

What was the role of the first world war on mussolini's transition from socialism...

[Politics](#), [Marxism](#)



What was the role of the First World War in Mussolini's transition from Socialism to Fascism? Mussolini's controversial transition from his Socialist roots to leader of the Fascist Party has been bewildering to many, particularly those who perceive it as a sudden and random change. However, many historians, such as O'Brien, have suggested this transition was not so random; Mussolini's political shift from the Left to the Right was the result of World War One. Italy's entry into the war in 1915 divided the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which led to Mussolini's expulsion and his rapid political evolution. On the other hand, Gregor argues that Mussolini's underlying revolutionary nature was the main reason for his change, as it directed his beliefs to adopt various ideologies that conformed with his desire for revolution. Conversely, Payne argues that Nationalism completed the establishment of Fascism. This essay will explore these three arguments in order to understand whether Mussolini's transition from Socialism to Fascism was the result of the war, his revolutionary nature, or the influence of Nationalism. O'Brien has argued that the developments in the First World War guided Mussolini's political transition from Socialism to Fascism. Italy's intervention into the war, to Mussolini's personal experience in the trenches and the disastrous Battle of Caporetto all contributed to Mussolini's political evolution. Italy's intervention into World War One in 1915 signified a pivotal point in Mussolini's political career. As a Socialist, Mussolini was expected to promote the neutrality of Italy in the war, which he initially did. In the Socialist paper, *Avanti*, Mussolini declared that Italy should remain neutral, as Italy had not started the war, and it would sacrifice many working class lives. However, Mussolini's view on intervention soon changed (at least

publically), as he began to express pro-interventionist writings in *Avanti*. In October 1914, Mussolini argued that the PSI had always supported the allies, therefore intervention would not be altering their beliefs and that war could be seen as an opportunity for revolution. Furthermore, he argued that neutrality was risky and it would have consequences, particularly for Italian expansionism if the Allies or Central Powers annexed territory Italy desired, such as the Balkans. However, the Socialists did not agree and 20 October 1914, Mussolini was expelled from the PSI. Thus, the issue of intervention demonstrated how Mussolini's beliefs evolved from the start of World War One. On the other hand, Mussolini's apparent change of heart from neutralist to interventionist was not really a change. Not only was interventionism consistent with his revolutionary Socialism, he had already published and agreed with the syndicalist, Panunzio's, pro-intervention articles in his personal paper, *Utopia* in November 1913. Nevertheless, although the intervention issue may not have altered Mussolini's views significantly, he was expelled from the PSI as a result, which had a considerable impact on his beliefs afterwards. Thus, intervention could be seen as the architect of his political evolution. Similarly, Mussolini's personal experience in the trenches contributed to the development of his political beliefs. Mussolini joined the war in August 1915, which awakened his patriotism. He also became less anti-military. However, Mussolini's patriotism has been identified from as early as 1909. During his time in Trentino, Mussolini became associated with Battisti; his strong patriotism for Italy inspired Mussolini. Furthermore, as a socialist, Mussolini had always stressed that Socialism was against Nationalism, not the nation. Nevertheless, his sense of

national unity and tolerance of the military were expressed during his time in the trenches and represented a fundamental change in his political thought. It also demonstrated his tendency to adapt his views in response to changing circumstances. The Battle of Caporetto in October 1917 had a huge impact on the development of Mussolini's political attitude; for the first time he identified with the Nationalist movement. Indeed, De Felice believes that this disaster was largely responsible for Mussolini's transition to Fascism. The Battle was a surprise German and Austrian offensive on the Italian Army, which resulted in the collapse of the Italian Front and many deaths. This was worsened by the Italian General Cadorna; he blamed the soldiers and destroyed their morale. Mussolini defended the soldiers and wanted justice. The Nationalist movement had a similar attitude. The Battle of Caporetto enhanced Mussolini's attitude towards the military and brought him closer to the Nationalist movement and right-wing politics. Thus, the developments in World War One created huge political unrest at home, which altered Mussolini's political thinking and attitudes towards socialism, the military and the nation. These changes were significant in Mussolini's transition to Fascism, therefore the war did play a central role in Mussolini's political evolution. Alternatively, Gregor has argued that Mussolini's transition to Fascism was the result of his revolutionary nature, as he only adopted beliefs that were congruent with his desire for revolution. This has been supported by the idea that Mussolini never truly belonged to any political Party. Indeed, Mussolini's political beliefs from his Socialist days appear to be a culmination of borrowed ideologies from Marxism, Socialism and revolutionary Syndicalism. Although by fifteen years of age Mussolini called himself a

