

Subject: History

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COURSE: History – Dictatorship and Democracy

ACADEMIC LEVEL: Higher

ACADEMIC YEAR: 5th Year

TOPIC: Mussolini's Italy 1922-1945

STUDENT NAME:



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Mussolini's Italy: Timeline

1883 Birth of Mussolini.
 1914 Supported Italy's entry into the war.
 1919 Formation of the Fascio di Combattimento.
 1921 35 Fascist MPs elected.
 1922 March on Rome – Mussolini appointed PM.
 1923 Acerbo Law passed.
 1924 Fascists won general election.
 Murder of Matteotti.
 1926 All political parties bar Fascist Party banned.
 1929 Lateran Pacts signed with the Pope.
 1935 Italians invaded Abyssinia.
 1936 Rome-Berlin Axis signed.
 1940 Italy entered World War II.
 1941 Italians defeated in Greece and North Africa.
 1943 King Victor Emmanuel III removed Mussolini
 1945 Captured by partisans and shot.



Glossary:

Anti-clericalism: government policy of reducing the influence of the Church in political and social life particularly in education.

Concordat: the name for an agreement between a country and the Catholic Church.

Corporate State: Mussolini's policy that called for co-operation between workers and owners in different industries – a third way as he saw it between capitalism and communism – a cover for fascist control.

Il Duce: the leader – the title given to Mussolini when he ruled Italy.

Lateran Treaties: agreement between Mussolini and the Pope that recognized the Vatican State and ended a 60-year dispute between Church and State.

March on Rome: the event that saw Mussolini seize power.

Rome-Berlin Axis: alliance with Hitler signed in 1936.

Salò Republic: the German-backed government that Mussolini controlled between 1943 and 1945.

Squadristi/Blackshirts: Mussolini's uniformed followers who fought against his political opponents.



Focus on Fascism

Fascism was the political philosophy that was most associated with Mussolini's Italy. It spread to other countries such as Germany, Spain, and France. It developed for several reasons:

- The political and social changes brought about by World War I e.g. change in governments, defeat in war.
- Dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles. In Germany, the treaty was seen as too harsh, while many Italians felt they did not get the reward their sacrifices deserved.
- The spread of Socialism and Communism after the revolution in Russia.
- The economic problems after World War I, e.g. unemployment.
- A loss of faith in the democratic system, as it failed to tackle these political and economic problems.

There were differences between Mussolini and Hitler, but Fascism in both countries had the following characteristics.

- Authoritarian: Believed in strong government, order and a powerful leader – a dictator.
- Anti-democratic: Opposed democracy, which was seen as weak, indecisive and unable to protect the interests of the people especially against the rise of communism.
- Totalitarian: The state was all-powerful. Loyalty to the state was the responsibility of the citizen. Secret police and terror were used to keep control of the population.
- Propaganda was widely used to encourage loyalty to the regime especially the dictator.
- One-party state: All other political parties and trade unions were banned.
- Cult of personality: The leader could not be criticized. He had an almost God-like status: Il Duce in Italy, Der Führer in Germany.
- Anti-Communist/Socialist: Extremely hostile to these political groups, which they saw as disloyal to their countries and disruptive to society. In both Germany and Italy, this was an important reason for the growth of support for Fascist parties.
- Economic self-sufficiency: Countries should develop their own industry and agriculture and not rely on imported goods. This was seen as important in developing the greatness of the state.
- Nationalism: Great emphasis was placed on building up the strength and prestige of their country. This led to aggressive foreign policies in both Italy and Germany.
- Racism: As a result of nationalism, there was an intolerance of any racial group that was seen as different or not loyal. In Italy, it led to discrimination against Germans and Slavs and later Jews. In Germany, Jews were the target – this is called anti-Semitism.

Fascism is sometimes referred to as the 'anti' philosophy, as it can be best understood by what it opposed rather than what it advocated (anti-democratic, anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, etc.).



