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An Ominous Horizon: Fascism on the Rise

Abstract

The notorious dictator, Benito Mussolini, became Prime Minister of Italy in 1922- 3 years after the Treaty of Versailles concluded the settlements for World War I in the summer of 1919. Shortly thereafter, Mussolini established his formidable dictatorship that would last 23 years. Post-war Italy experienced economic stagnation, high unemployment, inflation, frequent labor strikes, and stalled production and output among other problems. Many Italians were also frustrated that their country did not receive more recognition in the Versailles Treaty for its contribution to the Allied Cause in the Great War. Interestingly, though, the situation in Italy was very similar to other countries at the same time that did not witness their own Fascist revolution. Especially, when compared to Germany at the same time, Italy offers a compelling case, as the Nazis in Germany, despite far worse circumstances in their country, did not come to power until around ten years after Mussolini in Italy. In this essay, I offer an explanation to the many perplexing questions surrounding Mussolini's sudden and absolute rise in circumstances probably inconsistent with expectations for a setting preceding a revolution. In sum, Mussolini used a variety of tactics and methods combined with the powerful attraction of his personality to seize power and vindicate his creation of a totalitarian autocracy. I finish with a statement on the future for democracy and what democracy must do to survive going forward.

Keywords

Fascism, Italy, Mussolini, History

Publication Statement

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An Ominous Horizon: Fascism on the Rise

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1 INTRODUCTION

Italian Fascism began in the face of economic stagnation and widespread frustration with liberal democracy following the conclusion of the Great War. It promised national renewal amidst humiliation and offered a prosperous future against seemingly inevitable decline and misery. In the drive for national revival and glory, Fascism led to war. This essay will compare the tactics of Benito Mussolini and his marauding Fascists (Mussolini's connection with Italians, Fascist economics, expansionist nationalism, and extreme political violence) with the conditions in the country (economic misfortune, nationalist anger, and government weakness) that set the stage for Fascism's impregnable reign of terror. This essay argues that economic decay, shrinking confidence in democracy, and nationalist indignation coupled with various political methods promulgated the rise of Fascism in Italy and formed the foundation of Mussolini's absolute rule that lasted more than two decades.

2 POSTWAR ITALY

The end of the First World War brought a languid economy with slow development to Italy. Unemployment was high and strikes were widespread. Industrial production lagged, agricultural output stalled, and the lingering specter of inflation stalked the land. The ominous cloud of the Communist menace constantly loomed overhead¹. Economic misfortunes combined with the frustrations of many Italians with what they believed was a poor deal their country got after the war². Economic hardship and nationalist anguish ultimately set the stage for Fascism's ineffaceable rise, and where many Italians saw frustration and misery, Mussolini and his Fascists saw opportunity.

3 CONNECTION WITH ITALIANS

3.1 The Power of Benevolence

A central tenet to Mussolini's appeal came from his sacrosanct image³. "... He seemed like a God," writes

historian, R.J.B. Bosworth¹. Through his fabulous benevolence to individual citizens and communities throughout Italy, Mussolini was able to build a powerful base, fashioning a belief that he could right any wrong³. A significant part of Mussolini's support came from the view of him as an "all-seeing, humane, and protective father figure"³. Acting as the Patron Saint of Italy, Mussolini crafted an image that he was never too busy to "deal with the plight of an individual"³. Popular legends of the leader's charity advanced a belief that Mussolini "was endowed with remarkable powers, and yet was at the same time down to earth and unexceptional – like an ordinary peasant"³. Zelmira Marazio summed up this view, remembering something that she heard a passenger on a train say:

"Do you see...all this cultivated land? Until yesterday this was a land of poverty and malaria. Who has brought about this transformation? An ordinary little man... with a big heart and an even bigger head. He has created a new Italy³."

