Mussolini and the Making of Modern Italy: Ideology, Institutions, and Legacy

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Introduction

This book examines how Benito Mussolini’s regime reshaped Italy’s politics, economy, and social life—and how those transformations have echoed through the Republic born after 1945. By bringing together archival research and policy analysis, it reconstructs the choices that enabled a movement born in wartime rupture to consolidate power, reconfigure state institutions, and attempt an authoritarian modernization. At the same time, it traces the limits and contradictions that culminated in war, occupation, and collapse, leaving behind a complex legacy that Italians have debated ever since.

The narrative begins in the crisis years after the First World War, when economic dislocation, mass mobilization, and fears of socialist revolution unsettled liberal Italy. From squad violence and the March on Rome to the steady dismantling of parliamentary democracy, we explore how Mussolini converted emergency into opportunity. Laws, decrees, and administrative engineering—rather than charisma alone—proved decisive. A central theme is how consent and coercion intertwined: repression narrowed the bounds of possibility, but the regime also sought to secure active participation through organizations, rituals, and material incentives.

Governance under fascism fused ideology with institutional experimentation. The book analyzes corporatism not as an abstract theory but as a set of administrative practices that reorganized labor, business, and the state. It evaluates economic programs—from currency stabilization and public works to autarky and the creation of state-holding companies—assessing both their stated aims and measurable outcomes. Propaganda is treated similarly: we examine the Ministry of Popular Culture’s control of press, radio, cinema, and spectacle, and how these tools constructed a narrative of national rebirth while masking uneven performance and persistent regional divides.

The imperial turn and the racialization of the nation constitute another crucial axis. Campaigns in Libya and Ethiopia, the declaration of empire, and the introduction of anti-Semitic laws in 1938 reveal how violence at the periphery and discrimination at home reinforced one another. Diplomatic choices—from the Stresa Front to alignment with Nazi Germany—are read against strategic miscalculations and domestic imperatives. War magnified every contradiction: military inadequacy, resource scarcity, and fractures within the ruling coalition culminated in regime collapse, German occupation, civil war, and the brief, brutal life of the Italian Social Republic.

What followed was not a clean break but a negotiated transition. Postwar purges, trials, and amnesties unfolded alongside the reconstruction of democratic institutions. This book investigates how elements of the fascist state—personnel, administrative routines, and economic structures—were dismantled, repurposed, or left in place. It

also tracks how memory politics evolved: monuments and curricula, public ceremonies and court cases, journalism and cinema all became arenas where Italians contested the meaning of fascism and its place in national identity. The emergence of neo-fascist parties and later waves of right-wing mobilization further complicated these debates.

Methodologically, the study combines close reading of archival sources with quantitative indicators of policy performance and comparative insights from scholarship on authoritarianism. Each chapter isolates a domain—ideology, law, economy, propaganda, empire, war, justice, memory—while following threads that connect them across time. The aim is not to rehearse inevitabilities but to illuminate choices: why particular paths were taken, how institutions shaped outcomes, and what costs were borne by different groups. By clarifying these dynamics, the book seeks to offer a concise yet comprehensive account of fascism’s rise, governance, and long-term effects on Italian politics and society.

CHAPTER ONE: Crisis and Opportunity: Postwar Upheaval and the March on Rome

Italy emerged from the First World War materially exhausted and politically fractured, a victorious state that felt like it had lost. The conflict cost more than 650,000 lives and left the economy strained, inflation eating into wages and savings, while demobilized soldiers crowded into an already tight labor market. The liberal state had entered the war late and with hesitations, and the peace did not resolve the contradictions it had exposed. Nationalist fervor, once channeled toward the front, now ricocheted through domestic politics, colliding with expectations bred by wartime mobilization and promises of reform. The map had been redrawn, but the social order had not.

The government in Rome, headed by Prime Minister Francesco Orlando and later by Giovanni Giolitti, faced mounting pressures. Inflation undermined confidence in the lira; industrial profits soared in some sectors while real wages sagged for workers. Strikes proliferated, and land occupations spread in the countryside as peasants and veterans pressed claims on owners. Meanwhile, the state's capacity to absorb and manage mass politics remained limited. The liberal system rested on notables, patronage, and shifting parliamentary coalitions, ill-suited to a society transformed by mass mobilization. The gap between expectations and performance widened, and political trust thinned.

At the heart of the crisis lay a profound fear of revolutionary upheaval. The Russian Revolution had electrified the left and terrified the propertied classes. In Italy, the Red Biennium—1919 and 1920—brought waves of strikes, factory occupations in Turin and Milan, and rural agitation for land reform. Socialist and emerging communist groups organized workers and tenants, while the Catholic Popular Party carved out a new electoral space among peasants and the urban middle class. The liberal establishment, nervous about the stability of property relations and the state’s capacity to keep order, hesitated between concession and repression. That hesitation created a political vacuum.

