

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 255

“Mussolini Is Always Right”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

By 1927, Fascist control over Italy was complete. Italian journalist and publisher Leopoldo Longanesi published a book on Fascism in which he coined a slogan that soon would be heard across the nation: *Mussolini ha sempre ragione*.

Mussolini is always right.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 255. Mussolini Is Always Right.

Last time, I told you about political developments in Italy up to October 31, 1926, the day that 15-year-old Anteo Zamboni fired a shot at Mussolini as he rode in his car through Bologna. Or so it is said. As soon as the shot was fired, the crowd in the street attacked and killed Anteo, leading some later historians to question whether he was actually the gunman, or even to ask whether the entire incident was fabricated to create an excuse for the Fascists to claim greater power.

This incident is comparable to the Reichstag fire in Berlin of 1933, and I'll have more to say about conspiracy theories when we get to that historical moment. For now I'll just say that what came next was inevitable. If it hadn't been Zamboni with a gun in Bologna, it would have been someone, somewhere, sooner or later. Recall that this was the fourth assassination attempt on Mussolini in a year. He had already used the first as a justification for increasing his own power and that of the Fascist Party. Now, in the wake of the latest attack, Mussolini took back the portfolio of minister of the interior for himself and used it to create his own secret police, the Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism, or OVRA for short. And he went back to the parliament to ask for another new set of laws the Fascists could use to crack down on the opposition.

New laws were passed that tightened Fascist control over the country, including one that outlawed all other political parties. Mussolini had spent years positioning the Fascist Party as the one party that represented all Italians. Other parties therefore, either represented non-Italians or extremist fringe ideologies out to make trouble, and why should we want to allow representation to any of *those* kinds of people?

It took Mussolini a little over four years from the moment he was first made prime minister in a perfectly legal, constitutional process until he became what we can safely call a “dictator,” or, as he will henceforth be known in Italy, *il Duce*, simply The Leader. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century know that in the next few years, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin will follow in Mussolini’s footsteps, but he was the first, and he took power through an ideology and a methodology no one had ever used before. In his honor, we call it fascism.

I want to take the rest of today’s episode to talk about Mussolini and Fascism and how they ruled Italy over the next five years, but before we get into domestic politics, I want to say a word about Italian foreign relations. Not that there’s all that much to say during this period. Mussolini’s focus was on domestic affairs; on the world stage he basked in his own celebrity, but his foreign policy was accommodating. He wanted to be perceived by other world leaders as calm and rational, someone they could do business with.

The most important bit of Italian diplomacy in this period was the Treaty of Locarno. I’ll have a little more to say about this treaty in a future episode. For now, suffice it to say that the Treaty was a five-way pact between Germany, France, Belgium, the UK, and Italy. It confirmed Germany’s western borders. Germany, France, and Belgium mutually agreed not to go to war against one another, with the UK and Italy guaranteeing the agreement by pledging support to any of those three countries, if they were attacked in violation of the Treaty.

The agreement ushered in an era of better relations between Germany and the western Allies. Germany’s eastern neighbors, Poland and Czechoslovakia, were less than enthusiastic, since the Treaty had nothing to say about their borders. One Polish diplomat summarized the agreement as “Germany was officially asked to attack the east in return for peace in the west.”

Mussolini had his own doubts about the Treaty, as it also had nothing to say about Germany’s southern border. Mussolini voiced his opposition to talk of *Anschluss*, the proposed unification of Germany and Austria. *Anschluss* would bring Germany to Italy’s northern border, and the territories Italy had claimed from Austria after the war, particularly the South Tyrol and Trieste, might become the next targets for German revanchism.

The Fascists were already working diligently to italicize these territories, the South Tyrol, Trieste, and other Italian holdings on the eastern shore of the Adriatic.

Hmm. Actually, I don't think *italicize* is the right word. *Italicize* is when you print the letters all slanty, right? What do I mean here? *Italianize*, that's it. I like that word better. The Fascists were working to italianize these territories. I mean that German and Slovene surnames and place names were changed to Italian, schoolchildren were taught exclusively in Italian, only Italian could be used in government offices and courts, that kind of thing. All in the name of erasing any use of the German or Slovene languages and any cultural identity other than Italian.

As I say, any talk of *Anschluss* set off alarm bells in Rome because with Germany extending all the way to the Brenner Pass, Italian control over the South Tyrol was definitely threatened. The same for Trieste, which some German nationalists declared was the German people's rightful port of access to the Mediterranean.

