

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 254

“The Century of the State”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Granted that the nineteenth century was the century of socialism, liberalism, democracy, this does not mean that the twentieth century must also be the century of socialism, liberalism, democracy. Political doctrines pass; nations remain. We are free to believe that this is the century of authority, a century tending to the “right,” a Fascist century. If the nineteenth century was the century of the individual (liberalism implies individualism) we are free to believe that this is the “collective” century and therefore the century of the State.

Benito Mussolini. “The Doctrine of Fascism.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 254. The Century of the State.

I told you the story of the March on Rome and Benito Mussolini’s becoming the Italian prime minister all the way back in episode 198. It is worth paying attention to this moment and what followed, for here is the world’s first fascist government. There have been and will be other political movements that could be called fascist, or maybe proto-fascist is a better way of putting it. In his book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, Robert Paxton points to some of the right-wing political movements in France in the late 19th century as harbingers of fascism. In this connection, you also have to think about the Dreyfus Affair, episode 8, with the blatant anti-Semitism in the French military and among French conservatives, plus the conviction that lying, forging false documents, and even imprisoning innocent people were necessary, even noble acts, if they served to protect the Army and the state.

Paxton also notes the Ku Klux Klan in the United States of the 1870s, which bears many of the marks of a fascist movement, including the racism, the paramilitary uniforms, and the willingness, even eagerness, to commit political violence.

But this moment, in Rome in October 1922, is the first time a fascist movement ever took control over a nation. And this will only happen once again. Spoiler alert: in Germany. It's always dangerous to extrapolate from a mere two data points, but we'll see what we can do.

First of all, in Italy, as will be the case in Germany, the Fascists did not take power through a revolution or *coup d'état*, but rather through a legitimate, legal, constitutional process. If you remember the details of the March on Rome, the Italian government wanted to use force, to declare martial law and break up the march, but the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele III, refused to approve that solution. The King's motives are not entirely clear. Maybe it was a reluctance to use the Army against fellow Italians, or perhaps it reflected sympathy with the Fascist movement. Maybe a little of both.

The Fascists had been generating political violence up and down Italy for years, mostly in opposition to socialists. The Italian criminal justice system, like the King, had an apparent soft spot for Fascists. The police were far quicker to arrest socialists for acts of violence, while looking the other way when fascists did the same. Fascists who were arrested were less likely to be prosecuted; those who were prosecuted were more likely to be acquitted or draw lighter sentences than socialists in similar straits. It seems there was a lot of sympathy for the Fascists up and down the Italian political and legal system.

Mussolini did not personally participate in the March on Rome. He was in Milan at the time. After the government resigned and the King chose Mussolini to be the next prime minister, he rode into Rome on the overnight sleeper car from Milan. When he met with the King to receive the formal request to form a government, he said to the King, "Your Majesty will forgive my attire. I have come from the battlefield," which was a lie. But notice the desire to depict himself and his movement in military terms, because that's a common fascist trope.

Even this story wasn't overblown enough, so later the tale emerged that Mussolini's words to the King were actually, "Your Majesty, I bring you the Italy of Vittorio Veneto." This is another military metaphor. It depicts Mussolini as in essence proclaiming the return of the glorious Italy of the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, which as far as an Italian Fascist is concerned, was the brilliant Italian triumph that broke the Central Powers and won the war for the Allies. The truth is far less inspiring, as we learned in episode 170, but no true Fascist will let a little thing like reality get in the way. The larger promise, implicit in this phony quote, is that the old Italy has returned, the Italy unified in purpose and ready to fight for its honor and to reclaim its stolen destiny.

Remember that although the March on Rome was an implicit threat of violence, it was not violent revolution that won Mussolini the premiership; it was the refusal of the King to fight back and the subsequent resignation of the previous prime minister and cabinet. This amounted to a fully legal and constitutional process. But less than two weeks later, when Mussolini addressed the Italian Chamber of Deputies for the first time, he was already referring to his accession as the Fascist revolution. You can think of this as a case of Bolshevik envy.

Mussolini went on to tell the parliament that with 300,000 Blackshirts at his command, he could have punished all those who had opposed him. He could have turned the Deputies out of their own chamber and made it into a Blackshirt barracks, but he restrained himself out of a sense of generosity. “I could have done so, but I did not wish to do so, at least not at this moment.”

