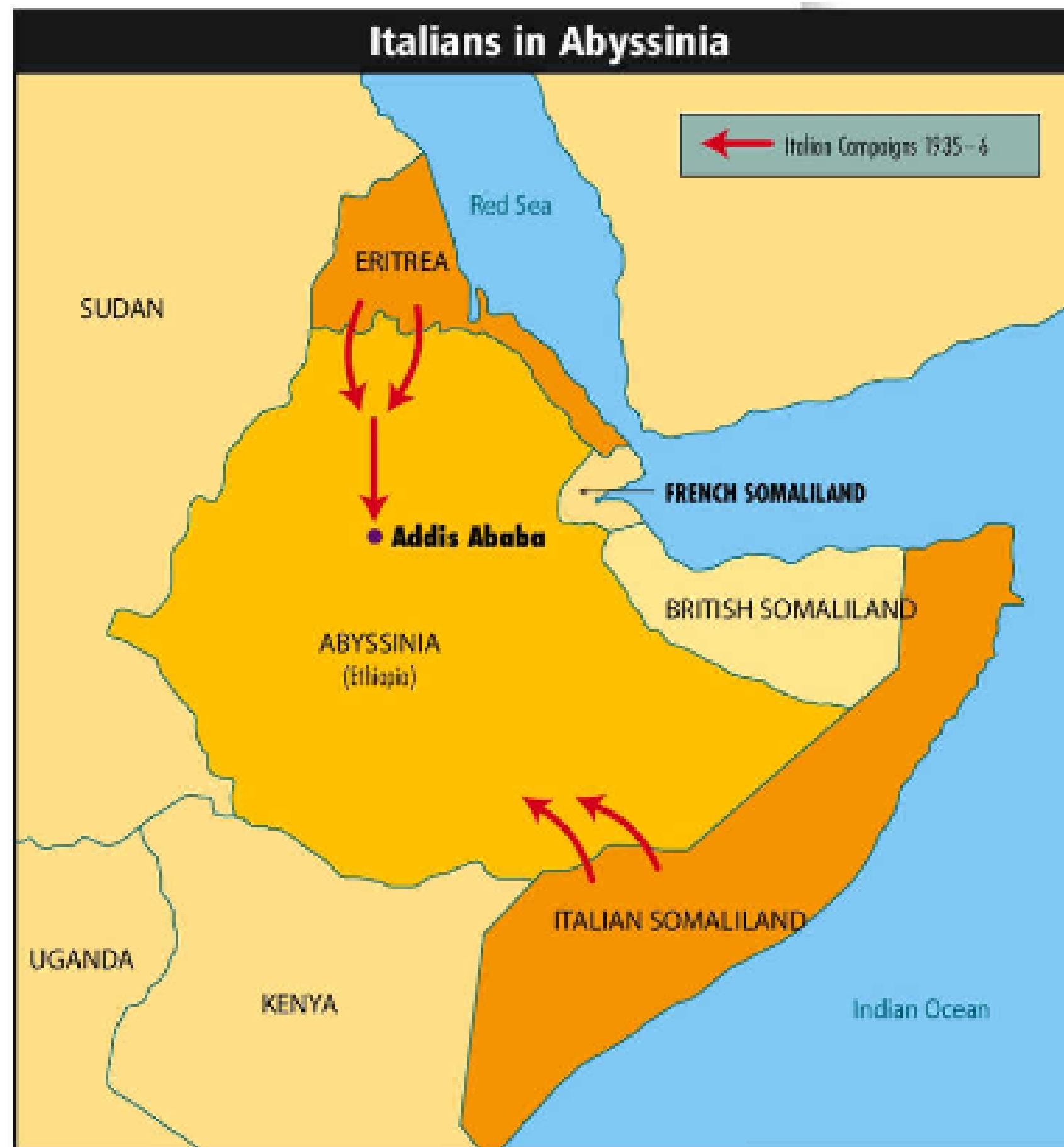
How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

The Invasion of Abyssinia

There were a number of **reasons** for Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia:

- Mussolini wanted to enlarge the Italian empire.
- Italians wanted revenge for a humiliating defeat by the Abyssinians in Adowa in 1896.
- Some historians suggest Mussolini wanted to distract the Italian people from economic problems at home in the middle of the 1930s.

Mussolini used a border incident with Abyssinia to build up his army and attack in October 1935. Over 400,000 Italian soldiers using tanks, planes and poison gas overran the lightly armed tribesmen of Abyssinia. Their Emperor, **Haile Selassie**, appealed to the **League of Nations**. The League condemned Italy and imposed economic sanctions. The sanctions, which excluded oil from the list, had little effect on the war and Italy took the capital, Addis Ababa, by May 1936.



