

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 198

### “1919 – Italy II”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Italian prime minister Vittorio Orlando had walked out of the peace talks in Paris and returned to Italy. When his train arrived in Rome, he was greeted with cries of *Viva Orlando! Viva Fiume! Viva l'Italia!*

There was no doubt Italians supported Orlando's dramatic gesture. But how much clout does Italy actually have? And what will happen if Italy doesn't get its way?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 198. 1919 – Italy, part two.

This is the 23<sup>rd</sup> episode of our 1919 World Tour, and today we begin where we left off last time, with Prime Minister Orlando walking out of the Paris Peace Conference.

Upon his return to Rome, Orlando addressed the Italian parliament. He called for calm, but he also insisted the justice of Italy's territorial claims was indisputable. His government won a vote of confidence overwhelmingly, 382 to 40. Italian nationalists demonstrated across the country in support of Italy's demands and against the Allies and Woodrow Wilson. Many demanded the government immediately annex the disputed lands, in defiance of the Allies. In Fiume itself, the small town that was becoming a big sore spot, a mob of angry Italians marched through the streets. Displaying an abundance of zeal, combined with a notable lack of comprehension of

exactly who and what the United States was, Italians in Fiume chanted, “Down with Wilson! Down with the redskins!”

And on the other side of the Atlantic, indigenous North Americans looked at each other, shrugged, and said, “They blame us for everything.”

In Paris, the withdrawal of the Italians from the conference was seen as a serious blow to the peace process. The Allies were divided over questions related to Germany, and China and Japan were raising strenuous objections. We’ll talk about those issues in future episodes, but for now let’s just say that some journalists began writing pieces suggesting the conference might collapse.

This was of course just the kind of leverage Orlando and the Italian government were hoping for. The conference must agree to Italian demands, or else there won’t *be* a conference. But the Italians had miscalculated. The other delegations continued to draft the German and Austrian peace treaties and if Italy refused to participate in the talks, were prepared to blot out all references to Italy in the final agreement. Let the Italians write their own peace treaties. With Orlando gone, the conference made the final decisions regarding the future of Germany’s holdings in Africa. Italy would get nothing. The US cut off aid and loans to Italy, while the French and the British suggested the Italian walkout might mean they were no longer obligated to uphold the terms of the Treaty of London.

It only took about two weeks for Orlando to figure out that his dramatic walkout had backfired and his only option was a humiliating return to Paris to pick up where he had left off, with the other members of the Big Four not giving an inch. There was no concealing the shame from the Italian public, and Orlando’s government failed another vote of confidence on June 19, less than two weeks before the signing ceremony for the Treaty of Versailles.

Representing Italy at that ceremony would be the new prime minister, 50-year-old Francesco Nitti, who had been Orlando’s finance minister. Nitti had made his name as a lawyer, journalist, and economist who studied the economic problems of his native southern Italy. Nitti was a member of the Italian Radical Party which, despite its name, was more left-liberal than radical. The Nitti government would bring Italy its first public unemployment and retirement programs. Under other circumstances, Nitti might have made a solid prime minister, but the questions of social reform and economic integration of the south that were so near to him were not the pressing issues facing the nation at that moment. Instead, Italy was convulsing with rage over what its most ardent nationalists and war supporters saw as their country’s betrayal at the hands of the very Allies for whom Italy had fought and bled and sacrificed.

For the new Nitti government, in signing the Treaty, had confirmed the concessions made by the Orlando government. There would be no Italian Dalmatia. Fiume would be a free city, on the model of Danzig, to be shared between Italy and Yugoslavia. Italy would get only what

Woodrow Wilson was willing to give: the Tyrolean Alps all the way up to the Brenner Pass plus Trieste and Istria.