Background

- Italy had been unified as one country in 1870. The head of state was King Victor Emmanuel III but major decisions were made by an elected parliament. Until 1913, only wealthier Italians could vote.
- The country was poor, with a large division between the richer north, where most of the industry was located, and the poor agricultural south. At the turn of the century, over 50 per cent of the population could not read or write and over 500,000 Italians were emigrating every year, primarily to the United States.
- In 1915, Italy joined World War I on the side of the Allies. Italy was promised large amounts of land by the secret **Treaty of London** at the expense of the Austrian Empire and thereby hoped to gain great power status.
- However, the war did not go well for the Italians. They suffered a heavy defeat at Caporetto in 1917 and in total Italy lost over 500,000 killed. Despite this, Italy emerged on the victorious side at the end of the war.

Key Question: How did Mussolini come to power in Italy?

There were widespread political and economic problems in Italy after World War I.

1. There was a lot of dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Versailles.
 - The country had gained the regions of Trentino, South Tyrol and Istria, but Italians felt that this was not enough. Many believed that Italy should receive all the land promised to them under the Treaty of London of 1915. Italian nationalists who hoped that Italy would now become a great power felt betrayed. They called it the '**mutilated victory**'.
 - This resentment was symbolized by the town of Fiume. Italians were outraged that the town, with a significant Italian population, had been made a Free City under the control of the League of Nations. In 1919, the war hero, writer and poet **Gabriele D'Annunzio** seized Fiume. He set up a Fascist-style regime with the Roman salute, speeches and marches. His occupation of Fiume lasted until he was removed by Italian troops in January 1921.

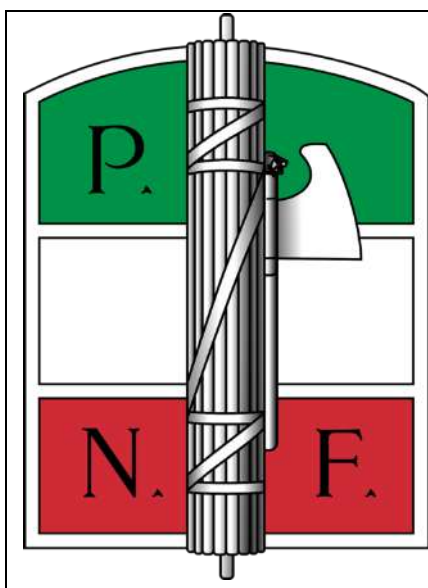


2. Economic conditions were tough.
 - The economy had failed to recover after the war. Unemployment rose to 2 million and ex- soldiers who had left the army found it difficult to get jobs. Prices were rising quickly – between 1919 and 1921 there was a 50 per cent increase in prices.
 - As a result of the economic problems and inspired by the Bolshevik takeover in Russia, there was also widespread industrial unrest in Italy. This culminated in a general strike in September 1920 where 500,000 workers occupied factories throughout Italy. In some factories, workers' councils were formed that were like the soviets set up in Communist Russia. This period of industrial unrest became known as the **Two Red Years**.
 - Conditions were just as bad in the countryside, where farmers formed Peasant Leagues to defend their interests against landlords. These leagues frequently resorted to violence.
3. Weak political leadership contributed to Italy's problems.
 - Between 1919 and 1922, there were weak coalition governments, with five different prime ministers. These governments did not seem able to tackle Italy's political and economic problems. Many Italians lost faith in democracy and looked to a strong leader that would solve Italy's ills.

Against this background, in March 1919, **Benito Mussolini** formed his political party, known as the **Fascio di Combattimento**, or combat groups, in Milan. Mussolini was a well-known journalist and political writer and had been an ardent supporter of Italy's involvement in World War I.

The following were some of his views.

- Although he was a former Socialist, his movement was opposed to Socialism and Communism. He promised to bring order and to end strikes.
- He wanted to make Italy a great power. He strongly attacked the Treaty of Versailles. Mussolini was a supporter of D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume.
- He criticized the weak democratic governments that governed Italy and argued that only a strong ruler – **a dictator** – could solve Italy's problems.



Mussolini borrowed a lot from the Roman Empire, including the **fascis**, the symbol of Fascist movement. A symbol of authority in ancient Rome it reflected the Fascists' belief in law and order and their hope of recreating the glories of ancient Rome.

His uniformed followers wore black shirts and were called the squadristi, or **Blackshirts**. Their role was to create an impression of order, loyalty, and discipline and to fight opponents of the party.