Mussolini publicly declared that any attempt at *Anschluss* would revive the Great War. But this was mostly for domestic consumption and it did not stop him from signing on to the treaty.

For the most part, though, Mussolini's place in international affairs was more about being a celebrity than a statesman. I described to you last time how Mussolini himself became something of a tourist attraction for world leaders visiting Italy like Winston Churchill and celebrities like Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. Fascism was at least as much about the mystique of Mussolini the man as it was about anything else. I told you last time about Mussolini's first speech as prime minister in which he answered the question of what was the Fascist Party's program by saying that Italy had plenty of programs. What it lacked was the will to put them into effect.

And where is this will to come from? It will come from Mussolini, of course. The first goal of Fascism, its most important policy priority, is that Benito Mussolini rule the country. Hence the slogan I used as the title of today's episode: Mussolini is always right.

One reflection of this thinking is Mussolini taking on so many ministerial portfolios himself. When he was first appointed prime minister back in 1922, he took on the ministries of foreign affairs and interior, two of the most important, in addition to the premiership. After the 1925 cabinet reshuffle, he gave up the interior ministry, but took on the ministries of war, the navy, and aviation. Later he would take back interior, and later still three more, until he held seven altogether.

It was meant to suggest Mussolini's unparalleled strength and vitality and his dedication to the nation. Dictators to come, like Hitler and Stalin, would also adopt this image of the superhuman servant of the people, but not even they would be tempted to take on seven ministries just to underscore the message. The public was told that Mussolini hardly slept, that he worked 16-hour days. The light was left on in Mussolini's office at night, long after he had gone to bed, to create the impression that he was still hard at work after midnight.

In reality, you know as well as I know, that no one can work that hard, just as we both know that no one person can manage seven government ministries, especially ones as big and important as the interior ministry or the foreign ministry or the war ministry. In practice, what it meant was that more junior officials ran the ministries, with only occasional oversight from *il Duce*, who, despite this public image as a workaholic, was not a particularly hard-working or hands-on administrator. One historian, noting Mussolini's former career as a journalist, compared his leadership of Italy to the leadership of a newspaper. He handed out assignments to the editors, but wrote the headlines himself.

Mussolini described his leadership style this way: every morning, he said, he would meet with a group of six or seven experts in a given field, listen to their briefing, then send them away, mull the question over, and make his decision. Remember it was not programs that Italy needed, but will. *Il Duce* provides the will, but you might add to the list that he provides what I'll call the "golden gut;" a supernatural intuition that allows him to look over a range of options and know at once, instantly and intuitively, which is the right answer for Italy. Here we see a basic tenet of Fascism: Italian society is a pyramid, with the Italian people at the bottom, the Fascist Party in the middle, representing as it does the needs and interests of all Italians, and at the top, *il Duce*, who embodies the greatness of the nation and exercises power on its behalf. Mussolini is always right.

The Fascist Party appealed to younger people, to those for whom the *Risorgimento* was a legend of brave deeds in bygone days, now found only in worn schoolbooks. This generation's formative experiences were the shameful Italian defeat at the hands of the Ethiopians in 1896, and more recently the wars against the Ottomans in 1911 and the Central Powers in 1915, both of which were hailed as inspiring victories, though neither seemed to have done anything to improve life in Italy. This was the generation for whom the Fascist message of past national greatness, stifled in our own time by the endless bickering of Italy's proliferation of pointless political parties, as well as the cunning deceits practiced by the Communists and the western Allies alike, hit home.

Benito Mussolini was the avatar of these young and disappointed Fascists, a fellow war veteran, just 39 when he became prime minister; he was a young and energetic leader for a young and energetic movement. From the first day, Mussolini was not like Italy's previous prime ministers, dull, colorless nonentities. Mussolini has style, panache, charisma. Mussolini was a celebrity. It was said at the time that he was the most photographed human being in history, and it was probably true.

Mussolini used his celebrity and his understanding of the news media, gained from his years in journalism, to build a cult of personality. Mussolini personally selected which photographs of himself would be distributed. In addition to allegedly working those 16-hour days, he was depicted as an athlete and sportsman, an adept swimmer, fencer, and equestrian. He was presented to the public as a skilled aviator, which was significant because the airplane played an

important role in Fascist symbolism. The airplane was a modern invention, a creation of the twentieth century, an innovation that allowed a select few to accomplish what earlier generations could only dream of. In that way, it was a metaphor for Fascism itself.