Surely, the view of Mussolini as "ordinary" advanced a belief amongst many Italians that the Duce was one of them and that he understood them and their experiences. "The intimate relationship of the masses with the leader," writes historian, Christopher Duggan, "was at the heart of much of (Mussolini's)... appeal"³. Stories of the Duce's benevolence – true, exaggerated, or otherwise, and personal accounts of his philanthropy to individuals coupled with his prodigious charisma and colossal stature as the head of state seemed to inspire an intense admiration for the leader that advanced a strong desire among many to be directly connected with him. Throughout his rule, many boys were named in his honor. Christopher Duggan writes, "The desire to feel organically linked to Mussolini and his family found additional expression in names given to children... or in requests to the Duce to stand as godfather to a newborn child"³. Indeed, the attraction to Fascism came more from "admiration for the Duce," than it did from policies or support for the Fascist Party³. "If only the Duce knew," pervaded the Fascist political

creed amongst many Italian citizens³. Many Italians literally worshipped their leader. In times of difficulty, great achievement, or otherwise, thousands of admiring Italians wrote letters to the leader, seeking his console and help, while others adorned him with obsequious praise³. One of these letters read:

"I believe in You, Duce, the Man sent by God to preach once again the Doctrine of Christ and correct what has been falsified by egoism. . . I believe that Your daily toil irradiates the light of God, and that everything You undertake is part of the great mission assigned to You by the Almighty. . .³."

"Many of those who appealed to the Duce for. . . help," writes Christopher Duggan, "did so from a belief that he occupied a position of absolute power and also from a sense that he would view supplicants with the kindness of a father and the charity of a man blessed by God"³.

A collectively written letter thanking the Duce for providing a small mountain village with an aqueduct read:

"You who know how much we have suffered for lack of water can understand our uncontainable joy and infinite gratitude. We used to feel truly forgotten by everyone. . . But You, DUCE. . . though beset by the most pressing work, have seen and thought even of us. . .³"

A popular belief held that "Mussolini was travelling around on his own with the specific aim of meeting the poor. . . and in disguise" on a holy mission to save them from their misfortunes³. Rosina Menin recounted a childhood memory of meeting the Duce:

"He was passing our house and came in, and for a while we couldn't really work out who it was, because he was dressed, it seemed, so as not to be recognized. He asked my father two or three questions. . . and then he suddenly disappeared. . . He left when he saw that he must have been recognized. He had his motorbike. . . and (he) went. . . to Malconsiglio. . . when there were workers there. And he stopped to ask the workers how things were going and if their companies were paying them well and if they were happy. Then they recognized him and knew who it was: 'It's Benito Mussolini!!!'³"

3.2 Saint of Italy

Many Italians who met Mussolini reported witnessing an extraordinary transformation upon the occasion. Tullio Lucetto, despite himself having been beaten and

jailed by local Fascists for his failure to attend a parade celebrating the leader, recalled admiringly:

"...The weather was bad. Then he arrived. . . and the clouds went and there was sun. It seemed like something from God. And when he finished making all his speech, down came the water again. How often do we think: was this Duce some kind of Saint Anthony or what!³"

Clearly, for Tullio Lucetto, Mussolini was saving the country and Italians, particularly the poor, from hopeless despair, as Saint Anthony for Catholics is the Patron Saint of the recovery of what is lost.

The economic stress experienced by many Italians after the Great War allowed for Mussolini to craft an image as the hero of Italy. Many Italians saw Mussolini as blessed by God³. One of the many who wrote to the Duce told him, "For us Italians, you are our God on earth, and so we turn to you faithful and certain of being heard"³. Summing up Italians' seemingly devout loyalty to Mussolini, Riccardo Martini, a soldier in the Italian Army, reflected on his devotion to the leader, "God has sent the Duce for the good and civilization of the world"³. Martini later contemplated his dedication to Mussolini. "For me," the soldier remembered, "Fascism was not a party: it was a religion, like the one my mother taught me as a child"³.

