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The Struggle for dominance within the fascist government of Italy

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**THE STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE WITHIN
THE FASCIST GOVERNMENT OF ITALY**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Pietro Costa

May 2002

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ABSTRACT

THE STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE WITHIN THE FASCIST GOVERNMENT OF ITALY

By Pietro Costa

This thesis demonstrates that Fascist Italy's positions on such areas as economic and foreign policy resulted from a struggle between several forces within the Fascist Party. Research shows that there were three main groups in the party competing for the support of its leader Benito Mussolini in helping to shape Fascist policy. These forces, syndicalists, nationalists, and conservatives, engaged in a constant struggle for dominance of the Fascist Party. The role these forces played inside Fascism determined which policies the totalitarian regime adopted. This thesis will demonstrate that Fascism was a revolutionary movement, which was, on a frequent basis, prevented from carrying out its program by a conservative faction working within Fascism. The research also indicates that Benito Mussolini, a radical force within Fascism, at times was forced to compromise by the powerful conservatives.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of Purpose

The First Amendment, guaranteeing the freedom of speech, stands as the most important symbol of American freedom, especially for the writer. No other nation so strongly protects this right. The few constraints placed on it, while unfortunate, are not very limiting in scope. Individuals may state their opinions on any topic, political or otherwise, without fearing that the government will arrest them. The strength of our democracy lies not simply in the fact that the Constitution protects free speech, but that, as a culture, we are usually tolerant of diverse opinions. Individuals' opinions might be countered or disputed but, for the most part, they may be expressed.

Some people today argue that free speech should be limited when it is harmful to others. "Hate speech" is a term used to describe extremists' spoken words and literature that espouse inflammatory beliefs. This attempt to limit free speech, however, could turn out to do serious damage to this most important right of any free society. Any time society limits free speech, the specter of censorship and political oppression increases. It must be remembered that the Founding Fathers did not draft the First Amendment to protect the mainstream. Rather, it was specifically aimed at securing a voice to the voiceless. The First Amendment's main purpose is to protect extremists and people who do not belong to the ruling parties or dominant classes. If the right of those individuals to express their views is limited the actual purpose of the First Amendment will be destroyed. As a result, democracy itself becomes threatened.

This emphasis on the right to free speech relates directly to the selection of Fascism as the topic for this thesis. Fifty years after the end of Fascism, many people still have strong emotions on the subject. Research regarding Fascism must, from the start, condemn it, or it will be viewed with suspicion. Ironically, some of the suspicion and criticism directed against “Fascist sympathizers” originates from the very people who, only a few years ago, themselves were coming under severe criticism for their views on such issues as free speech and the Vietnam War. For example, during the 1960s, protesters often were labeled as communists and anti-American for questioning government policies in Vietnam. Today, however, many of the same people who protested against the Vietnam War would support government action to investigate and limit the freedom of so-called “hate speech” advocates or people who might disagree with some aspects of the war against terrorism.

The motivation for choosing this topic originates from Italian Fascism’s personal impact on my own family. In the 1930s, when Benito Mussolini was at the height of his prestige and power, my parents, Rosa and Salvatore Costa, lived through and experienced Fascism first-hand. My parents came from lower middle-class families without any direct connection to the regime. They were, however, intensely touched by it. At school, my mother belonged to the Fascist youth organization, the Balilla. It was an involvement that she still believes was one of the happiest times in her life. Her emotional reaction to the Balilla, a government program, is one that forty years of living under democracy could never equal.

For a young Italian girl, usually fated to remain in the confines of the home, being a member of an outside organization was an achievement in itself. As a Balilla youth leader, she led marches while singing patriotic songs through the streets of Romagnolo. She wore sharp uniforms and shared in the camaraderie and sense of purpose of the group. The feeling of power and belonging that she experienced was something unheard of for girls and women in the conservative Catholic country. Through the Balilla, she even had the chance to meet Mussolini. For a young girl, who had been taught to believe that Mussolini was a great man, this experience was mesmerizing. The regime's cultivation of Mussolini's image led many children, including my mother, to a god-like worship of the Fascist leader. Some of the children were encouraged to profess openly that they would prefer for their own father to die rather than Mussolini. My mother, who dearly loved her father, did not go that far, but Mussolini's impact on her, as well as millions of Italians, was deep. In the late 1930s, as Mussolini's Italy gained the respect of the world, my mother's pride in being Italian grew stronger.

My father's involvement with Fascism was minimal before World War II. It consisted of regular visits to the local *Casa del Popolo*, a place where workers could meet to read, listen to the radio, or play cards. This greatly appreciated leisure activity provided by the Fascist government instilled in the workers an appreciation for Fascism. The *Casa del Popolo* was part of the Fascist regime's campaign of reaching the masses. Italy's entry into the war, however, made the greatest impression on my father.

At the beginning of World War II, my father was drafted into the army, and by the time Italy entered the war, he was taking part in the early campaigns. In June 1940, he

took part in the invasion of France. Later that year, he was involved in the campaigns to spread Italy's domination into the Balkans. While he remained loyal to Mussolini, whom he believed was acting on Italy's behalf, he witnessed the realities and inadequacies of Fascism. Because he lacked proper uniforms and clothing, sound weaponry, and good leadership, his experience as a soldier turned out to be full of hardships and bitterness. Up until his recent death, he maintained that the average soldier suffered the worst consequences because of the treachery and betrayals committed by military commanders. In fact, mounting evidence indicates that many acts of treason were committed, resulting in compromise and defeat during many campaigns of the war. Despite all the frustrations and suffering, including injuries suffered in Albania, my father rarely blamed Mussolini for Italy's failures. He accepted Mussolini's explanation of the need to enter the war or miss out on history. Mussolini's entry into World War II, as will be shown in the research, resulted primarily from his belief that Italy would not gain its share of the spoils of war as had happened after the First World War. My father accepted Mussolini's arguments. My father also believed, however, that, had Mussolini kept Italy out of war, Fascism would have continued on the path to economic progress and national power. Respect for Mussolini was not limited to humble infantrymen like my father. Indeed, the record shows that even Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had great respect for Mussolini until he became Hitler's subservient ally in the war.¹

These views of Fascism, as expressed by mother and father, provide in many ways a snapshot of the average Italian's dealings with the regime. Some witnessed the pageantry, populism, and advances of Fascism, while others experienced some of the

failings and dark sides of Fascism. My parents' memories of Fascism greatly influenced my understanding of Fascism. Had I not experienced their views, I might not have developed the complex understanding of the Fascist era that is atypical from the average American's more simplistic understanding of the regime. As an historian, I found myself faced with the problem of reconciling my parents' views with those commonly expressed by researchers who presented a quite different picture. I chose this topic in an attempt to understand why such a wide discrepancy exists between the memories of two people who lived under Fascism and the conclusions reached by some scholars and historians of Fascism who, while very knowledgeable of the facts, lacked the perspective of actually having lived through the period. Furthermore, I believe in order to undertake proper analysis of a revolutionary period, such as the one Italy experienced in the 1920s and 1930s, that it is important that people's emotions and passions, not just cold facts, be part of the research. For my parents, it was not so much what Fascism did for them that still resonated in their hearts fifty years after Fascism ended; rather, it was the sense of meaning that Fascism gave to them that makes their memories so strong.

Fascism had great success with the masses because of its ability to make them dream of greatness and glory through self-identification with Mussolini, Fascism, and Italy. In the hedonistic and liberal democratic age in which we live, it is very difficult to understand how an average person could have such powerful feelings for a leader or for his country. Yet millions of common people had these feelings, and many of them sacrificed much for the sake of the nation. Their dreams, personal aspirations, and sense of meaning were tied to the success of the nation. In most societies and in most eras, the

peasant, the worker, and the small merchant dare not dream of personal glory. They must be content to watch the powerful around them concern themselves with such endeavors. In the Fascist era, insignificant Italians dared to dream such dreams. It is this emotional pull that made the Fascist period such a dominant experience in the lives of so many Italians. And it is for this reason that the Fascist era must be studied for more than just its economic system, or for its leader's demagogic rule. While all of these aspects form part of the overall interpretation, in the case of Fascism, we must also take into account the goals and the philosophy of Fascism, not just what Fascism achieved. With regard to the concept of Italian Fascism, words matter just as much as reality. I undertook this research, then, to analyze both the aims as well as the deeds of Fascism, and we will, therefore, examine why many Italians, such as my parents, believed and still believe that Mussolini was true to his stated beliefs, while many scholars say that he was only a lackey for powerful Italians.

Having stated my motivation in writing this paper, I can now state its purpose: to show that Mussolini was a genuine radical and that Fascism was a movement founded on extremist roots, but that over time conservative forces altered the party's course. To understand this issue better, this research will try to answer some important questions such as, how did *Confindustria*, a body of wealthy industrialists, successfully manipulate the radical syndicalist faction as well as Mussolini, and thereby compromise Fascism's economic goals? Why were extreme nationalists, who were pushing for an aggressive foreign policy, more successful in their sphere of interest than the syndicalists? Finally, who were the radical forces, and what were their goals?

Method

This investigation attempted to analyze some important primary and secondary sources on Fascism, in order to examine the main forces within the Fascist regime, discern the role they played in shaping its policies, and obtain a clear picture of Fascist doctrine and goals. While a major effort was made to use relatively recent sources, I included older sources that were too important to exclude. Thus, I used Fascist researchers such as Renzo De Felice, Alexander De Grand, and James Gregor, as they provided a great deal of invaluable analysis and detailed commentary on Fascism.

The research addressed several questions. How, for example, have historians' views of Fascism as a populist and mass-based dictatorship changed? As leader of Italy, was Benito Mussolini forced to temper his radical views and government policies in light of internal Fascist party factionalism and powerful conservative forces like the Church and the industrial class who resisted revolutionary change? What are the views of current historians such as Alexander De Grand and Franklin Hugh Adler on my argument that conservative forces played a major role in some key failures of Fascist economic and social policy? What are historians' opinions on the view that Mussolini was simply a self-serving demagogue and nothing more?

The first chapter of this research focuses on the origins of Fascism. The second chapter analyzes the programs of leftist-Fascism, represented mainly by the syndicalist faction and ex-Socialists who transformed themselves into nationalist-oriented leftists. Chapter Three looks at how Fascism attracted new groups that helped transform it into a

mass-based popular movement. These chapters aim at familiarizing the reader with the stated aims of nationalist and leftist forces inside the Fascist party.

The remaining chapters examine the following subjects: corporatism and the Fascist state's intervention in the economy; conservatives' attempts to engage, influence, and/or subvert Fascism; the powerful influence of nationalism and nationalist factions on Fascism as well as Mussolini; and war as the ultimate symbol of dominance by radical forces within Fascism. In addition, the argument put forth in this research - that the radical aims of Mussolini and extremist Fascist factions were frequently challenged by conservative forces - was compared with those of several historians. While some of my research focused on policies, my primary goal was to examine the theoretical aims of Fascism and study the impact that factionalism had on the movement. This strategy provided more insight on what an "unfettered" nationalist and leftist-syndicalist Fascist regime might have looked like. The thesis sought to show that Fascist Italy never had the opportunity to implement fully its leftist radical economic programs, because at every step, conservative forces inside and outside the regime opposed and prevented revolutionary Fascists from taking full control of the state apparatus and carrying out their radical plans.

Evidence is too compelling, however, to disregard the possibility that the Fascist regime, overall, was sympathetic to the radical syndicalist and nationalist aims. This problem will be discussed thoroughly by looking at the evidence from past and current research. Evidence also points to the theory that Fascism's leader, Benito Mussolini, was unwilling to take the steps necessary to impose these policies on Italy. Contrary to Hitler

or Stalin, Mussolini did not seek to implement the repressive and bloody acts necessary to wipe out the opposition and give himself the total power required to achieve the plans of radical Fascism. Such acts would have resulted in the deaths of countless opponents of the regime, and Mussolini was not prepared to do this.

The blame, then, for the failure of Fascism to carry out a radical program is difficult to ascertain, but my research and analysis point to a complex political and social structure that dispersed power among various groups within Italy and within the Fascist party. Furthermore, Mussolini, it seems, was too “mild” a dictator to do to Italy what Hitler and Stalin were willing to do to Germany and Russia. This “personal failure” to use all means necessary to gain total control guaranteed that the Fascist program of radicals, led by the syndicalists, would ultimately not achieve many of its economic and social goals. In areas where Mussolini asserted himself, however, such as in foreign policy, radicals, led by the nationalist forces, had much more success.

Historiography

The various works cited in this research present challenges in the process of trying to understand the forces within the Fascist movement in Italy. Some of the works were clearly objective, while others were not. Franklin Hugh Adler wrote one of the most important works cited in this thesis.² Adler’s research centered mainly on the powerful industrialists of Italian commerce. His work argued that the industrialists played a pivotal role in the development of Fascist economic policy. In addition, he stated that there were important revolutionary forces within Fascism struggling to take the regime on a radical course, even if that meant putting the movement on a collision

course against the powerful industrialists. The work solidly supports my thesis that the industrial class was a major impediment against the progress of radical Fascism.

Alexander De Grand wrote another major source used in this research. De Grand's book covered many areas of Fascism and, in contrast to Adler's book, was very opinionated. Furthermore, like many other books on Fascism, it was shallow in that it provided few details about Italian Fascism. Instead, it gave a sweeping overview of the subject. De Grand's study lacked any extensive analysis into questions posed in my thesis. What he did say tended to be less substantial and more opinionated. When, for example, he mentioned someone like Edmondo Rossoni, he said so with the aim of discrediting him by saying that his reason for being a Fascist was that he was either corrupt or politically motivated in some way.³ He seemed to feel that it was necessary to provide his own opinion rather than let the facts speak for themselves. De Grand's book tends to go against my thesis that Mussolini was a true radical and that Fascism contained strong radical elements. He sees Fascism as a reactionary movement tied to the conservative forces led by the industrialists.

Historians whose works are composed along the same lines as that of De Grand include Max Gallo, Gaetano Salvemini, Edward Tannenbaum, and Dennis Mack Smith⁴ All of them give a sweeping view of the entire Fascist era without really tackling any of the topics of Fascism in great detail. Moreover, all are tainted with subjective language, like Smith's description of Mussolini as erratic and delusional, that makes it clear to the reader that the works are not meant to provide information, but represent attempts to convince with little or no factual support.⁵ A more recent historian, Richard Bosworth,

displays some of the same problems in his research, although he does, at times, engage the reader with novel information.⁶

In contrast to De Grand, I found one group of historians who were both objective and highly penetrating in their observations of Fascism. These historians include James Gregor, Alistair Hamilton, Peter Drucker, and Samuel Halperin.⁷ One of the more highly respected of these is James Gregor. Gregor's research gives a good analysis of the various strands of opinion on Fascist movements in Europe.⁸ Gregor provides a thorough look at what other historians' research revealed about the role the middle class, nationalism, and even myth played in the development of Fascism. Halperin's work takes a different approach from Gregor in that it concentrates on two aspects of Italian Fascism, economic and foreign policy.⁹ Drucker and Hamilton both focus on the psychological appeal of Fascism.¹⁰ Their works describe Fascism's attempt to create an ideology that went beyond economics and materialism and into the heroic. The title of Drucker's work, The End of Economic Man, highlights his central theme, i.e., Fascism's attempt to show that man is more than an economically and materialistically driven being.¹¹ Drucker's focus on Fascism as a movement interested in myth and heroism supports my own argument that Mussolini and radical Fascists were a powerful force that sought to move Fascism in a revolutionary direction. All of these works discuss how Fascism was a movement of middle class people, including soldiers, leftist radicals, and nationalists, all of whom were searching for meaning in something greater than themselves.

Other historians who provided good material for this research were David A. Binchy, John F. Pollard, and John N. Molony.¹² Their main contribution was on the subject of Church and State relations. The research of these historians supports my thesis that the Church tended to be ambivalent towards Fascism. Carl Schmidt and Franklin H. Adler provided excellent research into the corporate state and the industrial class.¹³ Adler's research, in particular, proved crucial in providing important facts to support my arguments related to the corporate system and industrial class.

There were several other historians that assisted in providing good background for minor topics in support of my thesis. Emilio Gentile's Fascism as a Political Religion and Visser Romke's Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of Romanita provided important evidence that bolsters my contention that Fascism was not a reactionary movement but, rather, a religion of sorts that was dedicated to heroism, myth, and the nation as an "organic" and spiritual idea.¹⁴

Giuseppe Parlato's work was a minor but, nevertheless, important source in support of my argument that Fascism contained important leftist elements within its ranks.¹⁵ Other historians helpful in this area of the research include Paul Corner, Renzo De Felice, and Stuart J. Woolf.¹⁶ These works contribute valuable facts and insight into Fascism's radical forces and Mussolini's leftist political views. De Felice provided important background on Fascism's leftist, nationalist, and conservative forces. De Felice, Adler, and Gregor are examples of historians that provided extensive evidence to support their arguments.¹⁷ These works also support my arguments that Fascism was a

complex movement that deserves more academic respect than historians like De Gramd and Smith are apparently prepared to give it.¹⁸

Recently, several new books have been written on the topic of Fascism. New writers, like Howard J. Wiarda and George L. Mosse, have given the field a fresh perspective.¹⁹ Less tied to the political ideologies of the twentieth century that have so skewed the findings of earlier works, these writers take a more objective approach to the question of Fascism. Specifically, their findings support the conclusions that Fascism was, indeed, a radical movement and that Mussolini was a true revolutionary. Wiarda, for example, argues that Fascism was successful in creating some aspects of corporatism.²⁰ Mosse, meanwhile, argues that Fascism was a complex movement that tapped into human beings' need for spiritual fulfillment through strong emphasis on the heroic and the "organic" community, as expressed through nationalism.²¹

The uniqueness of this thesis compared to the sources used in this work has to do with several arguments related to the internal workings of the Fascist movement. My thesis alone argues that conservatives, leftists, and nationalists were the pivotal forces within Fascism and that their struggle decided the direction it should take. In addition, my research indicates that the principal reason the Fascist leadership failed to carry out some of the radical plans of the leftist and nationalist factions was due mainly to the strong resistance of conservative forces. Also, previous research does not adequately address the theory that Fascism was a revolutionary movement and that Mussolini was truly a devoted Fascist. Instead, the research shows that conservatives skillfully coerced

him to make critical compromises that transformed Fascism into a more cautious movement.

