

# The rise of fascism in the 20th century



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Fascism represents one of the ideological products of the 20th century and it was established as a political regime by Benito Mussolini, in Italy, after the First World War, in 1922. It represents a broad concept, a radical and authoritarian nationalist political ideology, notoriously hard to define. It is based on ideas such as anti-democracy, anti-liberalism, anti-communism, anti-capitalism and anti-semitism. These ideas and many others which I will present in the following paragraphs, shaped the new right wing doctrine, called fascism. This political doctrine caught form and was put to practice after the First World War, especially in its two most widely known formats , Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy and Hitler's Nazi regime in Germany.

In this essay I will explain the nature of fascism and its impact in the inter-war Europe and I will analyse its basic ideas. In the first part of my essay, I will present the social, political and economical background that allowed fascism to appear as an ideology in both Italy and Germany, two of the fascist states. In the second part, I will analyse the fundamental ideas that shaped the doctrine of fascism. In order to explain their meaning, I will also use certain examples, regarding the Italian and German fascism. This way, I will be able to emphasis what these two types of fascism have in common, but also what differentiates them. In the end, I will state my conclusion, based on arguments.

The rise of the radical right wing after the First World War was, without a doubt, a reaction to the social revolutions and the power of the labor class in general, to Leninism and communism. In order to find the roots of fascism and understand the rise of this new political ideology, it is necessary to examine the elements and the circumstances which allowed fascism to be

established. Many historians argue that fascism is the consequence of the crisis that followed the First World War, war that caused damages and economic crisis in most of the European countries. The second source of the political instability created in the inter-war period was the rise and the threat from the left wing, communism, as a proletarian socialist revolution became reality. The First World War and the victory of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 shattered the trust of many European nations in democracy. These two main events also contributed to the rise of new revolutionary ideas. (Passmore, Kevin. *Fascism a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.)

As I previously stated, fascism took many forms such as Italian fascism, German nazism, Romanian legionarism, or French fascism in the 1920s but many historians tried to find the reasons why fascism firstly appeared in Italy. In Italy, many events created the necessary background for establishing fascism as a new ideology and as a political system. Historians argue that the liberal regime was imposed in Italy and this regime did not try to represent the mass of the people. The liberal regime failed to ensure political freedom, it used repression against mass protests and only the economical elite groups were able to take part in the political life. The mass of the society, which was poor, was excluded from participation in politics. (De Grand Alexander J. *Italian Fascism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000. Print.)

The First World War had devastating consequences for the liberal regime and for the entire Italy. Ten years after Italy joined the war, the liberal regime has been replaced by a fascist dictatorship, destroying a political system that has

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lasted for 50 years. Between 1918-1922, Italy faced the economic crisis and the disappointment after the war. From an economic point of view, the war led to increasing taxes and debt of the Italian state which was forced to rely on loans and inflation. These resulted in a sharp increase of prices, unmatched by wages, and, in a lower proportion than in Germany, but still quite strong, the misery of popular classes and the poverty of the middle class.

From a political point of view, a feeling of discontent among masses was created by the way that Italy was treated after the war ended. Even if Italy was part of the victorious countries, its territorial claims regarding the Dalmatia province and the city of Fiume, both located on the border with Croatia, were rejected by the U. S. President Woodrow Wilson. After the treaties were signed with the defeated states, Italy remained the only victorious country which did not achieve its goals. This event generated among Italians strong emotions against the President Woodrow Wilson, against the U. S, and, by extension, against the values he represented. The mass of the society also accused the liberal government for being incapable of defending its interests during the Paris Peace Conference, in 1919.

Until 1921, Italy was governed by weak coalitions. At the end of this year, fascist groups were attacking the socialists, gaining the support of nationalists and the support of those who were afraid of a new Bolshevik revolution. Having the necessary economical and political background for coming with new ideas to establish the political and economical order, and also the support of the mass of the society, fascists and their leader, Benito Mussolini gained, in the end, all the political power, becoming the leader of

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Italy. After Mussolini negotiated the fascists' entrance in the Italian government in the summer of 1922, later this year, in October, he increased the pressure, organizing the March on Rome, with the intention of taking the political power from the King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, by force. Facing such a threat, the old regime collapsed, the government resigned and Mussolini became the prime minister of Italy. In the following 3 years, he gained all the political power and this way, Italy became a totalitarian state, led by Benito Mussolini. (De, Grand Alexander J. Italian Fascism. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000. Print.), (Merriman, John M. A History of Modern Europe. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2010. Print.)

In Germany, the rise of fascism was also a result of the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution, even if there can be found some differences in the social, economical and political background where it was established. The major difference between these two fascist countries is that Germany was one of the defeated countries at the end of the war. According to the terms and conditions of the treaty signed in June 1919 at Versailles, Germany was ordered to pay massive war reparations to many countries, which damaged its economy. It also lost many territories and military restrictions were imposed. In few words, it lost a big amount of money, social capital and of course, money. The humiliations imposed by the victorious states, associated with the difficulties that Germany met during the economic recession, created a feeling of among the people which, lacking a democratic political culture were relatively easy to manipulate. All these created the necessary background for Adolf Hitler to join the political stage and promote his nazist ideas, mentioned in his book, Mein Kampf. Even

though the circumstances were favorizing the rise of a new regime, Hitler also needed to be supported by the mass of the society. In order to gain the trust of the German nation, he promised to restore the pride of Germany in the world. As the Depression was an important issue in Germans' poor quality life, he promised to solve all the economical problems by restoring the profits of small businesses and the value of savings, by ending unemployment and, as the majority of the people feared communism, Hitler ensured them that he will end the communist threat. Gaining people's support and winning the elections, Adolf Hitler became the unique leader of Germany, establishing a totalitarian, fascist state. (Merriman, John M. A History of Modern Europe. Vol. 2. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2010. Print.)

