

Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism

Fascism arose in Europe after World War I when many people yearned for national unity and strong leadership. In Italy, Benito Mussolini used his charisma to establish a powerful fascist state.

Benito Mussolini coined the term “fascism” in 1919 to describe his political movement. He adopted the ancient Roman *fasces* as his symbol. This was a bundle of rods tied around an ax, which represented the power of Rome.

Mussolini established the first fascist regime, followed soon after by others, including Nazi Germany. Fascism, however, differed somewhat from one nation to another. Thus, scholars often disagree on a precise definition of fascism. Even so, they tend to agree on its common characteristics such as:

- **Absolute Power of the State:** Fascist regimes have a strong centralized state, or national government. The fascist state seeks total control over all major parts of society. Individuals must give up their private needs and rights to serve the needs of the whole society as represented by the state.
- **Rule by a Dictator:** A single dictator runs the fascist state and makes all the important decisions. This leader often uses charisma, a magnetic personality, to gain the support of the people.
- **Corporatism:** Fascists believe in taming capitalism by controlling labor and factory owners. Unions, strikes, and other labor actions are illegal. Although private property remains, the state controls the economy.
- **Extreme Nationalism:** The fascist state uses national glory and the fear of outside threats to build a new society based on the “common



Fascist Benito Mussolini (1883–1945) led Italy from 1922 until 1943, when he was deposed. Germany then installed him as the leader of German-controlled northern Italy until it fell to the Allies in 1945. (Library of Congress)

will” of the people. Fascists believe in action and looking at national myths for guidance rather than relying on the “barren intellectualism” of science and reason.

- **Superiority of the Nation’s People:** Fascists hold up the nation’s people as superior to other nationalities. They typically strengthen and unify the dominant group in a nation while stifling dissent and persecuting minority groups.
- **Militarism and Imperialism:** Fascists believe that great nations show their greatness by conquering and ruling weak nations. Fascists believe the state can survive only if it successfully proves its military superiority in war.

Mussolini’s Rise to Power

After serving in the Italian army during World War I, Mussolini returned home, looking for a way to unify the Italian people. In 1918, he began to deliver emotional speeches, calling for a dictator to head the country. He argued that only a strong leader could unite the people to overcome Italy’s postwar mass unemployment, chaotic political party conflicts, and strikes by socialists and communists.

In 1919, Mussolini organized his fascist movement in the northern city of Milan. He formed squads of street fighters who wore black shirts. His “Blackshirts” beat up socialists and communists and threw them out of local governments.

The communist revolution in Russia had taken place only two years earlier. Mussolini’s fascist movement quickly gained the support of anti-communist business people, property owners, and middle-class professionals like teachers and doctors.

In 1921, Mussolini formed the National Fascist Party. But he still lacked a clear fascist program. He only knew one thing for sure: He wanted to rule Italy.

In a speech before thousands of his supporters in October 1922, Mussolini declared, “Either the government will be given to us, or we will seize it by marching on Rome.” A few days later, he unleashed his followers on a massive march to Italy’s capital city. As tens of

thousands converged on Rome, government leaders became so unnerved that they resigned.

King Victor Emmanuel had the constitutional duty to appoint a new prime minister, who would form the next government. With his Blackshirts and other supporters swarming the streets of Rome, Mussolini demanded that the king appoint him prime minister. The king gave in, and at age 39, Mussolini became Italy's youngest prime minister on October 29, 1922.

The Fascist State

Mussolini chose Giovanni Gentile, a noted Italian philosopher, as his minister of education. Gentile reorganized Italy's school system. He also wrote many articles and books, clarifying the basic ideas of fascism.

Gentile argued that the private desires and interests of the individual came second to the "common will" of the people. The fascist state, he said, put this will of the people into action.

Gentile explained that self-sacrifice and obedience to the state enable the individual to achieve unity with the "common will." Gentile argued that rights do not belong to the individual but to the people as a whole.

Gentile taught that the "common will" of the people is the law of the state. Therefore, individuals must submit to the fascist state in order to be truly free. Later, Mussolini put it this way: "Far from crushing the individual, the fascist state multiplies his energies, just as in a regiment a soldier is . . . multiplied by the number of his fellow soldiers."

Building on the ideas of earlier European philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Gentile claimed that the peoples of the world are engaged in a survival of the fittest. He declared it is the natural right of the stronger to conquer and rule the weaker. Gentile stated that war has another function in the fascist state: It unites the people and proves their superiority as a nation.