Italian soldiers returning from the front lines to civilian life faced all the same economic shocks that were being felt everywhere else in the world. Food shortages from the war and sky-high prices. Rising unemployment in the cities, as war industries shut down. Urban workers called strikes, protested, seized control of factories, and sometimes rioted. In the agricultural south, 2.5 million peasant farmers had gone off to war and yet Italian agricultural output was scarcely affected. This gives you an idea of how much surplus labor there was in the south. In the old days, those workers might have emigrated. Since Italy entered the war in 1915, they were instead conscripted into the Army. Now they were suddenly back home and there was still no work for them. They'd been promised land grants after the war, but so far those remained promises. Some of them indulged in do-it-yourself land reform, seizing vacant lands and farming them as if they were their own.

To the Italian far left, the working-class unrest in the north and the peasant unrest in the south added up to socialist revolution. Italy was following the path blazed by the Russians. Socialist party leaders praised the Russian Revolution and called for Italy to follow Russia's example. Socialists encouraged their followers to pick fights with police and soldiers and to desecrate the Italian flag. Socialists clashed violently with the right-wing blackshirts, and instances of arson and looting of shops and factories were becoming commonplace.

The landlords and the capitalists, meanwhile, looked at the seizures of their lands and their factories and the escalating violence and decided that Bolshevism and anarchy had already arrived. The socialists had to be stopped. Order had to be restored. We have laws for a reason, people. So they made common cause with other groups that were unhappy both with Italy's post-war status and with its seeming slide toward Bolshevik chaos: people like anti-socialists, nationalists, middle-class business and professional people, and disgruntled military veterans who believed in the cause and fought for unredeemed Italy, only to return home to discover that their struggle had been in vain and their homeland was being taken over by a bunch of socialist traitors. In this latter group you can count a lot of military officers and a lot of *arditi*, the bold ones, elite Italian military personnel whom today we might call "special forces."

The summer of 1919 was in Italy the summer of discontent. Left-wing discontent. Right-wing discontent. And the most discontented Italian of them all, the man who gave voice to this national feeling of chagrin was Italy's most prominent war hero himself, Gabriele D'Annunzio.

D'Annunzio gave a series of fiery speeches in which he blasted the peace agreement. He argued that Italian heroism had saved democracy, only to be betrayed by its allies. He dismissed Woodrow Wilson as a "Croatedified Quaker," whatever that means, and questioned the intentions of the French. Hadn't the French always betrayed the Italians? Was it not the French in 1867 who had prevented Garibaldi from entering Rome and seizing it for the Kingdom of Italy? Or

who had seized Tunisia for themselves when it was naturally an Italian territory? They were probably behind the debacle at Adowa, for that matter, when the Ethiopians had defeated the Italians.

And while D'Annunzio articulated the right-wing grievances against the post-war order being forged in Paris, his rhetoric struck a chord with many rank-and-file socialists as well, particularly when he spoke of Britain, France, and the United States, the three richest nations in the world, as conspiring to keep Italy impoverished and compliant.

Over the spring and summer, D'Annunzio organized his followers, especially the disgruntled veterans into a private military force with an eye toward seizing control of Fiume on their own. This group adopted as their motto *Me ne frego*, which literally means "I don't mind" or "I don't care." But the literal translation can be misleading. They meant it in the sense expressed in the 1920 fascist song that proclaimed, *Me ne frego di morire, per la santa libert *. That is, "I don't care if I die for sacred liberty."

When Francesco Nitti became prime minister, he offered D'Annunzio a cabinet post, as a way of bringing this disgruntled right wing movement into the government coalition. D'Annunzio not only turned down the offer, he bit the hand that had reached out to him in friendship, calling Nitti *Cagoia*, another Italian expression that doesn't translate well. It means "snail" in the Trieste dialect, which in turn implies "cowardly," but it can also be understood to mean, shall we say, "full of crap"? Not a term normally applied to a prime minister.

