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Italy 1919-1929: The Rise of Mussolini

ITALY

Condition of Italy

Benito Mussolini was Il Duce, or leader, of Italy from 1922 to 1943. He became dictator as a direct result of the unhappiness and disorder experienced by Italians after the First World War. The cost of living had jumped 500% since 1915 and there was a general demand for higher wages. The middle class complained they were impoverished by high taxation; ex-soldiers grumbled because of the lack of jobs; industrial workers went on strike; the peasantry wanted better conditions and a chance to improve the barren soils of the Italian hillsides. Matters were so serious that in 1920 the country came close to revolution when workers commandeered the factories and tried unsuccessfully to market their own products. There was also general dissatisfaction with Italy's war gains. Italy had hoped to expand along the Adriatic coast—but all it received were the Trentino and southern Tyrol areas, Istria, and Trieste.

Fascists

Mussolini claimed he could solve Italy's problems. In 1919 he had formed his own political force—the *Fascio di Combattimento*—and soon his black-shirted followers were busy breaking up the meetings of other political parties. Mussolini excused this violence on the grounds that Italy was on the brink of a Communist revolt and that his Fascists were strong enough to prevent such a revolt even if the government was not. Many discontented Italians joined the Fascist party and by 1922 they were strong enough to march on Rome and demand a role in the government. The king, Victor Emmanuel III, soon agreed and Mussolini became prime minister that year.