So strong was the Cult of Ducismo that a university professor got a phone call from concerned test administrators after the professor's son had written about his sister for a free-response question on a secondary school admission exam that asked "... who after your parents do you love most?" The puzzled examiners told the professor that all the other 39 students had written about the Duce in response to that question³.

As the Patron Saint of Italy, opposing Mussolini at least equaled going against the people, and, at worst, presented a blasphemous insult to God. Mussolini's stupendous charisma and impressive philanthropy contributed a significant piece to the leader's political appeal and fomented his indestructible power through his cult-like following, as many Italians had elevated "politics into a religion"³.

4 FASCIST ECONOMICS

4.1 Liberal Decay

Using the moment of the time to claim absolute power, Mussolini set about planning his reforms for a beleaguered economy. Reflecting on the sub-optimal economic setting, the Fascist leader blamed Italy's postwar recession on rapacious materialism, selfish individualism, liberal economics, and capitalism, more generally². The Duce insisted that the "bourgeois" was to blame for

the country's economic misfortunes². Mussolini pursued further, declaring democracy to be at fault for Italy's economic afflictions. "The democratic regime may be defined," Mussolini wrote, "as from time to time giving the people the illusion of sovereignty, while the real effective sovereignty lies in the hands of other concealed and irreversible forces."

"Democracy," the leader continued, "is a regime nominally without a king, but it is ruled by many kings – more absolute, tyrannical, and ruinous than one sole king, even though a tyrant,"². The oligarchs of democracy, Mussolini insisted, were the architects of Italy's economic misfortunes. The Duce explained his anti-democratic motivations, drawing reference to the country's founders, Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi. "As for Italian unity," wrote Mussolini, "its debt to Liberalism is completely inferior in contrast to that which it owes to the work of Mazzini and Garibaldi, who were not Liberals"². The leader summed up his perspective when he wrote, "Fascism has taken up an attitude of complete opposition to the doctrines of Liberalism, both in the political field and the field of economics"². Reaffirming his claim as the guardian of Italy, Mussolini wrote, "Fascism is the doctrine best adapted to represent the tendencies and the aspirations of a people..."². Christopher Duggan explained Fascism's purpose, writing, "From the outset, Fascism regarded itself as a movement of the spirit, determined to counter the corrosive materialism of both liberalism and socialism..."³. Mussolini justified his drive for total power, saying in a 1933 speech that "Political power creates wealth..."⁴.

4.2 Corporatism

To solve Italy's postwar economic quandary, Mussolini favored a system connecting the state to the private sector that he called Corporatism². Mussolini explained this concept to be the deployment of Fascist bureaucrats to supervise organizations for the purpose of creating what he insisted was necessary command over the economic sector in order to promote national wealth and rescue the country from, "the general crisis of capitalism"⁴. Speaking before the National Corporative Council in Rome in 1933, Mussolini defended the illiberal principles outlined in his essay "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism" as necessary to overcome the strife of the time:

"...Three conditions are required. The first is a single political party in order that political discipline may exist alongside economic discipline and that the bond of common fate may unite everyone above conflicting interests... Beside the single political party there must be a totalitarian State, a State which by

absorbing the energy, interests, and aspirations of the people may transform and uplift them. But even this is not enough. The third and last and most important condition is to live in an atmosphere of strong ideal tension"⁴.

4.3 A Fascist Solution

The tension the Duce spoke of can be understood to be Italians' unquestioned, incorruptible commitment to the Fascist Party and to Mussolini as the leader. Through Corporatism, Mussolini was able to control an important part of society: the economy. Through his supervision of private enterprises, Mussolini was able to quickly spot and silence any opposition and to ensure that organizations properly supported Fascist principles. With his image as a profit through his mystical aura, his amazing benevolence, and his alluring charisma, the Duce's dictatorship was justified as a necessary establishment for the betterment of the Italian people rather than a repressive regime of tyranny. Therefore, the controlling nature of Corporatism was vindicated as part of the philanthropic effort to redeem the Italian citizenry from their postwar gloom. Mussolini insisted that this establishment was critical so that "the masses may improve their standard of life"⁴. Mussolini pursued, "At a given moment, the worker... must be able to say to himself and to his family: 'If I am... better off today, I owe it to the... Fascist Revolution'"⁴. Along with Corporatism, the Duce proposed a series of welfare programs and other reforms, further cementing his image as a magnanimous saint³. Christopher Duggan writes:

