

The Success and Collapse of Italian Fascism by Its Own Hands

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Introduction

The twentieth century is one often associated with some of the worst political woes of mankind. Names like Hitler and Stalin take up whole chapters in history books, as do Pol Pot, Mao, Che Guevara, Castro, and Ho Chi Minh. Even among the worst of the regimes of the Second World War, Fascist Italy and Mussolini are often seen as the least radical, the least capable, and the nation that posed the smallest threat to the Western free world. Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Party had been in control nearly as long as the Russian Communists and far longer than Hitler's Nazis. So what made Fascist Italy the weakest and least imposing of the political religions during the Second World War even though it was one based on the ideals of war and victory? This paper examines several key issues that seemed to stunt the growth of Italian power in Europe, even if it was meant to solidify Fascism. Contradictions between Mussolini's speeches and actual policy, the failure to re-birth the militaristic Roman Empire, and the issues associated with creating a revolution in 1919 to 1922 and keeping it alive into the 1940's all played a role in the weakening and eventual death of the war and victory-centered Italian Fascist State.

War as an Ideal

Italian Fascism as a political religion was born with Benito Mussolini in the cold and mountainous trenches of the Great War. The brotherhood of units in those miserable conditions were the beginning of political groups from socialists to Catholics to the fascists. Mussolini believed that out of the end of the war would come a "new aristocracy" with a political voice that

anyone not in the war could understand.¹ As the war eventually came to end and 1919 began, millions of this “new aristocracy” returned to Italy and many of them, including Mussolini, felt that their sacrifices must have meant something. In 1919 Italy, the meaning of the war was not obviously known. Italy had not gained all that much and now millions were destitute and the political and economic structures of the country were in shambles. It was in this vacuum of despair that Mussolini and the early Fascists, mostly ex-soldiers and students, began to spread the word of an united Italy. As every other political group shouted for peace, Mussolini wrote in 1919 that “Our position is different in spirit, because it is based on the war and the victory”.² The war was to be continued at home, but the enemies were to be domestic and the ones that had brought Italy into the war and made their sons killers. The recently formed Confederation of Italian Industry had become a symbol for the bureaucratic war machine and all that was wrong with industrial warfare in Italy.³ This militancy would be a key theme in both the rise and fall of Italian Fascism. Mussolini would become known for his Caesarean stance in Italian politics as he gave speeches and reviewed Fascist troops on beautiful white horses or from a turret of Italian-made tanks.

Mussolini and the other Fascists were mostly anchored in the northern section of Italy, closest to the fighting front during the war. Rome was seen as the main center for the industrial, war-mongering politicians and the city itself was seen as a parasite and beggar of the other

¹ Marla Stone, *The Fascist Revolution in Italy: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin’s Publishing, 2013), 36.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

³ Roland Sarti, “Fascism and the Industrial Leadership in Italy before the March on Rome,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 21 (1968): 401.

provinces of Italy.⁴ As the Fascists began to take control of Northern governments, political and economic strife was ramping up, Mussolini struck. In October of 1922, around a hundred thousand armed Fascists, the Blackshirts, entered the city and forced the hand of the king and the prime minister to give the government over to a new cabinet with Fascists in control.⁵ Their victory was now assured, the war now had meaning, and Italy was Fascist. However this did not mean that the Fascist ideal of the war was over. In fact, Italy and the Italian people were reborn and it was Fascism that had redeemed them all, according to the *Fascist Anthem*.⁶ “The Italians are remade, Mussolini has remade them for tomorrow’s war”.

The relationship between Mussolini and the Industrial Regime in Italy remained tricky at best. After the March on Rome and Fascist power had been solidified, the Confederation of Italian Industry wrote an enthusiastic endorsement of the movement that praised “the youthful energies of the nation and is dominated by the Will of the Leader”. They also stated that Mussolini was the only one to attempt to fix the nation’s economic and financial problems.⁷ The endorsement was a painful attempt at making amends with the Fascists, many of whom still saw the Industrialists as the main enemy of Italy. After all, the endorsement never mentioned the Fascist Party or Mussolini by name. The relationship between the two groups remained stressed as in public the Confederation of Industrialists backed the Fascist Party for their “support” of property rights and the right to work of the people. Of course, most of this was not true or would be reversed by the 1930’s. Mussolini kept the other Fascists at bay and didn’t often touch the

⁴ Stephanie Zeier Pilat. “La Parola Al Piccone: Demonstrations of Fascism at the Imperial Fora and the Mausoleum of Augustus,” in *Political Landscapes of Capital Cities*, ed. Jessica Joyce Christie et al. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 319.

