Fascism in Italy

By David Eacker

Italy was the first fascist state in Europe between the First and Second World Wars. Under Benito Mussolini, the Fascists aspired to a totalitarian, authoritarian dictatorship. How did they rise to power, and what were their beliefs and policies?
Introduction

Of the fascist states that emerged between the two world wars, Hitler’s Germany was the most notorious – but Mussolini’s Italy was the first. Benito Mussolini came to power eleven years before Hitler did, and Italian Fascists were active as early as 1919. The term “totalitarian” is even credited to Il Duce himself. In this article we look at how Fascists came to power in Italy. We will also consider their efforts to create an authoritarian, totalitarian state.

Early success in the Po Valley

Italian fascism emerged in the economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. It started with a string of violent clashes in the northern part of Italy beginning in 1920. There, tensions over pay and work conditions had put landowning farmers in conflict with Socialist-backed workers. The Fascists, led by Mussolini, formed a street-fighting group called the Blackshirts to support the landowners. When the government chose not to intervene in this struggle, the Fascists used the fighting to gain power in the region. On November 21, “squads” of Blackshirts launched an attack on the Socialists in Bologna. Six people died. The Fascists soon followed up with assaults throughout the region. After nearly two years of fighting and more than one-hundred deaths, the Fascists had defeated the Socialists. Through violence, they had become what one historian called, “a de facto power in northeastern Italy with which the state had to reckon.”

The fighting in northern Italy had shaped the Fascist movement in four ways:

- The fighting nourished the Fascists’ belief in violence as the true path to manhood.
- It became clear that Socialism was one of Fascism’s main political enemies.
- The Fascists saw that the liberal government was weak and vulnerable to challenge.
- The Fascists learned that violence was an effective political tool.

By 1922, with these experiences behind them, Mussolini and his followers liked their chances of taking over Italy. Fascist squads racked up violent wins as they marched through the provinces beating up socialists, intimidating liberals, and removing agents of the state. Following a series of planned demonstrations known as the “March on Rome,” Mussolini was named Prime Minister by the King of Italy. Everything seemed to be falling into place for a Fascist revolution. They would destroy their political opponents and, under Mussolini’s leadership, create a totalitarian state. Or so they thought.

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1 Il Duce, meaning “the leader”, was Mussolini’s title as he led the Fascist movement and during his rule.
2 Authoritarian states expect people to strictly obey the government even if it means giving up personal freedom. Totalitarian rule is a more extreme version of this, where all citizens are essentially servants of the state.
Fascists in power

The Fascists craved revolution and total power, but instead found they had to cooperate with various, mostly conservative political parties. The Fascist party wanted to crush the existing “liberal” rulers, but Mussolini allowed many officials to continue working for the state. That meant they could hinder the Fascist agenda, if they wanted. One-party rule seemed beyond Mussolini’s grasp.

Beginning in 1925, Mussolini tried to strengthen the party and expand its reach. Among his achievements was the creation of organizations designed to make children grow up to be good Fascists. These youth groups fostered a cult of violent masculinity and expected girls to aspire only to traditional maternal roles. They promoted the authoritarian belief of blind loyalty to the nation. Such movements were a common feature of interwar fascism. The Hitler Youth in Germany, for example, had much in common with Mussolini’s youth associations. Organized into collective action by the state, young people supplied political energy to Fascism in Italy and elsewhere.

Later in the 1930s, Fascism was strengthened both by Mussolini’s attempts to build an overseas empire as well as the increasing likelihood of war in Europe. The projection of national power overseas resonated with many Italians. They believed victory on the battlefield abroad would bring back the glory of ancient Rome. It would also show the world that Italy was a real player in the “game of empire.” In this way, militarism and imperialism broadened Fascism’s appeal. Furthermore, Mussolini brought discipline to the party and aligned it more uniformly with the aims of the state.

Ultimately, the Fascists were unable to achieve the kind of totalitarian, authoritarian system they had envisioned. Mussolini had been forced to make too many compromises. Conservative and liberal elements within the state blocked the most extreme revolutionary goals of Fascism. Only outside of Italy, in the arena of empire, were the Fascists really able to experiment with totalitarianism.

Ethnic cleansing, race, and conquest

Antisemitism (discrimination against Jews) defined Nazism in Germany; that was not exactly the case with Italian Fascism, at least before 1938. Certainly, Mussolini and the Fascists saw ethnic minorities as impediments to the creation of a purely Italian state. However, their solution was “Italianization.” The idea was that non-Italians could become Italian if they assimilated. In other words, they had to embrace Italian culture and pledge loyalty to the nation.3 If the state had to accomplish this by force with re-education programs, that was just fine. The idea

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3 When someone assimilates, they blend in with someone else’s culture while giving up, or at least hiding, most of their own culture.
that ethnicity was largely a matter of culture—rather than genetics—distinguished Italian Fascism from Nazism’s biological view of race. In Fascist Italy, Slovenians and German-speaking peasants could, in principle, become Italians. In Nazi Germany, Jews could never become Germans.

Still, Fascism in Italy was not without racism. Mussolini’s war against Ethiopia in 1935 brought race into focus as a Fascist concern. Fascists portrayed the war as Italy’s “civilizing mission” or the need for “military security.” But deep-seated attitudes about racial hierarchy played out during the conflict. Advanced, deadly weapons, including the use of gas by the Italian Army, made the fight pretty one-sided. Italians convinced themselves that this firepower made them superior to their Ethiopian victims. After local resistance was crushed, Mussolini’s regime established a tight grip over that region of East Africa. Italian rule included segregation, and policies prohibited interracial relations. These rules extended not only to sexual relations and marriage, but to any kind of social relationship at all. Step-by-step, Ethiopia became a state governed by a regime without moral or political constraints. There were no bureaucrats to rein in the Fascists. Thus unlike minorities in Italy, Ethiopians were viewed by most Fascists as barbaric “others.” They could never become Italian.

The conquest of Ethiopia prompted Fascists to set harder boundaries between who could be assimilated and who could not. It influenced policies back in Italy. Their colonial policy in Ethiopia provided the basis for Italy’s antisemitic race laws in 1938. So while Jewish people had little to do with Ethiopia, they were affected by that policy. From this year onward, Italy moved closer and closer to the Nazi position. Namely, that certain groups, especially Jews, could not assimilate and would have to be removed entirely so the nation could thrive. In this way, the imperialist thinking drove Italian policy in more radical and racist directions.

**Conclusion**

When they seized power, Fascists had hoped to take over the Italian state completely. However, Mussolini’s compromises with conservatives and liberals put up too many obstacles for this plan to succeed. The result was a state that became authoritarian. However, it never really became totalitarian, at least within Italy itself.
Sources

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Image Credit
Cover: March On Rome. Italian dictator Benito Mussolini (1883 - 1945) (centre), general and Fascist politician Emilio de Bono and aviator and politician Count Italo Balbo leading the blackshirts in the Fascist ‘March on Rome’. © Photo by BIPs/Getty Images

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