He went on to tell the chamber that he was forming a coalition government, not out of necessity, but as a similar act of generosity. The need to save the Italian nation was more important than matters of party or ideology. It was a task for every Italian.

Of course, one of the things Mussolini was promising to save the Italian nation from was Fascist violence. Political violence in Italy, mostly between Fascists and socialists, had killed about 2,000 people since the end of the war, a remarkable number in what was supposed to have been an advanced liberal democracy. Mussolini and the Fascist movement had not actually used violence to win political power, but rather had unleashed Fascist violence in the streets of Italy, and then offered themselves as the leaders who could end the violence and save Italy. From them. You might think of this as a revolutionary “bank shot.” This was the genius of Mussolini and of the Fascist movement.

Despite Mussolini’s bluster about how he didn’t need to form a coalition government but would do so anyway since it was what the country needed, the fact was, of course he needed a coalition government. The Fascist Party held just 35 out of the 535 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Obviously, nothing much would get done without coalition partners. With the benefit of historical hindsight, you might wonder why other political parties would agree to enter into a coalition with the Fascists and lend them the credibility of legitimate political partners. In fact, at the time it felt more like the opposite: the other parties were forming yet another coalition government, as was the norm in Italian politics, only this time with Benito Mussolini as the new face of the same old coalition.

Mussolini and his Fascists had been strident—and effective—critics of Italian democracy. Mussolini had condemned Italian democracy as an impotent debating society that argued endlessly as the nation plunged into crisis. By placing Mussolini up front as the government figurehead, the other parties and their leaders could create the appearance that Italian democracy had reformed and reinvigorated itself, while behind the scenes, the same old politicians and parties would keep doing the same old things. That was the idea, anyway.

No doubt many leaders of the traditional parties believed Mussolini to be a gadfly, a showman with no real political expertise who could easily be outmaneuvered, especially since his own party was only a small portion of the governing coalition. But they had underestimated him.

[music: Vivaldi, *Concerto for Two Trumpets*]

In that same speech, his very first speech before the Chamber of Deputies as prime minister, Mussolini noted that in the aftermath of his sudden accession to the premiership, everyone was

asking what the new government's program would be. Mussolini told the Chamber: "It is not, alas, programs that are wanting in Italy, but men with the will to carry them out. All the problems of Italian life—all, I say—have long since been solved on paper, but the will to put these solutions into practice has been lacking. The Government today represents that firm and decisive will."

And there, ladies and gentlemen, you have fascism in a nutshell. It's not about programs. It's not about solutions. Programs and solutions are a dime a dozen. It's about the will to put them into practice. Fascism is all about *will*.

And since only Fascists have the requisite *will* to do what must be done for the good of the nation, it follows inevitably that the good of the nation demands Fascist rule. Thus, as soon as Mussolini became prime minister, he set to work to insure that he and his Fascist Party would be ruling forever.

From the beginning, Mussolini used his position in government to dispense patronage to Fascists and their allies, which naturally in turn led to growth in the party. Party membership rose from 300,000 at the time Mussolini took office to 780,000 by the end of the following year. Many of the new members were from the south of Italy, a region where the Party had very little presence. Until now.

Mussolini pursued a strategy of institutionalizing the Fascist Party by creating Fascist-controlled replicas of existing institutions. Even before he took office, Mussolini was musing about creating a separate body that would be more efficient than the Chamber of Deputies with its endless speeches. In December 1922, he announced the Grand Council of Fascism, populated by the Party's most important leaders; increasingly it was here that important matters of state would be discussed and decided.

The Party already had its paramilitary Blackshirts; these were reorganized into what came to be known as the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*, the National Security Voluntary Militia, or MVSNI, to use the Italian abbreviation. Its declared purpose was to defend the October Revolution—just months after Mussolini became prime minister, he was already recasting his accession in the mold of Lenin. Back in Milan, the Fascist newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, was taken over by Mussolini's younger brother, Arnaldo, who faithfully took on the task of portraying his big brother in the best possible light in the pages of his newspaper. The two consulted one another by telephone almost every day.