- Many of Mussolini's early followers were university students and ex-army officers who were attracted to the movement by a sense of adventure and a dislike of traditional politics. Fighting between the Fascists and their left-wing enemies became common in towns and villages throughout Italy.
- The party grew slowly at first, winning only 2 per cent of the vote in the 1919 election. To win over more supporters, Mussolini moderated his policies to appeal to the middle classes. He stopped his attacks on the Catholic Church and the monarchy.
- In 1921, Mussolini turned his movement into a proper political party called the **National Fascist Party**. He was helped when the powerful Socialist Party split into two when more radical members left to form the Communist Party in January 1921.
- In the 1921 elections, the Fascists won 35 seats, and Mussolini was elected to parliament. Although overall the result was disappointing, in some provinces Fascist candidates topped the polls.
- Many wealthy industrialists and landowners started to give significant financial support to the Fascists because of their anti-Socialist policies. Membership grew dramatically from 30,000 in 1920 to over 300,000 in 1922. The Fascists held massive rallies to intimidate their opponents and to remove local officials they disliked.
- Throughout Italy, left-wing party and newspaper offices were attacked and burned. It is estimated that about 2,000 people were victims of political violence in the years between 1919 and 1922 – most at the hands of Blackshirt mobs. There was a lot of sympathy for Mussolini among the police and the army. As a result, they often ignored Fascist violence while coming down hard on political violence from the left.
- In August 1922, the Blackshirts helped to break a general strike called by the Socialist Party. For an increasing number of Italians, **Mussolini seemed like the man who would save Italy from the Communist menace and return it to greatness.**
- In October 1922, convinced by other leading Fascists that it was now time to act, Mussolini demanded that he be appointed prime minister. He announced his intention to march on the capital, Rome that became known as the **March on Rome**.
- On 28 October, Prime Minister **Luigi Facta** asked **King Victor Emmanuel III** to declare a state of emergency and use the army. The troops were loyal to the king and could have crushed the Fascists. However, fearing civil war, the king refused and Facta resigned.
- In the negotiations that followed Mussolini refused to serve under another prime minister. The king gave in and appointed him prime minister at the age of 39. His Fascist supporters then staged a victory march through Rome – **the myth of the Fascist revolution had been born.**



Key Question: How did Mussolini establish a dictatorship in Italy?

- When appointed prime minister, Mussolini led a coalition government in which Fascist MPs were a small minority. His government contained all major parties except the Socialists and Communists. He also served as Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Interior (justice). The latter ministry gave him control of the police. **Over the next four years, Mussolini gradually set up a one-party state.**
- The Blackshirts were formed into the **Volunteer Militia for National Security** and paid by the government. They now had a free hand to attack Mussolini's political enemies. He set up a **Fascist Grand Council** which introduced laws for Italy without consulting the non-Fascists in the government.
- In November 1923, **the Acerbo Law** was passed that said the party with the most votes in a general election (over 25 %) would receive two-thirds of the seats in parliament. This law was broadly welcomed as it would end weak and indecisive coalition governments.
- In January 1924, Mussolini's popularity increased when he negotiated Italian control of the disputed city of **Fiume**. The April election was a great victory for the Fascists, who received 65 per cent of the votes cast. As a result of the election, he now had control of the parliament.
- There is little doubt that the result reflected the fact that Mussolini was popular among many Italians, but he was not taking any chances. The election was marred by the violence of Mussolini's followers and the rigging of votes (cheating) in the countryside, particularly in the south.



After the election, Mussolini suffered a major political setback. After the election, the moderate Socialist leader **Giacomo Matteotti** had made a very critical speech in parliament attacking the Fascists' tactics during the recent elections. Soon after Matteotti was abducted in broad daylight by Blackshirts and later murdered.

- Historians are unsure whether Mussolini ordered the kidnapping and murder, but at the time it was widely believed that he was responsible. The murder placed Mussolini in a very weak political position. There was an outcry in the press and non-Fascist MPs resigned from the parliament in protest.
- They hoped to put pressure on the King to dismiss Mussolini. The king refused to act against Mussolini, who still had the support of most MPs in parliament. He feared civil war between the army and the Blackshirts and the possibility of the Socialists coming to power. Mussolini recovered and survived the crisis.
- Mussolini came under pressure within his own party to end democracy and in January 1925 announced his intention to set up a dictatorship. Press freedom was ended, and the police and Fascist militia increased their violence against opponents of the regime.