In Milan, Benito Mussolini put his newspaper and his organization squarely behind D'Annunzio. He too turned his invective on Prime Minister Nitti, whom he called "Franz Josef Cagoia," and on the Allied leaders, whom he called the "bandits of international plutocracy." He was just as harsh with the Russian Bolsheviks, and here Mussolini helped perpetuate the lie that Bolshevism was a Jewish conspiracy and that Lenin and Trotsky were serving the interests of Jewish bankers in London and New York. By the way, I should take note that if there was any kind of significant Jewish presence in US banking during this period, in New York City or anywhere else, I'm unaware of it.

The strident attacks coming from D'Annunzio and his fanboys like Mussolini caught fire across Italy, nowhere more so than in the town of Fiume itself, where the ethnic Italian plurality was all in with the new Italian nationalism. In an appalling incident, Italian police fired on a group of schoolchildren, presumably Slavs, out on a picnic for refusing to call out "*Viva l'Italia!*" when ordered to. Nine were killed and many more wounded.

Mussolini was in no way a leader of the movement D'Annunzio had begun, but he was unquestionably part of it, and as the Italian patriotic rage grew, so did Mussolini's *fasci*. New chapters were forming in towns up and down Italy, about 150 in all, and the movement now boasted over 4,000 members, though it's important to note that each one of these *fasci* was an

independent, locally led organization. The only *fascio* that took orders from Mussolini directly was the first one in Milan, the one he had founded himself.

Fiume was occupied by a joint Allied military force that included American, British, French, and Italian soldiers. In August 1919, Allied military command, taking note of the rising tension and fearful of losing control of the situation, ordered the Italian contingent out of the town. These Italian soldiers appealed to D'Annunzio to do something.

And he did something. On September 12, 1919, D'Annunzio joined up with about 200 followers in the town of Ronchi, which lies between Gorizia and Trieste. Many of them were active duty soldiers who had abandoned their posts and seized Italian military vehicles. D'Annunzio led them south, in a procession toward Fiume, a journey of just over a hundred kilometers. Along the way, they picked up more military deserters, political radicals, students, veterans, and a few troublemakers.

By the time they reached Fiume, there were more than two thousand of them. The Italian military commander in Fiume, a General Vittorio Emanuele Pittaluga, was ordered to stop the procession before it entered the town. He met D'Annunzio at a roadblock and warned him that if he proceeded further, Italy would be ruined. D'Annunzio told him, "It is you who will ruin Italy if you prevent destiny being fulfilled." In a dramatic gesture borrowed from Napoleon, D'Annunzio opened his coat, revealing a chest full of medals, and invited the soldiers manning the checkpoint to shoot him.

The opposing forces stared at each other. No one moved. No one spoke, until at last General Pittaluga announced "I will not shed Italian blood," and shook D'Annunzio's hand.

And that was that. D'Annunzio and his followers marched into Fiume to a hero's welcome. From the Italians, anyway. Like the revered Giuseppe Garibaldi, D'Annunzio had assembled his own band of adventurers and had freelanced the conquest of new territories for Italy.

[music: Blanc, "Giovinezza"]

The government in Rome was appalled by D'Annunzio's excellent adventure. D'Annunzio wanted to hand Fiume over to Italy for annexation, but the government refused to accept it. Italy was still dependent on the goodwill of the Allies, and here a band of civilian extremists and mutinous military officers had just poked them all in the eye. The Nitti government denounced D'Annunzio and his followers, but was afraid to do anything more. If they sent Italian soldiers into Fiume, it seemed more likely they would join D'Annunzio than arrest him. Allied governments withdrew their own troops from Fiume, while the Italian government ordered a blockade of the town. Maybe they could starve out D'Annunzio and his radical followers. Or at least wait them out. D'Annunzio was a mercurial figure. Given enough time, especially once the novelty of the situation wore off, a celebrity like D'Annunzio, accustomed to the spotlight, might get bored rattling around a Podunk town on the Adriatic coast.

In November 1919, Italy held its first general election since entering the war. It was also the first Italian election conducted under universal male suffrage. Election reforms had replaced the British-style system of single-member constituencies with larger electoral districts, which would each elect multiple deputies under a system of proportional representation.

