

The Mussolini Manual

Deluxe Student Edition



WAR BETWEEN FASCISTS & SOCIALISTS, 1920-1922

Between 1920 and 1922, the fighting between Fascists and Socialists increased until Italy was on the verge of civil war.

Violence in the towns

At first the fighting took place mostly in towns and cities where Socialists were on strike. Battles were often organized in advance. For example, warning of a fight was given when this notice was stuck up on walls all over the city of Bologna in November 1920:

On Sunday, women and everyone else who likes peace and quiet should stay at home. Those who wish to deserve well should put the Tricolor [the Italian flag] in their windows. On Sunday there should be only Fascists and Bolsheviks [socialists] in the streets of Bologna. This will be the test, the great test in the name of Italy.

In the battle that took place that Sunday, nine people were killed and nearly a hundred were wounded.

The punishment expeditions

In 1921 the violence spread into the countryside when the Fascists organized what they called “punishment expeditions” to fight Socialist groups of peasants. The next two documents show how punishment expeditions heightened tensions between Fascists and Socialists and what happened when a punishment expedition went to a small farming town called Roccostrada.

Document 1

Roccostrada was governed by a Socialist mayor who had been elected the year before. Early in April 1921 he received this letter:

“Italian Fighting Fasci of Tuscany, Florence, 6 April 1921”

To the Mayor of Roccostrada,

I, voicing the feelings of the citizens of your town, advise you to resign by Sunday the 17th. Otherwise you will be responsible for anything that may happen to persons or property. If you appeal to the authorities against this kindly advice of mine, the above date will be changed to Wednesday the 13th.

Perrone Compagni

The mayor did NOT resign and for two months nothing happened. But at 4:30 AM on July 24, 70 Fascists roared into town on lorries. For the next 3 hours, they broke into people’s homes, beating them and smashing their property. As they drove off at 8 AM, three peasants hiding behind a hedge fired on the lorries and killed three Fascists: the lorries turned straight back to Roccastrada. The newspaper *Secolo* described what happened next (SEE DOCUMENT 2)

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Document 2

Along the road they met a peasants and his son and shot them dead. Then they ran into the town shouting “Who fired that shot?” They broke into several houses, stabbing 4 men. One of these, an old man of 68, was killed at his daughter’s side. Three others were killed in the streets, fifty others more or less seriously injured, and seventeen houses reduced to smoldering ruins.

During these events the 13 policemen stationed in the town did nothing. None of the Fascists were arrested. The three peasants who ambushed the lorries were later prosecuted and sent to prison.

METHODS OF THE FASCISTS

The punishment expeditions did not always result in killing but they were always cruel. Peasants were beaten with a long wooden club called the *manganello*. Men and women alike were given “castor oil purges” in which pints of castor oil were forced down their throats until they were ill. On some occasions, they were chained naked to trees dozens of kilometers from home. Women had their heads shaved bald. Men were made to eat live toads.



The Black Shirts

After World War I Benito Mussolini started a Fascist party in Italy. Many of the young men in his party wore black shirts and carried guns and clubs. They walked the streets beating up people who did not believe in their ideas. The Black Shirts were combat squads of Mussolini's supporters.



This propaganda poster reads, **“Believe, Obey, Fight.”** This slogan, employed by Mussolini, reveals the thinking adopted by the Italian educational system. Even primary school children were forced to learn this slogan by heart!

Mussolini becomes Il Duce

The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy (a gradual increase in power)

Until 1925, Italy was a democratic country and Mussolini was its Prime Minister, sharing his power with the King and with Parliament. His official title was Lion Mussolini — Deputy Mussolini.

From 1925 onwards this began to change. He increased his authority until only he had any power in Italy. He made the King into little more than a figurehead and Parliament into a rubber stamp for his decisions. People called him by a new official title, Il Duce (The Leader), and worshipped him as if he were a god. In short, Mussolini became a dictator.

ON THE ROAD TO DICTATORSHIP

1925: Mussolini introduced laws to censor the press. Overnight, newspapers lost all their freedom. From then on they could only print news that was approved by the government. Anti-Fascist newspapers were shut down.

Mussolini also reorganized the entire system of government. All democratically elected officials were kicked out of office and replaced with Fascist Party officials. Mussolini made himself the Head of Government, giving him the ability to make laws WITHOUT consent of Parliament.

1926: After four assassination attempts in three years were made on Mussolini, he banned ALL political parties other than the Fascist Party. Mussolini expelled opposition from Parliament, abolished trade unions, and set up a special law court with the power to pass death sentences for political offenses.

1927: Mussolini created a secret police force to hunt down his political enemies. All enemies were imprisoned and sent to concentration camps on islands off the coast of Italy.

1928: Since Italian law mandated that elections for a new parliament be held in 1928, Mussolini changed the voting system. He created a law that permitted only men over 21 years who belonged to Fascist organizations called Syndicates could vote. With a completely Fascist Parliament and a powerless King, democracy in Italy was dead. There was no one left after 1928 to oppose Mussolini.



In 1926 Mussolini ordered that this emblem must be put on the Italian flag. It is a bundle of sticks tied up with rope, with an axe attached to it. It was called a fasces. In Ancient Rome, the fasces was carried in front of magistrates (judges) as they went into court. It was a symbol of the power of the magistrates to punish wrongdoers. The sticks symbolized corporal punishment, or beating.

Dictator: a ruler with complete control over a government

A dictator's political party is under his personal control, and always backs up his authority. A dictator cannot afford to let people criticize him, for that would undermine his authority. People living in a dictatorship do not have basic human rights. The dictator is often a cult figure. This means that his ideas, personality and his every activity is given maximum publicity through propaganda — posters, films, books, slogans, etc. The people are led to believe that their dictator can never be wrong!