- A law was introduced on Christmas Eve, 1925 which stated that only the king could dismiss Mussolini as prime minister. Mussolini now had the sole responsibility to introduce laws.
- In November 1926, taking advantage of a failed attempt on his life, Mussolini banned all political parties except the Fascist Party. The Fascist Grand Council, which Mussolini controlled, replaced the parliament. This spelled the end of parliamentary democracy in Italy. At local level, elected mayors were replaced by Fascist officials. Mussolini was now the dictator of Italy, or **Il Duce** – the Leader.

Key question: How did fascism control the everyday lives of Italians?

Mussolini talked of the state having total power over its citizens' lives – this became known as **totalitarianism**. Propaganda and terror played important roles in creating the totalitarian state.

Propaganda was used to develop a cult of personality around Mussolini:

- In 1925, all independent newspapers were closed. The remaining newspapers were told to print his name in capital letters as DUCE. Newspaper editors were expected to praise his successes and play down his failures.
- The image portrayed of Mussolini was tightly controlled. Backed by the slogan 'Mussolini is always right', he was presented as a man of destiny working tirelessly for the Italian people – a superman. His picture was to be seen on posters on buildings throughout the country. All cinemas had to show official newsreels supporting the regime before every film.



Since coming to power in 1922 Mussolini's followers had used violence on their political opponents. Once he became dictator of Italy, Mussolini was now free to eliminate all political criticism.

- A Secret police, the **OVRA (The Organisation for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism)**, was established. It held suspects without trial, tapped phones and read

mail. A special court was set up to try those who were judged to be a danger to public safety. The death penalty was brought in for political crimes.

- Ten people were executed for political crimes between 1927 and 1940 and over 5,000 people were sent to prison camps. Some of the camps were on remote Mediterranean islands where conditions were tough but not severe.
- One by-product of the strict nature of Mussolini's regime was the destruction of the Sicilian Mafia. Over 10,000 suspected members were arrested and many more emigrated to the US.
- However, Italy never became a truly totalitarian state, and the government was more content with appearance rather than reality. In Mussolini's Italy, life was far more tolerable, even for enemies of the regime, than in Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany.

Mussolini wanted to show that Fascism would bring a new society to Italy that could provide an example to the rest of the world. He introduced what became known as the **corporate state**.

- His aim was to promote co-operation between employers and workers and to end class warfare. This would provide an alternative to socialism and capitalism – **a third way**. In the different areas of the economy, workers and employers were organized into corporations, they were expected to work together to settle disputes over pay and working conditions. Strikes and lockouts were not allowed. Catholic and Socialist trade unions were banned and Fascist-controlled unions negotiated for the workers.
- By 1934, there were 22 corporations for each of the major industries, e.g. the textile industry. In the 1939 the parliament was renamed the **Chamber of Fasci and Corporations**. MPs now represented different branches of trade and industry not geographic constituencies.
- Mussolini's system had admirers in many countries, e.g. Britain and Ireland. However, the reality was that the Fascist Party was in full control. It also ensured the control of employers over their employees. While the employers were free to choose their own representatives, the Fascist Party chose the leaders of the Fascist trade unions.
- To compensate them for their loss of freedom, workers had access to such benefits as free Sundays, annual holidays with pay, social security, sports and theatre facilities and cheap tours and holidays.

Like Hitler, Mussolini made sure that the Fascists exercised a lot of control over the young. This is called **indoctrination**. He saw children as the Fascists of the future.

- He wanted boys to grow into brave soldiers who would fight for the glory of Italy. Girls were expected to be good mothers who would provide Italy with a population that a great power was expected to have.
- A portrait of Mussolini hung in every classroom. Children chanted Fascist slogans such as 'Believe, Obey, Fight'. They were taught that Mussolini was the only man who could lead Italy back to greatness.
- History textbooks were rewritten to focus more exclusively on Italian history. In 1931, all teachers had to swear an oath of loyalty to the party. Despite tight political control,



Mussolini did spend more money on education, and this helped to rapidly reduce the illiteracy rate.

- After school, boys between 8 and 15 were encouraged to attend Fascist youth movements such as the **Balilla**. It placed great emphasis on loyalty to the Duce and physical training involving gymnastics and sport and the use of rifles. Girls attended similar organizations, such as the **Piccole Italiane** (eight to 14 years old).