These electoral reforms were bound to shake up the political status quo, and they did, but one political movement that definitely did not benefit was Mussolini and his *fasci*. Mussolini had offered the government coalition the support of his movement, but had been rebuffed, forcing the *fasci* to stand for parliament on their own. Since they were small in numbers and scattered across Italy in such a way that nowhere did they amount to enough to crack the system of proportional representation, they didn't get anywhere. Even in Milan, where Mussolini was well known and had a cadre of devoted followers, he was not able even to get himself elected.

The Socialist Party was the big winner in the election, tripling its numbers in parliament. The old liberal coalition that was accustomed to running the country took a hit, but they were able to assemble enough votes to keep Francesco Nitti in the premiership for now.

In Milan, which had gone heavily Socialist, the socialists conducted a funeral procession past Benito Mussolini's home, carrying an empty coffin meant to represent his political aspirations. The socialist newspaper *Avanti!* weighed in with a mock news item reporting that "[a] corpse of in a state of decomposition was fished out of the canal yesterday. It appears to be that of Mussolini."

But this socialist gloating was just a tad premature. Having been shut out of government themselves, the socialists encouraged a wave of strikes and demonstrations in early 1920. The workers won most of these, but their gains were short lived. The year 1920 saw a global recession as purchases of arms and military equipment tapered off and private-sector demand failed to pick up the slack. This led to factory slowdowns and layoffs that undid many of the gains the labor unions in Italy had recently won.

Meanwhile, across the Adriatic in Fiume, Gabriele D'Annunzio remained in charge of the orphaned and unwanted city-state of Fiume. In grandiose fashion, he set up his own government, and if you're familiar with the trappings of Italian fascism, there's a lot going on here that will sound familiar. Like D'Annunzio's habit of standing on a balcony and delivering an emotional and bombastic address to the crowd in the street below, punctuated with the Roman salute. Carefully choreographed parades, marches, and political rallies. And perhaps most of all, the title D'Annunzio gave himself as head of his comic opera state: simply "the Leader." Or, in Italian, *il Duce*.

Between the speeches and the rallies, D'Annunzio and his followers lived as libertines. Sexual promiscuity and excessive drinking and drug-taking were the new order in Fiume. D'Annunzio himself proved to be a heavy cocaine user.

Reckless political theatre also extended to Fiume's foreign policy. D'Annunzio gave the Allied powers and the new League of Nations a conspicuous middle finger by creating the so-called League of Fiume, an alternative international organization ostensibly created for the oppressed nations and peoples of the world who had been snubbed by the Allies. It explicitly named Russia, Germany, and Turkey in the former category, and in the latter, a long list of peoples with grievances against Allied governments. Peoples like the German-speakers in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Montenegrins, and the Irish. Nations like India, Egypt, Morocco, Korea, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, as well as African Americans and Asian Americans in California.

With domestic political violence on the rise and D'Annunzio making trouble in Fiume, it was a difficult time for the Nitti government, which fell in June, after just shy of a year in power.

The government that replaced it was led by the 76-year old Giovanni Giolitti. If you're thinking you've heard that name before, you are correct. This would be his fifth turn as prime minister. We met him during his fourth, back in 1911, during the Italo-Ottoman War, episode 66, and we encountered him again in episode 101, when he was one of the most prominent voices in Italian politics opposed to Italy entering the Great War. Now he was an elder statesman, seen as the kind of respected and stabilizing figure needed to lead Italy through this turbulent period, and if you add all five of his premierships together, this will make Giolitti the longest-serving prime minister in Italian history until...well, we'll get back to *him* in a few minutes.

Giolitti pursued a policy of pressing the factory owners to make concessions to the workers as a way of stemming the left-wing unrest and violence. He believed that all Italy needed was some time. Time for passions to cool and for the economy to transition back to a peacetime footing. But his velvet glove approach to the socialists angered the political right in Italy, who saw the government and industry making concession after concession while the left-wing violence continued unabated. The word went out among those unhappy with the government's conciliatory policy: Don't let the people who opposed the war rob us of our victory. They began to gravitate toward Mussolini's fascist movement.