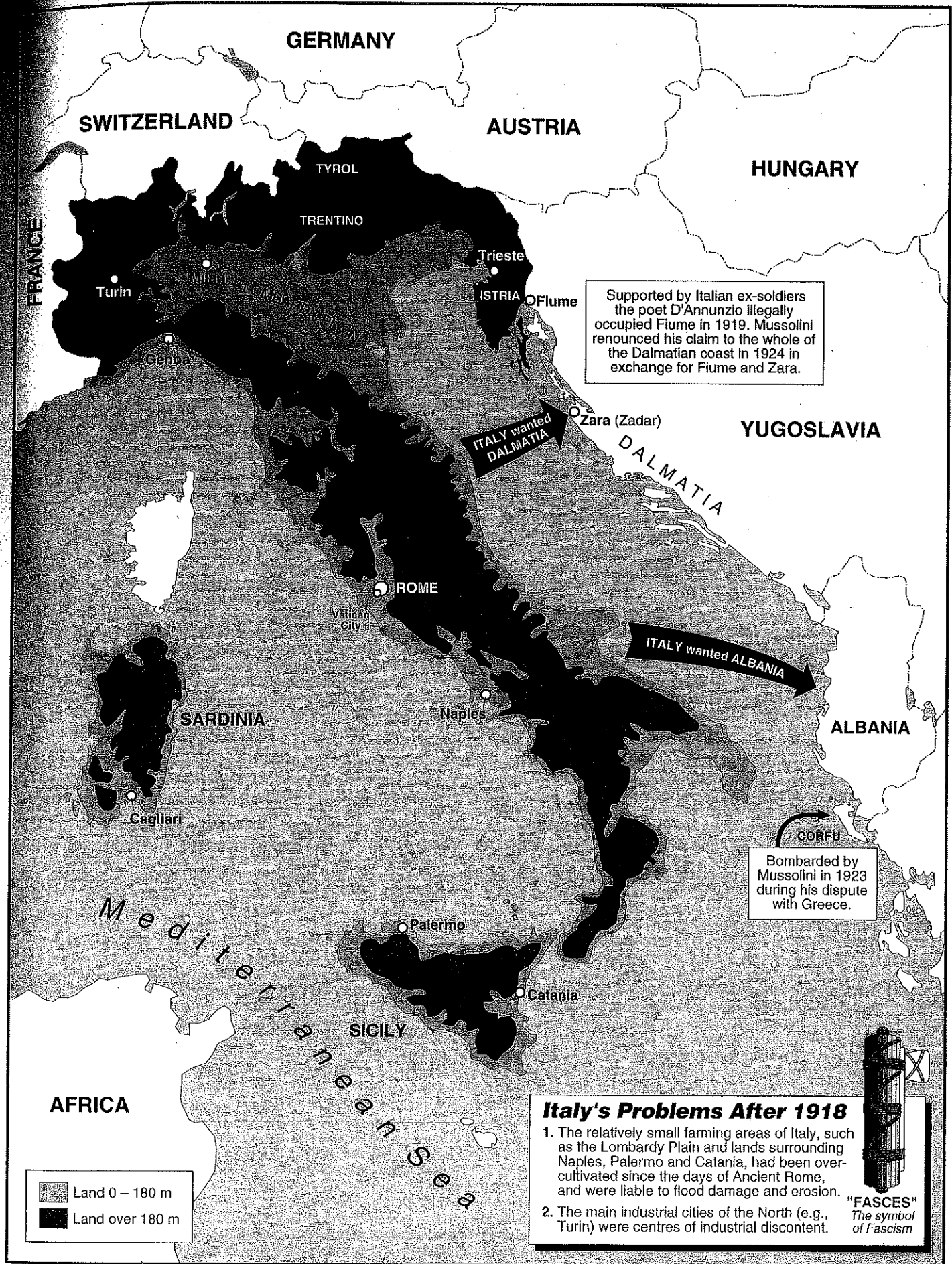
Il Duce

For three years Mussolini ruled Italy along semi-democratic lines, but in the background his Fascists were rigorously eliminating opposition, resorting where necessary to torture and murder. In 1925 Mussolini accepted responsibility for such events and declared himself dictator of Italy. His talent lay in propaganda, and soon he convinced most Italians that his rule was in their best interests. He controlled the press. He made emotional speeches to hysterical crowds who raised their hands in the Fascist salute and chanted "Salutiamo il Duce!" His speeches and the hysteria were broadcasted on the radio. After 1925 he outlawed all political parties except the Fascists. Elections disappeared and were replaced by plebiscites in which the people approved a list of Mussolini's hand-picked deputies. Parliament vanished and was replaced by the Fascist Grand Council and the Chamber of Deputies. Mussolini claimed to have created a "corporate state" where the population, divided into twenty-two "corporations," would work in harmony for "social justice." There would be no more strikes and no more unjust dismissals from work. He promised the farmers a "battle for wheat" in which they too would prosper. Fascist Italy was now, he said, the greatest country in the world. Children were educated to believe this claim, for Mussolini had all school textbooks rewritten by Fascist propagandists.

Mussolini's Impact

These despotic tactics were widely publicized and often admired by people abroad. Here was a dictator who seemed to be producing results. Wheat production increased, land reclamation schemes were launched, railways and motor roads improved. His foreign policy was flamboyant and at first fairly successful. In 1923, after some Greeks murdered an Italian general, Mussolini bombarded Corfu. In 1924 he surrendered his claims to Dalmatia, but demanded Fiume and Zara as the price of his generosity. And, in 1929, Mussolini won worldwide fame by negotiating an agreement (or Concordat) with the Pope who, in return for the tiny Vatican City in the heart of Rome, recognized the legality of Fascist Italy.

Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and young followers



GERMANY

SWITZERLAND

AUSTRIA

HUNGARY

TYROL

TRENTINO

Trieste

ISTRIA OFIUME

Supported by Italian ex-soldiers the poet D'Annunzio illegally occupied Fiume in 1919. Mussolini renounced his claim to the whole of the Dalmatian coast in 1924 in exchange for Fiume and Zara.

Turin

Milan

Genoa

Zara (Zadar)

YUGOSLAVIA

ITALY wanted DALMATIA

DALMATIA

ROME

Vatican City

ITALY wanted ALBANIA

ALBANIA

SARDINIA

Naples

CORFU
BombarDED by Mussolini in 1923 during his dispute with Greece.

Mediterranean Sea

Cagliari

Palermo

Catania

SICILY

AFRICA

Land 0 - 180 m
Land over 180 m

Italy's Problems After 1918

1. The relatively small farming areas of Italy, such as the Lombardy Plain and lands surrounding Naples, Palermo and Catania, had been over-cultivated since the days of Ancient Rome, and were liable to flood damage and erosion.
2. The main industrial cities of the North (e.g., Turin) were centres of industrial discontent.



"FASCES"
The symbol of Fascism

ITALY



ITALIAN FASCISM

Fascism was an extreme right-wing, militaristic European-wide phenomenon that arose out of the social chaos resulting from the First World War. It emerged in Italy but appeared later in other parts of Europe and the Americas. The Croix de Feu in France, the Mosely Fascists in England, the Belgian Rexists, the Romanian Iron Guard, General Franco in Spain, and the Heimwehr in Austria are examples of fascist movements.

In times of economic distress and social dislocation, people often look to a demagogue to restore order and bring back stability to the regime. The Italian fascist movement is a good example of how ruthless leadership, supported by the armed forces, imposed order on a chaotic situation. Benito Mussolini and his fascist cohorts came to power during a time of domestic crisis that threatened the existence of the state.

The roots of Italian fascism are the achievements of Gabriel D'Annunzio and Benito Mussolini. D'Annunzio was a poet and adventurer who appealed to Italy's younger generations. During the war he had been a pilot, lost an eye in combat, and been decorated for bravery. He called for action for action's sake. Someone had to do something to stop the worsening political and economic situation. It was an anarchist call to revolt.