CHAPTER ONE

Benito Mussolini's Ideological Development and the Various Forces that Comprised Fascism in the Aftermath of World War I

Benito Mussolini: From Socialism to Fascism – the Early Years

The development of Fascist ideology is tied to Benito Mussolini's own ideological transformation from the early 1900s until March 23, 1919, when he organized the *Fasci di Combattimento*, which later became the Fascist Party. Mussolini began his political career as a Socialist.²² Socialism had been a strong part of Mussolini's family upbringing, and his parents named him Benito in honor of the Mexican revolutionary, Benito Juarez.

Mussolini's father, Alessandro, had a great influence on him. Alessandro's socialist roots and rebellious nature rubbed off on his son. Alessandro held views that spanned the political spectrum and, therefore, could not be labeled with any one ideology. Like his father, Benito Mussolini held views that seemed contradictory to some. He supported revolutionary socialist ideas, such as the need to overthrow the liberal regime, instead of pragmatic socialism, which he believed tended to compromise with capitalism. In addition, he supported some aspects of anarchism but accepted a place for the Church in society due to the influence of his mother, who was a devout Catholic.²³

According to Dennis Mack Smith, Mussolini's first major involvement with politics came in Switzerland, where he taught illiterate Italian immigrants and convinced them to assert their rights.²⁴ While in Switzerland, he also joined a socialist newspaper and became secretary to a builder's union. It was among his fellow Italian immigrants, however, that he fine-tuned his skills as an orator by developing his ability to exhort and denounce perceived

injustices such as discrimination against Italian immigrants.²⁵ From these early political brushes, Mussolini began his long climb to power.

In the early 1900s, Mussolini became interested in the Socialist Party. The Socialists had gone through a transformation of sorts between 1894, when Prime Minister Francesco Crispi dissolved the party, and 1900, when Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti allowed it to take part in political elections. The Socialists, however, had to make some concessions, which altered it from a radical to a moderate movement.²⁶ Gregory M. Lubbert argues that the Socialists' compromise had turned the party away from its Marxist anchor into a mainstream party, upholding, rather than destroying, the Liberal establishment.²⁷ This transformation would provide Mussolini, who called himself an "authoritarian communist" and a radical, the opportunity to carve himself a place in the extreme left position within the Socialist Party. Mussolini used his position to push the Socialist Party as far left as possible.

By 1909, Mussolini had not yet fully developed his ideology. According to Dennis Mack Smith, the one constant about Mussolini was "his belief in violent defiance of the law," which sustained his thirst for action.²⁸ In 1909, he took a post as secretary to the left-wing Chamber of Labour and editor of a socialist newspaper, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore*, and by then, his evolution toward syndicalism and socialism had developed greatly. Mussolini's devotion to violence, radicalism, and action had set him on a revolutionary course. From 1909 to 1912, Mussolini bounced from job to job and ideology to ideology. Six months after joining the socialist newspaper, *L'Avvenire del Lavoratore*, Mussolini

changed his job and joined the *Popolo*, a populist newspaper. A month later, he left for Austria, where wrote highly inflammatory articles that led to his serving time in jail.

After his release, Mussolini returned to his native province and helped found a weekly magazine, which he named *La Lotta di Classe*, (*The Class Struggle*). The magazine preached Marxism and stated that only through violence could the Liberal regime be destroyed. In his articles, he also attacked the Church as backward and serving the interests of capitalists. Mussolini's tirades reached a pivotal turning point at a meeting of Socialists assembled at Reggio Emilia in 1912. At that meeting, Mussolini gave a powerful speech attacking the party's movement towards moderation and succeeded in having some moderates expelled. Mussolini, then, was able to help turn the revolutionaries into the dominant faction within the party leadership.²⁹

Mussolini's next major move was taking over as editor of Italy's largest socialist newspaper, *Avanti*. Once again Mussolini stood out among his counterparts for his extremist views. According to Carl T. Schmidt, Mussolini's writing style set him apart from others "in his unusual flair for boldly whipping up the emotions of the crowd, whether by melodramatic gestures – as he had done at socialist congresses – or by the flaming pen of the sensationalist journalist."³⁰ Dennis Mack Smith, who argued that Mussolini's greatest skill was that of a journalist, corroborates this view of Mussolini. Smith wrote, "As editor, it became obvious that his particular talents would lead him to make a (successful) career in journalism and political agitation."³¹ Mussolini's main targets as editor and writer for *Avanti* were the Liberals, for whom he expressed contempt, and the parliamentary discussions, which he described as a waste of time as they served only the

interests of the rich and powerful.³² When war broke out in 1914, Mussolini was initially for neutrality going along with the stance of the Socialist Party. Quickly, however, Mussolini realized that the tide of war was unstoppable and that even many socialists were rallying to the Italian flag. He wrote an impassioned article in *Avanti*, demanding that Italy enter the war. The about-face shocked many fellow Socialist leaders.³³ This change marked another transformation in Mussolini from radical socialist to extreme nationalist.

This evolution in Mussolini's ideology does not mean, however, that he discarded all socialist ideas. According to Richard Bosworth, Mussolini would later in the decade incorporate many socialist beliefs into Fascism. Bosworth believes that Mussolini was not an extreme ideologue who would doggedly hold on to a theory or set of beliefs. Instead, Mussolini was willing to show flexibility by discarding some past beliefs and adopting new ones in response to a changing environment.³⁴ By the start of World War I, it became clear to Mussolini that he needed to move beyond the neutral stance of the Socialist Party. Thus, he left *Avanti* and started his own newspaper called *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Through his newspaper, Mussolini became a strong voice for those supporting Italy's entry into the war. Nevertheless, Mussolini claimed that he still supported socialism, arguing that war would help spark a social revolution. His party, however, did not accept this argument and, instead, expelled him.³⁵ In the ensuing war years, Mussolini moved closer to the nationalists. By 1918, Mussolini's mouthpiece, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, became much less Marxist or socialist, but, nevertheless, retained an air of extremism with the aim of capturing the reader's attention. By the end of the war, Mussolini again changed his message and began to complain bitterly that the war had resulted in no gain for Italy. He

demanding that Italy, as a victor, should take her share of war “booty.” For example, he demanded that Italy annex Fiume and Dalmatia, regions under Yugoslav control but heavily populated by Italians.³⁶

In 1919, Mussolini sensed that he could take power and worked hard to elicit the support of various groups. He endeavored to convince socialists to support his planned “populist dictatorship” as the only revolutionary alternative.³⁷ Mussolini sought support from other groups as well. For example, at a meeting on March 23, 1919, where he founded the *Fasci di Combattimento*, various groups were represented, including Futurists, syndicalists, nationalists, liberals, and leftists. In addition, another major component of the early Fascist movement, ex-servicemen, were quickly won over by Mussolini’s strident dissatisfaction with the war. The veterans of the Great War were angry because they felt their sacrifices had been for nothing. Italy, they believed, had gained very little from joining the war. It was the middle class, however, including white-collar workers and professionals, that was most captivated by Fascism. The Fascist movement under Mussolini’s leadership offered the middle class a strong hand to suppress the “elite of organized workers,” who sought to push Italy towards revolution.³⁸ Nevertheless, the working class was never a crucial part of Fascism’s support. According to Renzo De Felice, Fascism was “in large part an expression of the emerging, mobile, middle classes, the bourgeois . . . who were attempting to acquire political power.”³⁹ This is an important point because it supports the view that Fascism was a movement by and for the middle class. Furthermore, this assessment refutes the opinion of scholars like Dennis Smith and

Richard Bosworth who maintain that Fascism was basically a tool of conservatives who did not want any meaningful change to take place in Italy's social and economic order.⁴⁰

In 1919 and 1920, Mussolini furthered his plans to create a powerful Fascist movement. His primary aim in those years was to create a strong militia that utilized violence to achieve political goals. His soldiers, called *squadristi*, or members of fascist squads, waged an urban battle against communists and socialists. His aspiration was to gain himself a name as a doer and a revolutionary, as opposed to a talker, like the socialist leaders and supporters of the status quo. In these post-war years, Mussolini tried to expand his political base of support by increasing his appeal to conservatives and nationalists. At the same time, he continued to call himself a socialist with the hope that he could still retain the support of leftists.

By this time, Mussolini clearly was prepared to use any means to gain power. He used the tactics written by one his favorites, Machiavelli, to achieve his political ends.⁴¹ Having gained no seats in 1919, Mussolini decided to turn to the Liberals whom he despised in the election of 1921. The ploy worked. His Fascist Party got thirty-five seats in Parliament. His plan at this time was to try to convince as many people as possible to join his movement. He also continued to use violence in order to maintain a level of tension in Italy that he could exploit. These tactics were instrumental in enabling him to seize power the following year. Despite his use of violence against leftist forces to gain power, some scholars maintain that Mussolini kept many of his socialist beliefs even as a Fascist. Historian Walter Laquer holds the view that Mussolini retained many of his socialist ideas and merged them into his newly formed Fascist movement.⁴² This move had

great influence in the development of early Fascism because it ensured that the new political party would retain a leftist and revolutionary appeal.

Mussolini's influence on the movement extended much further than just ideology. Right from Fascism's foundation in 1919, Mussolini played a larger-than-life role as its leader, quickly gaining an aura that bordered on cult worship. His popularity, according to Laquer, outpaced that of his movement throughout his rule.⁴³ Laquer's observations support the argument that Mussolini was a revolutionary figure in a radical movement. In this instance, Laquer's assertions contradict the view that Mussolini was a reactionary or a stooge of conservative forces.

George Mosse, through his research on Fascism and Mussolini, provides another important view on the question of what sort of man was Mussolini.⁴⁴ Mosse, when comparing Mussolini with other dictators of his age, says that "Mussolini had no Auschwitz and . . . (Il) Duce showed more human dimensions than the *Fuhrer*."⁴⁵ Mosse's assertions support the argument that Mussolini did not "accomplish" as much as other dictators of his day, such as Hitler or Stalin, because he was unwilling to carry out inhuman policies and not because he was a phony revolutionary.

The Fasci di Combattimento

In 1919, a movement of ex-soldiers, disaffected socialists, syndicalists, and small town *squadristi*, coalesced into a new political organization. Led by Benito Mussolini, these groups united to form an umbrella organization, the *Fasci di Combattimento*. The aim was to create a political movement that would counter communists, socialists, and liberals. Mussolini's antipathy for each of these groups differed. He disliked the

communists due to their anti-nationalist stance, while he had disdain for socialism based on his belief that socialists had sold-out to the liberal-capitalist ruling class. Mussolini's strongest repulsion was directed at the liberal class; he looked on them with contempt for their mainly materialistic and individualistic outlook on life.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, to gain power he compromised with the liberals just a few years after founding Fascism.

To avoid issues that could lead to infighting the movement preferred violence to political dialogue. The *Fasci di Combattimento* became a paramilitary group that initially focused its fury on socialists and communists. The goal was to create tension in the political system so that common people of all political persuasion would turn to Fascism as a stabilizing force. Running street battles, as a result, became commonplace all over Italy. The Fascists' goal was to intimidate and weaken opposition groups. After the attacks on the left-wing, the squadristi aimed their anger at liberals.

The groups that coalesced into the founding of the *Fasci di Combattimento* came from all sides of the political and social spectrums. The syndicalists, a radical group of unionists, sought to give peasants and workers producing rights equal to the owners of industries. The small town *squadristi*, rural and anti-modern landowners, were aggressive and violent. Modernists and futurists that leaned to the left, on the other hand, supported the development of a modern society based on technology and mass planning. They supported corporative planning, a progressive tax, and redistributing land to peasants and workers.⁴⁷ There were also ex-socialists and other leftists who, having been disillusioned by the major left-wing parties' lack of resoluteness to carry through and seize power, turned to the more action-oriented *Fasci di Combattimento*.

Extreme nationalists made up another major segment of the *Fasci di Combattimento*. This faction wanted Italy to have a strong and aggressive foreign policy. In addition, they wanted to use mass society to develop a strong and united national “will.”⁴⁸ This development of a populist based faction found its most eloquent voice in Giovanni Gentile. Gentile, a philosopher and the intellectual voice of Fascism, believed in the idea of a “national will,” where individuals found their purpose in life to be something that transcended the self. His philosophical doctrine centered on the idea that the state should transform the individual and society into an “organic” whole. By “organic,” Gentile meant that, in society, everyone must become involved in the development of the community. Through this shared activity, everyone would contribute to a vital and common social experience.⁴⁹ To achieve this organic national community, the state would need to limit individualist and liberal tendencies that tended to fragment, rather than unite, society. This new path would allow the community to become a sort of mass-based collective. In this new society, the individual would lose himself and his identity into the larger “organic” society guided by the state. In this way the individual would become whole through the community rather than through personal development. Individualism would be anathema in this new society where the creation of the ideal community took preference over all other aims. Gentile’s vision of the individual, society, and the state as an “organic” whole was the essence of early Fascism. His ideas about society were inherited by the nationalist and the syndicalist-left factions of the Fascist party in the late 1920s and into the 1930s.⁵⁰

The Early Fascist Umbrella

World War I preceded the formation of the *Fasci di Combattimento*. The immediate post-WWI period was a turbulent, and for many, a frustrating time. Ex-soldiers were not the only Italians angry that the promised fruits-of-victory had not been delivered; nationalists also were extremely angry. They demanded that the Italian government force the Allies to follow through on the promised territorial concessions. If the Allies failed to do so, the nationalists said Italy should then act unilaterally.⁵¹ As the Liberal government failed to respond, as evidenced by the free-lance foreign policy of Gabriele D'Annunzio, who occupied the Fiume region, nationalists turned to the extremist Fascist movement.⁵²

Besides embittered soldiers and extreme nationalists, another group, syndicalists, also began showing an interest in Fascism. This faction was made up of leftists who sought to combine radical syndicalism, or unionism, and extreme nationalism. This perspective, held by Benito Mussolini, was rooted in a coalition of leftist forces that had favored participation in World War I. This group wanted to create a "third way" between communism and capitalism. While private property would be generally respected, they put forth an aggressive plan for fixing the inadequacies of Italy's stagnant and unjust economy. They planned to nationalize vital industries, give unused land to peasants, and reorganize the private sector into a syndicalist-based system. They believed in the "social control of industry" whereby economic decisions were made not just by the owners, but the workers as well.⁵³ To achieve this goal, they pushed for the establishment of management councils to oversee the activities of owners. They also wanted company

profits to be shared with workers. To do this, a powerful syndicalist union would have to be formed to force change on society. Among the most ardent syndicalists was Edmondo Rossoni. Rossoni was an intelligent and longtime syndicalist who envisioned giving employees more power through a state-sanctioned confederation of workers' union. He sought to create a nation-wide union of all workers that would garner enough power so that it could challenge powerful employer confederations such as Confindustria.⁵⁴

Syndicalists also envisioned the creation of an assembly made up of four parts: workers and shareholders; a managerial council of capital and labor; a syndical college, where union representatives could meet and discuss labor issues separately; and a director chosen by the assembly. The purpose of this assembly would have been to give workers a say in management decisions and plans and to give owners labor stability. Specific plans were to be drawn by the government.⁵⁵ Fascism adopted some of the ideas of the national-syndicalists in Mussolini's corporate state system.

The Street Toughs

Aside from the revolutionary-syndicalists, Fascism also had strong support from several other groups. Encouraged by the ex-Socialist and war-veteran Benito Mussolini, street toughs, ex-soldiers, and anti-modern idealists and romanticists believed that only direct action would alter the political crisis. So, they took matters into their own hands.⁵⁶ Calling themselves *squadristi*, they engaged in violent provocations aiming to create a state of chaos in Italy. Their hope was that King Victor Emmanuel would be forced to turn to a strong-man like Mussolini to resolve the crisis. They engaged in violent

activities, including urban warfare against communists and socialists. This strategy, however, did not immediately succeed because it lacked mass support.

To increase his political base, Mussolini turned to the peasant class, which was receptive to his militant agenda. The Italian peasant class looked on leftist groups like the communists with suspicion. They feared that, under communism, they would lose the little plots of land they had received pursuant to land reforms of the early 1900s. The Fascist agenda appealed to them because it offered to stop communist collectivization schemes and concentrate, instead, on stabilizing the economy.

Seeing an opportunity to increase his power, Mussolini unified these diverse factions under one banner, the *Fasci di Combattimento*.⁵⁷ The *Fasci di Combattimenti* acted as the para-military arm of Fascism throughout the turbulent early 1920s. The purpose of this organization was to intimidate opponents of Fascism through the use of violence, while at the same time serving notice that Fascism had the ability to take power by force if need be.

The “Respectable Groups” of the Fascist Umbrella

While the *Fasci di Combattimento* served Fascism well in the streets, it created some consternation among many Italians. To counter this violent image, the Fascist movement sought to lure more “respectable” members of society. Mussolini, always an opportunist, urged monarchists, who were worried that worker strikes and daily political agitation might bring communism to power and put an end to the House of Savoy, to turn to him. Mussolini sought the monarchists’ support by promising to put an end to the chaos. Another group that Mussolini worked hard to lure into the Fascist umbrella was

the industrial class. Mussolini convinced industrialists that he alone could bring back political stability so that they could carry on with their work. The impact of these conservative groups on Fascism will be discussed in greater detail later. For now, it is enough to say that they looked to Fascism as a possible solution to Italy's political crisis.

