

## *Rise of the Dictators: Benito Mussolini*

### Essential Questions:

*“Who was Benito Mussolini?”*

*“What were the origins and goals of Italy’s Fascist government?”*

### BENITO MUSSOLINI’S CHILDHOOD

- Born July 29, 1883, Predappio, Italy
  - His father was a part-time Socialist journalist and blacksmith
  - His mother was a schoolteacher
    - Mussolini’s father spent much of his time discussing politics in taverns and most of his money on his mistress,
      - His family often went hungry as a result.
  - As a child, Mussolini was described as: very charismatic, intense, intelligent, restless, disobedient, unruly, aggressive
    - He read constantly – anything he could
    - Was a bully in school – twice stabbed kid with a knife
      - Was expelled numerous times
  - Passed his exit exams very easily – very smart
    - Obtained a teaching diploma - worked briefly as a schoolmaster (elementary school teacher)
  - 1903 Left Italy for Switzerland - lived from day to day, jumping from job to job
    - Was an involved Socialist – organized strikes, spoke at rallies, advocated for violence, was arrested numerous times
      - Returned to Italy in 1904
        - Became a schoolteacher, then quit and returned to trade-union work, journalism with extreme politics
          - Arrested and imprisoned again
  - 1909, he fell in love with 16-year-old Rachele Guidi, the younger of the two daughters of his father’s widowed mistress
  - Was recognized as one of the most gifted and dangerous of Italy’s younger socialists
    - Founded a newspaper *La Lotta di Classe* (“The Class Struggle”) – HUGE success!
      - 1912 he was appointed editor of the official Socialist newspaper, *Avanti!* (“Forward!”)
        - As Editor, he was antimilitarist, antinationalist, and anti-imperialist
          - He thunderously opposed Italy’s intervention in World War I – then – he changed his mind and politics
  - Mussolini was convinced by Karl Marx’s quote: *“social revolution usually follows war”*
    - He was persuaded that *“the defeat of France would be a deathblow to liberty in Europe”*
      - Switched to being violently in favor of war - Began writing articles and making speeches
        - Resigned from *Avanti!* - was expelled from the Socialist Party.
  - Became the editor of *Il Popolo d’Italia* (“The People of Italy”)
    - Spread his new philosophy:

*“From today onward we are all Italians and nothing but Italians. Now that steel has met steel, one single cry comes from our hearts—Viva l’Italia! [Long live Italy!]”*

- This is called “the birth cry of fascism in Italy”
- In WWI, Mussolini served with the *bersaglieri* (a corps of sharpshooters)
  - Was wounded and returned home a convinced antisocialist
- After WWI, Italians were upset with Prime Minister Orlando Vittorio
  - Thought Orlando was too weak during Treaty of Versailles – economy was suffering after the war
  - Thought Italy should have been granted more territory after the War
    - This led to the rise of fringe political elements: Socialists, Communists, Fascists (happened all over Europe)
- 1920s Italian Fascism: extreme nationalism and loyalty to leaders (dictator)
  - Fascist parties begin winning seats in the Italian Parliament
- February 1918, Mussolini begins advocating for the emergence of a dictator—*“a man who is ruthless and energetic enough to make a clean sweep”*—to confront the economic and political crises then gripping Italy.
  - Formed the *fasci di combattimento* (“fighting bands”) - Italian fascists using the symbol of the lion
- Mussolini gave impressive speeches at rallies—surrounded by supporters wearing black shirts

- These “black shirts” were Fascist squads and militias inspired by Mussolini
    - Led by local Fascist leaders - rounded up Socialists, burned down union and Communist party offices, terrorized the local population.
      - Hundreds of Socialists and Communists were humiliated, beaten, or killed
- Mussolini began to attract followers, including other dissatisfied war veterans, opponents of the monarchy, Socialists, and anarchists.
  - In 1919, Mussolini and his supporters formed the revolutionary Fascist Party.
- Fascist “black shirts” began to attack local government institutions and prevent left-wing administrations from taking power.
  - Little was done to combat this lawlessness – Italian government was too weak to confront these Fascist thugs
  - By 1922, Mussolini had become such a powerful figure that when he threatened to march on Rome, *“Either the government will be given to us, or we will seize it by marching on Rome.”*
    - The king panicked and appointed him prime minister.
    - October, 1922 - Mussolini becomes the 27<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Italy
- Strikes and riots had plagued Italy since World War I.
  - Mussolini and the Fascists vowed to end Italy's economic problems.
- In order to be more efficient, Mussolini suspended elections, outlawed all other political parties, and established a dictatorship.
  - Mussolini was given the name *Il Duce* (“the leader”)
- The Fascist secret police (former “black shirts”) destroyed all political opposition and violently quelled labor strikes.
- The free press was outlawed – Fascists controlled media
  - Free speech was crushed – A network of spies and the secret police watched over the population.
- A series of laws consolidated power into the hands of the Fascists, led by Il Duce
  - Transformed the nation of Italy into a one-party dictatorship
- Italy's economy improved under *Il Duce's* firm command.
  - “miracle worker” – initially was praised for his economic success
  - The Fascist government had two main objectives:
    - Modernize the economy
      - Reform the widely abused tax system, dispose of inefficient state-owned industry, cut government costs and introduce tariffs to protect the new industries.
      - Fascists inaugurated ambitious programs of public works
    - Remedy the country's lack of strategic resources
      - Colonization: Spread out and conquer!
- A Fascist slogan summed up Mussolini's expansionist goals:
 

*“The Country Is Nothing Without Conquest.”*
- October, 1935 - Mussolini invaded the independent African kingdom of Ethiopia (Abyssinia) .
  - The Ethiopians resisted fiercely, but the large Italian army, using warplanes and poison gas, overpowered the Ethiopian forces.
  - By May 1936, Ethiopia's emperor had fled to England and the capital, Addis Ababa, was in Italian hands.
  - The League of Nations imposed sanctions but was essentially powerless – did not want to provoke a European war.
- The Pact of Steel: a Rome-Berlin Axis and a brutal alliance between Hitler and Mussolini
- 1938 – Italy followed the German example: Mussolini’s government passed anti-Semitic laws in Italy that discriminated against Jews in all sectors of public and private life
  - Eventually deported 20%of Italy’s Jews to German death camps during World War II.

\*\*\*TO BE CONTINUED...