THE FASCIST ERA AND WORLD WAR II, 1919–1945

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF ITALIAN FASCISM

World War I left over one half million Italians dead and perhaps one million total Italian casualties. Compounding the losses was the profound disappointment that Italy’s sacrifices had not been sufficiently rewarded. Furthermore, the war destabilized Italian politics and devastated the economy, just as it disrupted life throughout Europe. Economic suffering and unfulfilled expectations in turn fueled political instability, which tested the very roots of the constitutional system. In the midst of spreading malaise and violence, Italian revolutionary socialists entertained a Soviet-style revolution. In reaction, a new, militant movement appeared, dispensing intimidation and violent retribution primarily against socialists while employing symbolism and rhetoric that they called “Fascist.”

Fascism’s roots lie in a combination of historical influences, including extreme nationalism, syndicalism, imperialism, and socialism. But because Fascist ideology was fluid and contradictory, sources of political support may prove more useful than ideology as a means to understand the movement. As time passed, Italian Fascists won sympathy from an increasingly insecure middle class and financial backing from industrialists fearful of an Italian Bolshevik revolution. Just as revealing were conditions in postwar Italy that drew many young Italians, especially veterans, to a movement that promised to take action against the moribund Liberal State.

THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE, “MUTILATED VICTORY,” AND THE RED BIENNIUM

Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando and the Italian delegation arrived at the Paris Peace Conference hoping to claim the spoils of victory in World War I. In addition to the territories promised in the Pact of London, they demanded the city of Fiume. When the “Big Three” powers (the United States, Britain, and France) disregarded Italy’s claims to Fiume, Orlando and Sonnino led the Italians out of the conference in April 1919 to return to Rome. Arriving with nothing to show for their efforts, and inflaming public opinion for a variety of reasons, Orlando sealed his fate. In the language of Italian nationalist newspapers and politicians, the failure of the Paris Peace Conference to deliver territory to Italy rendered the war a “mutilated victory.” In June, economist F. S. Nitti replaced Orlando as prime minister, establishing proportional representation in time for the November elections.

Buffeted by inflation, rising unemployment, and general deterioration of the economy, Italy fell prey to the so called Red Biennium (“the red years”) of 1919–1920. Food riots, lawlessness, industrial conflict, and spreading violence raised the specter of revolution. Strikes spread, taking over a million workers off the job in 1919 and periodically disabling major sectors of Italian industry. In the countryside, land-hungry peasants occupied large estates.

In September 1919 the poet, wounded veteran, and political provocateur Gabriele D’Annunzio contrived a bold, theatrical gesture. Marching at the head of several thousand students, veterans, syndicalists, and rabid nationalists, D’Annunzio occupied the contested city of Fiume. Welcomed by many Italian-speaking residents, he dramatically proclaimed himself head of a “Regency,” talked of a “march on Rome,” and began to employ a number of symbols, including black shirts, that Fascists would later adopt. In a disconcerting demonstration of weakness, Nitti failed in his efforts to expel D’Annunzio from Fiume. Although Giolitti would later oust him, some would term D’Annunzio’s coup a “dress rehearsal” for Fascism.

In the midst of turmoil, the 1919 elections proved more crucial than could have been imagined. Under the new election laws, two mass parties won sweeping support. The new Catholic democratic party, the PPI, organized by Sicilian priest Don Luigi Sturzo, won 100 seats; the PSI’s 156 seats made it the largest party in the Chamber of Deputies. Clearly, voters had opened the door to change. However, the PSI and PPI could not agree to cooperate, providing Giolitti the opportunity to resume power. In June 1920, at age seventy-seven, Giovanni Giolitti returned to form his fifth government and prepared to apply his considerable political skills to the spreading crisis.

Just prior to Giolitti’s return, in the spring of 1920, Italian workers formed “Factory Councils,” based loosely on the Soviet model. In the fall, anticipating lockouts, workers took control of plants in Milan and Turin. True to form, despite pressure from industrialists, Giolitti continued his policy of restraint in the face of the “occupation of the factories.” Worker militancy rose to a feverish pitch by September 1920, then began to wane. The PSI revolutionary leaders, most notably G. M. Serrati, while employing Bolshevik symbolism and rhetoric, declined to pursue a revolution, convinced that the conditions for revolution did not exist. But because of the spreading violence, industrialists and landlords feared that a communist revolution threatened, ironically at the very time revolutionary action began to lose its steam. Soon these conservative groups would summon Fascist squads to counter the perceived threat of Bolshevism and to gain for themselves assurances that the government would protect their property and investments.