In addition to the conservative forces, Mussolini worked hard to gain the support of Socialists. Tired of the weakness and lack of vision shown by the Socialist Party's leadership, many turned to Mussolini with the hope that his Socialist past and radical plans for government domination of the economy would prevail in a new Fascist-led regime. Nationalists, syndicalists, squadristi, and other groups differed on many issues, but they were united in their disdain for the liberal-democratic political system. All these factions shared a passionate desire to destroy the liberal regime, individualism, and democracy.⁵⁸ The industrial class was the one major faction that was opposed to the overthrow of the liberal-democratic system. As will be discussed later, the industrial class became a major obstacle to the radical aims of Fascism.

The entry of all these disparate groups within the Fascist umbrella guaranteed that the movement would never become a homogenous political entity. Instead, the party fused into a conglomeration of various interests and ideologies, each group wanting to fashion the Fascist movement according to its needs. Fascism had become more of an umbrella of disparate factions rather than a coherent political body. Nevertheless, Mussolini succeeded in keeping Fascism a united movement by his sheer political skills, his ability to please everyone, and his charismatic leadership.

From its humble beginnings in 1918 to its meteoric rise to power in 1922, Fascism had evolved from a small party to a massive movement. The growth and change caused by the absorption of many new groups brought about a new equilibrium within Fascism. From the many disparate groups, three general groupings took shape: the leftists, such as ex-socialists, and syndicalists; the extreme nationalists; and the conservative forces. These forces became locked in a struggle for the soul of Fascism that was never fully resolved throughout the twenty-two years of Fascist rule. This internal party tension became increasingly evident in the years following Fascism's consolidation of power in 1925, as key decisions made by the Fascist government became the battleground of these three groups' attempts to influence Mussolini and the Fascist leadership.

CHAPTER TWO

Fascism: The Development of the Leftist Factions 1919-22

The interest of leftist workers and intellectuals in Fascism was based on their reaction to the liberal state created after Italy's unification in 1861. After uniting Italy, the leaders of the revolt chose a conservative path by creating a highly elitist parliament and a monarchy. Few common people were allowed to take part in the new state, and a large percentage was not even allowed to vote. This limited democracy created long-lasting resentment among workers and social-minded groups. By the early 1900s some steps to enhance democracy were taken by the Liberal Party and its leader, Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, but much was left undone. Suffrage, for example, was still limited to males over the age of 30. In addition, parliament was still dominated by the Liberal Party and was unable to come up with desperately needed new ideas and programs for a vastly changed political and social landscape.⁵⁹

By 1914, many workers and socialists were turning to more radical ideas to tackle Italy's problems. Benito Mussolini, as editor of the Socialist newspaper Avanti, from 1912 to 1915, attacked Italy and Europe for leading the workers to a war that benefited only the ruling classes. He initially called for Italy to remain neutral in the war and appealed to the workers to rise up against the existing liberal-capitalist political system. After the war, as Italy verged on chaos, workers and leftists initially turned to the Socialist Party to lead a revolution. Their hopes were dashed, however, by an overly cautious party leadership that did not seize the moment.⁶⁰ The Socialist leadership, full of old and recalcitrant leaders, feared that radical change would be quashed by the

military that was strongly loyal to the king. Besides socialism, the only other radical alternative lay with communism; yet, the possibility of change from that part of the political spectrum was non-existent.⁶¹

Because of the Socialist Party's weakness and the Communist's small base of support, many workers became disillusioned and turned to Fascism.⁶² Its leader, Benito Mussolini, who was well known in socialist circles from his days as the editor of *Avanti*, proclaimed himself as the real revolutionary. Mussolini's bombastic style and radical beliefs were famous even before he became a Fascist. His roots included joining *Lotta di Classe* (*The Class Struggle*) in 1910, a group dedicated to the overthrow of the liberal regime. As a correspondent for *Avanti* and then its editor, he incessantly demanded strikes and other radical measures to put pressure on the government.⁶³ The Fascist party moved quickly to seize this opportunity; in their party program of 1919, the Fascists declared that they would lower the age of voting to 18, end the monarchy, set up a constitutional assembly to draw up a new set of institutions for the country, confiscate war profits, set a minimum wage, and institute the eight-hour work day.⁶⁴ Many of these programs were, in fact, enacted in the years following the Fascist takeover.

The cadre of leftists, which included syndicalists, and ex-Socialists, as well as Futurists, Modernists, and intellectuals, became attracted to Fascism for another reason: because it opposed the liberal-capitalist regime as they did. Like many leftists, Fascists saw liberal-democracy as detrimental to the individual's true place in society, which was to submerge the self into what Gentile called the "organic whole." The Liberal establishment was also seen as cowardly and effeminate, while the bourgeois lifestyle

was looked upon with disgust.⁶⁵ In contrast to the decadent liberal-democratic ideals, radical Fascists praised romanticism and irrationalism as examples of uplifting ethics that must replace the old liberal values. The emblematic Fascist call to “believe, obey, and fight” represented this anti-liberal value-system that glorified violence and heroism.⁶⁶ Anti-liberal leftists became increasingly attracted to the radical and action-oriented Fascist ideas of the early post-war period. As a result, they turned away from the weak and paralyzed socialist and communist parties to join the more aggressive and action-oriented Fascist forces.

Fascists believed that nations, too, were engaged in the same Manichean-like struggle, between good and evil forces, that characterized the internal social conditions within nations. Individuals such as Enrico Corradini and Giovanni Gentile talked of a “proletarian nationalism,” which placed nations in two camps. One camp was made up of plutocratic and capitalist nations like the United States and England. These nations sought to dominate other nations, while the other camp, the proletarian-nations, such as Italy, consisted of weaker and impoverished nations struggling to break their subjugation to their more powerful neighbors.⁶⁷ These so-called proletarian-nations were composed chiefly of workers, peasants, and nationalists. Corradini argued that Italy “was materially and morally a proletarian nation.”⁶⁸ The future of Italy depended on whether proletarian-nationalism could defeat the powerful forces of liberalism that were leading Italy on a path of decadence and selfish individualism. The ideas of Corradini and Gentile, who wrote frequently on the need to establish a collective national consciousness to fight individualism and capitalism, appealed to many socialists, workers, and intellectuals. As

a result, throughout the 1920s many leftists defected to the Fascist movement. This influx of leftists altered the Fascist Party's balance and created a core of dedicated revolutionaries.

The emergence of revolutionary leftist and syndicalist groups within the Fascist Party had a major influence on the evolution of Fascist ideology. Leftist ideas thereafter played a major role in the development of party myths, doctrine, and policies.⁶⁹ Parlati contends that "revolutionary-syndicalism" had, in fact, developed important links with the nationalist forces within Fascism. He gives them the label of Fascist-left to emphasize their "revolutionary and social vision" of Fascism.⁷⁰ The leading thinkers of the Fascist-left, such as Dino Grandi and Cesare Rossi, were instrumental in the gradual evolution of Fascist thought. As will be explained more fully in a later chapter, Grandi and Rossi maintained that Fascism was the true heir to the syndicalist movement, as evidenced in its strong support for corporatism. Furthermore, they use the term "their Fascism" to show that a leftist faction existed within the several factions that made up Fascism.⁷¹ Parlati further argues that before Fascism, the Italian masses had been kept in an apathetic state while the industrial and liberal elite pursued the larger questions of society and nationhood. To counter this political hegemony by the conservative forces, revolutionaries developed the theory of Corporatism that they hoped would eventually spur Italians to initiate a social revolution.⁷² Fascism, according to Parlati, was the final act in that process.⁷³

Historian James Gregor also holds that, during the *fin de siècle*, the masses were looking for a movement that would uphold their values.⁷⁴ They sought unity and a sense

of meaning. The ideas of folk, community, and nation were appealing for many who felt increasingly isolated and alienated in the modern world.⁷⁵ Fascism, according to Gregor, offered to do all these and more. The Fascist movement presented itself as an activist, revolutionary, and romantic, rather than a rational, force for change. It spoke of national unity and an ideological and spiritual-based view of the world that would replace the traditional influences on societies. In this new-world, archaic Catholic teachings on faith, would no longer have a place. The individual would be closely joined to the community and nation.⁷⁶

This collectivist, revolutionary, and radically new approach to society appealed greatly to workers, syndicalists, disaffected socialists, and other left-leaning groups. Increasingly, therefore, Fascism became an attractive alternative to many leftists disappointed with the compromising approach to the ruling Liberal regime taken by mainstream leftist parties, such as the Socialists. Unlike the mainstream left-leaning parties, the fascists backed their radical demands with violent resolve. For militants on the left and the right, many having just returned from a gruesome world war, violence was a sign of genuine resolve and commitment to the aims of the Fascist movement.

CHAPTER THREE

Fascist-Nationalism: Philosophical-Nationalism and the Radicalization of the “Mass-Man”

Fascism’s Appeal to the Masses

Fascism had mass appeal because it presented itself as a party of action and it used effectively imagery and words to convince the masses that it alone had the power and will to bring about revolutionary change in Italy. Internally, however, there was intense infighting over which direction the mass-based party should go. The struggle for control of the Fascist Party between conservative forces on the right representing the liberal-democratic political spectrum, radicals on the left, and extreme nationalists became fiercer as the party sought the support of the masses. The dilemma for the Fascist leadership was whether it should take the conservatives’ view with their emphasis on preserving the established social and economic order and preventing communism from taking power, or the more revolutionary path which syndicalists, nationalists, and the newly joined *petite bourgeoisie* and working classes wanted.

Peter Drucker makes clear that, in the early post-war years, Fascism had offered itself as an authentic revolutionary alternative to the socialists and communists.⁷⁷ According to Drucker, as a consequence of the unrealized expectations of victory from World War I, the Italian masses became very disillusioned with their political leadership. With losses reaching over 600,000 dead, Italians had expected a great deal from the Allied powers. Instead, much that had been secretly promised to Italy was not honored. Italians felt betrayed. Embittered ex-soldiers turned on the Liberal government, which

they felt had done little to demand more from the Allies. As a result, these ex-soldiers joined radical movements, like Fascism, in the hope of bringing about a revolution.⁷⁸

Liberal and Socialist Party leaders also received much of the blame for the post-war economic dislocation of the working classes and the *petite bourgeoisie*. Having abandoned all hope that the current political system would bring “freedom and equality,” Italians from numerous political factions turned to Fascism and its promise of refuge from the harsh realities of modern society.⁷⁹ The primary aim of the Fascists was to encourage Italians to give up many freedoms as well as the idea of equality in return for liberation from the insecurity and hopelessness of their present lives.

Visser Romke supports the view that Fascism’s main political objective was to convince workers, peasants, and the *petite bourgeoisie* that it was the only authentic revolutionary movement in Italy.⁸⁰ According to Romke, Italians were in search of a movement that would give them personal meaning and national honor. Thus, they became susceptible to Fascism’s propaganda with its strong emphasis on heroic imagery and symbolism.⁸¹

Fascism employed the symbolism of the Roman Empire as one of its most powerful propaganda tools for attracting the masses to its movement. The use of the fasces, the “Roman” salute, and the *passo Romano*, the Roman march, for example, all Roman symbols, that aroused popular enthusiasm for Fascism. This emphasis on what Romke calls “*Romanita*,” the association of all things Italian with all things Roman, had been a part of Italian myth for centuries, but not until after the *Risorgimento* was it allowed to flourish.⁸² The *Risorgimento* itself was seen “as the destiny of the Roman-

Italian race to engender Italy with a ‘civilizing mission’ in the world.” During the early decades of the twentieth century, many films such as Romulus and Remus emphasized this *Romanita*. Scholars joined this culture of *Romanita* by propagating the belief that Italy was destined to be heir to the Romans. This culture of *Romanita* was especially effective in creating excitement among the uneducated masses.⁸³

Giovanni Gentile, who would become a minister in Mussolini’s first cabinet and a philosopher, also believed that Italy was destined to become a great power. He warned, however, that Italy’s attempt to assert itself was opposed by strong internal and external forces. The decision of whether Italy should enter World War One had already brought this struggle to the foreground. On the one side stood the neutralists (chiefly socialists, pacifists, and simple folk), who could not afford to abandon their families to go off to war, and materialists (mainly wealthy families and some elements of the *petite bourgeoisie*), who believed in the personal accumulation of wealth above all else and placed little value on any national aspirations. On the other side, the interventionists and romantic idealists believed that entry into the war would put Italy on the same level as the powerful nations of the world. The issue of war or peace brought these two forces closer to a final decisive clash. The issue would not be resolved conclusively, however, until after the war and the rise of Fascism.⁸⁴

Gentile’s goal of Fascism creating an “organic” whole, where everyone was a cell in a larger living organism, the state, formed the basis of Fascist totalitarianism.⁸⁵ This new Fascist totalitarian ideology, according to Gentile, put Italy at the vanguard of an apocalyptic struggle between good, i.e., Fascism, and evil, i.e., liberal-capitalism. In this

struggle, Italy would be forced to confront plutocratic nations such as England and the United States, which were determined to maintain their hegemony over poorer nations like Italy. Gentile believed that Fascism would return Italy to greatness and then lead it in an epic battle for the salvation of Europe.⁸⁶

Giovanni Papini, editor of La Voce, also believed that Italy was destined to lead a reunited Europe. According to Papini, World War I had been about a struggle between powerful nations led by the United States against the poor nations of Europe. Because Liberals led Italy, it sided with the plutocrats. Moreover, the aim of the United States and her allies was to keep Europe weak and divided. Similarly, Futurist Ardengo Soffici believed in a struggle for the heart and soul of Europe. He argued that the materialism, greed, and aloofness of the United States, England, and other rich nations, should be replaced by the Fascist ideals of heroism, strength, and sacrifice.⁸⁷

This vision for Italy, as described by Gentile and others, provides an insightful look at Fascism's ideological pattern in the early 1920s. Gentile was a strong supporter of the nationalist faction. He believed that the state should be at the forefront of societal development. It is evident that Gentile was only one of many voices within Fascism that made up a strong current of revolutionary, anti-liberal, and anti-capitalist sentiment. It is also clear that this faction, at least in the development of Fascist ideology, had the upper-hand over the conservative forces led by monarchists, industrialists, and other reactionary forces.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the internal struggles between the conservatives and the nationalist-syndicalist revolutionary forces in the development of Fascist economic policy such as worker pay and benefits, a labor charter, and corporate planning, indicates

that, unlike the ideological battles that gave the revolutionaries dominance over policy-making, the conservative forces were in solid command of economic disposition for much of the 1920s. Mussolini's support of the 1927 "Rocco Laws" on labor, which banned strikes and independent unions, demonstrated the conservative's sway over Fascist economic plans. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, the situation changed significantly in favor of those who supported state intervention in the economy.

In the early 1920s, the conservatives dominated Fascism's economic plans, as opposed to its ideological development, because they provided a substantial portion of the Fascist party's financial backing.⁸⁹ The agreements of Palazzo Chigi, where Mussolini resided, in 1923 and at Vidoni in 1925 allowed for the formation of the *Confindustria*. *Confindustria*, an organization that acted as the official bargaining agent for industrialists in negotiations between the corporations, was a state body organ that organized the economy into what was known as the Corporate State and the Fascist regime.⁹⁰ The *Confindustria* became a powerful organization that elicited important concessions from the syndicalist unions, such as wage reductions and limitations of strikes.⁹¹ In spite of the conservatives' ability to influence Fascist economic planning, mass support continued unabated throughout the 1920s and 1930s

Fanaticism as a tool of Fascism

Why did workers, peasants, and the middle class, as well as nationalists and syndacalists, continue to support Fascism in spite of its domination by conservative forces? The reason has little to do with Fascist policies that were dominated by the conservatives; rather, it was Fascism's ability to transmit its ideological fanaticism to the

masses and give them a strong feeling of excitement and a sense of destiny that assured their support. Emilio Gentile, in his Fascism as Political Religion, discusses the Fascist government's attempt to turn Fascism into a secular religion:

With the myths, rituals and symbols that were born in the trenches, it provided a greater amount of material for the construction of a national religion. The symbolism of death and resurrection, the commitment to the nation, the mysticism of blood and sacrifice, the cult of heroes and martyrs, the 'communion of camaraderie' – all contributed to the spreading of the myth among soldiers that politics was a total experience which had to renew all forms of existence.⁹²

Gentile's words represent, in many ways, Fascism's version of a creed and represent the "sacralization" of politics. These religious-like myths, which took shape among soldiers during World War I, became part of Fascism's dogma in the 1920s and gave a new look to Fascism that was focused more on spiritual symbolism than economic matters. This new symbolism gave Fascism's ideological doctrine new direction based on heroism and the glorification of war. In addition to providing a new emphasis on spiritualism and the idealization of war, Gentile, also believed that the Fascist Party was creating a "political theology." In this new totalitarian state, the regime aimed to create an ethical state that would mold the soul of Italians after centuries of moral decadence suffered at the hands of foreign occupiers and corrupt leaders.⁹³

By 1938, the political religion of Fascism was moving towards the creation of a totalitarian state. The Italian masses were to be united under the religious banner of Fascist ideology. Augusto Turati, Fascist Party Secretary, stated in no uncertain terms what the new Fascist creed would be:

The need to believe absolutely; to believe in Fascism, in the Duce, in the Revolution, just as one believes in God . . . we accept the Revolution with pride, just as we accept these principles – even if we realize they are mistaken, and we accept them without discussion.⁹⁴

Blind faith and dogma, as well as ritual and symbolism, became more important to people as fanatical devotion to ideologies increased in the late 1930s when regimes like Fascism used various propaganda tools to move the masses. Faith, then, became more important than reason as a motivator in one's life and in the development of society. Fascism thus rejected rationalism and praised mythical thinking. The masses, therefore, became increasingly motivated by mystical thinking and irrational thought processes. According to Turati, Mussolini created a motivational ideology in order to assure the long-term support of the masses. This newly formed belief system was based on rituals and symbolism.⁹⁵ According to Mussolini:

Every revolution needed to create new rituals and order . . . Mass politics had to unite mystical and political elements . . . The Roman salute; all the songs, dates, and commemorations, are indispensable in preserving a movement's pathos.⁹⁶

Fascism's penchant for marches, ceremonies, and songs can be understood if seen as part of a religious and mystical experience. Songs, marches, and ritual all became part of a massive effort to give the masses a mystical experience that would bind them tightly to the religion of the Fascist state.