socialist, he rejected moderate socialist ideas of reform on the grounds that it was conforming to bourgeois society and was passive. Thus, he was more influenced by Marxism. He despised the bourgeoisie and traditional institutions, such as the Catholic Church and the military, as they apparently repressed the proletariat. Consequently, he believed that class confrontation and revolution by the proletariat would resolve this repression. Mussolini opposed Parliament, as he believed they were too self-involved to transform Italy from a backward State. He also despised Nationalism as it apparently endorsed the vested interests of the bourgeoisie, church, military and monarchy. Thus, Mussolini's political attitude was a combination of the radical aspects of Marxism, Socialism and revolutionary Syndicalism, whilst disregarding moderate aspects, such as reform. This supports the idea that Mussolini was simply a revolutionary, not committed to any one Party or ideology and that this is the reason he was able to adopt Fascism. On the other hand, it may have been Mussolini's influences (particularly in his youth) that led to this mixture of beliefs, rather than his lack of loyalty to any one ideology. Mack Smith believes that Mussolini's father had the greatest influence on his political attitude. His father was a radical socialist, often in prison, and Mussolini spent a lot of time with him and his socialist associates. However, as a young man, Mussolini became more influenced by Marx than Socialism. Furthermore, during his time in Switzerland in 1902, Mussolini became familiar with revolutionary syndicalists, such as Michels and LeBon(who wrote about crowd psychology; crowds apparently needed myths to motivate them) and Panunzio (who was against reforms). Thus, Mussolini was surrounded by politics from a young age, which may explain why he was

inspired by so many different ideologies. However, it is more likely that these influences reinforced his natural revolutionary instincts. Indeed, some of these ideas that influenced Mussolini were later seen in the Fascist regime, such as myths around the Duce. This therefore reiterates Gregor's argument that Mussolini's revolutionary nature led him to adopt views that complemented his desire for revolution and was therefore open to any Party that would provide this, including Fascism. On the contrary, Payne has argued that Mussolini's Fascism was the result of the Nationalist movement. Whilst Mussolini's ideas evolved from Socialism, through revolutionary Syndicalism, Nationalism completed the transition. Indeed, once Mussolini was expelled from the PSI, he needed to support someone new; and so turned to the revolutionary Syndicalists who were also pro-intervention. This demonstrated Mussolini's tendency to change according to political situations, and the importance of the ideologies he turned to. Indeed, the revolutionary Syndicalists were significant, as they had parallels with the Nationalist Party (ANI). These included violence that would lead to a revolution of the classes, imperialism and class hierarchy. They both believed that intervention into the war would create revolution, thus demonstrating unity of the Left and Right. Furthermore, syndicalists, such as Michels, stressed the importance of uniting the classes to protect the Italian nation. This highlights the element of national consciousness in Syndicalism. These overlaps demonstrate the influence of the National movement on Mussolini's development. By adopting revolutionary Syndicalism, Mussolini was essentially adopting elements of Nationalism, which thus influenced his journey to Fascism. On the other hand, the disaster at Caporetto had a major