The fascists welcomed them with open arms, even tweaking their program to make it more palatable to the conventional Italian right. They de-emphasized the movement's calls for an eight-hour workday, universal suffrage, and the abolition of the monarchy and talked up nationalism, defense of private property and above all, the need to fight socialist violence with anti-socialist violence.

In foreign policy, the Giolitti government was also determined to deal with the thorn in its side that was D'Annunzio's Fiume. On November 12, 1920, Italy and Yugoslavia—technically, the “Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes,” but I'm just going to call it Yugoslavia from now on—Italy and Yugoslavia signed the Treaty of Rapallo, which settled their outstanding territorial disputes. Italy would be granted some Dalmatian islands and an enclave around the port city of

Zadar, or Zara as the Italians called it, owing to its large proportion of Italian-speaking residents. As for Fiume, the treaty affirmed the arrangement drawn up at the Paris Peace Conference. Fiume would be a free city, jointly overseen by the governments in Rome and Belgrade.

D'Annunzio's comic opera government in Fiume refused to recognize the treaty and declared war on Italy...only to surrender a few weeks later when the Italian Navy appeared in force. D'Annunzio himself, now 57, retired to his villa on Lake Garda in northern Italy to write and to further explore the pleasures of cocaine.

November 1920 also saw local elections in Italy, and the socialists did very well at the polls. They made major gains in local governments, especially in the industrial north, taking control of councils in major cities. You can call this moment right here the high point of the Italian Socialist Party. The party leadership spoke confidently of their impending victory over capitalism. A little too confidently, as it turned out.

The violence began in Bologna, on the day that the new socialist majority was to be sworn in. The local fascist group rallied about 300 armed fighters who marched through the streets and attacked the building where the ceremony was being held. Eleven people were killed. Ten were socialists, but the eleventh was an anti-socialist councilor who was among those to be sworn in. The fascists named him a martyr in the fight against socialism.

The rest of the year saw more attacks against socialists, socialist offices and newspapers, and socialist government officials. The perpetrators of these attacks were generally gangs of armed young men, often still in their teens, known as "action squads." These action squads were the public face of the fascist movement, but it should be noted they had a lot of support from their friends and families, and sympathetic middle-class Italians who provided money and arms and often even drove them to the scenes of their attacks in their personal vehicles. Many of the leaders among these young men had returned after spending some time in Fiume, patrolling the town as part of D'Annunzio's irregulars. They learned his politics and his tactics and brought those lessons home to Italy to teach to their friends. These tactics included heavy drinking and cocaine use just before an attack, in the manner of *il Duce* himself.

They organized in a quasi-military way, many of them being veterans. Individual fascist units had their own emblems and banners and mottoes, though *Me ne frego* was the most popular. They sang songs as they marched through the streets, the most popular one being "*Giovinezza*," which simply means *youth*, a nod to the young men in the squads. This would become the official song of the National Fascist Party. You heard an excerpt from it a few minutes ago.

These attack squads armed themselves with anything and everything up to and including firearms, which were sometimes lent to them by sympathetic police or soldiers, but the classic weapon of the fascists was the *manganello*, which is a sort of truncheon or nightstick, a short wooden club. The fascists romanticized the *manganello*, even composing songs about it,



referring to the “holy manganello.” One fascist club put up a statue of the Virgin Mary with an infant Jesus in one hand and a *manganello* in the other.

The other signature weapon of the action squads was castor oil. For the benefit of you young people, who don’t know how good you have it, castor oil is extracted from castor beans and has a variety of industrial applications. It’s also sometimes used as a laxative, though happily not so much anymore. Fascist action squads frequently forced their victims to swallow castor oil. The result of this could range from an incapacitating bout of diarrhea to vomiting and abdominal cramps and in a few cases it might prove fatal. Besides making the victim painfully ill, the castor oil was meant symbolically. Remember how D’Annunzio called his enemies *cagoia*? The fascists were metaphorically purging their enemies of their disgusting Bolshevik tendencies.