Again, while the conservatives shaped some of the economic planning of Italian Fascism, one sees little evidence of conservative sway in the development of Fascist doctrine on philosophy, which was almost entirely inspired by nationalist and syndicalist - the Corporate State - thought. Thus, the idea that Fascism was a conservative

dictatorship with reactionary tendencies is without basis. Conservatives might have influenced Fascism, but it did not lead it. Clearly, Fascist leaders placed great emphasis on gaining the support of the masses who would support Fascism's radical leaders.

The Petite Bourgeoisie

The one social grouping that, at first, does not seem to fit in with the radical Fascists is the lower-middle class, or the *petit bourgeoisie*. This *petit bourgeoisie* was made up primarily of small shopkeepers, civil servants, and craftsmen, normally tended to be conservative, satisfied that they had property and good jobs. In the aftermath of World War One, however, with Italy's economic and social situation near the point of chaos, and workers in revolt, a nervous *petite bourgeoisie* became radicalized. The *petite bourgeoisie*'s biggest threat, however, came from the powerful industrial class. With the rise of large industrial companies in the nineteenth century, the *petite bourgeoisie* had witnessed a steady decline in its share of the nation's economic wealth.⁹⁷ These problems resulted in this group's increased frustration with the liberal government.

In the wake of the Great War, the traditional stance of the middle-class individual to work with "the established order . . . for the improvement of his condition through reforms" changed radically. Faced with a "crisis of the whole social system," the middle class became radicalized and more open to extreme measures.⁹⁸ As historian Daniel Guerin points out, the middle class turned to Fascism in the hope that capitalism and big business could be regulated: "they want to roll back the wheel of history! They call for an economy that is not [subject] to . . . speculation" and the domination of large capitalist enterprises.⁹⁹ The hope of the *petite bourgeoisie* was that the Fascists would restrict and

control big business so that it would no longer threaten the very existence of the middle-class merchant and craftsman. This is the main reason why the middle class joined Fascism.

The Fascist Party's response to the middle class and workers was to push for the creation of the corporate state, which addressed the demands of small merchants to regulate the economy in a way that benefited the nation and its people, not just big business. The corporate system appealed strongly to the middle class. The vision of a corporate system provided the crucial link that joined the middle class with the radical forces of Fascism. The middle class had hoped that the Fascist radicals would bring about revolutionary change in an economic system that had fallen into chaos as a consequence of World War One. The middle class expected that Fascism would bring about a more stable environment for them while, at the same time, reducing the power of big business.¹⁰⁰

In addition to economic turmoil pushing the *petite bourgeoisie* and other middle class groups to Fascism, so did the strong emotional pull of nationalism. Traditionally, the lower middle class had been strongly nationalistic. Hence, the strongly nationalistic Fascist movement resonated well among the lower middle class. For this reason as well as the stabilizing effect that Fascism brought to Italy, the bulk of the middle class became a strong supporter of the regime.¹⁰¹ By presenting itself as a revolutionary movement, as well as anti-socialist and anti-communist, Fascism succeeded in gaining the support of the *petite bourgeoisie* and other middle class merchants afraid of a Soviet style

revolution. This success widened Fascism's appeal and helped turn it into a mass-based movement.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Revolution Begins

The Charter

Fascism's first major attempt at changing the structure of Italy's economic system took place in 1927 with the creation of the Charter of Labour. For many years, Italy had experienced much instability in the labor market. Agitators in the labor movement who were unhappy with workers' wages and working conditions organized many strikes to press their demands. As a result, conservative employers and socialist-led workers remained in a state of continuous conflict, which resulted in serious disruptions to Italy's economic output.¹⁰² The Charter of Labour was enacted as a result of this state of affairs. The Fascist party and Benito Mussolini wanted to end the negative impact that this conflict was having on Italy's economy as well as on Fascism.

The primary aim of the Charter of Labour was to set up rules for workers, owners, and the government. Production, according to the Charter, was to serve the aims of the state and give it national power. Thus one of Fascism's ideological centerpieces, that private interests were subordinate to national interests, became the Charter's main goal.¹⁰³ In its "preamble," the Charter of Labour defined Fascism's doctrine on producers' duty to the nation:

The Italian nation is an organism having ends, a life, and means superior in power and duration to the single individuals or groups of individuals composing it. It is a moral, political and economic unit which finds its integral realization in the Fascist state.¹⁰⁴

The Charter, then, sought to ensure that neither individuals nor groups would be above the nation; it thus put restrictions on both workers and owners. The Charter also emphasized that work was a social duty and production was for the good of the nation. Workers would be grouped into state-recognized syndicates, and these alone would have power to make agreements and contracts. Furthermore, the Collective Labour Contract would reconcile the opposing interests of employers and workers and make them subordinate to the goal of uninterrupted production. If there were a dispute that could not be resolved by government mediation, then a Labour Court would intervene.¹⁰⁵ This framework represented the essence of the new labour system of collaboration among employers, workers, and the state.

For the Charter of Labour to work, however, compromises would have to be made. Success required that the three major forces within the Fascist movement – the conservatives, the nationalists, and the leftists – give their assent. The conservatives, however, who sided with the industrialists, did not want to give up anything to the workers. Moreover, the conservatives' influence in the party remained strong because they had the support of the powerful ruling classes in Italy, which included monarchists as well as industrialists. In 1927, Fascism was still not completely sure of its ability to hold on to power in a crisis. In fact, given Italy's powerful institutions, such as the Church, the monarchy, and the industrial elites, all of whom were highly suspicious of Fascism's aims, Fascism did not have complete control. Yet, Fascism was characterized by relatively little bloody repression, no intimidating detention camps for political

opponents, and few internal weaknesses, the regime never could assert absolute rule over it.

Unlike Germany and the Soviet Union, where the Nazis and the Communists decimated their opponents or brought them under their influence, Fascism never eliminated its opponents on a wide-scale, nor did it fully neutralize its opposition. Therefore, the strong influence of the conservatives favored the industrialists rather than the workers. As a result, the Charter of Labour placed more of the burdens on the workers. Strikes were effectively banned. Free trade unions were outlawed and replaced by state syndicates. Wages were frozen. In turn, employers could no longer arbitrarily lay-off workers or lock them out, as they had previously done.¹⁰⁶ Those workers who belonged to communist-led unions objected strongly, while most of those who supported the Fascist unions, such as ex-socialists and government workers, remained loyal to the Fascist system. Their loyalty may be seen as a sign that workers did receive some benefits, such as worker's compensation, health benefits, and some job security. In addition, some workers accepted the Fascist government's claim that more time was needed to implement revolutionary change.¹⁰⁷

The Charter of Labour represented an early, tenuous, and imperfect attempt by Fascism to alter the economic system. The ambitious goal of creating a harmonious relationship among employers, workers, and the state was not realized. Nevertheless, Fascism's goal of maintaining high production levels was achieved, as seen by the rise in the index on industrial production from 100 in 1922 to 164 in 1927.¹⁰⁸ Thus, while there

was some disappointment because of the unachieved goals, the Charter of Labour was viewed positively by supporters of Fascism as a first step in the Fascist revolution.

Some historians, such as Renzo De Felice, believe that Benito Mussolini was concerned more with the concept of Fascism rather than with the day-to-day economic concerns facing the government. De Felice argues that, while the Charter of Labour was not a complete success in actual practice, the very fact that Fascism put it in place was a great achievement because it established a national standard for workers' rights.¹⁰⁹ Had Mussolini been given more power to effect change, he would have done so. The constraints placed on Fascism by the monarchy, the industrialists, and the Church prevented Fascism from taking a more radical course. As events in the 1930s show (see Chapters 6 and 8), Mussolini took the radical path when given the opportunity.

In addition, Mussolini's evolution from socialism to nationalism and syndicalism shows that, with Fascism, Mussolini was trying to create a new force. The new force merged the beliefs of left-wing revolutionaries that Mussolini once held with those of the nationalists and syndicalists.¹¹⁰ Thus, he encouraged the development of corporatism and state-capitalism, which centralized power in the government. While conservative forces sought to disrupt this alliance within the Fascist movement, they could not destroy it. Syndicalists, leftists, and nationalists, by making themselves malleable to the changing times, were able to gain some influence within the party.¹¹¹ The Charter of Labour was but one step in the steady rise of the radical forces within the Fascist party. Thus, while it seemed at the time that workers were losing power under Fascism, it can be argued that they were losing power to the government and not to the industrialists, who were

themselves having their own cherished liberal-capitalist economic system taken over by the developing Fascist economic system. Industrialists like Gino Olivetti expressed their concerns to Mussolini personally, and he assured them that their independence was secure.¹¹² In reality, the Fascist regime was slowly taking over the economy for the purpose of creating an alternative to capitalism and communism. This “third way” can be seen as a kind of “state capitalism” in which the government, workers’ unions, and the employer classes, which included the wealthy industrialists, shared in the decision-making process. While never fully achieving its ultimate goal of total dominance, this creeping “state-capitalism” (see Chapters 5 and 6 show) became a serious threat to capitalist interests. Thus, it can be argued that, had leftist Fascists gained total control of the economy, they might have felt secure enough to follow through with their pro-syndicalist plans. In this light, the Charter of Labour can be seen as a first step in the gradual Fascist takeover of the economy.

Soon after the Charter of Labour was instituted, the Fascist government introduced a new project, the corporate system (see Chapters 5 and 6), which was an attempt to create joint structures that linked the workers, employers, and the state together to collaborate on economic planning. Alexander De Grand, points out that the Charter of Labour formed the basis for worker-employer relations.¹¹³ The Charter, then, established the embryonic structures of corporatism by forming state organizations to work out collective contracts between labor and employers. The Charter, however, reaffirmed the right of private property, to the relief of employers. In addition, it set goals aimed at giving workers tangible improvements, such as paid vacations and rest

periods. In this respect, both sides gained something. De Grand, however, argues that the ban on strikes was a major defeat for workers and tilted the balance of power toward the employers.¹¹⁴

Franklin Hugh Adler, in his exhaustive work on Italian industrialists, agrees with De Grand that the Charter was biased against the workers.¹¹⁵ Adler, however, places the blame for the slant on *Confindustria's* – the Confederation of Industrialists – successful attempts to pressure the government to make concessions to the employers. In addition, Adler stresses that the Charter of Labour was viewed differently by Fascist syndicalists, who saw it as “points of departure” as opposed to Confindustria’s view that it was to be “points of arrival.”¹¹⁶ These opposing views by conservative forces and radical Fascists were to continue and spread to other issues, such as defining the corporate system’s purpose and the delineating the state’s role in the economy.¹¹⁷

De Felice takes the view that the Charter of Labour was an attempt by Mussolini to compensate workers for the many concessions forced on them, such as salary reductions and a ban on strikes, in order to begin putting in place the corporate system.¹¹⁸ Other leaders inside Fascism agreed with Mussolini on the need to balance the pain and gain of corporatism between workers and employers. Enrico Suardo, head of the Ministry of Corporations between 1925-27 and a radical-syndicalist, argued that, after the workers’ many concessions, it was time that Fascism act against the “*plutocrazia*, (the) degenerates of capitalism, who will pay their share.” Also, Edmundo Rossoni, the syndicalists’ most powerful proponent within Fascism, called for “equal division of corporate profits and compulsory hiring [of workers] through employment offices run by

... Fascist syndicates.”¹¹⁹ The demands made by these two radical-syndicalists were revolutionary and would have resulted in major changes in the economic distribution of wealth. As a result of *Confindustria*’s strong united stance against the demands of the syndicalist faction inside the Fascist regime, however, no action was ever taken to implement these radical proposals. In fact, the final draft of the Charter of Labour adopted by the Fascist regime was vague and ineffectual. The document, although written by Giuseppe Bottai, the successor to Suardo as head of the Ministry of Corporations, was friendlier to the needs of the employers than previously envisioned by the radical wing of Fascism.

Ultimately, however, the Charter of Labour served as a basis for further action by Fascist syndicalists and radicals. The Charter was viewed by Bottai, and other corporatists, as conceding to the state an “active, directing role in the economy” and superseding the liberal economic system.¹²⁰ Mussolini himself pushed the Charter of Labour as a tool that would make production paramount, allow for more equitable sharing of products, and increase the role of the state as the supreme regulator of the economy.¹²¹ In stating these goals, Mussolini was striking a vision for the future while at the same time appeasing the conservative, syndicalist, and nationalist forces who were trying to pull him and Fascism to their side of the struggle.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Corporate State

Background

Renzo De Felice, in his famous biography of Benito Mussolini in the 1960s, presented a controversial view arguing that Mussolini had never discarded his socialist beliefs but, instead, had merged them with Fascism. De Felice's ideas contravened the prevailing views of historians who contended that Fascism was simply a tool of conservatives, such as industrial leaders. Furthermore, he argued that Fascism was a natural consequence of both the *Risorgimento* and socialism.¹²² According to De Felice, nationalism represented the values associated with the *Risorgimento*, like those of Mazzini, who in the 1860s had sought to create a nationalist and democratic state. Syndicalism, on the other hand, represented the values of socialism that sought to unite workers into powerful unions. Together, the two forces metamorphosed into "national-syndicalism" and became the pillars of popular Fascism.

National-syndicalism in the Fascist party, then, was supported by several factions within the party. Nationalists looked to national-syndicalism as a force that would unite the people. They envisioned a new society based on the common will of the nation. This new collective would be furthered by national-syndicalism, which had as its goal the inclusion of all workers under the guidance of the state.¹²³ According to this view, the revolutionaries and the *Risorgimento* of the 1860s were seen by nationalists as the rebirth of *Romanita*, which referred to a sense of destiny for the Italian race and a place for Italy to carry out its historical "civilizing mission."¹²⁴ Syndicalists and leftists looked to

national-syndicalism as a way for workers to achieve parity with business owners. They also hoped that the Fascist party would use the vehicle of national-syndicalism to enact new programs to aid the workers. They urged the Fascist party to enact legislation that would provide medical aid for workers, financial aid for sick and injured workers, and some form of social security system. In fact, all these proposals were enacted during the Fascist era. There were other proposals, instituted by the Fascist regime, including the 40-hour workweek, work rules designed to safeguard children and women, and aid to the poor.¹²⁵ While industrialists fought these proposals, they realized that they had to give ground on some occasions or else risk a crisis with the entire Fascist regime. As a result of these improvements to workers' conditions in the early 1920s, some leftists became convinced that the Fascist movement was more authentic and revolutionary than the Socialist and Communist parties.

Mussolini was not satisfied with making significant but un-revolutionary changes to the economy. He believed that the then-current capitalist economic system was destined to destroy itself as the natural result of progression from the Industrial Revolution to contemporary super-capitalism.¹²⁶ According to Mussolini, capitalism had gone through different phases and was in decline. He stated that capitalism had become "super-capitalism":

Super-capitalism would like all babies to be born the same length so that cradles could be standardized; all children to want the same toys; all men to wear the same uniforms, to read the same books, to like the same films; and everyone to crave for so-called labour-saving machines.¹²⁷

Furthermore, this standardization of capitalist economies would turn capitalism into a “social phenomenon,” where private business would become dependent on government assistance and guidance, which would force it to the “arms of the State.”¹²⁸ At this point, Mussolini added, capitalism becomes “State capitalism, which is State socialism reversed” and, thus, “one way or another we should arrive at the bureaucratization of national economy.”¹²⁹ Having reached this stage, the state begins its full intervention in the economy. But what sort of intervention? Would it be state capitalism, communism, or Fascism’s corporate state?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the views of Mussolini, Gentile, Papini, and others on the topic of statism. These Fascist leaders believed that Europe, not just Italy, was in a political, spiritual, and economic crisis.¹³⁰ They insisted, however, that the root of this crisis lay in Europe’s unstable political and economic situation. This crisis had its roots, according to Fascist thinkers, in the political and economic Liberal regime that had come to power in the aftermath of the independence wars of the mid-nineteenth century. Fascism rejected the theory of the “economic man” as the basis of history and the root of man’s search for fulfillment. Man, according to Fascism, was political, religious, and warlike, not just economic. Revolution, then, required a social, as well as an economic, reversal of the status quo. The Fascist revolution sought to utilize the masses and make them into the engine that would help the party carry out its aims.¹³¹ Knowing the goals of the corporate state aids in understanding how it would assist the Revolution. Mussolini argued that the individualist and self-oriented liberal economic system needed to be replaced by a nationalist system. The

characteristics of the corporate state rejected individualism while retaining some of the economic aspects of liberalism. Thus, the corporate economy would not overturn the right to hold private property. In general, Fascism viewed private property as a complement to the human personality and as an incentive to increase production. The primary objective of Fascism, however, was to bring order to the economy. Postwar Italy had been plagued by strikes and confrontations between workers and employers. As a result, the economy had suffered. Fascism promised an end to this situation, and the corporate system was a fulfillment of this promise. With the corporate state, the government ended strikes and instituted a system of stable relations between the classes. The social goals that corporatism instituted for workers included guaranteed work, fair wages, decent homes and the possibility of personal improvement, whether it be monetarily or in workers' professional lives.¹³² Fascist thinkers, including Mussolini, believed that the world was about to enter a science-inspired revolution:

Modern science has succeeded in multiplying the possibilities of wealth; science, controlled and spurred by the State, must now solve the problem of distribution of wealth, in order that the illogical, paradoxical, and cruel fact of poverty in the midst of abundance may cease to exist.¹³³

This prophetic vision of a liberal democratic world where, amid unimaginable wealth and material well-being, there is still a significant amount of poverty still existed, seemed inhumane to the Fascist utopian philosophers such as Gentile and Papini. They proclaimed that Fascism would use state power to create a more equitable economic system.¹³⁴ This demonstrates that Mussolini retained at least some of his earlier socialist-based ideals of a more just society. In addition, it is apparent from documents, such as

On the Corporate State, written in 1933, that Mussolini was instituting the Corporate system, in part, to end economic inconsistencies similar to those previously mentioned.¹³⁵

The Corporate system was created not to end economic disparities but, rather, to fulfill the Fascist myth of the “organic” nation. One of the strongest proponents of this myth was Gentile, who along with Mussolini, continually developed the idea throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Gentile, who co-authored many works with Mussolini, believed that man had a higher goal beyond his personal experience.¹³⁶ This higher goal was founded on the idea that all major aspects of life were tied to the state:

The Italian Nation is an organism having ends, a life, and means superior in power and duration to the single individuals. It is a moral, political and economic unit which finds its integral realization in the Fascist State.¹³⁷

The highest aim, then, was to make of individual Italians a single unit or whole. All moral, political, and economic aspects of the nation would become integrated under the Fascist State, which would utilize the power of the masses to carry out its revolution.

