

chapter 17

The Rise of Totalitarianism, 1919–1939



Certain social and political conditions of the period after World War I gave rise to Fascist dictatorships throughout Europe. The first was the new trend that gave ordinary citizens a voice in their government. The second was dissension among the forces or parties of the political left. The third was the large class of combat veterans who made an enthusiastic audience for nationalist rhetoric.

Widespread participation in government by the citizens was something new in the twentieth century. For the first time, each man had one vote, regardless of his birth or education. Fascist leaders found that propaganda techniques were enormously effective with uneducated voters; simple images and slogans were often repeated, easily remembered, and immediately appealing to a class of people who were accustomed to obeying and accepting authority. Since the uneducated vastly outnumbered the rest of the population, Fascists always made sure to commandeer their support.

Political theorists speak of “the left” when they refer to liberal politicians who look to the future, and of “the right” when they refer to conservatives who look to the past. In the years after the Great War, the forces of the political left found themselves in disagreement. The radicals had become so radical

that they alienated the Socialists and liberals, whose political aims were more moderate. Many Socialists reasoned that a conservative government would be more moderate than a radical one; in other words, they believed that fascism (a conservative government) was a better alternative to communism (a radical government).

A high degree of nationalism always exists among the military; this is natural and inevitable among a profession of people who risk their lives in combat for their nation, while regarding other nations as the enemy. Many veterans of World War I, especially the Germans, believed that their sacrifices had been in vain and their nation had been damaged and humiliated. Dictators could give extreme, angry, high-flown patriotic speeches that sounded excessive to any reasonable person, but that veterans could be counted on to applaud enthusiastically. Dictators actively courted the support of veterans because they wanted the personal loyalty of the military. Control of the military made any leader practically invulnerable to opposition because the military had control of the guns.

In practice, as it turned out, fascism and communism amounted to the same thing—totalitarianism. Each dictatorship of the period between the world wars was fiercely nationalist, espousing an extreme form of patriotism that, at least in Germany's case, developed into active, malevolent racism. Each established government controls over what had been a market economy. Each used the army as an instrument to control the people. Each employed a police force that reported only to the dictator and that was hated and feared by the citizens. None tolerated dissent in any form; none tolerated free speech, free expression in the arts, or a free press.

CHAPTER 17 OBJECTIVES

- Compare and contrast fascism and communism.
- Identify the facts that gave rise to totalitarian governments after World War I.
- Identify the dictators of the era and discuss how each one rose to power.
- Describe, compare, and contrast the dictatorships in Italy, Germany, and Spain.

Chapter 17 Time Line

- 1921 Mussolini founds Fascist Party in Italy
- 1922 Mussolini becomes prime minister of Italy
- 1929 U.S. stock market crashes; beginning of Great Depression
- 1933 Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany
- 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War
- 1939 Francisco Franco establishes dictatorship in Spain

Italy—The Rise of Fascism

In 1919, the Italian economy was suffering from massive unemployment and high inflation. In areas where fighting had occurred, cities and land would have to be rebuilt and recultivated. Politically, the country became divided between the Socialist and nationalist parties. The situation was ripe for the rise to power of Benito Mussolini.

Born in 1883 in the ancient town of Forlì in northern Italy, Mussolini was a very well-read intellectual, a combat veteran, and a former journalist. He had once been a committed Socialist, but his ideas changed during the war. In 1919, Mussolini held the first meeting of the group that would become the Fascist Party of Italy. (The Italian word *fascio* means “union” and comes from the Latin *fasces*, a sheaf of grain that had been a symbol of the authority of the Roman state in ancient times.)

As the leader of the Fascist movement, Mussolini explicitly encouraged violence against the Socialists, thereby attracting new members who were little better than thugs. Their extreme nationalism found expression in gang-style violence. In April 1919, Mussolini’s supporters stormed into the offices of the Milan newspaper *Avanti* (*Forward*) and destroyed the printing presses. This act of violence was typical of the terrorist tactics that would become the signature of the totalitarian regimes of the next two decades.

Mussolini had one serious rival in the person of Gabriele d’Annunzio, already famous as a playwright, poet, and hero of World War I. In September 1919, D’Annunzio led his followers in an invasion and occupation of the Yugoslavian city of Fiume, on the nationalist grounds that nearly 90 percent of its citizens were ethnic Italians. Once in power in Fiume, D’Annunzio behaved like the

Caesars of ancient Rome, staging military parades and bombastic daily speeches to impress and intimidate the people.

Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti eventually negotiated a settlement with Yugoslavia. In exchange for Yugoslavia's making Fiume independent, Giolitti forced D'Annunzio to step down. D'Annunzio's supporters, balked of their prize, turned to Mussolini.