⁵ William Ebenstein, *Fascist Italy* (New York: American Book Company, 1939), 30-31.

⁶ Stone, *Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 68-69.

⁷ Sarti, “Fascism and the Industrial Leadership”. 417.

Industrial Confederation in order to keep them on his side, as they would be needed for ensuring the next war would be an industrial war. It seems that some of the Industrialists may have even grown a devotion to Mussolini for protecting them and giving them business. Industrialist Giovanni Agnelli even stated “We industrialists are government-minded by definition”.⁸

Progressive War Within The State

Now that Mussolini was in power, where were the Fascists to turn with the defeat of the war-mongering government? The answer was to Italy itself. The new war was to be a progressive one within Italy to ready the nation for conflict and modernity. Official Fascist theorist Giovanni Gentile stated that this new Italy would be a “People’s State” and a “democratic State par excellence”.⁹ Warfare on the wrongs of society within Italy would be the only way to continue the victory of the party. Intellectually, the newly appointed “Il Duce” was purifying the nation of anti-Fascist lawyers, professors, doctors, and the seizing the property of Italians fleeing in the wake of the March on Rome.¹⁰ The social and economic issues that plagued the people of Italy were also not conducive to the Fascists ongoing victory. Education programs to boost literacy, restrictions outlawing contraception and women suffrage, a tax imposed on bachelors, and policies confiscating unused agricultural and industrial land were all put into place in order to ready Italy for what was to eventually come.¹¹ The Fascists tried to gain power through all of these and other actions. Ironically, Gentile’s Fascist people’s state and democracy seemed like an illusion as Italy entered into the 1930’s.

⁸ Ibid., 418.

⁹ Ebenstein, *Fascist Italy*, 55.

¹⁰ Walter Consuelo Langsam & Otis Mitchell, *The World Since 1919* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 92.

¹¹ Ibid., 95-96.

Population was a huge issue for Mussolini. He needed bodies to continue his revolution. He stated in 1934 that Italy needed 60 million people by 1940 (a number only gained in recent years) and that “The military power of the state is closely tied up with that of the population problem”.¹² A population explosion was required in a nation with very limited resources, agricultural and industrial land reclamation could only do so much. Mussolini was painfully aware of the lack of ability within Italy to wage his war when he stated “without quantity there can be no quality”.¹³ Emigration was severely restricted in order to keep Italians within the borders. The age of marriage was lowered severely in order to promote more births and more soldiers for Mussolini’s and the Fascist’s cause. Ironically, Fascism would be one of the worst things for Italian population growth, which would see a steady decline into the 1920’s and 1930’s. Fifteen years of Fascist rule would see the same numbers of population decline in Italy as the last fifty had taken. This would have a major impact as Mussolini came closer to moving his progressive war at home to actual combat abroad.¹⁴

The contradictions and militaristic fever of Fascist Italy only become stronger in the decade that saw mass unemployment and financial turmoil in most of the Western world. Tensions with the Catholic Church had always been long standing. It of course did not help that Mussolini had stated that Fascism was to be the new religion of Italy. In the 1932 *Social and Political Doctrine of Fascism*, Gentile wrote that “Fascism is a religious conception” and that the political body was a spiritual and religious one.¹⁵ An agreement of sorts was reached the Catholic and Fascist states, in that neither could truly exist in Italy without the other. The role of picking new bishops and

¹² Ebenstein, *Fascist Italy*, 127.

¹³ Langsam & Mitchell, *The World Since 1919*, 100.

¹⁴ Ebenstein, *Fascist Italy*, 132.