Also, Mussolini was not averse to taking off his shirt in public before a demonstration of his physical prowess, something that was all but unheard of for a world leader at the time. And though Mussolini was officially depicted as a family man, a devoted husband and father, it was well known in Italy that he slept around. No official effort was made to suppress such rumors, as they only added to *il Duce's* image as a man of strength and charisma.

After the Fascist Party became the only legal political party, it was inevitable that Party membership would become prerequisite for an increasing number of jobs and to access government benefits. The fasces, a bundle of wooden rods with an axe blade, appeared on public buildings everywhere. Schoolchildren were taught the greatness of the old Roman Empire, of the *Risorgimento*, and of Italy under Fascism.

Fascist organizations were created for everyone. Fascist men's groups, women's groups, youth groups. The Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, or the National Afterwork Club, was created as a Fascist recreational organization that put together sporting events and outings for workers, soon followed by a similar afterschool organization for young people.

The Fascist government introduced social insurance programs into Italy, of the kind already in place in Germany and Britain: a pension program, health and unemployment insurance. A program to make Italy self-sufficient in wheat was launched, called the "Battle for Wheat." How like Fascists to use a military metaphor. This was followed with the Battle for Land, a program to drain marshes and create new farmland.

Mussolini believed that Italian greatness demanded a strong Italian currency, and so returned the lira to the gold standard in December 1927, at an exchange rate of 19 lire to one US dollar. As was the case in Britain, this led to deflation and falling wages at home. When the Great Depression struck, Italy, like many countries, raised tariffs on imports. In Italian Fascism, this was justified as an effort to make Italy more self-reliant. Even so, Italy would give up on the gold standard in 1934.

But the signature economic policy of Fascism was corporatism. This was a system under which everyone, farmers, factory workers, professionals, business leaders, were organized by profession, in a manner modeled on the medieval guilds. The Fascists claimed this system was traditional, yet at the same time modern and egalitarian. Private enterprise was preserved, but economic activity was organized and directed. Corporate groups representing workers and businesses would coordinate with government officials in a three-way partnership. In practice, all this was organized from the top down, and these corporate groups were effectively Fascist unions and Fascist business associations.

Mussolini once declared that “the essence of Fascism is corporatism,” by which he meant this corporatist policy. In our time, the word corporatism evokes modern multinational corporations, and in our time some left-wing commentators try to connect our corporate economy to Mussolini’s corporatism, but that’s wrong. Mussolini meant something quite different when he used that word.

Mussolini’s government encouraged population growth. *Il Duce* noted that the continent of Europe was home to 70 million Germans and 200 million Slavs and warned that 40 million Italians were not enough to stand against them. He announced a goal of increasing the population of Italy to 60 million by 1950. To that end, a special tax on bachelors was introduced, and a government bonus paid to women who had many children or bore children quickly. Working women were to be “rescued” from employment so they could fulfill their natural place in the Fascist order, making more Italians. Homosexual relations between men were criminalized, as were sexual relations between Italians and African colonial subjects in Libya, Eritrea, or Somalia. Mussolini was outspoken about his view that the great mistake the French had made was allowing for interracial relations between their own citizens and residents of French colonial possessions in Africa.

A larger Italian population would mean Italians would need more living space, or *spazio vitale*. Mussolini and the Fascists often spoke of the greatness of the Roman Empire of ancient times and of the dream of reestablishing Italian primacy over the Mediterranean, or *mare nostrum*, our sea, and of reclaiming ancient Roman territories. The Fascists were particularly interested in the Balkans. Italy already held some Aegean islands and everyone remembered how easily *il Duce* had cowed the Greeks in 1923.

And then there was Libya.

[music: “Istakhbar Mexmoum”]

Back in episode 66, in the Belle Époque days of the podcast, we looked at the 1911 war begun by Italy against the Ottoman Empire with the goal of seizing control of the Empire’s remaining North African territory, which we know today as Libya. The war proved more difficult than anticipated, to the embarrassment of the Italian government, but it ended with Italian control over a portion of the Aegean Islands, the Dodecanese, and the North African regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, which represent the western and eastern parts of what we know today as Libya.

This war was begun and fought by a democratic Italian government, but the justification for it sounds distinctly Fascist. It was argued that Italy had a claim to the region inherited from the Roman Empire, and that the lands of North Africa were barren and unproductive because of North African mismanagement, while Italian administration would extract the region’s mineral wealth and make the land bloom again, as it had in Roman times.