This emphasis on unity was pivotal to Fascism’s appeal as a harmonizing force and in its declaration that it aimed at balancing the interests of the classes. Its stated goal was not to do away with the classes, as Communism professed, but to establish an orderly relationship among them. Mussolini and Gentile set the standard for corporatism that was to become the model throughout Europe in the 1920s and 1930s.¹³⁸

How was the corporate state to achieve these grandiose plans for an economy that was a single unit and under the governance of a powerful state body? Corporations, according to Fascism, would link all the forces of production, workers, and employers alike and make them responsible to the State, in this case the corporate state. The

primary tool giving the Corporations power would be their ability to enforce agreements and contracts.¹³⁹

The Corporations

The Corporate System was created by a series of laws – the Labour Charter of 1927 and Corporate laws of 1934, among the most important of them – that set up twenty-two independent corporations. According to these laws, each corporation would manage a sector of the economy and guide its capital and labor relations. Each sector of the economy would have its own employer syndicate and worker syndicate, independent of the other. Every province would have a representative from the national syndicate to manage local production plans and employer-worker relations. These syndicates would come under the control of the government through the Corporate system. Each corporation would have a government representative, usually a Fascist party member, as the head.¹⁴⁰ The last link in the Corporate chain of command was the Fascist Council, with Mussolini as the head. The Fascist Council's role was to formulate policy and planning for the Corporations.

The Corporations were divided into sectors of the economy such as agriculture, industry, commerce, and the professions. The twenty-two managers of the corporations were grouped into what Mussolini called the “general staff” of the corporate state. The formal name given to this body was the National Council of Corporations. This body was empowered with quasi-legislative powers relating to the Corporations.¹⁴¹ Serving as a form of parliament, the NCC engaged in discussions of social, technical and economic issues. The NCC, however, fell under the guidance of the Fascist Grand Council, which

acted as a sort of executive branch. All economic matters of the nation were to be regulated and coordinated under this system.¹⁴²

The creation of the Corporate system allowed the Fascist government to proclaim itself as the “third way” between capitalism and communism. Mussolini said that Fascism would take what is best from both systems and incorporate it into its own economic system. The state would then act as a guarantor of the nation’s general welfare and guide the economy to greater productivity.¹⁴³

The Corporate System, however, like many other Fascist policies, was plagued by infighting between the major forces influencing the movement. The radicals, the syndicalists, and the nationalists were very hopeful that Corporatism would usher in their long hoped-for goals of bringing the leading industrialists, as well as other employers, under the control of the state. The nationalists had long sought to give the government more power so that it could unite the nation and make it stronger. Giuseppe Bottai, a leading proponent of Corporatism, believed that the Corporations would help regulate relations between all classes, thus uniting the country. He also sought to bring national production under state control with the aim of giving the state more say in economic development:

Citizens will not be selfish and individual and have the anti-social right of rebelling against any law of collectivity. The Fascist State with its corporative conception puts men and their possibilities into productive work and interprets for them the duties they have to fulfill . . . in this new conception. . . . The citizen is valued because of productivity, his work, and his thought . . . in the corporate state all national activities are reflected.¹⁴⁴

The establishment of the corporate state aimed at centralizing power in the state over labour and capital so that they would come under the direct influence of the Fascist state and Mussolini himself. Leftist contemporaries such as Gaetano Salvemini criticized Corporatism as anti-labor because it placed too much power in a state organ “friendly” to the industrialists. The Corporate system, however, also faced opposition from conservatives such as the powerful industrialists, who argued that giving the state too much power was a dangerous precedent.¹⁴⁵ Thus, the industrialists took steps to undermine the Corporate system. This opposition created severe problems for Mussolini. Compared with the unlimited powers of a Hitler or Stalin, both of whom wielded authority almost absolutely, Mussolini had to contend with many potent forces in Italy’s political and social structure. The industrial class, as well as monarchists and Liberals like Giolitti, who wanted to retain their traditional ways of doing things, were wary of change because above all they wanted, stability. This conservative opposition to radical economic changes succeeded in preventing the most radical proposals from being implemented. Nevertheless, the Corporate System set in place structures that would have led to revolutionary changes if given enough time. Mussolini felt that the Corporations were a major tool in the transition from laissez-faire capitalism to a more state-controlled society. He believed this economic shift was inevitable and cited capitalism’s crisis during the 1930s as evidence.¹⁴⁶

Throughout the 1930s, proponents of the Corporate System within the Fascist party, and especially Mussolini, its leading architect, worked to overcome opposition to

their economic plans for Italy. The following quote from a Mussolini speech supporting his policies highlights his foresight and revolutionary dreams for Italy:

The economic objective of the regime is the realization of a higher quality of social justice among the Italian people. This promise will be kept in full. But what is the meaning of the higher quality of social justice? It means that the worker's job will be secure, his wages constant, his home comfortable. It means the possibility of continual development and improvement. This is not all. It means that the workers, the labourers, are to penetrate more and more deeply into a knowledge and control of the productive process. If the last century was the century of the power of capital, the twentieth is that of the power and glory of labour. I tell you that modern science is destined to solve the problem of the distribution of wealth to the end that we shall no longer behold the illogical, paradoxical, and cruel fact of want in the midst of plenty.¹⁴⁷

This 1930s speech could have also been made in 1912, when Mussolini was editor of *Avanti*, the socialist daily newspaper. Although the speech may appear somewhat demagogic, it offers much insight about what moved Mussolini to act politically. It shows that Mussolini had not forgotten his working-class roots despite the many accusations to the contrary. In addition, it shows that Mussolini had a long-term plan stretching decades, even centuries. His declaration that the twentieth century would be labor's time indicates his vision for the future. He made another important point when he articulated the "illogical, paradoxical, and cruel" distribution of wealth under liberal capitalism. Mussolini was striking at the heart of the unequal economic and social system that develops under a laissez-faire system. His prediction of a future where science and technology will increase production to a level where there will be enough for everyone is quite prescient. However, while science was able to solve the problem of how

to produce enough for everyone, Mussolini's paradigm failed to resolve the issue of distribution, thus leaving mostly intact the "illogical, paradoxical, and cruel" aspects of capitalism. In his last years during the Salò Republic, Mussolini regretted that he was unable to unite the radical, nationalist, and progressive forces to defeat the conservative forces who did not want to change the fundamentals of the economic system. That failure was an important reason why Fascism failed to achieve some of its economic objectives. Nevertheless, Joseph La Palombara, an expert on Italian history, argues that, while Fascism was defeated in 1945, corporatism survived despite the unrelenting opposition of conservative forces.¹⁴⁸ Walter Laquer, on the other hand, believes that Mussolini had no real interest in the question of corporatism. He argues that, despite many pronouncements, corporatism accomplished very little.¹⁴⁹ Laquer's view, however, is based on few facts and its analysis too short to give it much weight. The following chapter describes how one major conservative force, the industrialists, almost single-handedly kept radical Fascists from putting into effect their plans for a corporate state.

CHAPTER SIX

The Industrialists, *Confindustria*, and the Radicals

As pointed out in the previous chapter, the corporate state was an attempt to bring Italy's economic forces together under the control of the Fascist State. The aim was to create a system where labor and management would come under the direct influence and leadership of the state. This plan, however, met with great resistance among industrialists, who wanted as little state involvement in their activities as possible. Radical Fascists, on the other hand, criticized the system as weak and unable to confront employer organizations, such as the powerful *Confindustria*, an organization that included all of Italy's most influential industrialists. Through this organization, industrialists such as Gino Olivetti, Alberto Pirelli, and Giovanni Agnelli were able to hold off any attempt at major economic change by the radical forces in the Fascist Party.

A major work on this topic, by Franklin Hugh Adler, sheds much light on the strong tension between industrialists and revolutionary Fascists throughout the Fascist period.¹⁵⁰ The work describes how leaders of industry, working in unison through *Confindustria*, fought a long battle with radical Fascists who were trying to create a revolutionary Fascist state. Other works, by Daniel Guerin or Alexander De Grand, are limited in their research and highly subjective in their analysis.¹⁵¹ A comparative analysis of these works with that of Adler gives more insight into the struggle that took place between industrialists and radical-syndicalists in the formative period of Fascism.

The Struggle

The struggle between the industrialists and Fascist syndicalists began in 1924 when Mussolini encouraged Fascism to “turn to the left.” This shift in political direction greatly unnerved the industrialists who responded by issuing a series of warnings to Mussolini not to go too far on the road to radicalism.¹⁵² Alexander De Grand, states that Mussolini and the industrialists were “fellow travelers in industry”; therefore, they were partners, not adversaries.¹⁵³ However, the evidence does not support De Grand’s view that the industrialists came close to ending their ties with Fascism as a consequence of the Matteotti Crisis, where a Socialist Parliamentary member was assassinated by Fascist sympathizers, because they felt Fascists had gone too far. As a result, Mussolini threatened to use the Fascist unions and the *squadristi* to “bully” the industrialists into submission if they tried to overthrow his regime.¹⁵⁴

According to Adler, the period of 1924-25 was pivotal in establishing relations between Fascism and *Confindustria*. The Matteotti Crisis forced Mussolini to take decisive action. Specifically, Adler argues that the industrialists’ attempts to “encourage” and threaten Mussolini into forming a coalition with the Liberals, as well as their call for him to abide by the rule of law, met with strong resistance from the ruler. On January 3, 1925, Mussolini declared that he alone would be responsible for the country and quickly moved to establish dictatorial rule. To gain the support of syndicalists, Mussolini also announced that the economy would come under more state control. This immediately set off alarms among the industrial elite. To placate the powerful industrialists, he eased Fascism away from the “turn to the left” that he had encouraged a few months earlier.¹⁵⁵

Throughout 1925, Mussolini took steps to end the Liberal-Fascist understanding that had begun in 1922 and helped establish the Fascist dictatorship. The press was muzzled, political parties were banned, and parliament's power was diminished. Mussolini also forced industrialists to fall in line and abide by the idea, if not the letter, of the corporate system.¹⁵⁶

These moves indicate a much more adversarial relationship than historian De Grand argues. In fact, it seems that Mussolini's intent was clearly in the direction of creating a corporate system under Fascist guidance. Mussolini took actions contradicting this goal only when forced to by circumstances or threatened by the powerful industrialists. Even so, Mussolini did not always bow to the industrialists. In the lira valuation scheme, which Mussolini ordered in 1925, he faced great pressure from the industrialists to stop the plan because it was hurting their ability to export their products. Mussolini defied the industrialists and ordered the lira set at a very strong 90 lira to the British pound.¹⁵⁷ He took this action to stop the high inflation that was ravaging the livelihood of fixed-income middle-class Italians and to make a point to the industrialists on his tolerance level.¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, however, the industrialists' economic power and political influence – as is the case in most industrialized nations – was too strong for Fascism to ignore.

Mussolini's most important supporters in his battle against *Confindustria* were the revolutionary syndicalists of the Fascist Party. In 1924, with Mussolini's blessing, strikes and syndicalist violence increased drastically as a response to the industrialists turning against him in the Matteotti crisis. In fact, De Grand concedes this point, stating that

industrialists disliked this “agitation” and the attempts by revolutionary Fascists to impose monopoly labor representation on the industrialists, which would greatly limit their freedom of economic action.¹⁵⁹ In the *Rivista di Politica Economica* annual of 1925, a mouthpiece of *Confindustria*, the industrialists made clear their displeasure at the government’s imposition of compulsory arbitration and syndical monopoly. These Fascist decrees were seen as a threat to the industrialist’s cherished freedom of action. The anti-liberal, anti-capitalist nature of the decrees was a clear sign that Fascism was becoming a threat to the industrialists. The ensuing confrontation between Fascism and *Confindustria* points out that the Fascist regime had its own agenda and was not a partner of the industrialists, as De Grand argues. Another historian, Renzo De Felice, describes Mussolini’s actions, as mentioned earlier, as the actions of a “revolutionary idealist concerned with vision rather than day-to-day concerns.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, while Mussolini’s actions were at times confused and too accommodating, he had radical goals to which he was committed.

This revolutionary spirit in Mussolini and other Fascists was greatly influenced by the syndicalist ideas of Georges Sorel. Sorel’s philosophy of revolutionary syndicalism and violent political action greatly influenced the extremist elements of Fascism, including Mussolini. Sorel argued that change could take place only through violent confrontation with the ruling classes and governments. Those in positions of power, Sorel said, would not make major concessions to workers unless forced to do so.¹⁶¹ Therefore, as the Matteotti Crisis and the ensuing events of 1924-25 show, a clear pattern emerges that supports the view that *Confindustria*’s relationship with Fascism was not a

collusive partnership. It was, instead, a struggle between industrialists and revolutionary Fascists to turn Fascism into an innocuous and ineffectual system or to turn it into a radical movement.

The Corporate System and Industrialist Intransigence

The corporate system and the Charter of Labour were parts of an overall reappraisal of world economic conditions by Italian intellectuals. Many rejected materialist-centered communism and capitalism as spiritually bankrupt. As mentioned earlier, Fascism presented itself as a “third way”. Historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat states that this “third way” was a response to a sense of crisis and decline in the West.¹⁶² The Fascist conception of the corporate state was seen by radical Fascists as their alternative to liberalism and Marxism.¹⁶³ They criticized these systems’ emphasis on materialism, viewing them as devoid of man’s need for heroism, individual creativity, and spirituality. Taken in this light, the development of Fascism must be seen as more than an attempt to alter economic conditions. The Fascist State’s attempt to establish the corporate system should be looked at as an attempt to alter the human condition. Thus, the corporate system represented a tool to move man’s place in society away from materialism as the end-goal of life. Instead, Fascism sought to create a system where the economy would be “rationalized” away from classism, selfish individualism, and greed and toward a more collective based alternative.¹⁶⁴ This collective-based economic system would place the nation as the ultimate beneficiary. In this new society, workers, small merchants, and industrialists would all have to put aside their individual needs for the good of the

To understand better the actions taken in the course of institutionalizing the corporate state, it is necessary to take into account the “spiritual” side of the corporate system. The centrality of the corporate state to Fascism’s goal of creating a “new man” based on the ideals of heroism, altruism, and devotion to the community and nation is pivotal. A reorientation toward a Fascist “spiritualism,” with a creative vision of the self that rejects selfish individualism and self-centeredness, and away from capitalist-communist materialism was a major reason why revolutionary Fascists refused to give up on corporatism. This attempt to create a “new spiritual order” from corporatism was a popular notion among Italian intellectuals during the Fascist era.¹⁶⁵ Industrialists, however, did not support this goal and were effective in neutralizing the impact of the corporate system.