¹⁵ Stone, *Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 78.

archbishops was still with the Holy See, but every new candidate had to be checked for proper political views. By 1929, three pacts constituting the Lateran Pacts were signed between the Fascists and Pope Pius XI.¹⁶ Even though Catholicism seemed an obvious threat, Both Gentile and Mussolini came to the conclusion that religion involved in the education of the Italian youth was better than none at all. Catholic teaching and iconography had been banned from education since 1908. Gentile went through with reintroducing compulsory religion in all schools, even Mussolini oddly considered this action “the most Fascist of all the reforms of the New Government”.¹⁷ Catholic Education was meant to a stepping stone into strong philosophical and moral backbone for their life in Fascist society. The Fascists and Gentile, in particular, had an odd explanation for the allowance of Catholic teachings in a nation where Il Duce openly denounced and criticized the Catholic church. Gentile stated that the system was the most secular education that Italy had seen, as all the teachers were secular Fascists, who still were picked and hired by the Fascist state.¹⁸ Solidifying another doctrine of Fascism that in practice could not be pulled off.

Another major contradiction in Italian Fascism would end up causing unrest in Southern Italy and Sicily and even helping the Allies as they reached Europe in 1943. These portions of Italy had long been riddled by the influence of the Italian Mafia, the *Mafiosi*, and was a prime target in Mussolini’s early speeches to gain support south of Rome.¹⁹ Eradication of the *Mafia* in Italy would be much easier on paper than in reality. On the local level, regional Fascist leaders often had an intimate relationship with the *Mafiosi*, as they were centers of powers in an area where

¹⁶ Langsam & Mitchell, *The World Since 1919*, 98.

¹⁷ Anthony Scarangelo, “Church and State in Italian Education,” *Comparative Education Review* 5 (1962) 203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁹ Theodoros Rakopoulos. "Cooperatives and the Historical Anti-mafia Movement." *From Clans to Co-ops: Confiscated Mafia Land in Sicily* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018) 67.

Fascist control was minimal. They both also had a common enemy in the socialists and unionists that had tried to gather local workers against the Fascists and the land owners associated with the *Mafia*. Thus by the end of the 1930's it was not uncommon to see local Blackshirts and *Mafiosi* goons disbanding the meetings of top socialists in Southern Italy.²⁰ By the time of the Allied Invasion of Sicily and Southern Italy in 1943, the *Mafiosi* sensed the winds of change and supplied information to the American and British commands and helped in the massive defeat of the German and Italian armies in Italy.

Bringing War Abroad

As Ernest Nolte wrote, "Every totalitarian dictatorship must be founded on some necessary, incontestable factor...".²¹ For Fascism, this factor had always been war. The movement had been founded by ex-soldiers under the guise of "class warfare" in Northern Italy. By the mid-1930's, Mussolini's politicians and the industrialists had been brought closer, not expelled, from the party, most of the progressive domestic policies had been put in place, and the only place the war could go was across the Mediterranean Sea. Africa seemed to be the easy target to expand living and farming land for the "growing" population of Italy. Abyssinia, modern-day Ethiopia, was the obvious cultural and historic first-step in Italy's road to Imperialism. In 1896, when Mussolini was only 13, the Italian Army was badly defeated in an early attempt to colonize the area.²² So in 1935, Italian troops began to move on Ethiopia. The Fascist government clearly laid out the reasons for the invasion: more room and resources, revenge for 1896, civilizing Africa for future Fascism, and a severe lack of colonies given to

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

²¹ Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Francaise, Italian Fascism, National Socialism* (Munich: R. Piper & Co, 1966), 222.

²² Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini: A Study in Power* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc, 1964), 304.

Italy after the 1919 peace agreements.²³ Mussolini and higher Fascist military leaders were so excited for the new campaign and to show both Italians and the world community that Italy was a force to reckon with that they pushed for the time tables and energetically hit the fast forward button on the invasion.²⁴ This of course, would have huge implications for the Italian army and Blackshirt²⁵ divisions that were already under-manned and under-equipped. Even with these setbacks in getting to Africa, the Fascist Army was able to conquer Ethiopia, a nation without a single fighter airplane. However, the conquest and colonization of Africa, the embodiment of the Fascist war that had been spouted since 1919, would end up hitting the dominoes that would lead to the further contradiction and failure of the Fascist State.