Benito Mussolini was a gruff man, brusque, rough around the edges, prone to violence; he was the son of a blacksmith. After he became head of government, he tried to soften his image. He wanted to seem strong and firm, yes, but not uncouth. Also, it was part of the Fascist promise that Fascist rule would mean an end to the political violence plaguing Italy. It was the Fascists who had created the political violence, mind you, but even so, winding your followers up so tightly that they go out and do violence against your political enemies is one thing; winding them

down again is another. Mussolini never had as tight a grip over his party as Hitler or Stalin had over theirs. But Mussolini turned this to his advantage by publicly pledging that the new Fascist-led government would crack down on all outbursts of violence, even when committed by other Fascists.

This won the new government praise at home and abroad. Within two months after taking office, Mussolini made two foreign trips, one to Lausanne, Switzerland, where the Treaty of Lausanne was being ironed out, episode 196; the other to London for a conference on reparations, where he was met at Victoria Station by a squad of fifty Blackshirts, who threw up Roman salutes and sang “Giovinezza.” The British reaction to this spectacle was a mix of surprise and amusement. Newspapers had to explain that funny salute, the raising the right arm with hand pointed forward. *The Times* gushed that “Signor Mussolini has an air of authority and a dominating personality.”

Over the next few years, Mussolini’s leadership in Italy would be praised by figures as diverse as Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, and Mohandas Gandhi. America’s first couple of the cinema, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, visited Mussolini in Rome and came back home to the United States sporting fascist pins and teaching their Hollywood friends how to throw a proper Roman salute.

Perhaps Winston’s wife, Clementine Churchill, said it best when she replied to her husband’s praise by suggesting it was perhaps more pleasant to admire a figure like Mussolini from afar than it was to live under his rule.

Under Mussolini, who also held the portfolio of foreign minister in his government, Italian foreign policy remained mostly the same. The Fascists wanted to convey an international image of a reasonable Italy that would work cooperatively with other countries. But this image soon took a hit in August 1923, when the Corfu Crisis broke out.

This crisis began as a border dispute between Greece and Albania. The two nations brought the case before the Conference of Allied Ambassadors. A joint Italian-French-British commission was created to settle the dispute; this commission was chaired by an Italian general named Enrico Tellini. On August 27, 1923, Tellini and his entourage of three Italians and their Albanian interpreter, were ambushed and killed in the disputed border region. The perpetrators were never found and their motive remains unclear. They may have been bandits, although the victims were not robbed. Given the location of the attack, in the disputed border region, the attackers could just as easily have been either Greek or Albanian. No one knows for certain, even in our time.

The Mussolini government in Rome blamed Greece for the attack. Anti-Greek demonstrations broke out across Italy. Two days later, Rome issued a stringent set of demands, beginning with a funeral for the victims in Athens, to be attended by the Greek cabinet, with full military honors and then an indemnity payment of fifty million lire, and going on from there. When the Greek government made a counteroffer that was less than complete compliance with Italian demands,

the Italian Navy bombarded the Greek island of Corfu in the Adriatic and landed thousands of Italian marines, who seized control of the island.

The Greek government appealed for help to the League of Nations, but the Italian government refused to discuss the matter at the League and threatened to leave the organization if it got involved. The Italians insisted instead the dispute should be resolved by the Conference of Ambassadors. In Britain, Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon described the Italian ultimatum as more stringent than the one Austria had given to Serbia in July 1914. He told Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin that if the League of Nations did not act to protect Greece, then the League “may as well shut its doors.”

Crucially, though, France opposed League involvement in this confrontation. This was at the same time France was occupying the Ruhr region of Germany, episode 214, and the French government was reluctant to set a precedent that might support League intervention against the French occupation.

The Conference of Ambassadors announced a settlement less than a week later. Greece was forced to accept virtually all of the Italian demands, including the indemnity, although there was and is no evidence to confirm that Greece bore any responsibility at all for the attack. A chastened Greek government abandoned its claim for the return of the Italian-occupied Dodecanese Islands, which Italy had won from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, episode 66, and to which the Greeks laid claim following the Great War. Italy would formally annex the Dodecanese Islands in 1925.

It was a major foreign policy success for Mussolini and was widely celebrated in Italy. The political boost couldn't have come at a better time. The Fascists still only held 35 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and Mussolini was by this time, less than a year in office, already eyeing ways of increasing his majority. Like, drastically.