Gentile, sometimes called the philosopher of Italian fascism, believed he could combine philosophy with raw power. He once praised Mussolini as being dedicated to Italy in "its honor, its glory, its security and prosperity, and, therefore, in its power and its value in the history of the world."

***Il Duce* and the Fascist State**

Mussolini called new elections for the Italian parliament in 1924. Intimidation and fraud marred the election. Mussolini's Fascist Party together with a smaller allied party won 66 percent of the vote.



Mussolini (Il Duce) and Hitler (Der Fuehrer) ride in an open car through the streets of Munich, Germany, c. 1940. (National Archives)

After the election, Mussolini closed opposition newspapers and banned public protest meetings. He declared all political parties illegal except for his own Fascist Party. He outlawed labor unions and strikes. He also established a political police force, the Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Antifascism. A Fascist Grand Council rubber-stamped Mussolini's decrees and made parliament irrelevant.

By 1925, Mussolini had adopted the title, *Il Duce* (the Leader). He delivered emotional public speeches, swaying back and forth, puffing his chest, and holding his hands on his hips. The crowds chanted back fascist slogans such as "*Il Duce* is always right!" and "Believe, obey, fight!"

Opponents of Mussolini coined the term "totalitarianism" to describe his quest to control not only the political system but also the economy, schools, police, courts, military, and more. Ironically, Mussolini liked this term and began to use it himself to persuade Italians to come together under his leadership for a rebirth of society.

Mussolini compared the "new man" of Italy to the hardened soldiers of ancient Rome. As for women, *Il Duce* saw their role as giving birth and caring for a new generation of warriors. The Fascist Party organized youth organizations for all boys and girls aged 8–18. These groups promoted physical training, military drills (for boys), and the ideals of the fascist state.

Mussolini had little use for religion. Italy, however, was a strongly Catholic country. Gentile, as minister of education, continued the teaching of Catholic doctrine in

the elementary schools. But he replaced it with philosophy at the secondary level. The Catholic Church objected to this reform.

Hoping to keep the church from opposing his fascist regime, Mussolini adopted pro-Catholic policies against abortion and divorce. Then in 1929, he signed a treaty with the church that made Catholicism the state religion. This agreement also restored the teaching of Catholic doctrine in secondary schools. For its part, the church accepted Mussolini's fascist state and ended its involvement in Italy's political affairs.

Mussolini wanted to create an economic system that provided a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism depends on private property, employer-owned competing enterprises, and the profit motive. Socialism envisions a society in which the workers jointly own the economic means of production (factories, farms, etc.) and control the government. Communism is a form of socialism that calls for a revolution to destroy capitalism, establish a dictatorship in the name of the workers, and distribute goods equally throughout society.

During the 1930s, Mussolini organized industry, agriculture, and economic services into state-controlled labor unions and employer associations called "corporations." Government officials appointed the heads of each union and employer corporation. They negotiated wages and working conditions with each other.

This "third way" corporatism attempted to unify workers and employers by requiring them to set aside their private interests in favor of the best interests of the fascist state. In practice, however, the employers usually benefited more than the workers did.

Compared to Hitler's Germany, police crackdowns were less harsh. But a special court tried anti-fascists, those working against Mussolini's regime.

The Jewish population of Italy was small, and neither Mussolini nor most other Italians were very anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish). Jews had fought for Italy in World War I and participated in Mussolini's march on Rome.

Even so, *Il Duce* came increasingly under the influence of Hitler in the late 1930s. Mussolini finally agreed to anti-Semitic decrees such as banning Jews from certain occupations. When the Germans occupied parts of Italy during World War II, they transported 20 percent of Italy's Jews to Nazi concentration camps. While Italians hid many Jews, Mussolini did nothing to stop the Nazi deportations.

Before World War II, popular support for Mussolini's fascist state was high. His charismatic style of leadership convinced many that Italy was on a path to greatness. When the Great Depression hit Italy after 1929, Mussolini acted quickly and boldly with a large program of public construction projects, which put many jobless Italians back to work.

Il Duce at War

Mussolini agreed with Gentile that the strong nations of the world had a natural right to subdue and rule the weak. Mussolini glorified military values like physical strength, discipline, obedience, and courage. "A minute of the battlefield is worth a lifetime of peace," he declared.

In 1935, Mussolini ordered the invasion of Ethiopia, a poor African country that had once humiliated Italy in battle. Seeking revenge, Mussolini used planes, artillery, and poison gas against tribesmen with old muskets. Mussolini announced to cheering crowds that the Roman Empire was back.