Controlling the People's Minds

Controlling the Youth:

The minds of the young were particularly important. If Fascism was to last, the young must grow up loyal to Mussolini and to the Party. So schools taught them Fascist ideas from a very early age. Infants began their school day by saying this prayer:

*I believe in the genius of Mussolini...
In the conversion of Italians and in
The resurrection of the Empire. Amen.*

At age 4, boys joined the group called Sons of the She Wolf, and was given their first black shirt. At age 8, boys joined the most important of youth groups, the *Balilla*. The *Balilla* was similar to the Boy Scout movement, which Mussolini abolished in 1927, but the difference was that the boys carried guns and did military training (see pictures below). The *Balilla* code described the ideal young Fascist like this:

*He tempers all enthusiasm with iron discipline...despises fear, loves the hard
life and serves with faith, passion and happiness the cause of Fascism.*

Girls joined similar organizations which trained them to believe that the ideal woman stayed at home and brought up the children.



Controlling Adults: Adults, like children, were bombarded with propaganda. Everywhere the walls were plastered with slogans such as: *Believe! Obey! Fight! Better to live one day like a lion than a hundred days like a sheep! Nothing has ever been won in history without bloodshed! War is to the male what childbearing is to the female!*

If they went to the cinema or opened a newspaper they would often see long reports of Mussolini's speeches. Even leisure was firmly controlled. An organization called Dopolavoro (After work) arranged sporting activities and provided workers with cheap package holidays. Films, plays, radio shows and books glorified Mussolini and Fascism. Tennis players had to play in black shirts and give the Fascist salute at the end of matches instead of shaking hands. The Fascist Party controlled time itself! A new calendar was introduced in 1933. New Year's Day was to be on October 29 each year and Year One began in 1922, making 1933 the eleventh Fascist Year.

Controlling Religion: Since religion was the only area of Italian life not under party control, Mussolini sought to improve relations with the Pope in order to gain his support. In 1929 Mussolini and Cardinal Gaspari signed a treaty in the Lateran, the Pope's cathedral in Rome. The Lateran Treaty gave the Pope 1.75 million lire in compensation for the land taken from him when Italy unified. It made the Vatican City where he lived into an independent state with its own small army, police force, law courts, post office and railway stations. It made religious education compulsory. Mussolini had healed the split between church and state which had lasted for over 60 years.

ECONOMIC BATTLES!

Since Italy was a poor country, one of Mussolini's greatest goals was to make it rich. This meant tackling all sorts of major economic problems which no previous government had been able to solve. Mussolini liked to tackle economic problems by declaring war on them! The four major economic battles launched by Mussolini in the 1920s were as follows:

The Battle over the Southern Problem (1924): to cure the terrible poverty problem in southern Italy and Sicily. Mussolini created thousands of new villages to transform the lives of the poor.

The Battle for Wheat (1925): Mussolini wanted to get farmers to grow more wheat, so he reduced the importation of wheat from other countries and awarded the Italian farmers that grew the most wheat each year. This greatly increased Italian production of wheat.

The Battle for Land (1926): Mussolini order marshes and swamps to be drained, hillsides to be plowed bare, and all woodlands to be cleared so that farmland could be expanded.

The Battle for Births: was an attempt to increase the size of the population. Mussolini's goal was to increase the number of Italians from 40 to 60 million by 1950. More people meant more soldiers. Mothers were therefore given generous maternity benefits. Couples with six children or more did not have to pay any tax while bachelors had to pay supplementary taxes which were especially high for those between the ages of 35 and 50. Newly married couples were given cheap railway tickets so that they could go on their honeymoon. Every Christmas Eve the 93 mothers (one from each province of Italy) who had borne the most children during their lives were given prizes. In the record year of 1934 the 93 award-winning mothers had borne a total of 1300 children between them!



The END of Mussolini

On July 24, 1943 a leading member of the Fascist Grand Council criticized the way in which Mussolini was handling the war, and proposed that he should be removed from power. Five years earlier, Mussolini would not have allowed such a speech to be made and would certainly not have allowed a vote. But now he was ill and tired, worn out by constant defeat. He did not stop the Council from voting on the proposal to remove him, and they passed it, 19 for and 7 against. The next day the king told Mussolini to resign and put army chief, Marshal Badoglio at the head of the government.

Mussolini was imprisoned while the Allies invaded the mainland. In September 1943, German paratroopers made a daring raid on the mountain-top prison where he was being held. They took him back to Germany where he announced by radio that he would set up a new Fascist state in northern Italy, out of the reach of the advancing Allies. Mussolini's new Fascist state was called Republic of Salo, but he was no more than a puppet ruler with Hitler pulling the strings. As the Allies advanced up the leg of Italy in 1944 the *Republic of Salo* steadily

shrank. In April 1945, the Allies captured the city of Bologna and began retreating across the Alps. Mussolini decided to do the same and headed north with a German convoy disguised as a German airman. Before he could reach the frontier a group of Italian partisans, or freedom fighters, stopped and searched the convoy. They quickly recognized Mussolini and arrested him. No one knows exactly what happened next. It would seem that on the next day, April 28, another group of partisans got hold of Mussolini, put him up against a wall and shot him along with his mistress and 15 other Fascists. The next day, 6 of their bodies were strung up by the heels in a petrol station in Milan. In bright spring sunshine, a huge and angry crowd took it in turns to hurl insults and rotten fruit at the swinging corpse of their *Duce*.