As an ideology, fascism is hard to analyse given the following factors. First of all, it is a conglomerate of negative characteristics, anti-liberalism, anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois, anti-communist, and it is hard to establish what it stands for and what it condemns. Secondly, it is an eclectic ideology, a vision of the world, as Hitler considered it, much like a religious vision which asks for blind belief, obedience and leaves no space for criticism and debate.

The fascist regime is, as I have mentioned above, a totalitarian political regime, and so it is based on organising and controlling the society following the power establishment principle by any means, including the use of force and the complete submission of the individual to the state authority. As I have stated in the first part of my essay, Benito Mussolini organised the March of Rome in order to obtain the entire political power. On the other hand, Adolf Hitler made a slightly more complicated maneuver, taking

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advantage of the political instability in Germany at the time and convincing the government to grant the chancellor more power than the president. He continued to gain more power as the people saw the Nazi regime as a way out of the crisis and ended up by destroying any democratic aspect and acquiring all the power needed to achieve his plan.

By promoting anti-liberalism and anti-democracy, fascism is based on disregarding the citizens' rights and freedom, suppressing the political pluralism, thus maintaining only one party, the fascist party that is often regarded as the state. Both in Italy and in Germany, anyone who dared to oppose the regime was punished and any political competitor was crushed, so that all the political power was kept in the hands of a single man, Benito Mussolini, in Italy and Adolf Hitler, in Germany.

Being a right wing political ideology, it is based on anti-communism and it is meant to fight against the promoting and expansion of communism in western Europe. Also, fascism is also based on the idea of anti-rationalism. Relying more on action, fascism represses human rationality and intellectual life in general. As opposed to socialism and liberalism, which considered that the world can be understood and transformed by the exercise of thought, fascism places will and violence above all virtues in the political doctrine. Furthermore, fascism represents the expression of a political regime based on will and addressed to the soul, emotions and instincts. Another key-element of the fascist ideology is the elitism, occupying a distinct place in history by condemning the idea of equality between individuals. According to it, there is a natural selection which imposes certain individuals which are meant to be leaders and the others must obey their command. The principle

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of the leader (Führerprinzip) is the fundamental principle of the fascist state. The leader not only holds unlimited constitutional powers, but also undeniable ideologic authority. Direct contact with the masses must be accomplished by general manifestations and popular demonstrations and other political parties and institutions must be dissolved to prevent the threat on the leader's authority. For the fascist ideology, the true democracy meant absolute dictatorship, which was the fusion between absolutism and people suzerainty in the form of the totalitarian democracy. ( Vincent, Andrew. *Modern Political Ideologies*. Chichester, U. K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.), (Heywood, Andrew. *Political Ideologies: an Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.), (Passmore, Kevin. *Fascism a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.)

Even if the Italian fascism and the German Nazism are often seen as one and the same because of their similarities, there are also important differences that need to be noticed. What mainly distinguishes fascism from the German national-socialism is the matter of the race, of the Volk tradition. In Nazi Germany, history and culture were influenced by the race factor. The Nazi strongly believed that the Arian race is the most pure race that exists and it is destined to rule the world. The idea of nationalism led to extreme describes best all the forms taken by fascism across history.

Nazism is the unique variety of fascism that involved biological racism and anti-Semitism. From all of the forms in which fascism manifested , the Nazi regime was the most brutal , bloody and which contained genocide proportions. One of the main purposes of the Nazi was the complete extermination of the Jews which they blamed for all the existent problems in



Germany. Definitory for the Nazi regime was not only the brutal suppression, by violating the rights of the citizens, and mass extermination, but also an aggressive foreign policy, unleashing World War II, to achieve global domination for Germany. ( Vincent, Andrew. *Modern Political Ideologies*. Chichester, U. K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. Print.), (Heywood, Andrew. *Political Ideologies: an Introduction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.)

Even though the Italian fascism was not based on racism, after joining the Axis in 1936, the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, started a campaign against Jews, giving the discriminating laws. The persecution of Jews started in the late period of the Second World War, when Italy was under Nazi control.

In fascist Italy the central element of the ideology was the corporatist state seen as a very important instrument in the development of the country. With the uprising of Benito Mussolini in 1922, the Italian economy was reorganised in the corporatist spirit, as opposed to the bourgeois state, which was thought to lack discipline and method, absorbing all the activities without achieving any productivity. The main idea was that the state could become more powerful if properly organised, the individual was to be judged only in relationship to the state and his value beyond this relationship is useless. So, one of the central principles of fascism is the supremacy of the nation over individuals.

Based on imperialism policies and the idea to constantly expand, fascism, in particular, Nazism, led to the World War II. To summarize, this regime proposed the regeneration of the social, economic and cultural life, as well as the ethnic identity principles. The rise and fall of fascism shows some

general characteristics, which point its strengths and weaknesses. Firstly, fascism was built on the background of a profound social crisis which weakened the existent political regime. For example, it was relatively easy for the Italian people to support Mussolini's plans to create a new type of state which would transform Italy into a superpower as it was during the Roman Empire and Renaissance. Also, fascism was a charismatic form of politics, which relied on the extraordinary abilities of the party and its leader. It was an extraordinary persuasion of the masses gathered around an idea. In this spirit, fascism was an attempt to fight urbanisation, the clash between social classes and other problems of the modern society.

In conclusion, fascism represented a great ideology which, along with liberalism, communism, conservatism, socialism, and democracy, shaped the 20th century. The interest in fascism and its crime increased considerably in the 21st century.