Nevertheless, the corporate system represented another move away from centralization. As the state became more involved in private economic affairs, industrialists’ concerns increased.¹⁶⁶ Centralization had, in fact, become an issue within the Fascist regime. A debate took place between “integral corporatists,” who sought little or no state intervention in the corporations, as envisioned by Edmondo Rossoni, and revolutionary syndicalists, led by the minister of the corporations, Alfredo Rocco, who wanted a centralized corporate system under the tutelage of the state. Because Rocco had the backing of Benito Mussolini, the supporters of centralized corporatism won out.¹⁶⁷

The corporatist system supported by Rocco was backed by Mussolini for two key reasons. The centralized corporate structure gave most powers to the state, which was headed by Mussolini. This structure allowed Mussolini to have direct control over the

The corporatist system supported by Rocco was backed by Mussolini for two key reasons. The centralized corporate structure gave most powers to the state, which was headed by Mussolini. This structure allowed Mussolini to have direct control over the corporate state's development. Second, giving Mussolini direct control of the corporations and their employee and employer syndical bodies, would limit the danger that the syndicates would become too independent of the Fascist state, as might happen in a more independent "integral corporate" structure.¹⁶⁸

On the issue of corporatism, De Grand says that Rocco, minister of the corporations, and *Confindustria* were on the same side of the debate, and that Rocco was a lackey of the industrialists. This accusation stems from Rocco's willingness to compromise with industrialists and reluctance to push them too much for fear of risking a strong response.¹⁶⁹ While it is true that Rossoni's syndicalism would pose a serious challenge to *Confindustria*, the creation of Rocco's plan for a centralized corporate structure would also pose serious challenges to the industrialists. As already pointed out, *Confindustria's* greatest fear was losing independence to a corporate system under the direct control of the Fascist State.¹⁷⁰ De Grand's charge that Rocco colluded with the industrialists to weaken corporatism is a simplistic approach that belies the facts without any basis. A more likely scenario is that Rocco had to contend with Mussolini's wish not to go too far on the path of radical corporatism, which could have provoked a crisis with the still-powerful industrialists. In addition, it would have been risky to take major steps toward corporatism at a time when Mussolini was trying to consolidate power and was

leading a controversial plan to revalue the lira known as “Quota 90,” which was opposed by the industrialists.¹⁷¹

Confindustria's success in limiting the effectiveness and power of the corporate system lay in its piecemeal approach, which attacked corporatism's individual functions rather than risk a major confrontation by attacking the entire system.¹⁷² This approach was first put into action after Mussolini pushed Italy to dictatorship in the aftermath of the Matteotti crisis. In 1925, the Fascist government imposed syndical monopolies and compulsory arbitration on the economy. This move, in effect, gave the Fascist state dominance over the worker syndicates and the employer unions. Realizing they could not fight the new economic reality, *Confindustria* changed tactics by working against individual pieces of legislation. One of their first moves was to prevent the establishment of a key provision of corporatism, mixed employer-employee syndicates, which was supported by both Rocco and Rossoni. This give-and-take approach by the industrialists toward corporatism proved to be highly successful in stifling Fascist corporate plans in this particular case as well as in future cases.¹⁷³

Another approach used by *Confindustria* to limit the power of the corporate system was to collaborate with the traditional state bureaucracy to limit the powers of the Ministry of Corporations. The traditional ministries of the Italian State were jealous of the proposed powers that the corporate system was to be given. Giuseppe Belluzzo, in charge of the Ministry of the National Economy, warned Corporations Minister Giuseppe Bottai and other pro-corporate Fascists that “he had no intention of becoming an adjunct” of the corporations. *Confindustria* aptly exploited this sentiment within the traditional

ministries by encouraging them to resist the development of a powerful corporate system.¹⁷⁴ Noting these moves by *Confindustria*, a frustrated Bottai complained to Mussolini that “the neutrality of those who direct the Confederation of Industry has remained unchanged. Openly, and without even feigning to conceal it, they pursue a line which aims at the annulment of the corporate order of the state, and thus the Fascist regime.”¹⁷⁵ *Confindustria*’s attitude, as stated by Bottai, is confirmed by the words of Felice Guarnieri, a leading industrialist, who stated openly that *Confindustria* opposed any micromanagement of the industries. He also confirmed Bottai’s fears that the state bureaucracy was collaborating with *Confindustria* in preventing the corporate system from spreading its influence into sectors of the economy, such as in production and credit, previously under the other ministries’ oversight. Belluzzo, also confirmed *Confindustria*’s “colonization of the state apparatus in pursuit of its private interests” which was directed against the corporate system.¹⁷⁶ De Grand’s remarks on this issue are brief, but they support Adler’s research. De Grand says that the state bureaucracy was insulated from the aims of radical Fascists and its powers unlimited by any other state organ.¹⁷⁷

In the newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, the voice of Fascism and the main medium through which Mussolini expressed his views, there was regular coverage of the corporate system. Some articles covered important individual pieces of corporatist legislation, such as expanded health insurance for workers, more direct control of the corporations, and creation of workers’ compensation benefits.¹⁷⁸ Other articles announced important changes or new major projects. For example, the nomination of

Dino Grandi as president of the new Chamber of the Corporations in 1939, was given wide coverage in the newspaper.¹⁷⁹ This major emphasis on the corporate system by Mussolini's mouthpiece clearly indicates the importance that Fascist organizations put on developments related to the corporate state.

This detailed coverage by a newspaper directly controlled by Mussolini also indicates his continued interest in pursuing the corporate system even as late as 1939. Thus, despite some historians' views, such as those of De Grand, that the corporate system was a charade designed to fool the people into believing that Fascism was a revolutionary movement, the evidence supports the more likely theory that the process of creating a corporate economy was a slow one that had to account for opposition to its implementation. Nevertheless, the process was progressing, if ever so slowly, toward actualization of the goals long set. Some historians, like De Grand, wish to impose the "tortoise and the hare" scenario, where lack of quick progress toward fulfillment of the goals of corporatism, meant that the overall project was a failure.¹⁸⁰ Instead, a more realistic view takes into account the many difficulties faced by radical Fascists such as the previously discussed intransigence of industrialists. The radical Fascists' goal with respect to Corporatism was first to install as quickly as possible the new system as a new economic order and, second, to overthrow the entrenched capitalist economic system. These radical steps sowed great fear among industrialists that Fascism was becoming anti-capitalist.

One can infer from analyzing the role *Confindustria* played in the Fascist era - particularly the development of the corporate state - that the industrialists played a

decisive role in slowing, subverting, and limiting the aims of revolutionary Fascists to create a “third way” beyond capitalism and communism with corporatism as its foundation. Furthermore, this struggle may be seen as the focus point of the battle between conservative forces and revolutionary Fascists. The limited progress made in setting up the corporate state set a precedent for the resolution of other issues fought over by these two factions. Nevertheless, it must also be pointed out that the revolutionary Fascists, while frustrated, did not give up on their drive to create a corporate system. In addition, while an economic revolution -- as envisioned by the corporatists -- was never achieved, some revolutionary advances were made. The Charter of Labour and the Chamber of Corporations helped lay the foundation for a corporate state that was never abandoned, even during World War II. Also, while corporatism -- as envisioned by syndicalists -- was never achieved, Howard Wiarda argues that a sort of totalitarian state corporatism was close to being attained.¹⁸¹ Mussolini himself became increasingly more anti-capitalist in his speeches as the world depression wore on. Increasingly he used terms such as *plutocracy* and *super-capitalism* to describe liberal capitalism. As a result, the 1930s witnessed greater state intervention in the economy, though not necessarily through the corporate system.¹⁸²

IRI: State Intervention in the Economy -- Corporatism's Trojan horse

If some historians argue that the corporate state was a façade, there are virtually none that say the same about the Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale (IRI). The IRI was created on January 23, 1933, in order to save large banks and companies on the verge of bankruptcy by buying stock in them. This process made the state the largest

stockholder with controlling interest in the companies being rescued. By 1939, the IRI controlled large sections of the economy. Sectors such as steel, electricity, telephone, shipping, and naval construction were dominated by the Fascist state.¹⁸³ While this move by the Fascist government can be seen as propping up capitalism, Mussolini maintained that it was to save the economy. In addition, it can be argued that the end-result was a major increase in state-capitalism's dominance of the economy.

While the IRI was not an ideologically motivated organ like the corporate system, its very nature of being a state enterprise under politicians' influence made it political. In 1934, Mussolini declared that, "when a firm makes [an] appeal to the capital of all [the public/state], its private character ceases, it becomes a public matter." He also announced that the state's control of "three-fourths of the economy" effectively ended economic liberalism. The economy, he claimed, was now more state capitalism, or state socialism, than it was capitalism.¹⁸⁴ While Mussolini exaggerated the state's control of the economy, it is a fact that the IRI had become a major holder of industrial enterprises. This dominance continued after World War II and, by the 1960s, the IRI controlled over fifty percent of industry and remained at that level until the 1990s. Statements made by Angelo Costa, the first post-World War II leader of *Confindustria*, indicate the IRI's emerging dominance in the 1930's. Declaring that the IRI was a threat to liberalism and capitalism he called for its privatization.¹⁸⁵ In fact, the IRI was to become a major economic and political tool of the Christian Democratic Party after 1945.¹⁸⁶ Its very size was a threat to liberal capitalism. Under Fascism, then, the IRI became a major tool for economic restructuring and centralization. In a sense the IRI had achieved many of the

goals that Alfredo Rocco and other Fascists had hoped the corporate system would have attained.

Adler argues, however, that unlike the corporations, the IRI's vast holdings did not translate into political influence. Although decisions having to do with the IRI continued to be made by conservative forces inside and outside of Fascism, nevertheless this does not mean that no change occurred.¹⁸⁷ The rise of the IRI as a major economic force gave the Fascist state enormous ability to influence and direct production.¹⁸⁸ While the IRI did not make any radical changes, it did "began to integrate industries into a political force over which the industrialists had only limited control."¹⁸⁹

The growth of the IRI, the continued development of corporatism, and Mussolini's increasing diatribes against capitalism gradually changed the state's role in the economy from that of a minor player into a major one. The state, by virtue of being an actual owner of industry, began asserting its position as a major force in the economy and influencing it in concrete terms. With the IRI, radical Fascism was able to put in place some of the social programs that had been thwarted by *Confindustria*. One might even surmise that, had Italy not entered World War II, the Fascist radicals eventually might have gained the upper hand over the conservative business forces like *Confindustria* and finally pushed through to their logical conclusion radical economic and social plans.

Finally, Adler describes Fascism's economic radicalization of the late 1930s as a fatal blow against the industrialists:

Confindustria played no formative role in any of these measures. Though the association could assume a formal opposition, privately

leaders like Ettore Conti expressed nothing but bitter disdain . . . (at) the confines of disgraceful dictatorship. Private property remained, to be sure, but the entire framework of economic action became increasingly political and, as such, became ever more constraining, inflexible, irrational, and beyond the influence of *Confindustria*.¹⁹⁰

The industrialists realized that with the onset of aggressive Fascism in Ethiopia, where Mussolini declared the rebirth of the Roman Empire, and with the rise of the IRI, their position had been seriously weakened. The increasing involvement of the Fascist state in the economy was becoming more far-reaching than in previous years. As Conti lamented, the entire economic structure was becoming much less favorable for *Confindustria* to the point of threatening the entire liberal-capitalist system. Clearly, this radicalization of Fascism in the late 1930s supports the argument that Fascism was not a tool of business or that it was simply a reactionary or conservative dictatorship. The evidence indicates that Fascism had evolved from a cautious stance in the first decade to a progressively more radical approach to economic and – as a later chapter will show – foreign policy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Church and Fascism

The Catholic Church, clearly tied to conservatism, might lead some researchers to assume it was in agreement with monarchists, industrialists, and other proponents of the status quo. This assertion, however, is not entirely accurate. While it is true that the Church, in general, has been cautious to change, this has not always been the case. In the case of Fascism, the Church supported the movement because it offered to stop communism and to give Catholicism a greater role in society than it had been given under the Liberal regime.

Relations between the Catholic Church and Fascism, however, can be described as a tense working relationship. Italy's historical development had a great deal to do with how Fascism and the Church were forced to deal with each other. In fact, the rise to power of Fascism can be traced, in part, to the support it received from the Vatican. The convergence of Fascist and Catholic thought relating to political, economic, and social issues was more profound than some might believe.

Catholic Thought in the Modern World

During 1870, the world witnessed the end of the Catholic Church as a temporal power in Italy when Italian forces unifying the country seized the Papal States. The subsequent establishment of an anti-clerical Liberal government assured that Church and state would be in perpetual conflict. In 1871, the Italian State enacted the Law of Guarantees, which created a strong division between Church and State. This effectively

ended papal influence in Italy's political affairs. The Pope, infuriated by this new law, isolated himself inside the Vatican. Relations remained strained for the next fifty years.

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII wrote the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The encyclical contained proposals for social reforms that would, in the 1920s, be used as the basis for relations between the Vatican and Italy under Fascism. Many of the reforms proposed by Pope Leo XIII were visionary. Lillian Parker Wallace, has asserted that the Catholic Church had a tradition of socially minded efforts.¹⁹¹ This tradition led to the gradual development of a body of works that reflected enlightened and progressive values. Not until Pope Leo XIII wrote his *Rerum Novarum*, however, did the Catholic Church began to carry through actively on its humanist beliefs. Previously, the Church had been more closely tied to large landowners, aristocrats, and other powerful classes. Leo XIII's papacy was an important step in moving the Church closer to the poor and the working class.¹⁹² Some of his acts included ending clerical agitation against workers, giving speeches in support of workers, and receiving worker groups at the Vatican.¹⁹³ He also set up a committee to develop Catholic social policies. His main work in support of the working classes and the poor was the *Rerum Novarum*.

The encyclical addressed issues related to the new industrial economy and its impact on society. The contrast between the severe poverty of the lower classes and the enormous accumulation of wealth by the industrialists was one key worry of Leo XIII. Likewise slave-like conditions of workers in factories, child labor, and employers' indifference towards their workers concerned the Pope.¹⁹⁴

This problem required careful thought because Pope Leo XIII knew full well that leftist extremists wanted radical solutions, such as the seizure of all private property and factories, and the Pope was not willing to go that far. He believed that the idea of the state making property communal was wrong because it usurped the father's role as provider of the family. This belief was similar to the Fascist belief in the supremacy of the husband in family matters. Pope Leo XIII proposed, instead, to make it a right of all men to own property. Private property, he insisted, was a fundamental human right for both men and women. The state, he concluded, should help the poor and the workers acquire their own property¹⁹⁵ This solution, he hoped, would offer social dignity and justice to the lower classes without having to resort to revolutionary tactics. Again, this solution was consistent with Fascist ideas of the bourgeoisie, which idealized the social class as the backbone of Italian society.¹⁹⁶

In offering conciliation in place of confrontation, Pope Leo XIII prepared the way for an alternative to the radicalism of the Left which, as it turned out, was to be Fascism. In rejecting the radicals' ideas on class warfare, the Pope pointed out that capital and labor were dependent upon each other not exclusive of each other. He reminded the rich that workers were not slaves but fellow Christians who should be treated as such.¹⁹⁷ The state, he added, should be given the power to provide for the well being of all, rich and poor. Thus, according to Pope Leo XIII, the worker had the individual duty to perform his work while the owner had the responsibility to run his factory humanely. The State, in addition to providing for the individual's well being, should make sure that the two

groups performed their duties for the benefit of the nation.¹⁹⁸ Pope Leo XIII also believed the following about the state:

[The state] must protect private property and restrain the advocates of revolutionary change by violence; it should seek to obviate strikes by public remedial measures for the just claims of laborers; it must protect the workingman's spiritual and mental interests [in which all men are equal], and to this end insist upon the day of rest – the Lord's day.¹⁹⁹

The name that Leo XIII gave for these reforms was the Great Charter of Labour, almost precisely the name Mussolini gave to his Charter of Labour in 1927. The similarities go beyond the names, however, in that they shared very comparable visions. Both charters sought to protect private property and to create a state organ that would have powers to end strikes and mediate between workers and employers. Remarkably, both charters set the groundwork for the corporate state, which Fascism implemented in the 1930s. In fact, for a long time, the Church had discussed corporatism as a possible solution to many social ills. Both charters also emphasized the importance of the collective good and the need for workers and employers to put their own self-interests below those of the community and nation. It seems clear, then, that the Vatican's relationship with Fascist Italy was to be a closer relationship than that which had transpired under the liberal Italian governments after the *Risorgimento*.

The reaction to *Rerum Novarum* and the Great Charter of Labour, like the reaction to Fascism's Charter of Labour and the Corporations, was either praise, fear, or anger. Extreme leftists saw the Pope as engaging in political trickery. Extreme rightists attacked him as being tilted too much to the side of the poor and the working class. For the most part, however, the Pope's proposals were greeted enthusiastically by the majority of

Italians and especially the lower classes who, as faithful Catholics, had long hoped the Church would focus more on their suffering.

Pope Leo's XIII's proposals were to become an important foundation for Fascism's corporate system project in the 1920s. As with Mussolini, leftists, even within his government, viewed Pope Leo XIII's proposals as mostly propaganda intended to gain the support of workers. Conservatives, on the other hand, worried that the Corporate system of the Pope and of Fascism, if fully implemented, could radically alter the economic balance in the favor of the working classes. The majority of Italians, however, including nationalists, Fascist party members, and Catholics, who saw the ideals of *Rerum Novarum* in Mussolini's proposals, were excited at the prospects for change in Italy's social and economic life.²⁰⁰ Like Mussolini, Pope Leo XIII sought to take the initiative away from militant radicals on both sides of the spectrum while at the same time making some major changes in the course of the nation. Like Fascism, the Church gained a great amount of respect from intellectuals, political leaders, and the lower classes for its attempt to improve conditions in Italy.

Catholic Political Organizations and Fascism

Early in the 1900s, Catholics ended their isolation from Italy's political life with the blessing of the Vatican. This change altered the political winds of Italy permanently and dramatically, and greatly improved Fascism's takeover in the 1920s. Among the early politically active Catholic groups were the *Integrismi* whose sole aim was to fight the evils of the modern world. Another Catholic group, the clerico-moderates, believed it would be best to work to effect change within the existing political situation. As such,

they were more willing than the *Integrismi* to work with the Liberal government of Italy. This group actively sought a resolution to the Roman Question and an end to the tense relationship between Italy and the Vatican. In the role of mediators, the clerico-moderates proved invaluable as a bridge between the Catholic Church and Fascism in the 1920s when they became clerico-Fascists.²⁰¹

The most important Catholic thinker of the early 1900s was Luigi Sturzo. Born in Sicily, Sturzo understood the problems of southern Italy and the suffering of the poor and the working class. As a devout Catholic, Sturzo opposed the anti-clericalism of the extreme left. He did, nevertheless, believe that the Church needed to respond to the social problems facing Italy. Like the Fascists a few years later, Sturzo believed that a political movement must take into consideration not just the people's individual needs but also those of the nation.

Sturzo was dedicated thoroughly to the invigoration and salvation of Italy as a social unit, rather than Italians as individuals or the Church as an organization within Italian life, and for that a Political movement with an ideal, a programme and a cohesive Structure was necessary.²⁰²

Sturzo's proposals appear to echo those of Fascism with respect to emphasis on the "social unit" rather than the individual and on the need for a "cohesive" and strong state.