"The government responded to the country's economic hardships with an enormous increase in state expenditure. In the 1930s the outlay on welfare schemes, including maternity benefits and family allowances, went up from 1.5 billion to 6.7 billion lire – more than 20 percent of the country's total receipts from taxation – thereby creating the prototype of the modern welfare state. The pace of land reclamation projects and other public works programs accelerated, and the regime was able to claim that it had spent more in this field in just ten years than liberalism had done in sixty"³.

These initiatives, Duggan points out, contributed a huge role to elevating the Duce's already staggering image³.

5 EXPANSIONIST NATIONALISM

5.1 An Italian Empire

Also important to Mussolini's attraction was his promise to redeem Italy from its postwar humiliation and to build an Italian empire. Historian, Giuseppe Finaldi writes, "Fascism arose in opposition to left-wing radicalism and was an expression of nationalist resentment at the poor deal Italy got after the war"². Historian, Denis Mack-Smith argues that the Duce aspired to recreate the Roman Empire and raise Italy to imperial dominance⁵. Historian, R.J.B. Bosworth writes, "... the Duce spoke in the same way Julius Caesar did"¹.

Importantly, Fascism had a highly diverse appeal. Mack-Smith summed this up, writing: "Fascism, according to circumstance could be either 'reactionary' or 'revolutionary' and could adapt as necessary to either class war or class cooperation. Inside (Fascism), there was room for all political beliefs or none at all"⁵.

"Everyone, whether militaristic, reactionary, or extreme pacifist on the left, could see his heart's desire" in Fascism, the Duce promised (Mack-Smith, 40). Despite these diverse, and sometimes contradictory persuasions, the conviction that united all these miscellaneous beliefs, Mussolini asserted, was Italians' dedication to national glory. Mussolini, Mack-Smith argued, framed his movement as one of "national renewal"⁵. Mack-Smith described the leader as an extreme nationalist who proclaimed Italy's destiny to control all the Adriatic and Dalmatian Coasts. The Duce, Mack-Smith points out, proposed a "piratical exhibition" to ensure the country's right to empire⁵.

Although many Italians mostly held unfavorable views of colonialism, Mussolini's nationalist rhetoric was an important source of Fascism's political attraction¹. Historian, Jeff Pearce points out that "an expansionist, militaristic nationalism was an essential component of (Mussolini's) Fascist credo"⁶. Mussolini justified Fascist imperial ambitions as for "Italians... as proud representatives of the Aryan race" to exercise their natural right to conquer and rule, dismissing Ethiopia in his 1935 speech preceding the invasion as "a barbarous country... unworthy of taking its place with the civilized peoples" of the world⁶. Nevertheless, considering what he wrote in his essay, "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism", a number of his speeches, and the works of several prominent historians, it appears that structures and institutions (ineffective democracy and greed in capitalism) were more central to Fascist political doctrine than racial politics probably was⁵. The militant expansionism of Fascist Italy is well demonstrated in the country's notorious invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. This campaign heralded Italy's independence from what Mussolini asserted was the country's subjugation by the Allies and Geneva and proved a powerful answer to the anger many Italians expressed at what

they insisted was an unfair deal their country got in the Treaty of Versailles¹. This aggressive crusade marked the beginning of a series of belligerent acts by Fascist Italy.