THE SQUADRISTI AND THE FASCIST MOVEMENT

The Fascist movement originated in the years immediately following World War I. At the Piazza San Sepolcro in Milan in March 1919, about one hundred socialists, syndicalists, futurists, and arditi (special forces) led by Mussolini formed the Fascio di Combattimento (Fighting Groups). Convinced that a socialist revolution was doomed to failure, Mussolini now attempted to build
a new movement. The original Fascist program delivered a radical message, with heavy doses of anticlerical and republican rhetoric, vaguely leftwing in its politics and economics, strongly appealing to its lower-middle-class, urban base.

At first negligible and politically isolated, the Fascist movement began to gain momentum as it spread from provincial capitals to small towns. By late 1921 it had burgeoned to include perhaps 250,000 members organized in more than 800 fasci (groups) throughout Emilia, Romagna, the Marches, Tuscany, and Umbria. In each case, Fascist paramilitary squads (squadristi, or Blackshirts) attacked Socialists and their institutions. These “punitive raids” destroyed the local offices of the Socialist Party, labor organizations, newspaper offices, and the peasant leagues (agrarian socialist groups organized in north central Italy since the 1890s). The squadrist battle cry, Me ne frego (“I don’t give a damn”) dramatically proclaimed their defiance of both legal authority and the conventions of middle-class morality. Many victims died as police widely ignored the violence, often in sympathy with Fascist attackers. Notorious among the early Fascist leaders (rus, named after Ethiopian tribal chiefs) of the fasci were Italo Balbo in Ferrara, Roberto Farinacci in Cremona, and Leandro Arpinati and Dino Grandi in Bologna. Farm laborers joined the movement, many under duress, but the bulk of the members came from the youthful ranks of the middle class. Conservative businessmen were drawn to Fascism as a counter to socialism while nervously observing the violence and antigovernment florishes of the squadristi.

In 1921 and 1922, Mussolini exploited the anxieties of landlords, industrialists, and the middle class in the hope that they would turn to Fascism out of fear of a Bolshevik revolution. In his drive for political power, he had to maintain the support of rabid nationalists, syndicalists, veterans, futurists, and followers of D’Annunzio—the extremist elements of the early movement—while courting the newly won conservative forces that could both diversify his constituency and bankroll his movement. All the while, he had to reconcile internal tensions between urban and rural Fascists and between the dominant lower-middle-class rank-and-file and the newly recruited elites. Onequarter of the Liberal coalition’s victories while outstripping Liberal candidates in a number of head-to-head races. Among the Fascists elected to the Chamber of Deputies was Mussolini, who immediately abandoned Giolitti’s Liberal bloc in favor of the opposition. The Left (the Italian Communist Party, or PCI, had split from the Socialists in January 1921) generally held its ground at about 167 seats, whereas the PPI increased its representation to 107, leaving Giolitti with severely weakened, minority control of Parliament. Unable to forge a stable coalition, Giolitti once again stepped away from crisis, resigning in June 1921 to be replaced by moderate Socialist Ivanoe Bonomi.

THE CRISIS OF THE LIBERAL STATE AND THE “MARCH ON ROME”

Mussolini considered a “truce” with the Socialists, but when his support for Bonomi’s “Pact of Pacification” was rebuffed by his own rank-and-file, he reneged. Then, sensing an opportunity to acquire power, Mussolini shrewdly abandoned the Fascist movement’s early radicalism to create the Fascist Party (PNF). Recruiting landowners, industrialists, and the middle class, the PNF adopted a new, more conservative program that emphasized a pro-business, nationalist agenda, cutting taxes and diminishing the role of the government while boosting military spending and supporting the monarchy and the Catholic Church. However, at the very time Mussolini’s new platform made him more appealing to moderates, black-shirted squadristi continued their punitive attacks, descending by the truckload on Socialist offices to dispense violence, virtually immune from justice despite mounting casualties.

In February 1922, Bonomi’s resignation renewed the political crisis. When Catholics and Socialists could not agree on a government, the king turned to the indecisive Giolitti loyalist Luigi Facta to form an interim cabinet. During the summer and early autumn of 1922, while Facta reshuffled his government, backstage negotiations continued as former prime ministers—including Giolitti, who waited on the sidelines for the right time to return—confessed with Mussolini. In August, in what became a last, futile attempt to protest Fascist violence, the Socialists played into Mussolini’s hands by calling a general strike. Mussolini now simply promised order in the face of what appeared to be a paralyzed government incapable of governing. Neither Liberals nor Socialists had proven able to summon the political will to stop him. While publicly pleading to avoid drastic economic changes, Mussolini carefully bolstered his support in the military, so that when the king consulted generals, they gave Mussolini their vote of confidence, as did leaders of the Catholic Church.