The idea of an actual war and conquest in the name of Italy had stirred the people into a frenzy in 1935 and 1936. The long awaited and revered “New Italian Empire”, modeled on Ancient Rome with Mussolini as Caesar, seemed to be on the horizon. In the aftermath of the conquest of Ethiopia, Mussolini would appear to crowds rhythmically crying out “Duce, Duce, Duce”. They were celebrating the man himself, but also the triumph of Italy itself.²⁶ Ethiopia would not be enough for the people of Italy either. By 1938, the battle cry of Fascist Deputies and the people in the streets alike was for “Tunisia! Tunisia!”.²⁷ It now seemed impossible for Italy or Mussolini to stop the locomotive that had been started with the invasion of Ethiopia. The nation bred on war and triumph and struggle needed more and Mussolini knew his state of power

²³ Langsam & Mitchell, *The World Since 1919*, 103.

²⁴ Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, 309.

²⁵ Similar to elite German Waffen SS Units.

²⁶ Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, 332.

²⁷ Langsam & Mitchell, *The World Since 1919*, 105.

would require more and more conquest, but he still had serious doubts about the ability of Italian industry, agriculture, and the people itself to keep sustained warfare going.²⁸

By the late 1930's, the Fascists and the Italian people were not the only ones in Europe hungry for war. Civil warfare was ravaging Spain and Adolf Hitler in Germany was in the endgame of his decade long rearmament program to de-neuter the German economy and military. Military aid from both Hitler and Mussolini was flowing into Spain in order to support Franco's Fascist attempts at an overthrow. Italy did begin to fear, or at least resent, the moves being made by Germany so close to Italy's borders. Austria and Czechoslovakia were being annexed easily by Germany, but Italy was still having to fight wars in Africa to gain any land or power. So Albania was added to the "Italian Empire" in 1939 with very little bloodshed to the cheers and cry of crowds across the Italian Peninsula. Even this was overshadowed as on March 30, 1939, Franco's forces were able to capture Valencia and solidify their power in Spain. Every building in Italy was be-flagged and crowds poured into the streets to celebrate Il Duce and another victory for National Fascism.²⁹ Despite these victories and the high morale of crowds across Italy, Mussolini and the Fascists were slowly being overshadowed by the progress and tenacity of the German Nazi Reich. In 1939, the pact that would bind Italy and Germany together was signed by diplomats from both countries including Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano who would become a major player in the Fascist government and aid to Mussolini in the final years of the Italian experiment. Many historians have seen the "Pact of Steel" as a Hitler's noose that Mussolini willfully placed around his own neck.³⁰

An Addiction to War and Victory

²⁸ Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, 222.

²⁹ Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, 395.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 404

The Fascists and Mussolini had sustained wide popular support for much of the victories of 1935-1939. The pact of Germany was not seen as one of the victories in the eyes of the Italian people. Indeed, Ciano wrote that many outside of close Fascists circles hated the alliance including the King of Italy, still nominally in power.³¹ By 1940, The German war machine was in full effect, something the Italian people and Mussolini were sure to wonder at how Germany, not their own state, had accomplished. Hitler kept pushing Mussolini to enter the war in a more full way and take on the Western Allies. According to Ciano, Mussolini was convinced of the unpreparedness of his armed forces to fight the West and possibly Russia.³² The Italians even continued to sell military equipment to France and Great Britain during this period. Mussolini had been convinced by the Industrial Confederation that these products needed to be sold in order for resources and money to flow back into the Italian economy in preparation for war.³³ Some war would have to be conducted and soon. The population of Italy was still restless over the pact with Germany and had not seen some military victory since the invasion of Albania. So in September and October 1940, the Italian Army would move against British-controlled Egypt and Greece. Both seemed to be the war and victory that Italy had been waiting for some time. Egypt and Greece had once been crown jewels in the Roman Empire and no doubt Mussolini wanted to add them to his. According to Ciano, Il Duce was incredibly excited over the prospect of “a success which affords her [Italy] the glory she has sought in vain for three centuries”.³⁴ So high was Italian morale that Mussolini even declined an offer from Hitler for the use of

³¹ Ibid., 406

³² Galeazzo Ciano, ed. Hugh Gibson, *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943: The Complete, Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1936-1943* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1946), 194.

³³ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943*, 195.

