

Fascism in Italy

The first of the nations of Western Europe to turn against the old ruling regime was Italy. During World War I Italy mobilised more than five and a half million men, of whom nearly 700,000 were killed. The financial cost of the participation in the War was huge. The country had suffered heavy losses in a war that was unpopular with both socialists and pro-Austrian Catholics. The nationalists were equally unhappy with the marginal gain in territory from the Treaty of Versailles. The War resulted in inflation with consequent rise in prices, speculation and profiteering. There were frequent protests and strikes. People held the rulers of Italy responsible for the humiliation at Versailles.

Rise of Socialist Organisations

As hardship increased, socialist ideas began to spread. In 1918 Italian socialists voted to join the Communist International. In the election of November 1919 they won about a third of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Radicalism spread even in rural areas. Red Leagues were organised to break up large estates and to force landlords to reduce their rents. To the landowning class fascism was a less dangerous form of radicalism that could save their property from confiscation.

The Rise of Mussolini

Benito Mussolini (1883–1945), was a son of a blacksmith. He qualified as an elementary school master and left for further study in Switzerland but ended up as a journalist with socialist views. He became the editor of *Avanti*, the leading socialist daily. When the Fascist Party was founded in 1919 Mussolini joined it immediately. As Fascists stood for authority, strength and discipline, support came from industrialists,

nationalists, ex-soldiers, the middle classes and discontented youth. Fascists resorted to violence freely and their opponents were attacked with knives, cudgels and guns. The Fascist dictatorship arose out of the breakdown of the parliamentary government which had proved unable to cope with the disorders following the end of the War. The inability of the Democratic Party leaders to combine and act decisively facilitated Mussolini's triumph. What threatened to become a civil war between the communists and their opponents was ended by the march of the black-shirted Fascists on Rome (October 1922). Impressed by the show of force, the King Immanuel III invited Mussolini to form a government.

Fascism: The word Fascism derives its origin from the Latin *fasces*, the ax surrounded by a bundle of rods representing the authority of the Roman state. 'Fascism is a form of radical authoritarian ultra-nationalism, characterised by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition and strong regimentation of society and of the economy, which came to prominence in early 20th-century Europe'.

Fascists under Mussolini

In the 1924 elections, after intimidation of the electors, the Fascists won 65 per cent of the votes. Matteotti, a socialist leader, who questioned the fairness of the elections was murdered. The opposition parties boycotted the Parliament in protest. Mussolini reacted by banning opposition parties and censoring the press. Opposition leaders were killed or imprisoned. Assuming the title of Il Duce (the leader), in 1926 Mussolini became a dictator with power to legislate. He passed a law forbidding strikes and lockouts. Unions and employers were organised into corporations which would settle wages and working conditions. The greater part of the rest of the population was grouped

into corporations, according to occupation. These were then organised into national federations and supervised by the Minister of Corporations. In 1938 Parliament was abolished and was replaced by a body representing the Fascist Party and the corporations. This new arrangement bolstered Mussolini's dictatorial control of the economy, as well as enabling him to wield untrammelled power as head of the administration and the armed forces. Thus Mussolini destroyed parliamentary government, trade unions and all democratic institutions.

Mussolini's Pact with Pope

In order to give respectability to the Fascist Party, Mussolini won over the Roman Catholic Church by recognising the Vatican City as an independent state. In return the Church recognised the Kingdom of Italy. The Roman Catholic faith was made the religion of Italy and compulsory religious teaching in school was ordered. The Lateran Treaty incorporating the above provisions was signed in 1929.

Great Depression Years In 1929 the United States plunged into a great financial and commercial slump. The effect on the rest of the world was grave. By 1931 European trade and finance was totally paralysed. Though the Fascist government in Italy could boast of achievements during this period in the much publicised public works – new bridges, roads and canals, hospitals and schools – it could not solve the unemployment problem. By 1935, when the collapse of the League of Nations had become complete, Mussolini in order to have an economic empire for Italy invaded Ethiopia. This was useful to divert attention away from the economic troubles. Mussolini's success drew admiration from ruling classes elsewhere in Europe.