5.2 World War I and the Treaty of Versailles

Reflecting on Italy's contributions to the Allied cause in World War I, Mussolini indignantly pronounced, "how many promises!"⁶. He followed up by reiterating Italian war losses and lamenting that "... when it came to sitting around the table of the mean peace to us were left only the crumbs from the sumptuous colonial booty from others"⁶. The Duce went on to denounce the League of Nations for sanctioning the Southern European country after its incursion into Ethiopia⁶. The leader finished his diatribe with "a cry of justice..."⁶. With his intense nationalism, Mussolini insisted on claiming for the country what he asserted Italy was wrongfully denied in the Treaty of Versailles. This powerful message coupled with Mussolini's sacrosanct image and the economic despair the country suffered under cemented his creation of an absolute dictatorship. At this point, Fascism was in full control and there was no going back.

Despite the significant roles each of the last three factors contributed to Mussolini's indelible rule, neither of them seems to offer a reasonable understanding for how he came to power so quickly. Mussolini became Prime Minister of Italy in 1922 – 3 years after the Treaty of Versailles concluded the peace settlements for the Great War. The situation in Italy was no doubt bad when Mussolini came to power, but it was not catastrophic. In many ways, it was very similar to other countries nearby that did not witness their own Fascist apocalypse. "... Strikes and inflation were as serious a problem in Italy as elsewhere," Mack-Smith writes⁵. Clearly, the setting in Italy was not nearly as dire as it was in Germany at the time, where, despite the arguably calamitous situation, it would still be around a decade before the Nazis took over⁷. Even so, Mussolini's Fascists seized power in Italy suddenly, while in Germany, the Nazis were still far away from their preeminence in spite of far worse circumstances. One factor does offer an explanation for the Fascists' rapid rise, though.

6 THE FASCIST WAY: VIOLENCE AND CORRUPTION

6.1 A Reign of Terror

A significant reason for Mussolini's sudden rise to power was the "illegality" of Fascism⁵. Brazen public political violence and blatant corruption were arguably Mussolini's favorite tools for creating power. Nonethe-

less, an environment of coercion and licentious electoral and campaign cheating seemed to contribute a substantial role to the ascent of Mussolini and his plundering Fascists. Denis Mack-Smith writes, "Mussolini knew instinctively that one way to consolidate his power was to create a reign of terror"⁵. The Fascist leader was reported to have employed uniformed, armed hooligans to attend his meetings and rallies. He once bragged that "... he preferred using bombs and guns rather than ballot papers against his opponents"⁵. When he was asked one time rather the pen or the sword was mightier, Mussolini replied, "the sword, because it cuts. Cuts ends things" (Mack-Smith, 114). Speaking about power, Mussolini once said, "fifty thousand guns are better than the support of five million voters"⁵. Mussolini actively used death squads and recruited a private army to terrorize his opponents⁵. In 1919, a band of Fascist thugs "threw a bomb into a parade held by the Socialists. Several small bombs were also sent in packages to the cardinal archbishop of Milan (who opposed Mussolini) and the Socialist mayor"⁵.

Fascist violence only escalated in the coming years, as the elections of 1921 took place in a setting of particularly alarming savagery. "... Perhaps as many as a hundred people were killed," writes Denis Mack-Smith⁵. This atmosphere of intimidation and unmitigated, plainly visible violence "influenced the results (of the election) significantly – some areas of Italy were virtually under Fascist control and [the] Socialists could not even hold their election meetings"⁵. With the support of the police and the military fully behind him, Mussolini and his Fascists became unstoppable⁵. "The police sometimes lent their trucks to Fascist squads; some units of the army gave them weapons; magistrates tended to decide any prosecutions in their favor. ..."⁵. When Parliament was in session, "armed Fascists guarded the doors... during debate, and militiamen in the public galleries ostentatiously fingered their daggers and revolvers"⁵.