The war ended with the Turks conceding Libya to the Italians, but that wasn't the same as establishing rule there. The indigenous population resisted Italian control. When Italy entered the Great War in 1915, its control over Libya was limited to a few coastal towns. In this regard, the situation in Libya is more than a little reminiscent of the situation in Spanish Morocco, which we discussed in episode 253.

During the war, an indigenous ethnic/religious group in Cyrenaica, called the Senussi, sided with the Ottomans and took up arms against the Italians in Libya and the British in Egypt, aided by arms shipped via U-boat from Germany and Austria. I recounted that bit of history in episode 100, where I told you that the British military actually formed a unit called the Imperial Camel Corps, which was able to push the Senussi fighters out of Egypt by 1917. The Italians were in no position to take on the Senussi alone while also fighting the Austrians, so an armistice was negotiated with the new Senussi leader, Sidi Idris al-Mahdi as-Senussi. In 1920, the Italian government and the Libyans agreed to an arrangement under which Tripolitania and Cyrenaica would become self-governing autonomous regions under Italian sovereignty and their inhabitants would hold joint Libyan and Italian citizenship.

This sounded good on paper, but in practice the arrangement soon broke down. Idris dragged his feet on demobilizing the Senussi military units in Cyrenaica, while civil war broke out in Tripolitania. Along the coast, a few Italian settlers were granted land and the Italian civilian governors boasted of economic development projects, while in the interior of the country, Libyans clashed with Italian military forces, led by a young up-and-comer, a 40-year-old officer Colonel Rodolfo Graziani.

In 1925, the year Mussolini clamped down at home, he also clamped down in Libya, appointing two new Fascist governors, Emilio De Bono and Attilio Teruzzi. Over the next four years, the Italian military were able to secure full control over the coastal region. Idris himself fled to Egypt, but as had happened after the war with the Ottomans, the Italians were unable to assert control into the interior of the country.

The most troublesome region was the Jebel Akhdar, or Green Mountains, an upland plateau region in the northeast of Libya. This is the wettest part of Libya, where the rainfall is sufficient to support forests. Here a veteran guerilla leader named Omar al-Mukhtar led Senussi resistance to the Italians.

In January 1929, Mussolini appointed Army Chief of Staff Marshal Pietro Badoglio governor of both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, a sign that the Fascist government was prepared to use whatever amount of force it would take to bring the Libyans to heel.

By the way, the Italian Army had not traditionally recognized the rank of Marshal. Mussolini introduced it, because the French Army had it and Mussolini thought the lack of such a rank in the Italian military to be an insult to Italian national honor. So he created it.

Anyway, after negotiations with al-Mukhtar broke down in 1929, the Italian military went Roman Empire on the Libyans. Badoglio ordered now-General Graziani and his troops to be “ferocious and inexorable” in dealing with the Senussi. He also wrote that “the course has been set and we must carry it out to the end, even if the entire population of Cyrenaica must perish.”

As is typical with guerilla fighters, the Senussi soldiers were receiving support from the civilian population. The “course” Badoglio referred to was a counter-insurgency plan that involved relocating the civilian population of the interior into concentration camps along the Italian-controlled coast. Italian soldiers rounded up civilian families and force-marched them to the camps. Anyone who couldn’t keep up was shot dead at the side of the road. Virtually all civilian-owned livestock was killed, leaving their owners unable to support themselves.

The Italian government told the world these concentration camps were modern and sanitary and an improvement over what the Libyans were used to. In fact, the opposite was true. The camps were filthy and overcrowded. Forced labor was commonplace.

About a hundred thousand people were relocated in all, mostly women, children, and old men. More than half of them died of Italian brutality during the marches or of Italian neglect in the camps.

As for the guerillas and those who resisted relocation, on them the Italians released the full fury of modern warfare. I already mentioned Fascist admiration for the airplane as a symbol of modernity and strength. You can also add tanks to the list of Fascist wonder weapons. The Italian military used tanks and airplanes liberally against the guerillas, who had never seen either of these modern marvels before and lacked the means to fight back against them. The Italians emphasized the superiority of their weapons by such demonstrations as running their tanks right over their opponents, crushing their bodies under the treads, by bombing and strafing civilians from the air, and also, most notoriously by taking prisoners up in airplanes and pushing them out the door. The message was not lost on those below.

The Italians also used poison gas against guerillas and civilians. For the first time, gas was dispersed from airplanes, which spread gas weapons much more efficiently than the artillery shells they used during the Great War.

