

Benito Mussolini Profile

Teacher Created Materials, Inc. World War II.

Benito Mussolini's mother was a village schoolteacher, and his father was a blacksmith. As a young man, Mussolini was a socialist leader and a radical newspaper editor. He was outspoken in his opinion that Italy should enter World War I on the side of the Allies, contrary to the position taken by the Socialists, and for this he was expelled from the party. Mussolini fought in the war and was wounded. In 1919, he organized bitter war veterans like himself into a political group called *Fascists*, an Italian word for "union of forces." Mussolini and his Fascist Party were revolutionaries, determined to create a state in which one party and one leader have complete power.

The Italians had not been happy with the Treaty of Versailles that ended the First World War. They had left 500,000 dead on the battlefields, and they felt cheated when their territorial demands for Fiume, Dalmatia, and other areas were rejected at the peace table. Italy had fought on the side of the Allies, and Italy's nationalists felt they had done it all for nothing. During the war, the Italian government promised higher wages for workers and land reform for peasants, but these promises were never kept. The angered and humiliated masses were eager recruits for fascist ranks.

Prior to the First World War, Italy was a liberal nation working its way gradually towards democracy, faced with immense and serious problems. Most of the Italian population was poor. There were sharp class differences in Italian society, and they were extreme and highly visible. Most of the peasants were loyal, attached to their villages and local communities, and these interests far outweighed their feelings of loyalty to the national state. With the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 to encourage their actions, radical workers began to seize factories, and angry peasants began to take over large estates in 1920, frightening property owners. The Italian middle class was also in an ugly mood, having suffered from the inflation of the war years. By 1922, groups at all levels of Italian society were in opposition to the liberal parliamentary government.

Benito Mussolini was a skillful politician and a magnetic speaker. Mussolini blustered and bullied his opponents, and his grandiose posturing won him a large following and support throughout Italy. His followers were organized into political units of Black Shirts, who carried the political struggle into the streets of villages, towns, and cities and intimidated their opponents by cracking heads, breaking bones, and committing random murder. Mussolini's program consisted of radical nationalism and socialism calling for Italy's territorial expansion, increased benefits for workers, and the equitable distribution of land to the peasantry. He was determined to be his own man and not a puppet of the capitalists and conservative politicians. Mussolini's fascist followers were convinced that their moment was more than just a battle against the "Reds," the hovering threat of communism being exported by the Soviet Union, but rather a revolution of their own making. They believed that they were creating a "New Order," bringing about needed change and helping the little people. The fascists were determined to destroy the liberal parliamentary system that they considered weak and ineffective. In October of 1922, Mussolini's fascist Black Shirts staged the famous "March on Rome." Intimidated and fearing bloodshed, Victor Emmanuel III, the king, called on Mussolini to form a cabinet and a new government.

Widespread violence throughout the country and the threat of a possible armed uprising brought Mussolini to power “legally.” The king and parliament gave Benito Mussolini dictatorial powers for one year. It became a power he would wield for more than two decades. In 1924, Mussolini declared his intention to make Italy a fascist nation. He imposed repressive measures that made his power total. His fascist government abolished the free press throughout Italy’s schools. Mussolini’s slogan for Italy in 1926 was “Everything in the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state.” As the year came to an end, fascism was firmly entrenched in Italy, with Mussolini creating a fascist youth movement, fascist labor unions, and scores of other fascist organizations. Italy was a one-party dictatorship with Benito Mussolini as *Il Duce* (The Leader), with unquestioned power and authority throughout the nation.

But Italy never became “totalitarian” in any true sense of the term. For all the posing, saluting, and speeches on balconies to the masses below, much of fascism was just “show.” The old power structure remained in place even after Mussolini came to power. The fascists left business and industry alone to make profits and operate as they pleased. Mussolini never moved against, purged, or threatened conservative elements that controlled the economy, the army, and the state. There was never a serious attempt to bring about land reform. Mussolini and his fascist never sought to rid Italy of old social classes and power elites. He came to an agreement with the Catholic Church and recognized the Vatican as an independent state. Italians were urged by the Pope to support Mussolini’s government.

Fascists Italy had the appearance of a totalitarian power but lacked the substance. While Mussolini boasted about his new army of “ten million bayonets,” the industrial base, modern technology, new tanks, and weapons were all lacking. He sought to create a modern Roman Empire, referring to the Mediterranean Sea as *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea), but Italy was not up to the task. In 1935, Mussolini conquered Ethiopia and, in 1939, the small kingdom of Albania. But his partnership with Adolf Hitler was fatal. In 1940, after Mussolini declared war against France and England, the British successfully attacked and disabled most of the Italian navy at Taranto, at the heel of Italy. Within six months of advancing into Egypt in 1940, the Italians were driven back, losing 500,000 men. Hitler and the Germans had to come to the rescue. In 1941, when Mussolini attacked Greece, his army was soundly beaten and forced to retreat into Albania. Again, Hitler came to his aid. The Italians never had their hearts in the war, and when Sicily was invaded by the Allies, the Fascist Council ousted Mussolini, and the new government quickly made peace with the Allies.

Mussolini did not persecute Jews; that came about later in the war when the Germans occupied Italy. Compared to Hitler, it would be extreme to say that Mussolini operated a ruthless and brutal police state. Nevertheless, from 1926 through 1944, 23 political prisoners received the death sentence and were executed. Mussolini, like all other dictators during the twentieth century, hated liberalism, and he destroyed it in Italy. He was a showman who loved to posture and pose wherever it was convenient, stirring up the crowds, making speeches, working in the fields with the peasants, or strutting with his troops on the parade grounds. The great leader staged mass meetings, parades, and pompous displays for his fanatic followers; he even copied Hitler’s aggressive foreign policy. Yet, Mussolini’s Italy, while undemocratic, was never fully a totalitarian state and fell far short of being as brutally repressive as Hitler’s Germany.