Mussolini was nothing if not pragmatic; he was guided much more by practicality than by principle. He was quite willing to negotiate with anyone or any group if he saw a chance of strengthening his own base of power. In the days after Fiume, Mussolini negotiated with leading moderate political leaders, treated the chastened D'Annunzio generously, and encouraged his own supporters to take action against Socialists.

In northern Italy, major landowners had lost a great deal of their negotiating power to the forces of socialism. Therefore, the landowners decided that the Fascists, as anti-Socialists, were their natural allies. Between November 1920 and April 1921, the Fascists gave free rein to their aggressiveness. They destroyed the offices of Labor Exchanges throughout the region, dragged labor organizers into the street and beat them up, and smashed printing presses of any newspapers whose editors favored socialist politics. At the same time, the Fascists won support among the peasants by giving some of them land outright. This convinced many farmers to desert the Socialists, since the goal of socialism was state-owned land. Farmers preferred the possibility of private ownership of their own farms.

The Fascists stepped up their campaign of terror and intimidation, taking over entire towns and cities in the region. With the help of local police, nationalist veterans, and their own organized military squads, called "Blackshirts" because of the uniforms they wore, the Fascists occupied public buildings and forced local governments to do what they wanted, including instituting public-works programs that gave jobs to the unemployed. Naturally, this won them a great deal of support among the people.

By May of 1921, the Fascists had become so strong that Giolitti felt it was better to assimilate them than fight them. He formed a coalition government that included seats in Parliament for Mussolini and thirty-four other Fascists.

In October 1922, Mussolini staged what became known as the March on Rome. The Blackshirts commandeered and boarded trains to Rome from three different starting points, taking over towns along the three routes. The new prime minister, Luigi Facta, resolutely prepared to stop them, assembling

troops and asking the king to declare martial law in Rome. However, the king refused, fearing that a confrontation between the Fascists and the Italian army would lead immediately to civil war. Unwilling to risk this, he offered the office of prime minister to Mussolini. Four years later, Mussolini had become Il Duce—the absolute dictator of Italy. (*Duce* is Italian for “leader.”)

Like all dictators, Mussolini was quick to establish one-party rule. During the 1920s, his policies brought economic recovery to the nation. Additionally, he struck a bargain with the Catholic Church. In the Lateran Treaty of 1929, the Church officially and formally recognized the nation of Italy for the first time in exchange for broad authority over the everyday lives of Italian citizens.

European economies collapsed in the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression (see later in this chapter), and Italy’s was no exception. In 1935, Mussolini ordered the invasion of Ethiopia, for both political and economic reasons. Politically, the invasion was a sign of the desire to subdue and control other lands that was typical of a fascist state. Economically, Mussolini hoped to counter the effects of the Depression by subduing a nation that was rich in natural resources. He intended Ethiopia to provide Italy with both natural resources and a market for Italian manufactured goods.

Germany—Hitler and the Nazis Seize Power

The rise of an extreme nationalist party in Germany was all but inevitable after the Treaty of Versailles. Germany’s industry was destroyed, its military greatly reduced, some of its territory gone, and its economy devastated. Workers’ revolutions broke out in several German cities, but all were eventually put down. With the proclamation of the Weimar Republic in 1919, Germany could begin to pick up the pieces and move forward.

The Treaty of Versailles required Germany to reduce the size of the army to a very small force. Already bitter because they had lost the war, thousands of veterans now found themselves out of a job. Blaming the new German government for abandoning them, they took revenge at the polling place. Robbed of their parliamentary majority, the Social Democrats—those committed to a democratic constitutional government—had no choice but to form a coalition with representatives of the other parties. These coalition governments, of which there were more than a dozen between 1919 and 1933, were unable to accomplish much because their members had too many different goals. Conservatives, monarchists, and Democrats could not work together effectively even in the

area of foreign policy, which traditionally united political opponents against the common enemy. Unable to negotiate effectively, Germany lost a series of arguments over Versailles Treaty provisions during the 1920s. As a result, Germans grew more nationalist and at the same time more contemptuous of their own government.

By 1922 France had determined the amount of the reparations Germany owed: more than 130 billion marks. The German people reacted furiously to the news that their government had agreed to this demand. As far as the people were concerned, the demand was unjustified; it was simply revenge on a defenseless nation. Moreover, the money simply was not there.

The French, deciding to take in fuel what Germany would not hand over in money, marched into the Ruhr—the coal-producing region of western Germany that had been made a demilitarized zone by the Treaty of Versailles. Although this was not cost-effective for the French, it brought economic ruin to Germany. Inflation soared to unimaginable levels. In December 1921, a loaf of bread cost 4 marks; in December 1922 it cost 163 marks; by December 1923 the price had risen to a staggering 400 *billion* marks!