Omar al-Mukhtar himself was captured and publicly hanged in 1931, at the age of 73. Afterward, resistance soon petered out and Badoglio declared victory in 1932.

It had been a democratically elected government that had begun the war to seize Libya back in 1911. (By the way, keep this war in mind next time someone tries to tell you that democracies don’t start wars.) The democrats had been able to win the war, but had never successfully pacified the new territory. Even though Mussolini had opposed the war, and even gone to prison for it, he and the Fascists demonstrated that they could do what the democrats could not—or should I say lacked the *will* to do.

The final conquest of Libya was celebrated in Italy, but Mussolini's biggest political accomplishment was the resolution of a nagging domestic political issue that had bedeviled the Italian nation for more than half a century: the Roman Question.

As you know from episode 22, the *Risorgimento*, the Italian unification, included the seizure by force of the Papal States. The Pope and the Roman Catholic Church never reconciled themselves to the *Risorgimento*. The King of Italy was excommunicated. Serving the Italian government or even voting in Italian elections was considered grounds for excommunication.

From 1870 to 1929, the Catholic Pope considered himself a "prisoner in the Vatican," as they put it. Five successive popes—Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius X, Benedict XV, and Pius XI—chose never to leave the Vatican or set foot on Italian soil, as this would be implicitly submitting to the authority of the Kingdom of Italy.

In 1926, Mussolini's government opened negotiations with the Church in the hope of ending the impasse. The result was the 1929 Lateran Treaty, a series of agreements that resolved the dispute between the Catholic Church and the Italian state. The Treaty recognized Vatican City as an independent sovereign state—a very small independent sovereign state—under the rule of the Holy See. Some other Church properties outside the walls of the Vatican were granted extraterritorial status or at least tax exemptions. Italy would pay compensation to the Church for the territory seized, and the Vatican and Italy would exchange ambassadors. Italy and the Vatican also agreed to a concordat, making Roman Catholicism the state religion in Italy and granting state recognition to ecclesiastical acts, like marriages, annulments, and titles of nobility.

This agreement was greeted with elation by devout Catholics in Italy, who celebrated the long-delayed reconciliation between Church and State. The Pope, Pius XI, praised Mussolini as the "Man whom providence has sent us" and even briefly spoke in favor of what he called "Catholic totalitarianism."

Later that year, Italians went to the polls for the 1929 general election. This time, for the first time in the Kingdom's history, voters were joined by Catholic parish priests, Monsignors, and other Catholic clergy and devout laity, who had never before participated in an Italian election. It is estimated that as many as one million Italians voted for the first time.

Not that it was much of an election. Since the Fascist Party was now the only legal party in Italy, the election consisted of one list for the 400 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the Fascist list. Voters were limited to voting yes or no on the Fascist list.

When the votes were counted, 98.43% of the country voted yes. *Time* magazine remarked that in the United States, only Ivory Soap could make a comparable claim.

The image Mussolini and his Party had won for themselves was exactly the image the Fascists wanted to project: you may approve of them or not, but you have to admit they get the job done.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Rif for his kind donation, and thank you to Tom for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Rif and Tom 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.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention back to the United States, which in 1927 saw disastrous flooding along the Mississippi River. President Coolidge sent his jack-of-all-trades, Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover, to deal with the crisis, but soon afterward Hoover would be faced with an even bigger and more dangerous crisis, this one on Wall Street. When the Levees Broke, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When you talk about the can-do image that Mussolini and the Fascists cultivated and embraced, it's hard not to be reminded of the cliché that, whatever else you might think about him, at least Mussolini made the trains run on time.

I can remember hearing that claim made unironically when I was a kid, as late as the 1960s and 1970s. When it comes up nowadays, it's often dismissed as a myth.

So which is the truth? The latter claim, that it is a myth, is closer to the truth. The Italian train service was notoriously bad. In the 1920s, Mussolini's government did make some improvements, notably in the main stations in big cities and on the intercity lines. These were the train lines most likely to be used by foreign tourists and business travelers. Tourism has long played an important role in the Italian economy.

In the 1920s, these well-to-do business travelers and tourists did indeed go home and tell their friends that the train service had improved under Mussolini. But like so much of Fascism, this was superficial; foreigners saw an improvement, but everyday commuter trains used by everyday Italians were as bad as ever.

Even so, the myth of Fascist efficiency persists, even in our time.

[music: Closing Theme]

© 2021 by Mark Painter. All rights reserved.