How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

Results of the Invasion

- The invasion of Abyssinia ended the **Stresa Front**. Britain and France, as key members of the League, were involved in imposing sanctions on Italy.
- The failure of the sanctions showed up the **weakness** of the League of Nations.
- At the same time, Hitler supported Mussolini, whose attitude to Hitler now changed. When he first met Hitler in Rome in 1934, he was unimpressed. But he was very impressed by German military strength after a visit there in 1937.

Other factors also drew the two countries **closer together**. One was the similarity between Fascism and Nazism, in particular, their anti-Communism. They were also drawn together by helping Franco in the **Spanish Civil War (1936-39)**. In Mussolini's case he sent 75,000 men, 100 aircraft, weapons and ammunition to help Franco to victory.



How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

Agreements between Mussolini and Hitler

A series of agreements cemented their relationship:

- They first of all formed the **Rome-Berlin Axis (October 1936)**, a loose agreement between the two countries.
- This was followed by the **Anti-Comintern Pact (November 1937)** with **Germany** and **Japan** to present a united front against Communism.
- When Hitler invaded **Austria** in **March 1938** to form **Anschluss**, Mussolini did not intervene.
- In **May 1939**, Italy and Germany signed the **Pact of Steel**. Both sides agreed to back each other in any future war.



How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

Anti-Semitic Laws

Mussolini was now increasingly under Hitler's influence. This can be seen in the anti-Semitic laws the **Charter of Race** - which were brought into Italy for the first time in October 1938.

There was no experience of racial persecution in Italy before this and even Mussolini said he was opposed to the ideas of racial superiority. Now Jews were deprived of Italian nationality; they were not allowed to have state jobs and they were not allowed to marry non-Jewish Italians. But many Italians objected and the Pope wrote to Mussolini in protest. The anti-Semitic laws were one factor in Mussolini's **declining popularity**.



The Road to War

In March 1938, Mussolini acted as a peacemaker in **Munich** to get agreement between Germany, France and Britain over **Czechoslovakia**. Even though Mussolini liked to think he had **saved Europe** from war, his role in Munich was very limited.

As Europe headed for war in 1939, Mussolini realised that the Italian army was not ready. Wars in Libya (1920s), Abyssinia and Spain ensured that Italy was economically and militarily weakened. Mussolini himself said Italy would not be ready until 1943. When Hitler declared war in September 1939, Mussolini asked for huge quantities of arms and ammunition which he knew Hitler could not give him. In this way, Mussolini was able to declare Italy's **non-belligerence**.



Fascism at War - The Downfall of Mussolini

By the beginning of the Second World War, **Mussolini's popularity** was already in decline:

- Italians were worse off in the 1930s, self-sufficiency made products dearer and the standard of living fell.
- Mussolini came more under Hitler's influence and Italians did not like that.

Mussolini was drawn into the war as he envied Hitler's success in Poland and France. But this was a **fatal mistake** on his part. His army invaded southern France when Hitler had conquered Belgium and northern France. But the war exposed the **weaknesses** of Mussolini's planning and exposed his bluff:

- He made himself commander-in-chief and therefore was held responsible for Italy's defeats.
- The Italian army was badly equipped and poorly led.
- He hoped for a quick victory so he made no provision for rationing.



Italian Defeats and the Death of Mussolini

Not surprisingly, Italy was beaten in Libya, Egypt and Greece. Mussolini failed to prepare for the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy, and this led to his downfall. He was removed by King Victor Emmanuel and the Fascist Grand Council and imprisoned in a mountain-top hotel. Hitler sent German commandos to rescue him. He set up a rebel Fascist government in northern Italy called the **Salò Republic**. But he was captured by Italian resistance fighters and shot. His body and that of his mistress, who was shot with him, were hung upside down in Milan. His participation in the Second World War led to his own downfall, and contributed to the defeat of his ally, Hitler.



Assessment of Mussolini

Mussolini was the **first** of the Fascist dictators. His tactics were later copied by Hitler to achieve power. However, Mussolini's rule was never as totalitarian as Hitler's - the king was still head of state in Italy and he eventually dismissed Mussolini. Neither could Mussolini control the Catholic Church. Mussolini's Fascist Party did not control the Italian state in the same way that Hitler's Nazi Party did in Germany.

Italian Fascism died with Mussolini. His **only long-lasting** legacy was the Lateran Agreements; his Corporate State was a failure and his foreign policy led Italy into the Second World War and to his downfall. His genius lay in his ability to manipulate the Italian people through mass meetings, press and radio.



Questions pg. 162 (Modern Europe, 4th Edition)

1. What were Mussolini's aims in foreign policy?
2. What success did Mussolini have in the 1920s?
3. What was Fascism for export? Was it successful/
4. Why did Mussolini and Hitler disagree over Austria?
5. Why did Italy join World War II and what was the outcome for the country?

EXAM QUESTION

To what extent was Mussolini's foreign policy the main cause of his downfall?