The solution came as an electoral reform, drafted in 1923 by one of Mussolini's Fascist allies, and known by his name: the Acerbo Law. Italian democracy had traditionally worked like French democracy. There was a large number of political parties and governments formed as coalitions of these parties, with cabinet positions handed out among members of the coalition. Such a system is arguably more democratic than the British or American tradition of two major parties, sometimes three in Britain, though it is inarguably less stable, with governments forming and falling far more frequently, to be replaced by new governments that are often composed of mostly the same old parties in a slightly different configuration.

But the Fascists had no patience with this Italian political tradition, and so a new electoral system was proposed, one intended to produce governments stronger and more stable, in line with Fascist doctrine, though one might argue that the Acerbo Law went a little far. It replaced a parliament made up of individual constituencies with one elected at large across all Italy, seats to be apportioned according to each party's share of the vote. So far, so good; a number of

countries use that system. But the law also included this provision: if at least one party carried at least 25% of the total vote, then the party with the largest vote share would be awarded two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, with the remaining third allocated proportionately among the other parties. Yes, you heard that right. Two-thirds of the seats to the party that gets the most votes, provided they get at least 25%. Because Fascists don't like to take chances.

Not at the ballot box, anyway.

You might think that the other Italian political parties would look askance upon this proposal, but in fact it passed easily. Italy's Liberal political parties voted for it. It was supported by three former prime ministers: Antonio Salandra, the man who had led Italy into the Great War, Vittorio Orlando, the man who had represented Italy at the Italian Peace Conference, and the Grand Old Man of Italian politics, five-time prime minister Giovanni Giolitti, now in his eighties, but still sitting in the Chamber of Deputies as a member of the Liberal Party. Many newspapers editorialized in favor of the law, including Italy's largest and most influential paper, the conservative-leaning *Il Corriere della Sera*, in Mussolini's home town of Milan.

The only real opposition to the proposal came from the socialist Left, though they didn't have the votes to block it. One such left-leaning opponent of the law was Giovanni Amendola, a Deputy who had served in the government of Luigi Facta—that would be the previous cabinet, the one that resigned when the King refused to use force against the March on Rome. Amendola spoke out against the law, accusing Mussolini and the Fascists of *totalitario*, a word he coined to signify that Mussolini didn't want to work in cooperation with other parties, but instead pursued total control over the government and the nation. It is from Amendola's coinage that comes the English word *totalitarianism*.

The Fascists at first resented this accusation, but within a few years, Giovanni Gentile, the great theoretician of Italian Fascism, would embrace totalitarianism—the word and the concept—and declare that, yes indeed, the goal of Fascism was to provide “total representation of the nation and total guidance of national goals.”

Almost as soon as the ink was dry on the King's signature on the Acerbo Law, he dissolved the Chamber of Deputies and called new elections, which were held on April 6, 1924. The Fascists ran as part of a coalition, called the *Listone*, which means “the big list” in Italian, like the British coupon election of 1918. The *Listone* also included Giolitti's Italian Liberal Party and Orlando's Democratic Liberal Party.

When the votes were counted, the *Listone* took about half the vote in northern Italy, the base of Italian industry and Italian socialism. It took three-quarters of the vote in central Italy, and an eye-popping 82% in southern Italy, a region that had had virtually no Fascist presence in the previous election. Overall, the *Listone* carried 64% of the vote, rendering the Acerbo Law virtually moot. Nothing like this had ever been seen before in Italian political history, and nothing like it would ever be seen again. This will be the first and the last time the Acerbo Law

would be in effect during an Italian general election. This will also be the last multiparty election in Italy until 1946, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

In the aftermath of this historic election, Mussolini felt encouraged to pursue consensus even with the parties of the Left. Fascism was supposed to represent the entire nation, after all, and he had some success with this outreach, but one leftist he could not persuade was the socialist Giacomo Matteotti, leader of the Unitary Socialist Party, which held 24 seats in the new Chamber. Matteotti emerged as the Fascist government's leading critic. He published a book titled *The Fascists Exposed* and denounced the government in speeches in the Chamber. He accused members of the government of accepting bribes from Sinclair Oil, the American company also deeply involved in the Teapot Dome scandal, episode 229, in exchange for granting Sinclair drilling rights in Libya. He also condemned the recent election as fraudulent and influenced by violence and intimidation. He suggested that the level of political violence in Italy might be compared to that of Mexico, except that such a comparison would be insulting to the Mexicans.