This was the low point of German fortunes after World War I. Beginning in 1923, France and Britain showed a willingness to compromise over the payment of reparations, and France began to withdraw troops from the Ruhr. The United States also loaned money to Germany, and the ensuing years saw a steady recovery of the German economy as prices dropped back to normal levels. In another sign that the rifts of the war were beginning to heal, the Western nations welcomed Germany into the League of Nations in 1926. In addition, the Weimar Republic became famous for bold, experimental works by such artists as composer Kurt Weill, writers Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann, painters George Grosz and Wassily Kandinsky, and film director Joseph von Sternberg.

The U.S. stock market crashed in the fall of 1929. It had been soaring on an insubstantial foundation of margin buying and unpaid debts. When people began selling stocks to pay debts, others lost confidence in the market and it collapsed with stunning speed. When the market collapsed, the banks failed; when the banks failed, the businesses closed; when the businesses closed, the workers lost their jobs and could find no others. This economic failure is known as the Great Depression.

The Depression was not confined to the United States; the fact of international banking and trade made it a universal economic crash. Banks closed throughout Europe and prices dropped. No one could find a market for goods

because no one had cash with which to buy them. The Great Depression was the deathblow to the recovery that Germany and other European nations had been making since the end of the Great War. The German government, faced with strikes, violent protests in the streets, and rising unemployment, collapsed. The Nazi Party (the name is an abbreviation of “National Socialist German Workers’ Party”) now rose to power under its founder and leader, an obscure Austrian named Adolf Hitler.

Born in 1889 in Branau on the Austrian-German border, Hitler had been a failure all his life, often living on charity, unable to settle down to any profession until he joined the German army during World War I. Hitler served with some distinction in a low rank and felt great personal bitterness over Germany’s defeat. He used his extraordinary ability to stir the emotions of crowds to gain power; his rhetoric about the greatness of the German Empire hit a nerve with people who desperately needed decisive leadership. Hitler believed that the way to win the support of the voters was to use simple slogans and propaganda to appeal to their national pride, their emotions, and their prejudices. He had no experience of government or politics, nor the skill or the desire to present logically thought-out social programs. Because of this, the established German political parties made the great mistake of underestimating him and his mass appeal.

In 1930, the Nazis won a large number of seats in the Reichstag (the German parliament). Hitler never looked back from this success. He and his closest followers now carried out a campaign of intimidation that brought him quickly to the top position in the German government. By 1932, the Nazis had become the most powerful party in Germany. In 1933, Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. It was not long before he exchanged this democratic title for the imperial title “Führer (Leader) of the Third Reich.” With the eager collaboration of the majority of Germans, this foreign nobody had made himself an absolute dictator whose orders could not be questioned by anyone.

One of Hitler’s first acts was to establish one-party rule by the Nazis. His close associate Heinrich Himmler soon created the Gestapo, a secret state police force responsible only to the führer. Hitler also had the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, or “Protection Squadron”), a rogue militia like Mussolini’s Blackshirts, at his command. These two organizations promptly and efficiently carried out many of the orders—executions and other acts of brutal violence against German citizens—that have cemented Hitler’s reputation as the greatest villain in modern European history.

Hitler soon made it evident that he espoused two of the most common aspects of fascism: expansionism and racism. In Hitler's case, the two impulses were linked. He considered that Germans and other northern European nationalities, such as Scandinavians and British, were racially superior, while Slavs and southern Europeans were inferior. Territorial expansion would provide living space for the Aryans (his term for the racially superior) while at the same time subduing the *Untermenschen* (literally "subhumans," or inferior races). His persecution of the Jews was the most obvious manifestation of his prejudices. Under Hitler's rule, German Jews were soon stripped of all civil rights, deprived of their professions, and forced into menial jobs. Later, conditions would become much worse for them (see Chapter 18). Historians estimate that perhaps one-fourth of all German Jews fled the country in the early 1930s.

Although the mass of the population had confidence in Hitler's leadership, thousands of Germans considered him a demagogue and a madman and were dismayed and appalled by his lightning rise to absolute power. Tight censorship of the press and the arts made it clear that Germany simply was not a safe place to live for those who were not committed to the Nazi ideology. Many German intellectuals, artists, journalists, and teachers packed up and left the country, hoping that Hitler would soon fall.

In order to expand, Germany needed to rearm. In 1933, Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations, and the country began to rearm despite the ban contained in the Versailles Treaty. Rearming increased considerably in 1936, as Hitler made it clear that he expected Germany to be ready to launch a war of aggression by 1940.