6.2 Cowing the Opposition

During the election of 1922, Mussolini's Fascists killed three opposition members of Parliament and "some fifty others [were] physically attacked, mostly in public and in broad daylight. ..."⁵. Two years prior, Mussolini proposed a march on Rome with his newly established Blackshirts, that he claimed would have the support of the military and the police, to seize power from a government he dismissed as "spineless"⁵. Ultimately, this scheme brought Mussolini to power, inaugurating his 23-year reign of terror⁵.

Shortly after the new Parliament started its session, Fascist deputies, under Mussolini's instructions, pitched a Communist deputy out of a window on a high floor of a building⁵. Perhaps the most notorious

and well documented Fascist murder was the killing of Giacomo Matteotti, the Socialist leader and longtime rival of Mussolini who dared to expose the Duce's corruption and the barbarity of the Fascists⁵. Matteotti was tortured to death in a manner so gruesome that Denis Mack-Smith, instead of describing the grisly details of the assassination, wrote that the slaying was "too vulgar and horrific to be reported. ..."⁵.

This scene of shockingly visible violence convinced many non-Fascists to not seek office, as nearly all of those who continued their electoral ambitions died on the campaign trail or shortly thereafter, the latest victims of Fascist terrorism⁵. Mussolini made it plainly clear that he would not tolerate dissent. He is reported to have said, "get rid of him," "teach him a lesson," "he must be made to disappear," or "he must fall back on the revolver" when speaking about his opponents in private⁵. Any brave journalist who dared to report Fascist atrocities risked savage beatings, a drink of castor oil – which was sometimes mixed with petroleum – a cocktail that nearly always proved to be deadly, or worse⁵.

Denis Mack-Smith argues that without this display of highly visible and disturbing violence, the Fascists would probably not have been able to acquire the overwhelming majority in Parliament needed for absolute power⁵. This scene of assassinations, beatings, and public torture led Mack-Smith to conclude that Mussolini's Fascist revolution presented little more than a "vulgar riot of bludgeons and castor oil"⁵. A weak response from the democratic government and limited intervention from the police, Mack-Smith insists, contributed a significant role to Mussolini's sudden ascent to power⁵. Although the violence of the Fascists led to Mussolini's arrest along with other Fascist leaders in 1919, he was promptly released the next day on government order⁵. The democratic government's "astonishing reluctance to punish Fascist" crimes "was to be a major factor in bringing Mussolini to power," Mack-Smith argues⁵.

7 AN EPIDEMIC OF VIOLENCE

In 1925, Mussolini addressed the Chamber of Deputies in a speech that historian, Stanislao Pugliese argued marked the "beginning of the full Fascist dictatorship"⁸. The Duce responded to accusations that he had promoted arbitrary savagery, answering that Fascist violence had a purpose, and that purpose, he insisted, was not to impose terror. "Violence, to be effective, must be surgical, intelligent, and chivalrous," the Duce declared⁸. He followed up by claiming full responsibility for, and complete control over, all political violence in postwar Italy, which was shockingly common^{8;5}. "I now declare before this assembly," Mussolini announced, "... that I assume, I alone, full political, moral, and historical responsibility for all that has happened"⁸.

"If Fascism has been nothing more than castor oil and the rubber truncheon, instead of being a proud passion of the best part of Italian youth," he continued, "then I am to blame!"⁸

"If Fascism has been a criminal association, then I am the chief of this criminal association... Let me take responsibility for this," Mussolini beseeched the Chamber⁸. A year before delivering this intrepid speech, Mussolini took over control of the police and used their authority to arrest and harass Fascist opponents⁵. Shortly after this audacious speech, "Freedom of the press and of association were banned by decree, and all political parties were outlawed. Political opponents... were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms by the Special Tribunal"⁸. By claiming complete control over all political violence in the country at the time and stating the intentionality of that violence, Mussolini made it plainly clear that anyone who should dare question his right to rule, and Fascist politics, was placing him/herself in a position of immeasurable danger. Immediately after this speech, the last non-Fascists in the government resigned⁵. With the government under complete Fascist control, Mussolini's dictatorship had begun.