The violence itself was also meant symbolically. Yes, it was intended to intimidate the socialists, but it had a broader message. The nation was in peril, and high-minded ideals like “liberty” and “democracy” were no more than code words for selling out to the socialists. The enemies of Italy had to be stopped, they needed to be stopped now, and there’s no time to be genteel about our methods.

The action squads went largely unpunished. Sympathetic police would not arrest them. Sympathetic prosecutors would not charge them. Sympathetic judges would not punish them.

The fascist movement took off. In one month, December 1920, membership doubled, from 10,000 to 20,000. By May 1921, it was over 180,000. Mussolini had nothing to do with it. This was a grass-roots phenomenon, and it surprised him as much as anyone else.

In January 1921, the Italian Socialist Party split between those who thought the movement had gone too far and those who thought it had not yet gone far enough. The latter group embraced Lenin’s 21 conditions and organized the Communist Party of Italy under the leadership of the Communist International and they prepared to take up the fight against the landlords and the capitalists.

In the middle of all this was the old man of Italian politics, Prime Minister Giolitti. His efforts to lure at least some of the more moderate socialists into the government coalition had gotten him nowhere. Even the moderate socialists were uncompromising, while the extremists were making common cause with the lunatics in Moscow. Well, if the socialists spurned him, perhaps he could outflank them, so to speak, by inviting the burgeoning fascist movement into his coalition.

And so Giolitti called a general election for May 1921. He went into the campaign as the leader of what was called the “National Bloc,” a coalition of four political parties led by Giolitti’s own Liberal Party and including both Mussolini’s fascist party and another nationalist party. The goal was for the National Bloc to ride the backlash against the now-fractured Socialist Party and replace it as the largest single party in Parliament, thus strengthening the government for a showdown with the socialists.

It didn't work out the way Giolitti had hoped. This would be the first Italian general election that included all the new territories Italy had gained from the war, for a Chamber of Deputies that now amounted to 535 seats. When the ballots were counted, the Socialist Party had lost 33 seats, down to 123, but that still made it the largest single party. The new Communist Party picked up 15 seats. But Giolitti's National Bloc won only a disappointing 105 seats, making it only the number three party. Even worse, 45 of these 105 seats taken by the National Bloc were held either by Mussolini's fascists or by the other nationalist party, meaning almost half of Giolitti's support was now coming from the extreme right wing.

With his political position weakened instead of strengthened by the coalition with the fascists, the now 78-year-old Giolitti chose to resign. Replacing him would be the 47-year-old Ivanoe Bonomi, an ex-socialist who had been expelled from the Socialist Party for supporting Italy's war against the Ottoman Empire in 1911. Despite this superficial similarity to Benito Mussolini's political biography, Bonomi was no fascist; he was more of a left-leaning liberal by this time.

As for Mussolini, the 1921 election was a huge personal victory for the man whose enemies were taunting him as dead and decomposing less than two years ago. He was now the leader of a small but crucial bloc of votes in parliament. In the Italian parliament's divided and paralyzed state, Mussolini had the opportunity to play an outsized role in government.

Only, his new image as a leader and a statesman was undercut by those fascist attack squads rampaging across the country. Mussolini had proved he could make trouble; now he needed to prove he could end it. And so that summer, Mussolini negotiated a truce with the socialists, under which the two sides agreed to lay off the violence for a while.

Sounds good. Only, remember that the fascist movement is not a top-down organization that Benito Mussolini can simply issue orders to. He may have helped inspire the formation of the local fascist clubs that had sprung up across Italy, but he didn't run them. And they weren't at all sure they wanted to lay down their arms on his say so.