In 1939, Mussolini and Hitler signed the so-called "Pact of Steel," which committed each country to come to the aid of the other in war. A few months later, Hitler invaded Poland and set off World War II. Mussolini, however, delayed joining Hitler until Nazi troops were just about to defeat France in June 1940.

Mussolini then decided to invade Greece. But his army was beaten badly and had to be rescued by German troops. In 1941, he sent 200,000 of his soldiers to aid Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. The harsh winter and Soviet guerilla fighters killed huge numbers of German and Italian soldiers.

By 1943, British, American, and other Allies had defeated Mussolini's army in North Africa, taken Sicily, and bombed Rome. The Italian people had had enough and abandoned *Il Duce*.

King Victor Emmanuel ordered the arrest and imprisonment of Mussolini after his own Grand Council voted for him to resign. German commandos, however, helped him escape to Germany.

Mussolini returned to Italy and established a new fascist regime in the north near Milan, an area that the Germans had occupied. But he was merely a puppet of the Nazis.

When the Allies neared Milan, Mussolini tried to escape. But anti-fascist Italian fighters captured and shot him on April 28, 1945. The next day, crowds cheered as they hung Mussolini's body by its heels in Milan where he had started the fascist movement 25 years earlier.

More Fascist Regimes and Movements

Mussolini inspired others to develop their own versions of fascism. When Hitler gained power in Germany in 1933, he added the idea of an Aryan “master race” to his fascist state. In 1939, Francisco Franco established the Spanish state with some fascist elements. Other fascist or fascist-like regimes rose and fell in Japan, Argentina, South Africa, Greece, and Iraq among other countries.

Fascist movements took root even in democracies. The British Union of Fascists thrived for a while during the Great Depression. In the United States, the German-American Bund supported Hitler’s Nazi regime until the U.S. entered World War II.

Today, variations of fascism live on in a number of military dictatorships around the world. “Neofascist” groups still exist in Western democracies. These groups typically preach ultranationalism and spew hatred of racial or

ethnic minorities. While the idea of a unified nation under a fascist state probably died with Mussolini, the extreme racist forms of fascism, empowered by the Internet, are alive and well throughout the world.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Why do you think Mussolini was so popular as dictator of Italy?
2. Compare Mussolini’s fascist corporatism with capitalism and communism.
3. Why did Gentile and Mussolini believe that war was an essential part of the fascist state?

For Further Reading

Eatwell, Roger. *Fascism: A History*. New York: Allen Lane, 1996.

Layton, Julia. “How Fascism Works.” *How Stuff Works*. 2010. URL: <http://history.howstuffworks.com>

A C T I V I T Y

Is It Fascism?

Because of their connection to Hitler and the horrors of World War II, the terms “fascist” and “fascism” are often hurled as insults by political opponents. The terms have lost much meaning, other than as insults. Even scholars have difficulty in agreeing on a definition of fascism. But as the article notes, scholars do agree on several common characteristics of fascism. In this activity, you are going to use these characteristics to judge whether particular governments are fascist.

1. Form small groups and review the characteristics of fascism at the beginning of the article.
2. Each group should discuss and decide each of the hypothetical cases below whether each is an example of a totally, mostly, somewhat, or non fascist state.
3. Each group should report and give reasons for its conclusions.

Case #1: The government of **Surs** is ruled by one party, whose council of 100 selects the supreme leader. The people vote in other elections, but only one person is on the ballot for each office, as the party nominates all those running. The supreme leader has complete control of the society. The government owns all the major businesses and runs them in the name of the people. Religious worship is discouraged: No party member belongs to a religious organization. The prisons are filled with political prisoners. The party is trying to create a “new human,” free of race, ethnic, religious, and gender prejudice and free from the greed of capitalism.

Case #2: The supreme leader of **Railkine** makes most political decisions and heads the armed forces. The Assembly of Religious Leaders elects him from the clergy and may remove him. It also approves all candidates running for parliament. The assembly may also veto laws passed by parliament if they go against religious law. The supreme leader has outlawed political parties, closed newspapers, imprisoned dissenters, banned other religions, suppressed minorities, put requirements on how women should dress, and even outlawed dancing. The supreme leader is building up the military, and neighboring countries fear that Railkine will invade and impose its form of government.

Case #3: **New Sed** is a country with a parliament and a strong tradition of political and religious freedom. In the last 40 years, the Accolade Party has won election after election. This party has built good schools and a strong social safety net for all its people. The safety net includes a government-run health system, a high minimum wage, generous unemployment insurance, retirement pensions for all, and other benefits. It has enacted strict regulations on businesses. The government has a small military. Taxes are very high.