The response from veterans and nationalists was swift and organized. In March 1919, Benito Mussolini, a former socialist journalist turned interventionist, gathered a coalition of ex-combatants, nationalists, Futurists, and disaffected socialists in Milan’s Piazza San Sepolcro to found the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento. The program was deliberately eclectic: republican and anti-monarchist sentiments sat alongside corporatist labor proposals, demands for a strong state, and exaltation of the war veteran as a new social type. The early movement was less a party than a cadre of

activists willing to use muscle as well as ideas, prepared to act where the state seemed absent.

In this context, squad violence—squadristismo—became the movement's signature. Organized in rural and urban squads, fascists attacked socialist and Catholic peasant leagues, cooperatives, and local administrations that appeared hostile to property or national unity. Violence was not random; it targeted the organizations that structured working-class and peasant life. Municipal governments, trade union halls, and rural banks were frequent targets. Authorities often turned a blind eye, or even cooperated informally, reflecting a convergence of interests between local elites and the squads. The state's monopoly of force, always central to liberal order, was challenged yet also exploited.

The electoral arena reflected these tensions. In November 1919, the Socialists made major gains, winning 156 seats, while the Catholic Popular Party captured 100, upending the old liberal parliamentary calculus. Giolitti's attempt to stabilize politics by integrating new forces into the system faltered. His "national bloc" experiment in 1921 sought to include fascists among candidates, yielding a modest parliamentary presence for Mussolini's movement. The result was a hybrid: a legislature still dominated by traditional notables but with a noisy, often disruptive fascist minority. The boundaries of acceptable political competition began to blur.

Mussolini cultivated a public persona that combined the businessman's pragmatism with the veteran's bravado. His newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, served as both party organ and personal platform, emphasizing order, anti-Bolshevism, and national dignity. He courted industrialists in Milan's salons and reassured landowners in the countryside that the squads were instruments of social defense. Yet he also negotiated, at times, with socialist leaders, testing the waters for a coalition. This tactical flexibility—pouncing when the state looked weak, bargaining when gain seemed near—characterized fascist strategy during these years.

The liberal response was inconsistent. General Pietro Badoglio, chief of the general staff, warned against the militarization of politics but offered little practical guidance. Local prefects oscillated between repression and accommodation, reflecting both the weak center and the divergent interests of elites. In the south and in parts of the center, the squads found protectors; in the north, where working-class organization remained strong, confrontations were fiercer. The state's uneven application of law produced a corrosive effect: it signaled that illegal violence might be forgiven if its targets were deemed enemies of the nation.

Behind the scenes, economic dynamics shaped political choices. The lira's instability and the burden of war debt constrained government action. Industrial profits rebounded after the postwar slump, but wages lagged. Inflation hurt fixed-income groups, while veterans struggled to find employment and housing. The government's

response, under Finance Minister Alberto De’ Stefani, sought tax relief and privatization of wartime enterprises. Fascist economic policy at this stage was pragmatic rather than doctrinal, favoring property owners and favoring a return to market stability. These choices shaped alliances, tying the movement’s fortunes to business confidence.

Student activism also played a role. The university towns of Bologna, Padua, and Rome became laboratories for nationalist ideology and youthful militancy. Professors and students formed the GUF, the Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, providing a cadre base and a cultural bridge to professional elites. Youth, restless and ambitious, found in fascism a promise of order and advancement. The movement’s rhetoric of renewal—against the old political class, against “sterile” parliamentary debates—spoke to the anxieties of a generation that had grown up amid war and crisis.

Between 1921 and 1922, the fascists moved from a loose movement to a more structured party. The transformation was imperfect: local squads retained autonomy, and Mussolini’s control was never absolute. Yet the creation of the Partito Nazionale Fascista institutionalized a national network, with headquarters, hierarchies, and a newspaper apparatus. Paramilitary organization and uniforms added a sense of purpose and spectacle. This reorganization coincided with an intensification of squadrist violence, particularly during the “two red years” and the subsequent conservative backlash, with fascists presenting themselves as the only force capable of restoring order.

The turning point came with the so-called August 1922 crisis, when fascists seized control of several cities—Bologna, Trento, Trieste—after clashes with local authorities. Mussolini alternated threats with negotiations, signaling both the movement’s power and his readiness to use it. The state’s response was hesitant, caught between legal restraint and the fear of civil war. By autumn, the fascists had declared a general strike and then engineered a show of force: the March on Rome. The details were theatrical rather than military, but the political effect was decisive. King Victor Emmanuel III, wary of risking civil conflict and uncertain of the army’s reliability, appointed Mussolini prime minister on October 29, 1922.

The March was less a coup than a coordinated pressure campaign. Fascist squads occupied strategic points in Rome and in several provinces as Mussolini waited in Milan, receiving the king’s invitation before traveling to the capital. The event unfolded with a mixture of bravado and calculation. Newspaper headlines captured the drama; in reality, the decisive terrain was the palace and the corridors of power. With Mussolini now prime minister, the fascists entered government while retaining their paramilitary apparatus—an arrangement that blurred the line between state authority and party force.

