

Looking back on the 20th century, many historians trace the causes of World War II, including the rise of **totalitarian** leaders, to factors created by World War I and the treaties signed at the end of the "Great War" (as WWI originally was called). After WWI, many countries faced severe economic problems. Germany was particularly hard hit economically. According to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was required to pay large sums of money, called reparations, to the countries that had won the conflict. By 1930, mass unemployment and economic depression led to bitter poverty in Germany, Britain, Japan, Italy, and the United States, as well as other countries around the world. In Germany and Italy, the economic depression weakened the existing governments. As people demanded change, a political movement that believed in an extremely strong, national government, called **fascism**, became popular in these countries. **Fascism** included a sense of nationalism (a powerful sense of patriotism) and leaders were often dictatorial, ruthless in suppressing opposition, and interested in centralizing power. Economic problems and ethnic tensions contributed to instability and helped **fascist** rulers to gain power.

Benito Mussolini was born in Predappio, Italy on July 29, 1883. Growing up, young **Benito** sometimes worked with his father at his blacksmith shop. His father was involved in politics and his political opinions had a strong influence on **Benito** as he grew up. **Benito** also played with his two younger brothers and went to school. His mother was a schoolteacher and a very religious woman.

After graduating from school in 1901, **Mussolini** became involved in politics. He worked for the socialist party as well as for political newspapers. A few times he was put in jail for protesting the government or advocating strikes.

When Italy entered World War I, **Mussolini** was originally against the war. However, he later changed his mind. He thought that the war would be good for the people of Italy. This idea was different from the socialist party who were against the war. He parted ways with the socialist party and joined the war where he fought until he was wounded in 1917.

In 1919, **Mussolini** started his own political party called the Fascist Party. He hoped to bring Italy back to the days of the Roman Empire when it ruled much of Europe. The members of the party wore black clothes and became known as the "Black Shirts." They were often violent and didn't hesitate to attack those who had different views or opposed their party.

Fascism is a type of political ideology, like socialism or communism. **Fascism** is often defined as being a type of "authoritarian nationalism." This means that the government has all the power. The people living in the country should be devoted to supporting their government and country without question. **Fascist** governments are usually ruled by a single strong leader or dictator.

The **Fascist** Party became popular with the people of Italy and **Mussolini** began to grow in power. In 1922, **Mussolini** and 30,000 Black Shirts marched to Rome and took control of the government. By 1925, **Mussolini** had total control of the government and was established as dictator. He became known as "Il Duce", which means "the leader."

Once in control of the government, **Mussolini** looked to build up Italy's military strength. In 1936, Italy invaded and conquered Ethiopia. **Mussolini** thought that this was only the beginning. He felt that Italy would soon rule much of Europe. He also allied himself with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany in an alliance called the "Pact of Steel."

In 1940, Italy entered World War II as an ally of Germany and declared war on the Allies. However, Italy was not prepared for such a large war. Early victories became defeats as the Italian army became spread out across a number of fronts. Soon the Italian people wanted out of the war.

In 1943, **Mussolini** was removed from power and put in prison. However, German soldiers were able to break him free and Hitler put **Mussolini** in charge of Northern Italy, which was controlled by Germany at the time. By 1945, the Allies had taken over all of Italy and **Mussolini** fled for his life.

As **Mussolini** tried to escape from the advancing Allied forces, he was captured by Italian soldiers. On April 28, 1945 they executed **Mussolini** and hung his body upside down at a gas station for all the world to see.

After World War I, Italian nationalists were outraged when Italy received just some of the territories promised by the Allies. Chaos ensued as peasants seized land, workers went on strike, veterans faced unemployment, trade declined, and taxes rose. The government could not end the crisis. Into this turmoil stepped **Benito Mussolini**, the organizer of the **Fascist** party. **Mussolini's** supporters, the Black Shirts, rejected democratic methods and favored violence for solving problems. In the 1922 March on Rome, tens of thousands of **Fascists** swarmed the capital. Fearing civil war, the king asked **Mussolini** to form a government as prime minister.

Mussolini soon suppressed rival parties, muzzled the press, rigged elections, and replaced elected officials with Fascists. Critics were thrown into prison, forced into exile, or murdered. Secret police and propaganda (any technique that attempts to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of a group in order to benefit the sponsor) bolstered the regime. In 1929, **Mussolini** also received support from the pope. **Mussolini** brought the economy under state control, but basically preserved capitalism. His system favored the upper class and industry leaders. Workers were not allowed to strike and their wages were kept low. In **Mussolini's** new system, loyalty to the state replaced conflicting individual goals. "Believe! Obey! Fight!" loudspeakers blared and posters proclaimed.

Mussolini built the first modern **totalitarian** state. In this form of government, a one-party dictatorship attempts to control every aspect of the lives of its citizens. Today, we usually use the term **fascism** to describe the underlying ideology of any centralized, authoritarian government that is not communist. **Fascism** is rooted in extreme nationalism. **Fascists** believe in action, violence, discipline, and blind loyalty to the state. They praise warfare. They are anti-democratic, rejecting equality and liberty. **Fascists** opposed communists on important issues. Communists favor international action and the creation of a classless society. **Fascists** are nationalists who support a society with defined classes. Both base their power on blind devotion to a leader or the state. Both flourish during economic hard times. **Fascism** appealed to Italians because it restored national pride, provided stability, and ended the political feuding that had paralyzed democracy in Italy. Known as el Duce ("El Doo-chay," the Leader), **Mussolini** wanted to establish the greatness of Italy and create an empire. In order to do this, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1936. The Italians, fighting with modern weapons against poorly equipped Ethiopians, conquered this African nation that same year.

ON A SEPARATE SHEET OF PAPER:

1. In detail, describe what fascism is?
2. Who was the Fascist leader of Italy that created the first totalitarian state?
3. What was the result of the March on Rome?
4. What is propaganda? Along with propaganda, what was used to bolster the fascist regime?
5. What was the slogan the Fascists used to promote loyalty to the state?
6. Describe the characteristics of a totalitarian state.
7. How are Fascism and Communism similar? How are they different?
8. Why did Fascism appeal to Italians?
9. What did Mussolini do to expand the Italian empire?