"Violence obviously attracted youth, and students in particular took pleasure in administering castor oil by the liter... to their helpless victims, Mack-Smith points out⁵. During the elections of 1921, a gang of Fascist students murdered a Socialist deputy seeking reelection⁵. With Mussolini's dominance now unquestioned and the authority of the police and the military fully behind him, violence and state terrorism became fully incorporated and began to take place as a regular part of Italian life.

An elderly man once overheard a woman on train complaining to a friend that the bread on sale gave her pains. Because the woman had the temerity to insult the Duce's bread, the old man escorted the woman to a pharmacy after she got off and "forced her to drink half a glass of castor oil (or else face 'something worse')." Christopher Duggan points out that, "... the man was probably not a police informer," but just a good Fascist performing his duty to the leader³.

7.1 Fascist Corruption

Prosecutions for Fascist violence were rare; arrests were even less common, convictions were almost unheard of, and, in the few cases when a conviction was secured, sentences were short and were nearly always over-turned within a few years⁵. Along with the appalling barbarity of the Fascists, election corruption was disgustingly high. Denis Mack-Smith writes:

"... These elections were gerrymandered more shamelessly than any election before them. Voting certificates were confiscated from op-

ponents and then used many times over by Fascists; the secrecy of the ballot was violated in a dozen ways; illiterates were illegally put on the voting roll, as were names of the dead; official circulars to local Fascist parties gave detailed instructions about destroying opposition voting papers in the urns and otherwise manipulating results...⁵."

This level of rank corruption and frightening violence arguably largely characterized the sudden ascent of Fascism in Italy right after World War 1 and both were to contribute substantial roles to bringing Mussolini to power.

8 CONCLUSION

Ultimately, a stagnant postwar economy and widespread nationalist umbrage set the stage for Mussolini and his Fascists who offered not only an instant remedy for Italy's postwar misfortunes but also prosperity and empire. Mussolini's magnetic charisma coupled with his magnanimous philanthropy allowed the Duce to solidify an image as the savior of Italy. By claiming the covenant as the hero of Italy, Mussolini put challenging his guidance out of the question, with his absolute rule justified as part of an altruistic effort to redeem the country from its postwar woes. Widespread frustration with liberal democracy amongst many Italians and a series of clever political tactics by Mussolini ultimately advanced the rise of Fascism in Italy and formed the base of Mussolini's absolute rule that lasted almost a quarter century.

The inability of the democratic government - already beset with the staggering task to rebuild an ailing postwar economy and to respond effectively to Fascist criminal activity ultimately led to the death of Italian democracy in the years immediately after the war. Mussolini and his Fascists continually tested the government's reserves with more and more shocking displays of open violence. By blaming liberal institutions for allowing economic stagnation and national humiliation to manifest, the Duce vindicated his movement. The initial improvements to Italian quality of life through Fascist welfare programs further elevated the Duce's popularity and justified his dictatorship.

A series of weak government responses and unpunished Fascist violence ultimately emboldened the insurgent Fascists, who used this as evidence for the failure of democracy and allowed Mussolini to destroy liberal institutions in Italy and replace them with his own. Through his passionate crusade for national revitalization, Mussolini led his country on a deadly path of destruction that ended with war. As the Duce would later find out, though, the new institutions he created were only as strong as his leadership. When he fell, his

institutions crumbled, and his empire collapsed. In the end, an unpleasant situation coupled with a violent revolution led by a charismatic leader proposing grand and immediate solutions matched by government languor allowed Fascism to spring from the shadows in Italy. For democracy to survive, going forward, it is critical that when democratic governments witness similar conditions met with a similarly violent uprising and pretentious political appeals by a charismatic leader, that the government respond quickly and strongly or they too could watch Fascism rise again.

9 EDITOR'S NOTES

This article was peer reviewed.

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