This became especially true after an incident in August, when 18 young fascists were killed in a pitched battle with police in the northwest. This incident inflamed fascist passions just as Mussolini was trying to tamp them down, and he faced outright rebellion from the local fascist leadership. A couple of them went so far as to visit Gabriele D'Annunzio at his villa to invite him to assume leadership of the fascist movement. Maybe he was tired of politics, maybe he felt the task of corralling these gangs of thugs into a political movement was too great, or maybe it was the allure of the cocaine, but for whatever reason, D'Annunzio declined.

In November 1921, the fascists held a national conference in Rome, and here Mussolini worked out a compromise that would end the rift in the movement. In exchange for Mussolini agreeing to end the truce with the socialists, the local fascist clubs would agree to join one single national fascist political organization, with Benito Mussolini as *il Duce*.

It was a masterstroke. The local *fasci* agreed to submit to Mussolini's authority in exchange for his ending the dispute he himself had caused. Besides, the truce with the socialists had done nothing to strengthen Mussolini's political position in Rome; if anything, it had weakened it. The fascist movement had gotten farther through the deployment of violence or the threat of violence than it had in conventional parliamentary politicking. Time to go back to our roots.

The return to violence in early 1922 triggered another growth spurt for the movement. By summer, membership was north of 300,000. The Fascist Party now had its own women's section and youth section. Hundreds of thousands more workers were members of Fascist-affiliated unions. Most of these Fascist unions were for farm workers.

The Bonomi government fell in February 1922. The cabinet was reshuffled under the leadership of 60-year old Luigi Facta, a respectable if not especially charismatic liberal lawyer and journalist who'd previously served as finance minister.

The Fascists' return to violence and their increasing support across the nation divided the liberal political parties. Some liberal political leaders, like Vittorio Orlando, advocated forming an anti-Fascist coalition government and cracking down on Fascist violence. Others, like new Prime Minister Facta and former Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, feared that would lead to civil war, and advocated keeping the Fascists in the government coalition.

This standoff lasted until July, when the anti-Fascists finally got fed up with the government's look-the-other-way approach to dealing with Fascist violence. An anti-Fascist coalition brought down the government, but by this time the cycle of socialist agitation and Fascist reaction was spinning so far out of control that no one wanted to take on the job of ending it. That same month, Italian trade unions called a general strike in protest against the Fascists. It backfired. Fascists paraded through the streets of towns up and down Italy, attacking labor union offices and left-wing politicians. In some communities, Fascist volunteers took up public service jobs abandoned by striking socialists, which provided a prime propaganda opportunity. Look at us, the people who keep the streetcars running while the Bolsheviks running the unions and the cowards running the government betray you.

Out of the political chaos in Rome came another new government, with Luigi Facta still at its head, but it was now an anti-Fascist, anti-socialist coalition of liberal and conservative parties. The new government got a vote of confidence from the parliament, 247-122, while one Fascist deputy warned, "Either the state will absorb Fascism, injecting fresh life-blood into its organs, or Fascism will replace the state."

By autumn, as political tensions in Italy remained high, rumor had it that the prime minister was going to use the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the armistice with Austria, November 4, 1922, to unveil a new set of programs meant to unify the nation. It was also rumored that none other than the old war hero himself, Gabriele D'Annunzio, would come out of retirement to give a speech supporting national reconciliation and calling for an end to the violence.

This would be a disaster for Mussolini and his party, so the Fascists made plans to pre-empt the announcement with a demonstration of their own. Before the end of October, Fascist action squads would seize control of government offices in cities and towns across the nation. Other Fascists, tens of thousands of them, would march on Rome and demand a Fascist government.

One possible obstacle to this plan was the opposition of the King Vittorio Emanuele III. Italy was a constitutional monarchy, but the King had to appoint the prime minister, and the King was commander of the Army. From the beginning, Mussolini's Fascists had declared themselves republicans and called for the abolition of the monarchy. Intimidating the colorless band of lawyers that made up the Facta government would be far easier than convincing the King to, in effect, sign away his crown.