When the Fascist congress met in Naples in October 1922, party leaders drafted secret plans for their March on Rome, made all the more urgent by rumors that D’Annunzio planned a large demonstration in Rome during the
first week of November. The march would be a bold seizure of power by which Fascist operatives would take control of rail lines and strategic public buildings in major cities, then converge on the capital, driving the government out of office. The plan involved serious risks, however, because superior numbers and firepower gave the military a significant advantage over the poorly armed Fascists—assuming King Vittorio Emanuele III would order the military to intervene.

Former prime minister Antonio Salandra hastened the final crisis of the Liberal State when he withdrew his support from Facta’s government on October 27—at the very time the Fascist march was scheduled to begin. Over the next few days, the various parties engaged in frantic negotiations. Before taking the train to Milan, out of harm’s way, Mussolini reassured military leaders while leading Facta to believe that the two could forge a coalition. When the king arrived in Rome, Facta’s negotiations with Mussolini had broken down. Meanwhile, evidence of Fascist armed insurgency led Facta on the morning of October 28, with the unanimous support of his cabinet, to advise the king to invoke martial law. However, Vittorio Emanuele was unwilling to ask the military to use force against a party that most people believed should join the government. When the king refused to proclaim martial law, Facta resigned.

Although the king preferred Salandra, Mussolini held out and got his way, refusing to join any government he did not lead. The next day, the king turned to thirty-nine-year-old Benito Mussolini to head the government. Mussolini assembled a cabinet that exaggerated his party’s strength: three Fascists, two Catholics, a Liberal, a Nationalist, and a handful of others. Safely in power, the Fascists completed the March on Rome, streaming into the capital as they claimed other cities, defiantly lashing out at their enemies in a wave of triumphant violence.

THE CONSOLIDATION OF FASCIST POWER

The March on Rome marked both an end to the Liberal State and the beginning of two decades of authoritarian Fascist rule. Technically, Mussolini’s seizure of power occurred within the letter of the Italian constitution; at the same time, by employing systematic violence and wantonly ignoring Parliament, the Fascists destroyed what was left of traditional constitutional government.

When Mussolini called for a parliamentary vote of confidence in November 1922, many assumed that he would govern in the tradition of Italian prime ministers. Once again, this bold tactician had been underestimated. He would never be bound by the niceties of constitutional government. Announcing that the vote was a mere courtesy, he boasted that he could replace the coalition with a Fascist government at any time he wished. Over the next three years, Mussolini embarked on the process of consolidating his power while attempting to reconcile the disparate elements within his own Fascist movement. While paying lip service to existing law and cultivating an image of respectability to reassure his more conservative supporters, he defied many constitutional traditions by condoning—and encouraging—Blackshirt violence. But sooner or later Mussolini would have to reconcile these conflicting aims. One thing was certain: He would never voluntarily relinquish power.

Strengthening his hold on power, Mussolini established the Fascist Grand Council (1922) to set policy and a voluntary militia (1923) to bring the turbulent squadristi under control. At the same time, he used various tactics to coopt the powerful and unruly ras, eventually transferring them from their provincial power bases. Among the other forces Mussolini brought under his influence were the Catholic Church, major industrialists, large landowners, the king, and the army.

The Acerbo Law of 1923 provided Mussolini the instrument to dominate the Chamber of Deputies. To get the law passed, he had to appeal directly to the Vatican to undercut PPI opposition while at the same time dropping the PPI from his government. Passage of the law awarded two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber to the party that won a plurality victory (provided that party won 25 percent of the votes), thus assuring the PNF control if it could reach the threshold. In the process of negotiating with the Vatican, Mussolini extended favors, including a guaranteed Catholic presence in the schools and a bailout of the Vatican-controlled Bank of Rome; the Church, in turn, abandoned the PPI and its leader, Sturzo.

Among Mussolini’s earliest attempts to build a power base were the December 1923 Palazzo Chigi Accords, by which the Confindustria (the manufacturers’ association) agreed to negotiate with the newly created Fascist unions in return for dropping plans to experiment with corporativism. This agreement represented only the first of a series of assurances that Mussolini gave the industrialists. In the Palazzo Vidoni Pact of 1925, the Confindustria solidified its agreement with the Fascist unions, opening the way for the banning of strikes, lockouts, and non-Fascist unions.