³⁴ Ibid., 297.

specialized German units in the fight in Africa.³⁵ By November 1940, Italian Fascism and Mussolini seemed to be riding high on the promises of glorious war and triumph for Italy. However within a year all that would be crumbling away because of Fascist history and policy since 1919.

By December 1940 and early 1941, the Italian military experiments in the Balkans and Africa were beginning to fail. “Why was this” asked millions of Italians, including Mussolini, as they had only a few years ago conquered Ethiopia and Albania and helped to pacify Spain. “Morale at home in Italy and the prestige of the regime had reached its lowest point.”³⁶ The Italian military was not able to stand up to the British in Egypt and to the Allied-backed army in Greece, like they had against the Albanians and Ethiopians, without serious intervention from the Germans. Ciano even notes that Mussolini had accepted a definitive change in the way Italy was conducting its wars from the Great War to the March on Rome to now. “I must nevertheless recognize that the Italians of 1914 were better than these” Mussolini would privately admit in December 1940.³⁷

In 1942, a new *Decalogue of the Fascist Militiaman* to keep Italian soldiers conscious of what they were fighting for was introduced. The tenet of these new Fascist ten commandments were to “Remember that those who have fallen for the Revolution and for the Empire precede your columns”.³⁸ However, the Fascist Revolution had been twenty years ago and many of the soldiers now fighting in Greece, Africa, and the Balkans were not even born when Il Duce and his hundred thousand strong force of Blackshirts marched on Rome. It was these men, whose zeal

³⁵ Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, 475.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 487.

³⁷ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943*, 326-327.

³⁸ Stone, *Fascist Revolution in Italy*, 92.

for the cause had been the highest in 1919 to 1922. However those Blackshirts were now in their forties and fifties and were no longer the men fighting in the trenches. The young German men fighting across Europe had been young boys and teenagers when Hitler came to power and had seen the leaps and bounds that their country had made since 1933, but the twenty-something year olds in the Italian Army had only known the Fascist regime they were fighting for and had nothing worse to compare their experiences. The weakened Italian birth rates, despite all the Fascist policies, had not helped either. Italy would not have the manpower to continue the path of cyclical Fascist war and victory.

Italy would not survive the Second World War. That much was obvious even to Mussolini, who in 1942 stated that Italy had become a confederated province of Germany, and to attempt rebellion would have the peninsula only become a colony of Hitler's war machine.³⁹ Despite years of grooming by Mussolini for a war, the Industrial Confederation failed. The planes and equipment they had sold to Britain in France in 1940 were now defeating the Italian Army in Africa. They were also not able to produce the needed materials for sustained warfare now beginning in Russia, as well as in Africa. Germany had completely surpassed Italy in the eyes of everyone, including Italians, as the true beacon of Fascist war and victory. Mussolini's and the Italian's resentment for the Germans rose by the day in the early 1943. Ciano remarked that Il Duce openly cheered for the failures of German troops in Russia and Stalingrad and German and Italian troops nearly killed each other in Greece.⁴⁰ It seemed that the enemy of Italy was shifting towards Hitler and the German Army instead of attempts to recreate an Italian Empire. Perhaps this would explain the sudden collapse of the Italian Army as the Americans and British landed

³⁹ Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini*, 487.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 503.

on their shores in 1943 and the resistance that would spring up in Italy from normal citizens and the *Mafigiosi* as the German Army occupied the northern peninsula.

Conclusion

In the end, it would be Fascism's own goals of war and victory that would be its own undoing. From 1919, Mussolini would wage war against the Industrial Confederation and their internal Italian enemies, then they would seek to wage war against the social and political woes of Italy, and finally wage actual wars in Africa and Europe. All of which would seem successful in their first iterations, but would end all being failures. Perhaps this is why Italian Fascism has become something of a joke when it comes to the dictatorships and the political religions of the twentieth century. The "Italian Tragedy", as Ciano called it, was ruined the day it signed pacts to go to war in Africa and Europe with Germany.⁴¹ War was to be the birth and the downfall of Fascism and Italy. Its obsession, the one thing that it had been built on since Mussolini's and Gentile's earliest writings, were to become the one thing that killed the Fascist Regime in Italy.

⁴¹ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943*, 581.

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