Spain and the Spanish Civil War

Spain spent the first half of the 1930s trying to settle what type of government it wanted: republican or nationalist. The dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera ended in 1930. It was replaced by the republican administration of Prime Minister Azaña. For three years Azaña carried out a program of egalitarian reforms. In 1933, Azaña was forced out of office due to the bitter opposition of the anti-reform establishment.

Over the next three years, two opposing political philosophies struggled for power. The Popular Front was the left-wing side, composed of Communists, anarchists, and Socialists. The National Front was the right-wing side, composed of conservatives, monarchists, and Catholics in positions of power and

influence. In 1936, the Popular Front carried the elections, executing Primo de Rivera by firing squad and restoring Azaña to power.

General Francisco Franco had been waiting with the army in Morocco for news of the elections. When he learned that the National Front had been defeated, he led an invasion into Spain, where he laid siege to Madrid. The fascist Falange party supported Franco, as did Italy and Germany. The Germans were able to supply Franco through Portugal, which was then ruled by a regime that sympathized with fascism. The Soviet Union supported the Popular Front for a time but eventually withdrew its support; this enabled the National Front to win the civil war, and as of 1939 Spain was a military dictatorship under Franco.

The Rise of Totalitarianism in Other European Nations

The small states of Eastern Europe, several of them newly created by the Treaty of Versailles, were the perfect breeding ground for totalitarianism for three reasons. First, nationalism was a divisive factor in these ethnically diverse countries. Second, this area suffered economically as much as any other during World War I. Third, several of these nations were newly created, and none had more than a few decades' experience in self-government. All these factors combined to create unstable societies that were ripe for a seizure of power. Except for Czechoslovakia, which established and managed to maintain a democratic government, all the nations of Eastern Europe succumbed to dictatorship between 1919 and 1936.

QUIZ

- 1. Why was Europe affected by the crash of the U.S. stock market in 1929?**
 - A. European economies depended on American loans.
 - B. European nations had loaned money to the United States.
 - C. The European branches of American banks failed.
 - D. International banking and trading connected the two economies.
- 2. The personal loyalty of _____ was crucial to the success of all European dictators in the 1920s and 1930s.**
 - A. the army or militia
 - B. the intellectuals and artists
 - C. the press
 - D. the civil servants
- 3. Which European nation supported the Popular Front in Spain?**
 - A. Britain
 - B. France
 - C. Germany
 - D. the Soviet Union
- 4. In 1930s Spain, high-ranking Catholics usually supported _____**
 - A. Prime Minister Azaña.
 - B. the Communist Party.
 - C. the National Front.
 - D. the Popular Front.
- 5. Which best describes the Spanish government in 1939?**
 - A. an absolute monarchy
 - B. a constitutional monarchy
 - C. a parliamentary republic
 - D. a military dictatorship
- 6. Large landowners in Italy supported the Fascists because both were _____**
 - A. liberal.
 - B. royalist.
 - C. anti-Catholic.
 - D. anti-Socialist.

- 7. The king of Italy refused to put down the Blackshirts because**
- A. he was personally afraid for his own life.
 - B. he did not command the loyalty of the Italian army.
 - C. he wanted to avoid a full-scale civil war.
 - D. he had made a secret bargain with Mussolini.
- 8. Why was Germany unable to negotiate effectively with other nations in the early 1920s?**
- A. because of the Great Depression
 - B. because of high unemployment
 - C. because of dissension within the coalition government
 - D. because of the invasion of the Ruhr
- 9. Adolf Hitler rose to power primarily by**
- A. commanding the loyalty of the German army.
 - B. demonstrating his intention to repair the economy.
 - C. expressing support for social programs.
 - D. appealing to the force of German nationalism.
- 10. Why did France invade the Ruhr in 1922?**
- A. to commandeer the coal
 - B. to annex the region
 - C. to aid the striking workers
 - D. to protect itself from German invasion

- 7. Why do people consider the fall of the Berlin Wall to be the symbolic end of the Cold War?**
- A. because East Germany was the last European nation to abandon communism
 - B. because it happened as the result of a fluke
 - C. because it signaled the reunification of East and West Germany
 - D. because the wall was the most visible symbol of the Iron Curtain
- 8. Which best describes the members of the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies?**
- A. They all belonged to the Communist Party.
 - B. They represented all aspects of Soviet society.
 - C. They all served by appointment from above.
 - D. They were elected on a strictly geographical basis.
- 9. Which best describes the Commonwealth of Independent States?**
- A. It is a parliamentary democracy.
 - B. It is a federal republic.
 - C. It is an economic union of self-governing nations.
 - D. It is an international peacekeeping force.
- 10. The USSR was bound to lose the arms race with the United States because the USSR was**
- A. a smaller nation.
 - B. a poorer nation.
 - C. a wealthier nation.
 - D. a more democratic nation.