Although large landowners could forge no national organization as effective as the Confindustria, they both contributed to and benefited from the Fascist seizure of power. Most directly, the Fascists drove local socialist governments out of power while destroying the peasant leagues, thereby virtually ending agrarian militancy. In turn, Mussolini provided the landholders with tax breaks and brought them into his Fascist power base. Already part of that base were the king and the military leadership, who, along with the Senate
and the bureaucracy, continued to provide Mussolini with important links to Italy’s past.

THE 1924 ELECTIONS AND THE MATTEOTTI CRISIS

When Italian voters went to the polls in April 1924, the economy had recovered from the postwar crisis and Mussolini had established some degree of respectability as prime minister. Mussolini proceeded to recruit a national list of candidates that brought Liberals (including Orlando and Salandra) and former PPI conservatives into the fold alongside Fascists. While Mussolini controlled the voting apparatus, squadristi intimidated the badly divided opposition. In this atmosphere of fraud and violence, Mussolini’s national list won a decisive victory, capturing 374 of the 535 seats in the Chamber of Deputies and placing him in position to solidify his power.

Vocal criticism of Fascist election abuses from Unitary Socialist (PSU) deputy Giacomo Matteotti provoked violent retaliation that, in turn, brought Mussolini’s government to the brink of disaster. The Matteotti crisis arose in the summer of 1924 when Mussolini, angered by Matteotti’s charges, let it be known that he expected retribution. On June 10, ten days after his speech from the floor of Parliament, Matteotti disappeared. For two months, Italians speculated that Matteotti had been a victim of foul play orchestrated by Mussolini. In August, Matteotti’s body was discovered. In fact, evidence eventually linked two close aides of Mussolini directly to the murder and coverup.

The Matteotti crisis sent shock waves through Italian public life, polarizing politics, aggravating tensions within the Fascist movement, and making it difficult for Mussolini to continue building a constituency around “respectable” parliamentary government. In June, Giovanni Amendola led opposition members of Parliament in initiating a boycott known as the “Aventine Secession,” telling the king that they would return to Parliament only when he removed Mussolini. At the same time, conservatives in Mussolini’s cabinet, led by nationalist Luigi Federzoni, while convincing the prime minister to reshuffle his government, fell in line to support him. Emboldened by the closing of conservative ranks and, at the same time, aware of the need to reassure the ras and their squads, Mussolini delivered a defiant speech to Parliament on January 3, 1925: “I declare before all Italy that I assume full responsibility for what has happened.” He then reminded the remaining members of Parliament of their constitutional right to impeach him. None took up the challenge.

THE FASCIST REGIME

Within two days of his bold speech, Mussolini dropped all pretense of democratic government and began to construct an authoritarian Fascist regime, still operating largely within the broad outlines of the traditional Italian state. A crackdown on the press marked the first step toward greater repression, followed by the expulsion of the deputies who had participated in the Aventine Secession. Then in December, in response to an assassination attempt against Mussolini by PSU deputy Tito Zaniboni, the Parliament fundamentally altered the constitution by surrendering to the king its traditional control over the prime minister and his cabinet. Mussolini now had to answer only to the king. Shortly thereafter, Mussolini outlawed organized political opposition and abolished local governments, each replaced by an appointee known as the podestà, responsible to the prefect, and thereby to the central government. In a move that signaled renewed violence against opponents, Mussolini appointed intransigent Blackshirt leader Roberto Farinacci head of the PNF.

In response to three successive assassination attempts in 1926, Mussolini cracked down even more decisively and created the legal framework for full repression of dissent. By taking over from Federzoni as Secretary of Interior, Mussolini gained control of the internal security apparatus and the ability to rein in the ras and local party leaders when necessary. The resourceful Arturo Bocchini, a non-Fascist professional, was appointed head of the national police. A new law gave the regime pervasive power to punish political crimes with confinement. Then, in December 1926, the “Law for the Defense of the State” established the secret police (the OVRA), a Special Tribunal to punish political crimes, and the death penalty for attempted murder of members of the government and the royal family.