Sturzo's plan to make Italy a single social unit and his insistence that Italy needed a national party that was independent of socialists and conservatives was very popular among progressives. Similarly, within the Fascist party, pressure arose from conservative forces and extreme leftists who sought to push the party in opposite directions. The main supporters of Mussolini's corporate state plans, however, the nationalists and

syndicalists, supported Mussolini's plans and urged him to continue his "creeping" revolution. Both Pope Leo XIII and Benito Mussolini developed policies that addressed the concerns of the masses, whether they were workers, peasants, the poor, or bourgeoisie. They sought revolutionary change without instigating the violence that came along with radicalism. Both leaders had to create a balancing act among their diverse supporters who had opposing interests.

The Popular Party and Fascism

Italy's Pyrrhic-like victory in World War I became apparent soon after when its hopes of territorial gains were shattered by the allies' unkept promises. The ruined economy further added to the chaos of the post-war. As a result, Italy became a radicalized society. Socialists gained strength while the extreme right demanded that the government act immediately to take what was promised by the allies. Also, as the Liberal government steadily lost its ability to govern, there emerged a power vacuum. Out of this volatile situation, Luigi Sturzo founded the Popular Party of Italy (PPI). His goal was to offer Italians a progressive Catholic alternative.

Sturzo's party called for support for the working class.²⁰³ It promised to increase worker wages and proprietorship, give women the right to vote, and institute cooperation between the classes instead of warfare. The PPI proposed that the economy be "Christianized" to help workers and the poor achieve a decent standard of living. The party called for wealth redistribution as a way to uplift the lower classes.²⁰⁴

The emergence of the PPI caused a fundamental shift in political power. It marked the end of Liberal rule as Catholics joined the party en-masse. And on the left,

the Socialists lost their momentum as the PPI presented itself as a moderate alternative to the dangerously militant Left. Its first electoral test in 1919 was a major success, gaining 100 seats in Parliament and making it the third largest party.²⁰⁵ Yet, in the elections of 1921, the PPI unable to build on the success of 1919, got about the same amount of support, partially at least because it showed little interest in resolving the Roman Question that had caused the estrangement of the Vatican from Italy. The PPI's indifference in this question was at a time when the Vatican was desperately searching for a solution angered Church officials. The party's subsequent weakness can be partially blamed on this issue. The Vatican's neutral stance on the PPI and subsequent opposition to the movement proved to be a major blow to the party.²⁰⁶

As the political situation worsened, and power changed quickly from one group to another, the Vatican was forced to make difficult choices. With the demise of the liberal regime, the Church could no longer depend on conservative rule. Also, with growing socialist militancy, accentuated during the Biennio Rosso, a period of chaos caused by strikes and political tension, the Vatican became deeply concerned by the possibility of a Communist revolution.²⁰⁷ Faced with this threat and its inability to work with the PPI, the Vatican turned to a new force promising peace and stability, the Fascists.

Fascism and the Vatican

Mussolini's rise to power and his relations with the Vatican demonstrate opportunism and political cunning. According to historian John F. Pollard, because of the threat of imminent revolution from the left, the anti-Catholic tendencies of the Liberals, and the Vatican's dislike of Liberalism, the Catholic Church turned to the

Fascists.²⁰⁸ The Vatican saw the Fascists as resolute anti-Communists. Pope Pius XI had, in fact, been in Poland when the Bolsheviks nearly overran Warsaw. Pollard believes that this experience made a strong impression on Pius and led to his crusade against communism. As a result, Mussolini's promises that Fascism would strongly protect the rights of the Church, had a great impact on the Vatican's decision to support the Fascist movement. Walter Laquer also supports the view that the two institutions were compatible in some areas. He argues that both leaders' strongly anti-liberal and anti-communist stands made them natural allies at a time of great uncertainty.²⁰⁹

The death of Pope Benedict XV and the subsequent election of Pope Pius XI helped push the Vatican on the side of Fascism. This change resulted in a major shift in political thinking within the Vatican. Whereas Benedict XV had been a moderate, Pope Pius XI was an extreme conservative. Pope Pius XI saw the greatest danger to the Church as the threat posed by communist atheism. At the same time, he had a strong dislike for the Liberal regime. He looked on the Liberal leaders as decadent and irreligious and detested the laissez-faire atmosphere of democracy, believing that it lowered moral standards.²¹⁰

Early in its creation, Fascism had shown anti-Catholic tendencies. Mussolini, after all, was an atheist. Sensing an opportunity for political gain, however, Mussolini quickly changed Fascism's relations with the Vatican. Standing in front of the Vatican on the morning of February 5, 1922, Mussolini remarked that the papacy, "heir of the universality of the Roman Empire, represents the greatest glory of Italian history and tradition."²¹¹ In a letter to the poet and patriot, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Mussolini

expressed his view that the Vatican could be very useful to Fascism, saying that Catholicism could be a great force for an expansionist Italy.²¹²

Upon gaining power in 1922, Mussolini quickly sought to gain the support of the Vatican for his new government. In one of his first moves after becoming Prime Minister, Mussolini moved to silence anti-clerical Fascists. Then he set the party on a conciliatory course with the Catholic Church, stating that “Fascism neither practices nor preaches anti-clericalism.”²¹³ As an act of good faith, he offered badly needed financial assistance to the Vatican. With these moves, Mussolini set about to woo the Vatican.²¹⁴

Mussolini soon began a serious program to integrate Catholicism into Italian social and political life. His most important step was to bring religious instruction to public school, an act that was still in force at the end of the century. Mussolini's Fascist government also raised the state's salaries to clergymen, reintroduced public crucifixes in all public buildings, and appointed military chaplains. The Vatican's response was one of great joy. For the Vatican, the concessions were a lot more than it could ever obtain from fifty years of Liberal government. Consequently, when the Vatican was forced to decide whom to support in the political chaos of the 1920s, the decision was an easy one to make. The Vatican also took the side of Fascism because it believed it offered a hopeful and stable future, or so it seemed.²¹⁵ Finally, Fascism's need for Catholic backing, and the Vatican's search for a way to end its isolation, paved the way for the formal negotiation process to settle the Roman Question.

The Lateran Treaties

By 1926, the Vatican and Fascism had finalized a treaty. One aspect of the treaties addressed the Vatican City's international status. With King Victor Emmanuel's reluctance, Mussolini ceded the small territory of the Vatican to the Pope. The second agreement concerned compensation for loss of property and revenue caused by the Vatican's dispossession of the Papal States to Italy in the 1860s. A large sum of money was given to the Vatican as compensation. These agreements brought delight and optimism to Italians hoping for an end to State and Church strife.

The Concordat

The other major agreement involved more thorny issues, such as political involvement by priests and the Church's role in the education of Italian youth. Another concession the Vatican sought and received was its role in family matters, including marriage. The Vatican asked for and received the reinstatement of Canon law, which blurred the lines of separation between Church and State.²¹⁶ Mussolini agreed with the Pope that the separation imposed under the Liberal regime was an anomaly in Italian history.²¹⁷ In fact, ever since the time of the Roman Empire up to 1870, the Church had played a central role in Italian society. The return of the Catholic Church as the state religion was thus sealed.

Vatican and Fascist Relation in the 1930s

The agreements between Fascism and Catholicism were supposed to help establish good relations. For the most part they did. Because the Vatican was a conservative force, however, it tended to side with other conservative forces that sought

to limit radical change. Catholic Action, a youth organization, adamantly opposed some aspects of Fascism, such as its near idolatrous behavior towards *il Duce* and Fascism. Also, the Vatican was uneasy over Mussolini's dictatorial powers, and Fascists were unhappy with the Church's hold on Italians. In addition, Fascists within the government were upset that Mussolini had made too many concessions, such as offering large financial compensation and territory around the Vatican. In response, Mussolini chose Catholic Action as the tool to reign in the Church. He limited its religious and social activities and ordered its surveillance.²¹⁸

It is clear from the events that took place that the Lateran Accords did not result in more peaceful and harmonious relations between the Vatican and the Fascist regime. The changes, however, did bring about the creation of a Fascist-Vatican alliance. This alliance gave the Church many new powers and responsibilities over Italians. It also allowed Catholics to express their nationalist sentiments without fear of stoking the Vatican's anger. Thus, the foundation was laid for an era of nationalistic Christianity. In 1935, when Italy invaded Ethiopia, most Catholics, including the Pope, gave their enthusiastic support. The Vatican was especially supportive of Italy taking the side of Franco in the Spanish Civil War. These moves may have been seen as acts of imperialism by the world, but to Italians and to the Vatican they were holy crusades. The invasion of Ethiopia was, to the Vatican, a Christianizing mission. In Spain, meanwhile, Fascist Italy had saved Spain from God-less communism.²¹⁹

In economics, too, the Fascist government and the Church were in accordance on some issues. Pope Pius XI approved of the corporate state, comparing it to Pope Leo's

Rerum Novarum. The Pope attacked capitalism, as did Mussolini, for being too harsh on the masses. For the Pope, then, Fascist Corporatism seemed a good alternative to greedy and chaotic capitalism and anti-Christian Communism. The Pope regarded capitalism and communism as being devoted solely to the altar of materialism. As seen by the Pope, Fascism offered a third, better ideology because it sought to balance materialism and spiritualism. Hence, it is logical to see why the Vatican sought a working relationship with the Fascist regime.

It is also important to point out that Fascist and Catholic relations were dominated by their respective leaders. Pope Pius XI's relations with Fascism alternated from positive feelings to reluctant alliance to outright opposition to the violence perpetrated on Catholic Action by Fascists. In the late 1930s, Pope Pius XI's main concern was to maintain peace in Europe, to keep communism from spreading out of Russia and into Europe, and to maintain a strong vibrant Church. In all three phases, he failed. It is maybe somewhat unfair to judge the Pope too harshly, however, for having tried to work with Fascism and its harsher counterpart Nazism. Nazi ideas of racial domination and German hegemony made it a far more difficult regime with which to work.²²⁰ Thus, its relationship with Nazis was much more tense than that with Fascism. Had Fascist and Church relations not been overwhelmed by the entry of Nazism into European politics, it is possible to conceive of a long and fruitful relationship, albeit with some periodical strains.

The Bolshevik Obsession of Pope Pius XI

The death of Pope Pius XI on February 10, 1939 had a profound impact on Fascist-Vatican relations and foreshadowed darker things to come later in the year. Under his reign Pope Pius XI had secured the Vatican's sovereignty and maintained a working relationship with Fascist Italy. According to Joseph Florencio, the Pope's actions were based on his strong opposition to communism:

Pius considered Bolshevik communism to be the evil of the twentieth century. Many of the decisions regarding world affairs were with one eye to the East . . . Much of what Pius felt must be attributed to his time in Poland immediately after the Great War. Called Monsignor Rattiat at that time, he saw the advance of the Bolsheviks to the very outskirts of Warsaw, only to be driven back. After his election, Pius XI developed an obsession with communism and stopping it.²²¹

This obsession led Pope Pius XI to seek alliances with foes of communism. Hence his support of Fascism in Italy and in Spain under Franco, must be seen in this light, as well as his early dealings with Nazism. In the end, he saw that Nazism was different than Fascism and spoke out strongly against it. In these turbulent times between World Wars I and II, relations between church and state in Italy are but a microcosm of the times. The Concordat and the establishment of relations between the Vatican and the Italian state were great accomplishments. The relationship, however, was frequently tested, at times quite severely. The death of Pope Pius XI and World War II shattered the Concordat created jointly by Mussolini and Pope Pius XI. Nevertheless, as it has done throughout its existence, the Church survived intact.

CHAPTER EIGHT

War as an Instrument of Fascist Radicalism

Mussolini's forays into foreign military adventures were rooted in Fascist ideology in that it supported the belief in aggression and violence as an "end". This view was a fundamental step in Fascism's goal of turning Italians into warriors and aggressors and away from their traditional role as victims and a conquered people. War, however, was a dangerous tool that could result in catastrophic consequences for the country. Italy's industrialists were deeply concerned that military adventures could result in unforeseen dangers for the nation as well as economic trouble for themselves. As a result of this fear, industrialists acted forcefully to keep Italy out of any conflicts. Militarism, however, was too much a part of Mussolini's belief system to allow anyone, including industrialists, to sway il Duce from his dreams of conquest. The Ethiopian War and Italy's entry into World War II illustrate the limitations of the industrialists' influence on Mussolini. Italy's involvement in the two wars proves that Italian Fascism was not just a tool of capitalism, as Gallo and Tannenbaum argue, but had its own agenda and was, at times, willing to take risky actions in order to carry out its aims.

Nationalists as Fascists

Nationalists were not always a cohesive force within Fascism, and they tended to divide into competing interests throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Some nationalists joined syndicalists in seeking to create a revolutionary Fascist regime. Others wanted the country to be disciplined and ordered and, thus, supported conservative forces like the monarchy.

National-syndicalists were leftists who chose a nationalist path for their syndicalist ideas, breaking with international Socialists.²²² Mussolini was one of these ex-Socialists, who in forming the Fascist Party, mixed socialism with extreme nationalism.²²³ These nationalists sided with leftist radicals in their struggle with conservative factions.

Another major group of nationalists who joined Fascism came from the Italian Nationalist Association. These nationalists were more conservative than the national-syndicalists and tended to support the monarchy and the Catholic Church. They did, however, have an activist agenda. They supported a strong central government and sought to lead mass organizations to the nationalist cause. Most importantly, they supported a nationalistic foreign policy. It was in foreign policy, then, that both the nationalist-syndicalists and traditionalist nationalists were in strong agreement. Luigi Federzoni and Alfredo Rocco, ministers in the Fascist government, were the nationalists' most important voices throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.

The Myth of Nationalism

Nationalism was seen as a religious, even mythical, experience among many fanatical nationalists. Mussolini argued that nationalism should be based on a spiritual, not just territorial, worldview.²²⁴ Giovanni Gentile, a leading philosopher of Fascism and minister of education, believed that nationalism's most important tool was the state. The state, he argued, should develop a nationalistic spirit in its citizens through various means, such as ceremonies and marches, militarism, and war.²²⁵ A colleague of Gentile, Enrico Corradini, supported "proletarian nationalism," whereby the lower classes and the

poor, including entirely poor nations, would be engaged in a battle against domineering capitalistic and plutocratic nations like the United States and England.²²⁶ James Gregor argued that, in the twentieth century, a struggle ensued between systems that were founded on materialism and mass consumption and other systems such as Fascism, that were “spiritually” centered. These spiritually centered-systems made the ideals of heroism, myth, and self-sacrifice the highest goals that the state should pursue. Furthermore, the highest expression of these goals was through nationalism and war.²²⁷

The following quote by Mussolini, as cited by Gentile, best describes what Fascist nationalism meant about heroism and myth:

This is the new consciousness; our race's new masculine and warlike pride which, thanks to fascism, has brought back the Roman tradition. Here are the fascist battalions marching past; and there, in perfect marching order, we can see the most beautiful, noble and generous aspects of our people. Intelligent and lively adolescent faces marching beside mature men whose faces betray the strain imposed by the speed of the march; workers and clerks with modest clothes . . . people who have fought with all kinds of weapons and on all fronts, who fiercely display their medals, and who march with the same pride as when they left the trenches to commemorate the dead and celebrate victories and to restore their spirit with the memory of their heroes and martyrs, and to prepare themselves for new glories and victories.²²⁸

The words ring of the days of Roman legions and Greek warrior-heroes. The theme here is obvious: war and the heroism of the individual in a wartime environment. In addition, it concerns the masses and their participation in the glories of soldiers. The theme is a vicarious, but nevertheless heartfelt and spiritual, experience for those watching, as much as it is for those marching in the parades. As in the Roman era when legions marched through the streets of Rome past wildly cheering and thankful citizens full of pride, the

soldiers of the Fascist era, too, had a lofty and mythical role in society. Fascism worked diligently to duplicate the Roman setting by encouraging both heroic soldier and prideful citizen to take part in these grandiose parades. The aim was to make the citizen feel the same nationalistic fervor and pride that the soldier naturally felt. This was the principal setting used by Fascism to prepare Italians for war.. This was the principal setting used by Fascism to prepare Italians for war.

The Ethiopian War: Nationalists Take Charge as Conservatives Retreat

Nationalist groups had been relatively quiet in the years following Fascism's ascendance to power. Mussolini, while very supportive of nationalists on foreign policy matters, had been more focused on domestic issues in the early years of his rule. Mussolini did have one foreign policy obsession, Ethiopia, which he regularly brought up in his speeches. Italy's catastrophic defeat at Adowa in 1896 had been a sore issue among nationalists, and Mussolini frequently asserted that it must be avenged.