impact on Italy's political situation and created more support for the Nationalists. It was the reaction of the Nationalists after Caporetto that influenced Mussolini. Caporetto signified intense disillusionment with the current government and created national unity amongst the Italians. Cadorna's blaming of the soldiers created anger and Corradini (a lead figure in Nationalism) believed soldiers should be rewarded. This aligned with Mussolini's view; he believed the government should boost the morale of the soldiers by uniting the nation and promoting revolution. Thus, Mussolini identified with the Nationalists for the first time after Caporetto, which may have increased his willingness to adopt Nationalist ideas in the following years. The Red years, beginning in 1919, completed this and symbolised Mussolini's complete abandonment of Socialism. These years were characterised by strikes and national unrest. They not only brought a decline in the support for the PSI (due to fear of communism), but also created a state of confusion, particularly amongst the bourgeoisie, as to which Party to support. Mussolini recognised this situation as an opportunity to create a revolution, and thus appealed to the bourgeoisie to support him, as he knew the Proletariat were loyal to the Left. He thus concentrated on motivating the bourgeoisie into revolution against the Socialists and Liberal Government (Nationalist element). This is another example of a fundamental change in belief. As a socialist, Mussolini had emphasised the importance of a proletariat revolution, but now he emphasised a revolution induced by the bourgeoisie. The Red years are thus an example of how Mussolini adapted his views in response to a situation and manipulated them to achieve his aims of revolution. In this sense, Nationalism was the final factor that drove

Mussolini to adopt Fascism; particularly due to the lack of a political doctrine on the Fascist part. Indeed, in 1923, the Pact of Fusion incorporated the Corradini and Rocco's National Doctrine into Fascism. Thus, Payne's argument that Fascism was the ultimate result of the Nationalist movement is demonstrated by the parallels of Nationalism in Mussolini's revolutionary syndicalist thought and the growing similarities between Mussolini's and nationalist attitudes during the failures of the war. The Red Years completed Mussolini's gradual attraction to Nationalism, his abandonment of Socialism and led to him embrace right-wing politics. Overall, Mussolini's transition from Socialism to Fascism was not random. The war certainly transformed Mussolini's political career forever and made him sympathetic to the politics and institutes he had always hated; the military and Nationalism.

Furthermore, World War One intensified his national consciousness, particularly his experiences in the trenches and the disaster of Caporetto. Indeed, it was essentially his patriotism that connected him to the Nationalist movement. In this sense the war did play the central role in Mussolini's transition; in the end it was the Nationalist doctrine that defined Fascist ideology. However, Mussolini's revolutionary nature no doubt drove all his political decisions. From a young age, he was a radical and greatly inspired by his radical father. This meant that he was open to any political Party that promoted radical ideas and can explain why he was so willing to abandon ideologies that did not conform to this, such as Socialism. Indeed, his revolutionary instinct seems to be the only thing that was consistent throughout Mussolini's political development; from the very beginning of the Fascist movement he promoted violence and revolution which lasted until

1943. Payne's argument, therefore, connects O'Brien and Gregor's approaches to Mussolini's adoption of Fascism. Whilst the war changed his political career and made him more aware of Nationalism, and his revolutionary instincts made him open to radical change, Nationalism completed it. Without the war, Mussolini may still have been in the PSI, therefore would have avoided Nationalism, and without his revolutionary instincts, he would not have been open to adopt right-wing politics, even if it was radical. Furthermore, without the Nationalist Party, there would not have been Fascism, as it was national unity that gained the Nationalist movement support and it was Corradini and Rocco's Nationalist doctrine that formed the basis of Fascist ideology. Thus, although the First World War transformed Mussolini's political career, and led to the evolution of his beliefs as a result, and although the Nationalist movement completed his transition to Fascism, Mussolini's revolutionary nature seems to be the central reason for his abandonment of Socialism and adoption of Fascism. It was this that prevented his full commitment to any Party and made him open to other political ideologies. From Marxism and Socialism, to revolutionary Syndicalism and Fascism, Mussolini's revolutionary instincts determined the political decisions he made, which resulted in his changing views. Even if the war had never have occurred, Mussolini's desire for revolution would have motivated him to respond to alternative events and political crises that would have developed his beliefs. The war just speeded up this process due to the failures of war and incompetent government to resolve the situation. Furthermore, without the war, Nationalism would still have had the same ideology and alternative political events would have led Mussolini to join this

movement. Thus, his revolutionary nature maintained one consistent idea throughout Mussolini's transition; the desire for revolution, and he would not have rested until the opportunity occurred.