Propaganda played a major role in promoting Mussolini's economic policies, with all his decisions hailed as successes. The truth was more mixed.

- Mussolini wanted Italy to become self-sufficient in agriculture, thereby reducing Italy's need for wheat exports. In 1925, he called for a victory in the '**battle for grain**'. Rich farmers did well out of this policy, as they were guaranteed a good price for the wheat they produced. Grain imports did fall, but wheat became expensive, causing the price of bread to rise, which affected the poor.
- Mussolini insisted on keeping the value of the lira strong against other countries. He viewed a strong currency as essential for Italy's claim to be a great power. This policy was a failure. Italian exports sold to other countries suffered as they became more expensive although imported raw materials were cheaper. This caused unemployment and in 1936 Mussolini was forced to reduce the value of the lira.
- Public work schemes were important for the government. As well as their prestige value for the regime, they had the added benefit of employing a lot of people. **The Pontine Marshes** – an area of mosquito-infested marsh outside Rome – were drained. Towns, villages and roads were built on the reclaimed land. Other major projects included the development of hydroelectric plants and the building of new motorways, or autostrada.
- The railways were electrified, and the regime prided itself on technological achievements such as building the world's fastest sea plane.

Key Question: How did Mussolini handle Church-State relations?

- Arguably, Mussolini's greatest achievement was the agreement he reached with the Pope in 1929. In a country where almost everyone was born a Catholic, relations between Church and state were important. The position of the Catholic Church had long been a source of controversy in Italy. The Church had lost a lot of territory during the process of Italian unification.
- After the capture of Rome that completed this process in 1870, the Pope had called himself '**the prisoner of the Vatican**' and called on Catholics not to vote in Italian elections. This dispute became known as the **Roman Question**. After 1870, many governments pursued anti-clerical policies, reducing the power of the Church in Italian life, especially in education.
- The Roman Question bitterly divided Italians. After the war, there had been an attempt to end the quarrel. In 1919, the Pope had ended the ban on Catholics voting in elections, but a final settlement on the Vatican failed because of the opposition of king.
- Mussolini was not religious and did not believe in God. At first, he had been strongly opposed to the Catholic Church. However, as we have seen, Mussolini moderated his



attitude. He knew that the Church retained the affection of many Italians and realized the benefits of reaching an understanding with the Church.

- The Church shared his anti-Communism. Although deeply concerned by the actions of Mussolini's government, especially against Catholic organizations, the Church regarded Fascism as the lesser of two evils facing Italy.
- Mussolini made several gestures designed to win the approval of the Church. He had his children baptized and went through a religious marriage ceremony with his wife of 10 years. His social policy, especially his opposition to divorce and abortion, won approval from the Church.
- Pope Pius XI wanted to reach an agreement with the government that would end the 60-year-old Roman Question. In 1926, negotiations began that resulted in the 1929 Lateran Pacts, which were named after the **Lateran Palace** in the Vatican. The future Pope Pius XII played an important role in reaching an agreement with Mussolini.
- The pacts involved a settlement of the **Roman Question** and a **concordat** that regulated relations between Church and state in Italy.
 - The Vatican (a tiny state of 109 acres) was created as an independent sovereign country.
 - The Church was compensated for the land that it lost during the process of Italian unification.
 - Catholicism became the state religion of Italy and religious instruction was made compulsory in all schools. Divorce was banned.
 - The Church guaranteed that Church-run bodies would not get involved in politics. Priests were not allowed to join any political party.
 - All bishops had to be Italian and take an oath of loyalty to the state. This was directed at the Catholic Slovene and German minorities in Italy.
 - The Pope was forbidden to interfere in international disputes involving Italy.

This agreement became known as the **Conciliation** in Italy. It brought Mussolini's regime great prestige, both nationally and internationally.





The historian Adrian Lyttelton wrote about the significance of the pacts:

“Mussolini’s solution of the Roman Question was a personal triumph which enormously increased his prestige and popularity, both at home and abroad “

Source: Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power – Fascism in Italy 1919–1929*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987, p. 419.