Mussolini dealt with this difficulty in the same way he always dealt with conflicts between ideology and practice. He adjusted his ideology. By September, Mussolini was delivering speeches suggesting that fascism was not incompatible with the monarchy and that the King had nothing to fear from the coming Fascist revolution, provided, of course, the King did not oppose the Fascist effort to purge the nation of its corruption and rancor.

As fate would have it, Gabriele D'Annunzio fell out of a second-floor window at his villa and was seriously injured. He was high on cocaine at the time, or so it is said. He survived the fall, but his injuries would keep him out of politics at this critical moment, much to Mussolini's relief.

On October 27, Fascist action squads took over government buildings around the country. Most of these seizures were peaceful. Some 16,000 Fascists made their way to Rome, gathering at designated assembly points around the capital, singing "*Giovinezza*," the Fascist anthem.

These Fascist squads were threatening to take over government ministries the next day. Now, 16,000 is not a huge number in a city of 700,000. They were not particularly well armed or supplied. That night, the Italian cabinet met in emergency session with the military leadership, and they agreed unanimously on a course of action. The government would declare martial law across Italy, effective at noon tomorrow, and the military would move in to occupy and defend government buildings. In the early morning hours of October 28, telegrams were sent to local government and military leaders across the nation, advising them of the coming declaration.

But the declaration of martial law had to come from the King. Facta met with the King at 9:00 that morning, but the King refused to sign the decree. Why he refused is a bit of a mystery, even in our time. He had earlier signaled to the government that he was willing to go along with the plan. Maybe Mussolini won him over with his promise that there would be a place for the King in a Fascist Italy. Maybe he doubted the loyalty of his own soldiers. Maybe he couldn't bring himself to order his Army to fire on fellow Italians.

Whatever the reason, he refused. This left Facta and his government no choice but to resign. Another round of telegrams went out at 11:30, advising the nation that martial law was cancelled.

Now the King had to appoint a new prime minister. The Fascists demanded it be Mussolini, and the King gave in. Benito Mussolini would become the 27<sup>th</sup>—and, at the age of 39, the youngest—prime minister of Italy.

Future Fascist propaganda would make a lot out of the “March on Rome,” as history will call it. But it’s important to understand what the March on Rome was not. It was not a coup or a government takeover. It was more the deployment of mob violence—or the threat of mob violence—to force a change in the government.

No law was broken. The new Fascist government took power according to the process laid down in the Albertine Statute, the Italian constitution. A prime minister resigned. The King invited a new leader to form a government. He did. It got a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies. Life went on.

Most Italians did not see this moment as representing any kind of sudden or radical change. If anything, it was the opposite. The Fascist government promised to end the violence and restore the peace and quiet of the good old days of the Belle Époque. No more war. No more strikes. No more inflation. No more crazy Bolsheviks calling for revolution.

And so it went, for now. But you know, and I know, that something has changed in the world. Something fundamental. The world has seen its first fascist government. The world will never be the same.

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Craig and Eric for their donations, and thank you, Liam, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Craig and Eric and Liam help keep the podcast on track and free for everyone, so thanks again for your support. If you have some spare change in the sofa and would like to pitch in, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

While you’re there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today’s show. I also post playlists of the music used on the podcast, along with composer credits and other information, so if you hear a piece of music you’d like to know more about, that’s the place to look. Most of the music I use here is free and downloadable, and you’ll find links to sites where you can download it, if you like.

And I hope you’ll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention to the fifth ally, Japan. We’ll examine the postwar situation in the Far East, and I’ll give

you a closer look at that big compromise Woodrow Wilson made with his principles. Japan, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Let us pause for a moment to say farewell to Giovanni Giolitti. He had served longer as Prime Minister than anyone else in the history of the Kingdom of Italy, but his record is about to be eclipsed...by Benito Mussolini.

Giolitti died in 1928, at the age of 85. His last words were reportedly, "I am very old. I served in five governments, but I could not sing '*Giovinazza*.'"

[music: Closing Theme]