With a system in place that rendered political opposition perilous, Mussolini proceeded to ensure Fascist control of the civil service, the professions (including the university faculty), and the press. In 1927, he replaced many career civil servants and diplomats with Fascists who brought into government their own political sentiments and style, but whose impact never fully shaped policy. Imposing Fascist conformity on the universities proved problematic as well. Professors who opposed Fascism, such as University of Florence historian Gaetano Salvemini, were subject to Blackshirt threats, arrest, and political confinement. To achieve conformity, Mussolini issued a decree in 1931 requiring university professors to swear their loyalty to Fascism. Although anti-fascist sentiments ran high within the university community, only about twelve of twelve hundred refused, illustrative of the accommodation many Italians made to the regime’s growing repression. Still, there was a passive, or “quiet,” resistance to Fascism as exemplified in the Neapolitan philosopher Benedetto Croce. Croce offered liberal, idealist interpretations of history and philosophy that Mussolini allowed to be published, fearing that censorship of Croce would bring international criticism of his regime. However, Mussolini did not extend such toleration to the press, on which the axe of Fascist repression fell decisively. By 1926 he
had removed the managers of two of Italy’s most esteemed newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*, and had shut down a number of opposition papers. In 1928, a decree required journalists to join the Fascist Journalists’ Association. Although historians sometimes have referred to the Fascist regime as totalitarian, many would argue that the regime fell short in its attempt to penetrate civil society and private life.

**FASCIST IDEOLOGY, PROPAGANDA, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE CULT OF IL DUCE**

Historians have long and passionately debated Fascism and its leader. Once seen as a mere opportunist whose pursuit of power led him to abandon socialism for Fascism, Mussolini is now viewed as a more complex figure—cruel, vain, and violent, but nonetheless a skilled tactician whose ideological views were shaped in part by an understanding of the dynamics of twentieth-century life. As historians reassess Mussolini, they continue to focus on such issues as the role of ideology, propaganda, and the personality cult in shaping life in Fascist Italy.

In the process of consolidating power, Mussolini made himself “Head of Government” in 1925 and took control of the bureaucracy and local and provincial governments in an unprecedented centralization of authority. He utilized both the traditional machinery of government—police, prefects, and the army—and the new forms of power—the PNF and the Fascist Grand Council—to control dissenters and keep dissident Fascists in check.

In reorganizing the apparatus of power to suit his affinity for personal dictatorship, Mussolini exhibited exceptional powers of manipulation; but his true gift lay in propaganda. To elevate the prestige of the regime and his own genius as dictator, Il Duce (“leader,” from the Latin *dux*) launched a propaganda barrage exalting Fascism’s themes. Typical was the “battle of grain,” a campaign to provide Italy a self-sufficient food supply that enjoyed at least partial success. But did his countless “battles” add up to a coherent ideology? The Fascist creed derived from a number of sources, most notably syndicalism, nationalism, and futurism, which, when intermingled, often gave rise to incoherence and contradiction. Most notably, exalming heroic virtues that emphasized action, violence, and warfare, Fascism derisively dismissed “bourgeois” values such as equality and majoritarian democracy.

As the regime stabilized its control, Mussolini called on the philosopher Giovanni Gentile to formulate a coherent Fascist ideology. At the core of Gentile’s Fascist philosophy was the concept that all ethical value derived not from the individual, but from the nation-state; that by authoritarian methods, the state could resolve problems in the interest of all. Still, conflicting views within the movement prevented the development of a unified, comprehensive ideology, and the debates over abstract ideas never fully engaged the Italian people.

Fascism’s symbolism did portray some sense of the ideological foundations, especially its emphasis on militarism and action. To instill Fascist values in the population, Mussolini established a number of organizations. Among the best known were three. The Balilla was created to train future generations of Fascists by organizing young Italians into uniformed, disciplined clubs. GUF (“Fascist University Youth”) would prepare university students for leadership roles in the movement. And the Dopolavoro (“leisure time organization”)—by far the most successful of the three—provided discounts for entertainment, sporting events, and vacations. In addition, the regime developed policies aimed at women, hoping to mobilize them as part of the work force while discouraging feminism. As Mussolini began to build an empire in the 1930s, the need for a larger population of soldiers and workers led the government to award medals to women who produced large families. Still, despite often conflicting government policies, women constituted more than one-fourth of the Italian work force by the mid-1930s.

By then, in spite of Mussolini’s efforts, Fascist ideology had lapsed into little more than the “cult of Il Duce” and a propaganda offensive derived from a series of ritualized slogans. “Il Duce is always right” permeated public life, as Mussolini struck heroic poses before cameras. Influenced by Nazi Germany, Mussolini proceeded to create his own propaganda machine. He placed his son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, in charge of the Press Office, then created a Secretariat for Press and Propaganda along with offices of film, theater, and radio. The one occasion when Fascist propaganda seemed most effective came in Italy’s 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, when Italians rallied in support of the war and the declaration of empire.