- Due to the agreement, Mussolini largely succeeded in silencing any independent Church criticism of his actions, and the Church supported his regime. However, this did not mean that there were no tensions between the two:
- In 1931, Mussolini became involved in a dispute with Pope Pius XI over the Church organisation **Catholic Action**. He accused it of interfering in politics and sought to destroy it, but his actions were strongly criticized by the Pope. In the end, a compromise was reached that ended the dispute.
- Pope Pius XI condemned the totalitarian doctrine. The writings of many leading Fascists, including Mussolini, were put on the Index of books that Catholics were forbidden to read.
- The Church opposed the introduction of the **Racial Laws** against Italian Jews in 1938. Under these laws, marriage between Jews and Italians was forbidden. They were not allowed to own important industry and were banned from certain occupations, such as the army. The laws used a strict, biological definition based on ancestry rather than religious practice, forcing a massive, forced census of Italian Jews in 1938. These anti-Jewish laws were enforced strictly but not with murderous intent until the Germans occupied Italy in 1943.
- The Church, especially Pope Pius XII, played an important role in saving many Italian Jews from the Holocaust. However, many historians have criticized the Church’s role in Fascist Italy and have argued it could have done more to oppose Mussolini.

Key Question What role did foreign policy play in Mussolini’s Italy?

Foreign policy was to play a key role in Fascist Italy. As nationalism was a central theme of fascism Mussolini’s main aim was to make Italy a major player in European and world politics.

- He wanted to recreate the glories of ancient Rome.
- He hoped to make Italy the dominant power in the Mediterranean, which he referred to as ‘our sea’.



He said, 'My objective is simple. I want to make Italy great, respected and feared.'

- In 1923, Mussolini occupied the Greek island of **Corfu** after Italian members of a commission deciding on the Greek-Albanian border were shot. This decisive action proved popular with Italians. The League of Nations condemned the occupation, but Mussolini stood firm and Italy received compensation for the murder.
- In 1924, he negotiated the return of Fiume to Italy, which was a major foreign policy success.
- In 1926, Italy established a protectorate (political control through a puppet government) over Albania. For the rest of the 1920s, Italy played a prominent but cautious role in international diplomacy.
- At first, Mussolini viewed the rise of Hitler with disquiet. In 1934 during an attempted revolt by Austrian Nazis, Italian troops were rushed to the Brenner Pass on the Italian-Austrian border. This action was designed to prevent any German intervention in Austria that Mussolini strongly opposed at the time.
- In 1935, the **Stresa Front** was formed between Italy, Britain and France to oppose German rearmament carried out in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. In October 1935, soon after the formation of the Stresa Front, Mussolini ordered the invasion of **Abyssinia** – modern day Ethiopia. He wanted Italy to gain glory and prestige by building up an overseas empire. This aggressive act was to have important consequences.
- Abyssinia was one of the few independent African countries and a member of the League of Nations. The invasion brought international condemnation, though France and Britain were reluctant to act against Mussolini. They did not want him to become an ally of Hitler.
- The French and British foreign ministers proposed a secret agreement that would see Mussolini keep part of the country. When this was made public, the foreign ministers were forced to resign. Economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations were agreed but were only half-heartedly applied.
- Mussolini was enraged by the response of the League of Nations, especially the British and the French. The very thing the British and French had feared happened – Hitler and Mussolini, the two dictators, became allies.
- In 1936, both countries intervened on the side of General Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Over 70,000 Italian troops were sent to Spain. Later the same year, Mussolini formed an alliance with Hitler that became known as the **Rome-Berlin Axis**.
- He abandoned his protection of Austria and supported Hitler's takeover of the country in 1938. The same year, fearful of war, he helped to negotiate the **Munich Agreement** that awarded the Sudetenland to Germany.
- In 1939, Mussolini occupied Albania and **the Pact of Steel** was signed, which drew Italy and Germany closer together. However, when World War II broke out, Mussolini declared Italy's neutrality. Despite all the propaganda about Italy's greatness, the country was completely unprepared for war.



Key Question: What was the impact of Italy's involvement in World War II?

In 1940, believing that German victory was inevitable, Mussolini joined the war and invaded France. This invasion descended into farce, as the Italian troops only advanced a few hundred yards. Italian involvement in World War II was to prove disastrous and contributed directly to Mussolini's removal from power.