The road to the Ethiopian War of 1935 began on July 25, 1934. On that day, Mussolini stood up to Nazi Germany's provocations and threats to annex Austria. He sent two Italian army divisions to the Austrian border along the Brenner Pass as a warning to Berlin. This action drew support and cheers from Western countries, especially France and England. Mussolini, however, wanted something in return for taking sides with France and England against Adolph Hitler's Germany. The price was Ethiopia. In a series of meetings with French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval, Mussolini sought the acquiescence of France concerning Italy's demands in Ethiopia. Mussolini believed that he had received this authorization.²²⁹

Mussolini immediately set about preparing a massive military operation in Ethiopia. As Mussolini delivered long diatribes on the need for action in Ethiopia, nationalists voiced their strong support. Mussolini's reasons for going to war mirror those of the nationalists who wanted to bring honor and territories to Italy. In a meeting on Ethiopia with his special envoy to France, Pino Aloisi, Mussolini coached his subordinate to be strong:

You must act more like a warrior than a diplomat, a Fascist rather than a negotiator. . . . Even if they gave me everything, I would rather avenge Adowa [Ethiopia].²³⁰

Mussolini's aim was clear. He wanted a war so that Italy would gain the world's respect and fear. Italy, he argued, deserved an honored place among the world's powers. At home, Mussolini had another reason for seeking a war. He wanted to create strong nationalistic feelings among the Italian people. On October 2, 1935, the day war broke out with Ethiopia, Mussolini presented himself before the nation. All Italians were called to their local *piazze*, where they were given the news of the war. Appearing before a large crowd at Rome's Piazza Venezia, Mussolini boomed in his typical style: "We have been patient with Ethiopia for forty years . . . Basta (enough)."²³¹ Italy was at war. This example of aggressive nationalism was Fascism at its quintessential best; it gave a grand show for the masses, who became ecstatic at the prospect of national glory. With this move, Mussolini had succeeded in uniting most Italians under the banner of Fascist nationalism. Renzo De Felice referred to the Ethiopian War as Mussolini's "political masterpiece."²³²

This great outburst of nationalism and conquest suggests strongly that Fascism did not just represent a conservative dictatorship. In foreign policy, at least, Fascism had become a revolutionary force ready to break with the status quo of international relations.

Mussolini stated:

this is a war of the poor . . . the war of the disinherited, of the proletariat. We are opposed by the ranks of conservatism, selfishness, and hypocrisy.²³³

Italy, Mussolini declared, was a victim of a conspiracy by plutocratic-capitalist nations out to destroy Fascism. At home, the response from conservative groups was mixed. The Church, seeing an opportunity for missionary conversion of Ethiopia, cheered and even blessed the operation as a sacred mission. Other conservative forces, however, were not as happy. Industrialists, while pleased to produce more weapons, were seriously concerned that international sanctions could destroy the economy. They also feared that Italy might soon be at war with England, which would certainly not be good for business.²³⁴ In addition, the conservative nature of the industrialists made them averse to embarking on such a risky and dangerous mission. Mussolini, however, was not going to be denied. With strong support from all nationalists, Mussolini brushed aside the fears and objections of the industrialists and pushed ahead with his plans.

The Ethiopian War is a milestone in the distribution of power and influence within Fascism between nationalist and conservative forces. In foreign policy, Fascist extreme nationalists had a strong ally in Mussolini. Whereas Mussolini tended to waver on economic matters between conservatives and radical Fascists, Mussolini did not hesitate in foreign policy, siding with the extreme nationalists on all key issues. He was

just as determined as other extreme nationalists to build an empire. Industrialists, monarchists, and other conservatives could only watch in fear and trepidation as Mussolini turned to a more radical foreign policy. Radicalism succeeded here because Mussolini was unrelenting in his determination to go to war and the industrialists thought that they could make substantial profits from selling weapons to the state.

World War II

Until the 1930s, conservative forces led by the industrialists had for the most part succeeded in limiting the impact of radical-syndicalism on the economy and extreme nationalism on foreign policy. The victory of the nationalist agenda in Ethiopia, however, proved to be a pivotal turning point. The triumph in Ethiopia emboldened radical-syndicalists and extreme nationalists, as well as Mussolini, to push Fascism on a more radical course. Franklin Hugh Adler describes this change:

As the 1930s progressed, Mussolini's personalistic-bureaucratic regime embarked upon an ever more economically irrational, belligerent, and proto-Nazi path: autarky, the alliance with Germany, racial legislation, and finally war against England and France, Italy's traditional allies. *Confindustria* played no formative role in any of these measures. . . . The Fascist experiment had led the once proud liberal nation into the confines of a disgraceful dictatorship. . . . The entire framework . . . [became] beyond the influence of *Confindustria*.²³⁵

The shift from a neutral to a pro-German foreign policy was an important element in the transformation of conservative Fascism into a more radical regime. Another sign that nationalists were gaining more influence at the expense of industrialists was the policy of autarky, or national self-reliance. Autarky was implemented to prepare Italy for all-out war. By this time, *Confindustria*'s influence had diminished to such a degree that it had

no role in major domestic and foreign policy decisions. The industrialists were no longer able to challenge confidently Fascist radical policies. The only option left for them was to complain privately that Fascism was pushing Italy away from its traditional relationship with *Confindustria* and, more importantly, from Western powers like France and England.²³⁶

In 1939, a series of events dealt further blows to *Confindustria*'s ability to influence the Fascist government: Italy's invasion of Albania in April, the Pact of Steel between Italy and Germany, and the start of World War II. These critical events helped consolidate radical Fascism's emergence as the dominant force within the Fascist government. Nowhere was radical Fascism's influence more evident than in foreign policy, as extreme Fascist-nationalists moved Italy on a collision course with liberal-capitalist nations. The best that *Confindustria* could do was declare its neutrality on whether Italy should join the war and on which side, the Allies or Germany. This neutral stance proved to be a complete failure as it showed itself to be weak and indecisive in the face of Fascism's momentous turn to radicalism.²³⁷ Business-oriented industrialists did not comprehend how strongly radicalism, nationalism and war could rouse Italians.

Italy's entry into World War II on the side of Nazi Germany was the final step in the total radicalization of Fascist foreign policy. Conservative forces were completely marginalized as Fascist Italy under radical domination initiated wars of conquest in France, the Balkans, and Africa. Fascist Italy's final step to declare war on the capitalist and "plutocratic" nations was a natural consequence of nationalist and radical Fascist philosophy. Mussolini, who in his youth had been a radical Socialist and anti-capitalist,

strongly supported this process. His long-held imperialistic ambitions for himself and Italy, then, were a major reason behind the Fascist shift to radicalism and anti-capitalism. We can infer that Mussolini had never given up his nationalistic aims and was waiting for the right moment to act on them. The world events of the late 1930s afforded him that opportunity.

CHAPTER NINE

The Republic of Salo: Fascism's Will and Testament

Italy's Republic of Salo, also referred to as the Social Republic, was the government that ruled northern Italy in the final years of Italian Fascism, and has been an afterthought for some historians of Fascism. This is a mistake, as some of the most insightful of Mussolini's beliefs are revealed through studying this period. In addition, for the first time in its history, Fascism can be observed in its most radical and unhindered form. This reason, alone, makes the Social Republic of Salo, as it was also known, an important resource on Fascism.

The Social Republic was established in 1943 following the dismissal of Mussolini by the Grand Council, his imprisonment, and his ensuing rescue by German paratroopers. The rump Fascist State of northern Italy, the Republic of Salo, was set up with the backing of the German Army. The division of Italy into a Fascist republic in the north and a pro-West monarchy in the south followed, allowing Mussolini the possibility to pursue a freer course than before.²³⁸ Freed entirely of the intransigence of the industrialists, the conservative monarchy, and the Vatican, Mussolini surrounded himself with the radical elements of Fascism.

The ideological foundation of the Social Republic was much closer to its radical and socialist roots than at any time since Fascism's rise to power in the early 1920s. This is because of Fascist radicals such as Roberto Farinacci,

the ex-socialist-turned-Fascist Renato Ricci, the militarily capable Marshall Rudolfo Graziani, and Mussolini loyalists like Giorgio Pini. In the only congress held by the newly formed Republican Fascist Party, its leaders set to work creating a constitution and establishing policy for the new Republic. The Congress of Verona, held on November 14, 1943, was headed by radical Fascists like syndicalist Farinacci and the extreme nationalist Alessandro Pavolini.²³⁹

The Congress called for a republican form of government elected popularly. While distancing itself from the Vatican, it nevertheless made Catholicism the state religion, not wanting to alienate Catholic Fascists. The Social Republic's most important ideas and legacy involved policies that harkened back to Fascism's radical and syndicalist roots.²⁴⁰ Alexander De Grand says the following of the Social Republic's economic goals:

Perhaps the most interesting parts of the Verona program were devoted to social and economic policy. The proposed system differed from the state-directed capitalism of the earlier regime. As might be expected, when the conservative restraints were removed, the Fascist syndicalists and populists, who were radical in their views, had freer rein for their dream of a "third way" between capitalism and socialism. Most private property was still guaranteed by the new regime, but social control, or socialization of production, became the goal. Nationalization of public services and war industries was promised. Uncultivated land or land that was not being used productively was to be divided among day laborers or handed to farmer cooperatives. Social control in industry would operate by means of state ownership of key sectors and the establishment of management councils and profit sharing in the private sector. These plans were given substance

in a decree law of February 12, 1944. All firms with a capitalization of more than one million lire were to be socialized.²⁴¹

The Verona program was clearly a turn to the populist and socialistic embodiment of radical Fascism. The break by the Social Republic from the compromising pattern of "monarchical" Fascism shows in what direction Mussolini would have moved Fascism had he been free of the conservative forces. In the plans and policies of the Social Republican government, we can see a return to the radical corporate economic structure of early Fascism, a socialist-based plan to redistribute land and wealth, and the nationalization of large parts of the private economy. The influence of radicals and syndicalists is clear. The sincerity of this radical shift is revealed by Mussolini's own words when, in his Memoirs, he says the following about his early decision to compromise with conservative forces:

The King erred in his calculations, and the martyred nation is now paying the price of the royal betrayal. Fascism - generous and romantic in not having been totalitarian right up to the apex of the pyramid, and for having believed that it was solving the problem by a system which, in its historical applications both recent and remote - has shown itself a difficult and short-lived compromise. The Fascist revolution halted before the throne. That seemed inevitable at the time. Events have decided that the Crown should expiate, by its fall, the treacherous blow dealt to the Regime and unpardonable crime committed against the nation. The nation can arise again and live only under banners of a Republic.²⁴²

The events of 1943 caused Mussolini to realize his mistake in not having created a fully totalitarian state. Mussolini's earlier compromise with the

monarchy and capitalist forces such as Confindustria was inherently bad because its premise that totalitarianism and capitalism could collaborate was naive. With the creation of the Social Republic, the only path for Mussolini and his fellow radical Fascists was to return to the ideas of early Fascism.²⁴³

As he had done in 1919, Mussolini again supported the creation of a republican form of government that would do away with the monarchy, and a radical leftist-syndicalist economic program.

Naturally the industrialists under the rule of the Social Republic were not happy. According to De Grand, their reaction bordered on treason:

The response of the industrialists to the social innovations of Mussolini's new regime was even more negative than it had been under the earlier Fascist corporative system. The Social Republic had virtually no industrial backers, and the rare gestures of support for socialization [of the economy] were designed to sabotage the program.²⁴⁴

The real positions of the various forces, which had played a role in the development of the Fascist system, became apparent with the onset of the Social Republic. The industrialists, as De Grand mentions, revealed their true feelings toward Fascism and its radical plans. At the same time, Mussolini admitted his error in compromising with industrialists and other conservatives. In fact, Mussolini went further by enlarging his attacks to show how conservative forces had treacherously allied themselves with "conspiratorial" forces inside and outside of Italy in order to destroy Fascism. Max Gallo, in Mussolini's Italy, says that Mussolini had reverted to his "quasi-Socialist

vocabulary” of early Fascism by referring to a “masonic conspiracy” and the “international plutocracy.”²⁴⁵

In a return to the days when Fascists like Emilio Gentile and Giovanni Papini referred to a battle between sinister ruling forces and oppressed nations, Mussolini called for the “abolition of [the] capitalist system and war against world plutocracies.” Mussolini, at this juncture, had come to believe that industrialists were in collusion with the secular and anti-nationalist masons, liberals, and international capitalists to prevent a radical revolution from taking place in Italy, which would disturb the world’s ruling hierarchy. Like Russian communism, Fascism was considered a danger to powerful interests inside Italy and in other major capitalist nations that must not be allowed to triumph. He repeated this warning frequently in the last years of his life. In his last speeches before his death, Mussolini looked to the future of Italy and Europe, wanting to leave a testament of his vision for the world. His main theme called for a fairer economic system that would be focused not on individual attainment but on the betterment of the people as a whole. He never relented in his support of a strong and independent Italy. His view of the world beyond Italy’s frontiers was one of optimistic possibilities. In one visionary speech, he called for the creation of a “European community” that would unite Europe’s nations together in harmony.²⁴⁶ Europe’s drive for unity in the decades following World War II make Mussolini’s words sound prophetic.

The Social Republic of Salo never had the opportunity to implement its many ideas and plans because of the realities of the ongoing war. In addition, Germany's quasi-occupation of the areas under the Social Republic's jurisdiction precluded any opportunity to realize its socialist plans. The overriding concern of the German military in Italy was arms production, not social experimentation. Nevertheless, the Social Republic offers convincing proof that Mussolini, had he ruled with a strong and free hand, would have pushed for revolutionary change. Mussolini's willingness to compromise submissively with industrialists and other groups engaged in monopolistic capitalism as well as with other conservative forces like the monarchy prevented him from implementing his radical vision for Italy. The Social Republic, then, stands as a testament to Mussolini and Fascism in its most radical form. The Fascist founders of the republic wanted to leave a blueprint of radical Fascism that future extremist movements in Italy and all over the world could emulate. As a matter of fact, the ideas of the Social Republic of Salo were inherited by the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a neo-Fascist party that is still an active party today.

CHAPTER TEN

Conclusion:

The Conservative and Radical Struggle for Control of Fascism Caused Incoherence and Ultimate Failure for Both Sides

The struggle among nationalist, syndicalist, and conservative forces was the defining drama that shaped the development of Fascist doctrine. In each and every major debate, these forces battled to decide who would shape the course of Fascism. This research has revealed that these groups were not monolithic, but were themselves divided into sometimes competing groups. Syndicalists were grouped into statist, like Rocco, and independent unionists, like Rossoni. Nationalists were divided into populist and traditionalist camps. Conservatives were grouped into monarchists, supporters of the Church, and the employers, the most important of which was *Confindustria*.

All this factionalism resulted in competing goals and divisive politics. One of the most important of these struggles was between national-syndicalists and *Confindustria* over the development of the corporate system. In this struggle, industrialists were very successful in preventing implementation of genuine corporatism. In other areas, the outcome of factionalism was not as clear-cut. Relations between the Church and Fascism proved to be more fruitful, if not always smooth. The Concordat of 1929 resolved many outstanding issues between the Vatican and the Italian State that had been a point of discord since the foundation of Italy. As a result, the Vatican eventually had a good working relationship with Fascism; the Vatican even gave its support to some aspects of Fascism, such as the corporate state and the Ethiopian War, which allowed the Church to

Christianize the conquered people. In other situations, however, such as Fascism's attacks on the activist *Azione Cattolica*, the relationship became more tense.

The area in which Fascism acted most freely was foreign policy. In this sphere, extreme nationalists were successful, albeit gradually, in shifting Fascism from a conservative to an extremist agenda. The result of this internal Fascist struggle was to give extreme nationalists a free hand that eventually led to a series of imperialistic wars leading up to total war among nations. World War II signaled a final break in Fascism's compromising stance toward conservative forces and the total radicalization of many aspects of the Fascist regime.

Several conclusions can be made about Fascism. First, it is clear that the employer class, *Confindustria* in particular, was successful in preventing the national-syndicalists from implementing a truly viable corporate system. While some major legislation was enacted, such as the Charter of Labour and the corporation laws of 1934, their impact was less than what radical Fascists wanted. Despite the limited impact of the corporations, however, Fascism was, eventually, successful in playing a dominant role in the economy even if a viable corporate system was not created. Fascism achieved this through the state takeover of failing companies and the creation of vast holding companies like the *Istituto di Ricostruzione Industriale*. Other important events that increased the Fascist government's role in the economy include autarky (the move to make Italy self-sufficient), wars in Ethiopia, Spain, and Albania, and Italy's entry in World War II.

In addition, Fascism's policies resulted in major gains in Italy's economy.

Workers, for example, gained from the implementation of Fascist projects, such as the forty-hour workweek, health benefits, pensions, "*dopo lavoro* (after-work)" worker activity, and social gathering centers. The nation, as a whole, made great advances toward becoming a major industrialized nation. In fact, Italy's postwar economic boom could not have been achieved had Fascism not created the infrastructure for it. The creation of *Istituto di Ricostruzione Industriale*, the corporate system's idea of state-private economic collaboration, and state management of the economy were all key aspects of the postwar Italian economic "miracle" that sprung from Fascism.

Another important conclusion is that, had Mussolini taken a harder line with the conservative forces, especially the industrialists, radical Fascism might have succeeded in creating a state-controlled economy. As it turned out, Mussolini's lack of resolve was nearly fatal to radical Fascism as opponents, such as the industrialists, took advantage of his weakness to cajole, threaten, and "convince" him to go against many of Fascism's plans for radical change. Although Mussolini never gave up on some socialist ideas and would proceed with radical-syndicalist proposals when he felt confident of success, his fear of the conservatives made him eager to avoid getting involved in internal conflicts. In the end, this prevented Fascism from becoming fully totalitarian.

Finally, it is clear that, when Mussolini took a hard line against the conservatives, as he did in foreign policy matters, radical Fascism was highly successful in achieving its ends. The accomplishment of radical nationalism is a clear example of the difference Mussolini could make in promoting radical Fascism when he gave his uncompromising

support. Had this happened in all areas, not just in foreign policy, Fascism might have gained a truly revolutionary dimension that would have transformed the regime into a fully radical totalitarian state.

Notes

- ¹ Paolo Bestianini, *Uomini, Cose, Fatti* (Milano: Eritrice, 1987), 188.
- ² Franklin H. Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism*, (New York: Cambridge Press, 1995).
- ³ Alexander De Grand, *Italian Fascism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).
- ⁴ Max Gallo, *Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973); Gaetano Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism* (New York: Viking Press, 1936; Edward R. Tannenbaum, *Fascist Experience* (New York: Basic Book Publishers, 1972); Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (New York: Random House, 1982).
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