I love a good burn.

After a few weeks of this, the Fascists had had enough. On June 10, Italians were stunned by the news that armed thugs had accosted Matteotti outside his house in Rome, bundled him into a car, and sped away. A nationwide search went on for ten weeks before Matteotti's body was discovered; investigation implicated several high-ranking Fascists.

Whether Mussolini was personally involved in planning the kidnapping and murder of Matteotti is a question still under debate in our time, but there can be no doubt that the leader of the Fascist Party was responsible for creating a political climate in which such an act was thinkable. The Fascist Party had survived accusations of violence and killings in the streets, bribery and corruption in government, and still thrived. But could the Party survive the brazen murder of an opposition political figure in broad daylight in Rome itself?

[music: Vivaldi, *Concerto for Two Trumpets*]

Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that the answer to the question I just posed is: yes. With regard to the Matteotti murder, the major power centers in Italy: the military, the business community, the King, and the Catholic Church all found it prudent to look the other way. The King excused himself on the grounds that it would be unconstitutional for him to remove a prime minister who held majority support in the Chamber of Deputies. Foreigners agreed. *The Times* of London condemned the killers but noted that political violence was more common in Italy than in most places. Mussolini was still the man who had saved Italy from Bolshevism, and the paper declared that his removal from office would be "too horrible to contemplate."

The Vatican's house newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, which hardly ever had anything good to say about the Kingdom of Italy, reminded its readers that Jesus had said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." I mean, who among us can honestly say they have never at one time or another murdered a political enemy?

But the socialists, Communists, and other anti-Fascists in the Chamber of Deputies, they protested. A few days after the abduction, over a hundred Deputies—about 20% of the total number—walked out of the Chamber in protest and refused to participate further. They called their protest the "Aventine Secession," evoking the secession of the plebs that had occurred in the early years of the Roman Republic, episode 5...of *The History of Rome*. The decision to name their protest after an important moment in classical history was meant to show Mussolini and the Fascists that they weren't the only ones who had listened to Mike Duncan's podcast. I mean, at this point, haven't we all?

Despite the grand gesture and the evocative name, though, the twentieth-century Aventine Secession changed no minds and accomplished nothing.

This is not to say that Mussolini was unmoved by the criticism. The circumstances of Matteotti's abduction in June were a serious embarrassment to the prime minister who had taken office on a pledge to end political violence. By autumn, as the investigation began reaching higher-ups in the Fascist Party, Mussolini was forced to deny any personal knowledge of the crime and blame it on a few bad apples. He assured the Chamber of Deputies that Fascist violence would be punished just as severely as leftist violence.

He was saying all the right things, and that went a long way toward placating Italy's political and military elites, but his fellow Fascists didn't want to hear it. One regional Fascist leader publicly warned that "it was not Mussolini who carried the Fascists to [power,] but the Fascists who had carried him to power."

Mussolini even tried to make light of his political predicament, joking that a "Fascist Aventine" was in the offing, trying to position himself as the guy in the middle who is taking heat from extremists on both sides.

The political pressure came to a head over the Christmas season of 1924. Mussolini called the Chamber of Deputies back into session immediately after the holiday, on January 3, 1925, and delivered a speech in which he abruptly reversed course. He told the Chamber he accepted responsibility for the murder of Giacomo Matteotti; not personally, but because he was the leader of the nation, which meant that Italy's political and moral climate were his responsibility. And, he warned darkly, "When two irreconcilable forces meet, the only solution is force."

In other words, in claiming responsibility for ending political violence in Italy, Mussolini was also declaring he had the right to *use* violence as a means to that end. Two weeks later, Mussolini reshuffled his cabinet. Out were his Liberal allies. He didn't need them anymore. Mussolini

would claim for himself not only the premiership, or technically the presidency of the council of ministers, but also the ministries of foreign affairs, war, the navy, and aviation. In years to come he would add the portfolios of Public Works, Corporations, and the Colonies. At his peak, he held no less than seven ministerial portfolios.