- The Italians suffered a number of embarrassing defeats. In North Africa, an Italian invasion of Egypt was crushed by British forces and Italy lost Abyssinia in 1941.
- In October 1940, jealous of Hitler's success, Mussolini invaded **Greece**. This attack was defeated, forcing the Germans to send troops to both North Africa and the Balkans to help the Italians.
- Italian troops were poorly led and equipped. Italian war production was very small in comparison to Germany or the Allies.
- Mussolini's popularity among ordinary Italians declined and it became clear that the war was deeply disliked in Italy. There were frequent strikes in the industrial north of the country. Mussolini made fewer and fewer public appearances.
- In May 1943, Italian and German forces surrendered in North Africa. Allied troops then invaded Sicily, where they were greeted as liberators. Rome was bombed for the first time in the war. It was significant that it was Pope Pius XII and not Mussolini who visited the survivors.
- Many leading Fascists now turned against Mussolini. On 24 July 1943, there was a revolt in the Fascist Grand Council and Mussolini was removed from power by the king and arrested. Italy changed sides, and in response the Germans occupied the country.
- Mussolini was imprisoned in a mountaintop hotel but was rescued in a daring raid by German paratroopers. The Germans installed Mussolini as the ruler of German-controlled northern Italy. Called the **Italian Social Republic**, it was more commonly known as the Salo Republic, as his headquarters was at the town of Salo. The once-powerful dictator relied on the Germans to remain in power.
- In April 1945, as the Allies advanced through northern Italy, Mussolini tried to flee to Switzerland in a German convoy, disguised as a German soldier. They were stopped near the border and he was captured by anti-Fascist Italian partisans. On 28 April 1945, he was executed along with his mistress, Clara Petacci. Their bodies were then displayed upside down in a square in Milan. The arrogant dictator had met a humiliating and brutal end. His death marked the end of Fascism in Italy.

Assessment

Mussolini took advantage of post-war economic and political problems to come to power in Italy. He promised to make Italy great, defeat Communism and restore order among the political chaos that was post-war Italy.

Once in power, he proceeded cautiously to establish a dictatorship. It was only in 1926 that he could be called a full-blown dictator. He used terror to maintain control and propaganda to promote a cult of personality.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he became a respected international statesman, enjoying a lot of popularity at home. His corporate state was admired throughout Europe. His regime was popular and brought some benefits to Italy.



However, his aggressive foreign policy and his alliance with Hitler were his undoing. The war saw him become an increasingly unpopular figure. After the Allies invaded Italy, he was removed from power. Installed as a German puppet ruler, he was later executed by his own countrymen.

Historians views of Mussolini:

Denis Mack Smith

Though his Fascist regime may be credited with some positive achievements especially in its early years, its crude belief in political violence ... and its praise of war as something inherently beautiful and beneficial did untold harm and ultimately turned any positive achievements to dust and ashes.

“Mussolini was not a man of strong convictions... he was above all an opportunist.”

“The Duce was a prisoner of his own propaganda.”

Mack Smith, D, *Mussolini*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson (1981).

R. J. B. Bosworth

“The cult of Mussolini concealed a regime that was chaotic, inefficient and riddled with compromise.”

“The alliance with Hitler was Mussolini’s ultimate act of political irresponsibility.”

Bosworth, R. J. B. *Mussolini*. London: Arnold (2002)

McGregor Knox

“Mussolini dragged Italy into a war for which it was economically and militarily unprepared.”

Knox, M. *Hitler’s Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–1943*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2001).



Leaving Cert Essays:

Most essays involving Mussolini are in conjunction with another historical figure usually Hitler. Below are the two elements that relate to Mussolini:

- Origins and growth of the fascist regimes in Europe
- Church-state relations under Mussolini and Hitler

Key concepts: fascism; dictatorship; personality cult; **totalitarianism**; democracy; propaganda;

2007 During the inter-war period, what conditions in Europe contributed to the growth of fascist regimes?

2009 How did dictators use propaganda and/or terror to maintain their power?

2010 What were the main developments in church-state relations under Hitler and Mussolini?

2011 How effective were the internal and external policies of Benito Mussolini?

2013 What were the characteristics of fascist regimes in Europe in the inter-war period?

2014 How did church-state relations develop under Mussolini and Hitler?

2015 How did Mussolini and/or Stalin use propaganda and terror to remain in power?

2019 During the inter-war years, what were the characteristics of fascist regimes in Europe?