It was Mussolini, a left-wing socialist turned right-wing activist, who called an organizational meeting in Milan on 23 March 1919 for the purpose of forming a new political party to stop the forces tearing Italy apart. His charisma and dynamic leadership drew in the masses. As leader of the movement, he promised to stabilize the economy, end unemployment, and restore Italy's national prestige lost at the peace tables in Versailles.

According to fascist beliefs, democracy had brought Italy to the sorry state it was in. The problems were caused by the government being turned over to the rule of the ignorant masses. The fascists would put an end to disorder with the power of a totalitarian state. Mussolini offered simple solutions to the nation's problems and, perhaps more importantly, he offered hope.

The political doctrine of the fascists evolved from taking action. Once in power a political doctrine would develop, but first the fascists would get rid of any opposition and render themselves secure in power. In *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini wrote that what started as aspirations would later develop into a political code. It was essential to appear to be doing something.

Fascism presented itself to the people as the antidote to the liberal and democratic ideas that had brought Italy to its knees. Some of the characteristics of its right-wing radicalism were:

- a state in which the nation held absolute priority over the individual.
- an acceptance of the need for struggle and war to develop a national character. War brings nobility and energy to the people.
- a government that aspired to total control of the individual within the state.
- a belief that the state was organic and had a life of its own.
- a belief that the state was greater than its individual parts.
- a government led by the heroic élite.
- a readiness to use violence against enemies of the state.
- a contempt of upper-class values and traditional cultural mores.
- a single-party political structure.
- a dictatorship supported by the armed forces and police.
- a restructuring of government along the lines of a corporate state that controlled the economy through syndicates.
- a violent anti-labour, anti-communist, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic bias.

Mussolini Attacks Abyssinia

Benito Mussolini saw in his Italian Fascist state the rebirth of the ancient Roman Empire. He dreamed of vast colonial territories in Africa, such as Rome had once possessed. He called the Mediterranean Sea *Mare Nostrum*—Our Sea—and occasionally he wore a toga. Italy had several colonies in Africa: Libya and Tripolitania, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland. But il Duce also wanted the ancient Empire of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). Once before, in 1896, the Italians had tried to conquer it but had suffered inglorious defeat at the Battle of Adowa. Now, in 1935, Mussolini made his bid against the badly armed soldiers of the Emperor Haile Selassie. On 3 October, he hurled his army, equipped with armour, artillery, and automatic weapons, and his air force, fitted with mustard gas sprayers, into Abyssinia.

Reaction of League

This onslaught aroused far more world indignation than the Manchurian affair had four years earlier. The League was stirred into action and on 7 October 1935 it condemned Mussolini's aggression; and in less than two weeks, with the approval of fifty-one nations, it decided to impose economic sanctions on Italy. Unfortunately, the sanctions excluded vital commodities such as steel, copper, and oil. At the same time, the League stopped all arms exports (except those actually in transit) to the combatants. Clearly, the Abyssinians weren't going to receive any military aid! Nevertheless, there had been *some* positive action; perhaps the League would at last show some strength and stop the fighting. Yet it was soon obvious that the sanctions were having absolutely no effect on Mussolini—who was threatening a general war if anyone dared to cut off his oil supplies. Finally, Anthony Eden, then a minister of the

British government with special interest in the affairs of the League, suggested that an oil embargo might begin during December.

Hoare-Laval Pact

Then came an extraordinary event. Samuel Hoare, the British foreign secretary, visited Paris a few days before the oil sanctions were due to be imposed. Hoare had some talks with his French counterpart, Pierre Laval, in which the pair agreed on a plan known as the Hoare-Laval Pact. Their plan was simple: if Mussolini would stop fighting immediately he could have most of Abyssinia. He had already captured more than half of it. When some reporters learned of this arrangement and published the details in British and French newspapers there was a tremendous public outcry—and Hoare had to resign. The Hoare-Laval Pact was never implemented—but the damage had been done. Obviously neither Britain nor France, the most powerful members of the League, really intended to take any positive action and soon the other supporters of sanctions drifted away. Mussolini completed his conquest of Abyssinia during 1936 without interruption and forced Haile Selassie to flee abroad. Il Duce's own words were significant: "If the League had extended economic sanctions to oil, I would have had to withdraw from Abyssinia within a week."

Failure of the League

The oil sanctions never *failed*, because they were never even applied. What had failed, and for the second time since 1931, was the League of Nations. The Abyssinian war was the last nail in the coffin of the League, and after 1936 politicians sought other ways of maintaining world peace, eventually turning to the policy known as "appeasement."