The regime also made an effort to utilize the formal arts to propagate Fascist doctrine, none more effectively than architecture. But, as was the case in a number of other instances, several different styles coexisted, representing the tastes of conflicting elite groups within the regime, each of which espoused different aesthetic visions of Fascism. Generally, the regime favored the stark, neoclassical buildings of Marcello Piacentini, who directed the building of EUR (Esposizione Universale di Roma). Mussolini’s “new Rome.” However, Mussolini also sponsored buildings in both traditional and modern “international” style, although, by the late 1930s, he had begun to favor architecture that invoked the glories of Italy’s past. In painting and the other visual arts, as in architecture, overt censorship was minimal.

In 1937, Mussolini reorganized the various propaganda agencies under the authority of the Ministry of Popular Culture. Concerned with non-Italian influences, particularly Hollywood films, the Fascist government outlawed American movies in 1938, then dedicated more resources to producing its
own newsreels, particularly through the LUCE (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa) institute. At the same time the School Charter of 1939, developed by education minister Giuseppe Bottai, committed the educational system to reforms designed to create a new generation committed to Fascist values. For example, the ministry placed greater emphasis on technical training and on the value of labor, both to alleviate the oversupply of professionals and to underscore the Fascist ideological commitment to the concept of hard work. Although they ballyhooed the new educational discipline, the Fascist regime’s impact on the education system appears minimal. In fact, the pervasiveness of propaganda led some critics to argue that Mussolini’s primary role was as promoter of Fascism; that claims of progress in a new society were merely empty verbiage.

THE CORPORATE STATE

Despite its limitations and overblown rhetoric, Fascism was grounded in economics, especially the theory and practice of corporativism. Corporativism was a new state planning system under which capital and labor were integrated into self-governing units called corporations for the purpose of reorganizing the economy through a rational process of negotiation. Mussolini launched the “Corporate State” in 1926 by establishing a Ministry of Corporations to bring together labor and management into single associations in each sector of the economy. As an antidote to Marxist theories of class warfare, corporativism generated enthusiasm among Fascist intellectuals and some non-Fascists, especially after Bottai was named Minister of Corporations in 1929. In 1934, twenty-two corporations were created. Four years later the regime abolished the Chamber of Deputies in favor of a Chamber of Fasces and Corporations. What materialized was a vast military-bureaucratic-industrial complex that fell well short of theory. Although Fascist propagandists trumpeted this new model, public enthusiasm and concrete results lagged sadly.

One reason that Fascism’s economic innovation failed to create a successful new economy was the devastating impact of the Great Depression. Such gauges of prosperity as the stock market, banking, industrial production, employment, exports, and wages all suffered severely. In 1933, the Fascist government intervened by creating the IRI (Institute for Industrial Reconstruction) to bail out banks and private companies. As a result, before World War II the state controlled a number of industries, including steel, shipping, and communications, and organized cartels (combinations of producers designed to limit competition) in other industries. As a result, such companies as Pirelli, Fiat, and Montecatini set production limits, prices, and wages with limited competition.

THE LATERAN PACT

Although less significant than economic policy, church-state relations assumed a place of significance in the Fascist era. In the Lateran Accords of 1929, Mussolini reached an agreement with the Vatican, thereby normalizing the Fascist regime in the eyes of many Catholics in Italy and around the world. In return, the Roman Catholic Church won guarantees of the autonomy of the Vatican state, protection of Catholic schools, and the latitude to organize groups such as Catholic Action. By negotiating the treaty, Mussolini gained invaluable support in sustaining his government. He not only reversed the Church’s longstanding boycott of Italian politics but at the same time won the Church’s stamp of legitimacy for the Fascist regime.

FASCIST DIPLOMACY BETWEEN THE WARS

Because Mussolini had significantly less interest in foreign than domestic policy when he assumed office, he originally left Italy’s international interests largely in the judicious control of the Foreign Ministry. However, as he consolidated his power, Il Duce began to utilize the diplomatic arena both to build popular support and to pursue his own aggressive drive to extend Italian influence in the Mediterranean and the Balkans, and ultimately to attain Italian imperial greatness.