Immediately after taking office, Mussolini assembled a cabinet that balanced fascists with liberal and nationalist figures. The “Ministry of the Interior” remained under his direct control, while key portfolios went to allies and accommodating notables. The new government’s first task was to reassure the king, the army, and business interests that order would prevail. At the same time, the fascist squads were not disarmed; their presence continued to intimidate opponents and reshape local power structures. This duality—legal authority supplemented by extralegal coercion—would become a hallmark of fascist governance.

Legislation in the early months emphasized security and public order. Authorities expanded preventive detention and tightened controls on the press and associations. The state of emergency, originally a response to labor unrest and political violence, became a permanent feature of political life. Law served both as a tool of repression and as a language of legitimacy. By situating violence within legal frameworks, the regime sought to normalize what had once been exceptional. This was the first major step from movement to state.

Economic policy blended continuity with gestures toward fascist priorities. The government aimed to stabilize the lira—a project that would become a centerpiece of fascist economic rhetoric—while encouraging private enterprise and reassuring foreign investors. Public works projects were floated, promising employment and modernization without overturning property relations. The “Battle for Grain,” a later signature policy, was not yet announced, but the groundwork was being laid for a state-led mobilization of agriculture. The emphasis remained on order, predictability, and confidence in markets.

The labor landscape shifted quickly. Squads continued to break union power in the countryside and in factories, while the government introduced labor charters and arbitration mechanisms designed to curb strikes without fully embracing collective bargaining. The “Voluntary Arbitration” system and the creation of the “National Council of Corporations” pointed toward corporatist reorganization, though in this period the measures served more to discipline labor than to structure a new economic order. Employers generally welcomed the repression of militancy; workers lost ground in both wages and organization.

Culturally, the regime moved to secure symbolic dominance. Celebrations of veterans, commemorations of the war dead, and public ceremonies presented fascism as the heir to national sacrifice. Mussolini cultivated a personal image as a pragmatic leader who could both negotiate with monarchs and inspire the masses. Intellectuals sympathetic to the movement published essays and manifestos praising the new era. Meanwhile, newspapers faced pressure to align with the government’s agenda, foreshadowing the later creation of a centralized propaganda apparatus.

The November 1923 Acerbo Law, a pivotal institutional change, would transform parliamentary elections to favor the winning party, guaranteeing a supermajority in the Chamber of Deputies. Although its consequences were not immediate, the law demonstrated the regime's method: using legal instruments to erode pluralism. This chapter of the story—how the regime dismantled liberal constraints—belongs to later chapters, but its roots were planted early. The shift from government to regime was underway, and the tools were being chosen deliberately.

Regional and local dynamics mattered. In the industrial triangle of Milan, Turin, and Genoa, factory owners valued the suppression of strikes and the promise of stability. In the rural center and south, landowners welcomed the dissolution of peasant leagues and cooperatives. In the periphery—South Tyrol, Trieste, and the ports—nationalist sentiment and anxieties over borders bolstered fascist appeal. These variations were not simply geographic; they reflected divergent interests and histories that fascism sought to stitch together under a single banner of nation and order.

The Catholic world remained an essential, complex presence. After the Lateran Pacts of 1929—addressed in a later chapter—the regime would formalize relations with the Vatican. In 1922 and 1923, however, the relationship was tense. The Catholic Popular Party, representing a substantial constituency, faced pressure to dissolve or merge. The regime promised to respect religious institutions while demanding political compliance. This negotiation set the tone for decades of church-state relations, balancing concordat and control, accommodation and coercion.

International considerations shaped domestic choices. The French and British wary of revisionism, the League of Nations still finding its footing, and the memory of postwar territorial disputes all influenced Mussolini's posture. He played to nationalist sentiment—Rome's greatness, the legacy of empire, the need for a seat at the table—while avoiding immediate risks that might destabilize his hold at home. Diplomacy became a theater for domestic consumption, signaling strength without committing to costly confrontations.

By the end of 1922 and into 1923, the March on Rome had achieved its immediate objective: it placed Mussolini in power and brought fascist cadres into the state. The broader achievement was to normalize the idea that the liberal order had failed and that a new institutional synthesis—combining authority, organization, and national purpose—was necessary. The early measures were pragmatic and targeted. They were also, in their aggregate effect, a rehearsal for a transformation that would turn emergency into a permanent political system.

The opportunity was seized through a mixture of violence, negotiation, and legal innovation. Mussolini's government did not overthrow the state; it inherited it and then slowly remade it. The March was both symbol and blueprint. It showed that power in modern Italy could be captured by outflanking institutions while also mastering them.

That dual strategy—pressure from below and legitimacy from above—would define fascism’s making of modern Italy for the years to come.

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