Mussolini put himself at the center of everything that mattered in Italy. Fascist labor unions replaced socialist and Catholic labor unions. The Confederation of Italian Industry was asked to recognize only the fascist unions in their dealings with labor, a request the Confederation was happy to agree to. Italian newspapers were pressured to sign onto the national unity that Fascism represented. One by one they fell into line. After the revelation of an assassination plot against Mussolini in November came the passage of a new law empowering government supervision of the press. After that, even the owners of *Il Corriere della Sera*, Italy's flagship newspaper, gave in and fired their anti-Fascist editor.

In the aftermath of the November 1925 assassination plot, which was broken up by the police before it got anywhere, there were no less than three assassination attempts against Mussolini in 1926. The first, in April, was the act of an Irish woman named Violet Gibson, who fired a pistol at Mussolini, grazing him in the nose. He put a bandage over the wound and went ahead with a scheduled speech, exhorting his audience to "live dangerously." He told them, like a general commanding his troops, "If I go forward, follow me. If I retreat, kill me. If I die, avenge me." The assassin was found to be mentally ill. It made great pictures for the newspapers; it even moved Mussolini's little brother Arnaldo to tears.

On September 11, an anarchist threw a bomb at Mussolini's car. He was not injured, but eight bystanders were. But the most important attempt was on October 31, when a shot was fired at Mussolini's car as he was riding through Bologna. The crowd on the street lynched a 15-year-old boy named Anteo Zamboni on the spot, although whether the boy was actually responsible for the attack is a matter still debated in our time.

This last assassination attempt is the most important, not for what happened on the street in Bologna, but for the Fascist response. But the hour is getting late; I'll have to save Mussolini's response for next week. But before I sign off for today, I should also mention that in July of 1925, as the Fascists were cracking down on labor unions, newspapers, and other centers of opposition, socialist Deputy Giovanni Amendola, the man who had coined the word *totalitarian* to describe Mussolini's politics, and now was among those boycotting the Chamber as part of the modern Aventine Secession, was severely beaten by a gang of Blackshirts. Afterward, he fled the country, although he never recovered from his injuries and died nine months later, in April 1926, an exile in Cannes, France. He was 43 years old and left behind a widow and four children.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Duncan and Ryan for their kind donations, and thank you to Patrick for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Duncan and Ryan and Patrick help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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A listener wrote in to point out that in the last episode, the one on Spain and the Rif War, I consistently mispronounced the name of the Spanish parliament, the Cortes. I said Cortes, because I thought there was an accent mark on the second syllable. Turns out there isn't, so my bad. Just for the record, it's the Cortes. I don't want to mislead anyone. It would be bad enough if I made this mistake just in the previous episode, but actually I've been saying it that way for about fifty years now. Still, you're never too old to learn something new, am I right?

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this narrative by examining Mussolini's response to the assassination attempt. Spoiler alert: it involves more cracking down on dissidents. Mussolini Is Always Right, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I'd like to say a word about the League of Nations. In our time, the League of Nations is generally regarded as a failure. I would push back against that a little bit and argue that although the League did not of course prevent the outbreak of a second World War, and indeed failed to resolve conflicts that arose on the way to that war, but it nevertheless created an international structure of institutions that would later be taken over and built upon by the United Nations, and that's a worthwhile contribution. The world today is better off because the League was created more than a hundred years ago.

Still, the League failed in its principal aim of providing an alternative to war as a mechanism for resolving international disputes. We could talk all day long about the reasons for this. They relate

to the structure and operation of the League, the failure of the US to join the League, and the failure of other Allied nations to back the League in moments of crisis, and so on.

But if you had to point the finger at one single individual of this era and say, “This person, more than anyone else, broke the League of Nations,” then the person you would point to would be Benito Mussolini. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know about the upcoming Second Italo-Ethiopian War that will begin in 1935, but we saw today how just three years after the League was established, Mussolini’s Italy was able to bully Greece in a manner seen even at the time as uncomfortably reminiscent of Austrian demands on Serbia in 1914, and get away with it. All Italy had to do was demand special treatment, relying on its status as one of the five major Allied powers, and it got what it wanted, because the other Allies, here especially France, were more willing to let Italy get away with it than to set a precedent that even the major powers could be restrained by the League.

And so the League was helpless, and when 1935 came around, no one knew better than Benito Mussolini how little influence the League of Nations actually held.

[music: Closing Theme]