As a comparatively weak European state, Italy had little choice but to define its interests in the larger context of Great Power diplomacy. But would Mussolini accept these constraints? The Fascist March on Rome occurred in a period when Germany was suffering severely from hyperinflation and from the great burden of the Versailles Treaty, leaving France and Britain as the dominant European powers. As the German Weimar Republic began to normalize relations with its former adversaries in the mid1920s, the Italian Foreign Ministry cautiously pursued Italy’s interests behind the scenes while, in public, Mussolini made theatrical gestures.

Among Mussolini’s first challenges were three incidents in the Balkans. In 1923, he aggressively ordered the Italian navy to take the Greek island of Corfu in response to the assassination of two Italians there. After marching to the brink, he backed down and accepted Greek reparations. In 1924, in a typical carrot-and-stick charade, Mussolini prevailed on Yugoslavia to yield Fiume. Although relations with Yugoslavia temporarily improved as a result, they deteriorated as the two quarreled over Albania and later over central European diplomacy. Throughout the 1920s, Italy remained on relatively good terms with Britain while encountering tensions with France, particularly over Italian ambitions in North Africa and the Balkans. In an effort to shake up the Paris peace settlement in the Balkans and Danube, Mussolini promoted subversion against the governments in Vienna and Belgrade, and he sided with the losers of World War I—Bulgaria, Hungary, and Germany. But this destabilizing diplomacy came to an inglorious end in 1929. After a temporary interlude, during which Foreign Minister Dino
Grandi postured as a proponent of League of Nations principles, Mussolini took back the Foreign Ministry in 1932 to infuse Fascist dynamism into a moribund diplomacy. This bolder approach reflected the influence of extreme nationalists and Mussolini’s own effort to play the nationalist card in order to build popular support for his regime and to spread Fascism in Europe.

Suddenly Hitler arrived in power in January 1933. Mussolini was at once elated and fearful. Like Il Duce, the Fuehrer yearned to destroy the peace settlement of 1919. Still, Mussolini worried about runaway Nazi expansion that would steamroll Austria, the German-speaking South Tyrol, and Trieste, the latter two of which had been awarded to Italy at the Paris Peace Conference. Beguiled by Hitler’s camaraderie and deference, but dubious of his ambitions, Il Duce walked the narrow line between the Franco-British pole and the ever more menacing Germans.

In this risky game, Austria assumed new importance. Formerly an adversary, Austria had become the linchpin of Italy’s security in Europe. Il Duce hastened to befriend the authoritarian Austrian chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss, and prop up his regime against the Nazi threat. But Hitler upstaged Il Duce by permitting the assassination of Dollfuss in July 1934. When Mussolini answered by sending Italian troops to the Austrian border, relations between the two dictators worsened. To gain some insurance against Nazi ambition, Mussolini turned to France and England.

THE ETHIOPIAN WAR AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The changing diplomatic climate in Europe provided Mussolini an opportunity to fulfill his imperialist ambitions by retaliating against Ethiopia for Italy’s humiliating 1896 defeat at Adua. Hitler’s move to rearm Germany threatened France, making it less likely that France would challenge Italy over East Africa. At the same time, with the Corporate State initiative having lost its initial excitement, Mussolini believed that an Italian drive for empire would rally public support behind the glory and heroism of war. Eying Ethiopia for its natural resources and potential for Italian settlement, Mussolini made his move, convinced that he would encounter no serious opposition from a Europe distracted by Hitler’s rise to power.

As Il Duce brazenly plotted war, England orchestrated a League of Nations defense against aggression. Not to be denied, Mussolini launched an invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935. The League responded by imposing sanctions that, for several reasons, proved ineffective. Not only were petroleum products omitted from the list of embargoed items, but the United States, Germany, and Japan—not League members—refused to respect the boycott, while the British refrained from closing the Suez Canal to Italian ships. After initial difficulties, Italian troops under General Pietro Badoglio took Addis Ababa in May 1936 by virtue of superior firepower, a half-million troops, and the use of poison gas. On May 9, Mussolini declared the Italian Empire. The victory brought a surge of support for the regime, but at the cost of major debt. More damaging still were the overconfidence the victory engendered and the diplomatic estrangement of England and France produced by the war. In response, Mussolini veered toward Germany.

At the completion of the Ethiopian War, Mussolini turned over the Foreign Ministry to the pro-German Ciano. Within a year, Ciano faced a major crisis in Spain. He convinced Mussolini to support the rebel forces of Francisco Franco against the Spanish republican government, which he characterized as “leftist.” When Germany joined Italy, they developed an ominous diplomatic understanding that Il Duce dubbed the “Axis.” Intervention in Spain proved more costly than anticipated; a contingent of Blackshirts fighting as “volunteers” was routed by Italian anti-Fascists at Guadalajara (March 1937), requiring Mussolini to replace them with seventy thousand regular troops and substantial equipment. Only in 1939 did Franco’s pro-Fascist forces prevail.

