**Mussolini and the Rise of Fascism**

Benito Mussolini coined the term “fascism” in 1919 to describe his political movement. He adopted the ancient Roman *fasces* as his symbol. This was a bundle of rods tied around an ax, which represented the power of Rome.

Mussolini established the first fascist regime, followed soon after by others, including Nazi Germany. Fascism, however, differed somewhat from one nation to another. Thus, scholars often disagree on a precise definition of fascism. Even so, they tend to agree on its common characteristics such as:

- **Absolute Power of the State:** Fascist regimes have a strong centralized state, or national government. The fascist state seeks total control over all major parts of society. Individuals must give up their private needs and rights to serve the needs of the whole society as represented by the state.

- **Rule by a Dictator:** A single dictator runs the fascist state and makes all the important decisions. This leader often uses charisma, a magnetic personality, to gain the support of the people.

- **Corporatism:** Fascists believe in taming capitalism by controlling labor and factory owners. Although private property remains, the state controls the economy.

- **Extreme Nationalism:** The fascist state uses national glory and the fear of outside threats to build a new society based on the “common will” of the people. Fascists believe in action and looking at national myths for guidance rather than relying on the “barren intellectualism” of science and reason.

- **Superiority of the Nation’s People:** Fascists hold up the nation’s people as superior to other nationalities. They typically strengthen and unify the dominant group in a nation while stifling dissent and persecuting minority groups.

- **Militarism and Imperialism:** Fascists believe that great nations show their greatness by conquering and ruling the weak.

**Mussolini’s Rise to Power**

After serving in the Italian army during World War I, Mussolini returned home, looking for a way to unify the Italian people. In 1918, he began to deliver emotional speeches, calling for a dictator to head the country. He argued that only a strong leader could unite the people to overcome Italy’s postwar mass unemployment, chaotic political party conflicts, and strikes by socialists and communists.

In 1919, Mussolini organized his fascist movement in the northern city of Milan. He formed squads of street fighters who wore black shirts. His “Blackshirts” beat up socialists and communists and threw them out of local governments.

The communist revolution in Russia had taken place only two years earlier. Mussolini’s fascist movement quickly gained the support of anti-communist business people, property owners, and middle-class professionals like teachers and doctors.

In 1921, Mussolini formed the National Fascist Party. But he still lacked a clear fascist program. He only knew one thing for sure: He wanted to rule Italy.
In a speech before thousands of his supporters in October 1922, Mussolini declared, “Either the government will be given to us, or we will seize it by marching on Rome.” A few days later, he unleashed his followers on a massive march to Italy’s capital city. As tens of thousands converged on Rome, government leaders became so unnerved that they resigned.

King Victor Emmanuel had the constitutional duty to appoint a new prime minister, who would form the next government. With his Blackshirts and other supporters swarming the streets of Rome, Mussolini demanded that the king appoint him prime minister. The king gave in, and at age 39, Mussolini became Italy’s youngest prime minister on October 29, 1922.

The Fascist State

Mussolini chose Giovanni Gentile, a noted Italian philosopher, as his minister of education. Gentile reorganized Italy’s school system. He also wrote many articles and books, clarifying the basic ideas of fascism.

Gentile argued that the private desires and interests of the individual came second to the “common will” of the people. The fascist state, he said, put this will of the people into action.

Gentile explained that self-sacrifice and obedience to the state enable the individual to achieve unity with the “common will.” Gentile argued that rights do not belong to the individual but to the people as a whole.

Gentile taught that the “common will” of the people is the law of the state. Therefore, individuals must submit to the fascist state in order to be truly free. Later, Mussolini put it this way: “Far from crushing the individual, the fascist state multiplies his energies, just as in a regiment a soldier is . . . multiplied by the number of his fellow soldiers.”

Building on the ideas of earlier European philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Gentile claimed that the peoples of the world are engaged in a survival of the fittest. He declared it is the natural right of the stronger to conquer and rule the weaker. Gentile stated that war has another function in the fascist state: It unites the people and proves their superiority as a nation.

Il Duce and the Fascist State

Mussolini wanted to create an economic system that provided a “third way” between capitalism and socialism. Capitalism depends on private property, employer-owned competing enterprises, and the profit motive. Socialism envisions a society in which the workers jointly own the economic means of production (factories, farms, etc.) and control the government. Communism is a form of socialism that calls for a revolution to destroy capitalism, establish a dictatorship in the name of the workers, and distribute economic production “to each according to his needs.”

During the 1930s, Mussolini organized industry, agriculture, and economic services into state-controlled labor unions and employer associations called “corporations.” Government officials appointed the heads of each union and employer corporation. They negotiated wages and working conditions with each other.