THE “PACT OF STEEL,” ANTISEMITISM, AND ITALY’S ENTRY INTO WORLD WAR II

Well before the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War, Hitler and Mussolini had begun the process of diplomatic and military alignment that would take Italy into World War II. When Mussolini visited Germany in 1937, he was swayed by an enthusiastic welcome and carried away by a dazzling display of German military might. Three months later, Italy withdrew from the League of Nations, further separating it from the western democracies.

One stunning consequence of the warming of Nazi-Fascist relations was Italy’s introduction of anti-Semitic laws in the Manifesto of Fascist Racism of 1938. Although Italy had little history of persecuting Jews—a minuscule part of the population—an undercurrent of anti-Semitism that stirred within the Fascist movement and the Catholic Church had surfaced as early as 1936. After 1938, the regime issued decrees removing Jews from certain occupations, restricting property holdings, and prohibiting intermarriage with Italians (who were proclaimed “Aryans”). Rather than arising from direct Nazi pressure, the anti-Semitic campaign came as a result of efforts by certain Fascist fanatics to align the regime’s policies more closely with those of Nazi Germany and from Il Duce’s desire to break into the sphere of private life—something he had largely failed to do.

Reluctant at first to respond to Hitler’s diplomatic overtures, Il Duce stood by as his “junior partner” absorbed Austria and the German-speaking Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1938. After helping defuse the Czech crisis at the Munich Conference, Il Duce came away convinced that France and Britain lacked the will to stop Hitler. As European diplomacy
became more polarized, Mussolini ordered an Italian occupation of Albania. The British countered by pledging to protect Greece against Italian aggression, leading Mussolini to engage Germany in discussions about a military alliance. The result was the “Pact of Steel.” In May 1939, Mussolini committed Italy to fight beside Germany in war, even if provoked by German aggression. Hitler ignored Mussolini’s attempt to tack on a proviso that Italy needed at least three years to prepare for war. Three months later German armed forces invaded Poland, leading Britain and France to declare war on Germany. World War II had begun.

Unprepared to fight, Mussolini mulled over the decision to honor the Pact of Steel. After consulting Italian interests, perhaps for the last time, he finally, if reluctantly, declared Italy’s “non-belligerency.” However, a rapid string of Nazi victories convinced Mussolini to enter the war. In April 1940, German naval and airborne forces invaded Denmark and Norway, and by the end of the month they had broken Norwegian resistance. Ten days later, with lightning speed and without warning, German armies invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. By mid-May, German mechanized divisions drove deeply into northern France, dividing British, Belgian, and French forces.

Believing the Nazi juggernaut to be unstoppable, Mussolini found it impossible to remain on the sidelines. On June 10, from the famed balcony of the Palazzo Venezia, Il Duce declared war on France and Britain. The ill-prepared Italian troops labored across the Alps into southern France after the Germans had broken French defenses. No sooner had Italian troops crossed the border than France signed an armistice with Germany. Convinced that Hitler was about to invade England, Mussolini moved to capture the Suez Canal. But the British responded decisively in January 1941, driving Italian general Rodolfo Graziani and his ten divisions back into their Libyan colony, leaving behind over 300,000 prisoners.

Exasperated that Hitler was collecting all the laurels of victory and determined to fight his own “parallel war,” Mussolini ordered the invasion of Greece on October 28, 1940. Within days, the Greeks drove the Italian forces into full retreat. Haunted by the specter of heightened British involvement in defense of Greece, Hitler rushed to rescue Italy’s beleaguered forces bogged down in Albania. Thus ended Mussolini’s “parallel war.” At home, the loss undercut much of the Fascist regime’s credibility, already suffering from commodities shortages and rising prices.

In the broader war, Italy’s fortunes mimicked those of Nazi Germany, but they fell sooner and farther. In March 1941, Rommel’s Afrika Korps struck quickly to take North Africa, while in June Hitler ordered his fateful invasion of Russia—which Mussolini supported with 200,000 Italian troops. When the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor in December, Mussolini declared war on the United States. After initial setbacks, the British and American armies retaliated, gaining the upper hand in North Africa, while the Russians successfully held out at Stalingrad. Now seizing the initiative, the Allies decided to strike at the Axis through Italy.

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