

## The Rise of Fascism and Totalitarianism

### The Great Depression & the Rise of Totalitarian Dictators

In the two decades following World War I, most of the world was swept up in economic depression. During the 1920's and 1930's, most nations attempted to cope with the problems of the post-war economy and subsequent depression but in some nations people felt their governments were failing to address their needs. In response to the economic disaster, some nations fell prey to totalitarian dictators. A combination of postwar nationalist resentment and economic hardship allowed military dictatorships to rise in Italy, Germany, and Japan. Additionally, dictatorships arose in other nations as well, such as Spain, the Soviet Union, and Latin America. Whether fascist or communist, totalitarian dictators controlled every aspect of life within their nation.

#### Italy: Benito Mussolini



In Italy, Benito Mussolini led the Fascist party starting in 1922 which was mostly composed of dissatisfied war veterans, nationalists and people afraid of the spread of communism. Ordinary civilians were disillusioned and frustrated that the Italian economy was weak after World War I and faced with unemployment and labor strikes that were sometimes led by communists. Mussolini, or Il Duce as he was known, established a fascist totalitarian regime with his powerful speeches that incited feelings of nationalism among his people.

Fascism is characterized by dictatorship, centralized control of private enterprise, repression of opposition and extreme nationalism. Mussolini knew how to appeal to Italy's wounded national pride, and played on their fears of economic collapse and communism. Mussolini promised to keep communism out of Italy. He promised to keep order and stability throughout the nation. Mussolini with his "Black Shirts"

Mussolini controlled every aspect of Italian life and crushed all opposition. (Danzer, p. 736).

Mussolini's rise to power attempted to restore Italy's position as a world power. In order to prove Italy's military might, Mussolini ordered the invasion and conquering of Ethiopia.

Benito Mussolini later became a close ally of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. At the end of the war, he recognized that the Axis powers were going to lose and he fled, only to be captured by partisans. He was shot in April 1945, just weeks before the war's end.

#### Germany: Adolf Hitler

Italy was not the only nation to lose faith in capitalism and democracy, Germany turned towards an authoritarian leader as well. The Fascist Nazi party gained power in the 1920's as a reaction to terrible economic conditions and resentment over the Treaty of Versailles. Adolf Hitler, also a powerful speaker and organizer, rose through the ranks to become the leader of the Nazi party and was elected to power in 1933.

Similar to Mussolini's fascism, Nazism was based on extreme nationalism. Hitler used the anger and frustration of the German workers to promote not only nationalism but his anti-Semitic agenda. He promised to bring back Germans pride and restore their military to full power, which he succeeded at throughout the 1930s—despite the Treaty of Versailles explicitly forbidding Germany to have a powerful military. Hitler gave his citizens people to blame for their nations' ills: Jews, communists, homosexuals, the disabled, and other minority groups. He believed the Germans were the best race on earth and advocated for racial "purification". Hitler claimed that Germany needed more "living space" (*lebensraum*). In order to gain that living space, he invaded neighboring regions. Initially, Hitler used propaganda and censorship to persuade people to follow the Nazi party.



Elected democratically, Hitler was similar to Mussolini, in that once established in power he suppressed all opposition and ruled with an iron fist. Anyone who opposed Hitler was typically jailed or, later, sent to a concentration camp or executed. His police and soldiers inspired fear in German citizens as they enforced government policies, spied on citizens, and used brutal force.

Adolf Hitler ruled Nazi Germany from 1933 until his suicide in April 1945 just before the end of World War II.

### Japan: Hideki Tojo

In the 1920's and 1930's, nationalists and militarists in Japan were trying to take control of the imperialist totalitarian government. Japan had goals of becoming an important empire and this necessitated more natural resources. At that time, Japan was plagued by a poor economy. The militarists promoted the idea of needing more living space (just as Adolf Hitler did with the Germans) and convinced the Japanese Emperor Hirohito that Japan needed raw materials and the only way to get them was to invade Manchuria, now northeastern China.



Hideki Tojo moved his way up the ranks in 1940 becoming the Minister for War, and advocated closer ties with Germany and Italy. Tojo was appointed Prime Minister in 1941 where he pushed his strategy for empire and taking over the colonies of defeated European powers. It was Tojo who promoted the attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Tojo had direct control over the Japanese military and became a dictator. Japanese militarists continued to expand their empire and flex its militarist muscle. Tojo was similar to the other dictators in his militarism, nationalism, quest for world domination and territorial expansion.

After the Americans defeated the Axis powers in the summer of 1945, Hideki Tojo attempted suicide but was captured and put on trial. He received the death penalty and was executed in 1948.

### The Soviet Union: Joseph Stalin

By 1928, Joseph Stalin had achieved total control of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. He quickly turned Russia into a totalitarian police state, promising that this was necessary in order to see the Soviet Union succeed as an industrialized superpower. Stalin had spies and monitors all across the Soviet Union. Anyone who was even suspected of being against Stalin or the Communists was often arrested, tortured, and imprisoned in death camps spread across the huge nation. Throughout the late 1930s he led the Great Purge in which he attempted to eliminate all potential threats to his power.

Meanwhile, the Soviet government heavily censored all media available to citizens and limited their access to information from the outside world. Propaganda was ubiquitous- from art to literature to the movie theater. All the news citizens heard was about the amazing changes happening in the Soviet Union thanks to Stalin. Students were taught to praise Stalin and the communist way of life. They received a government-funded education and had more work opportunities than most had never known prior to the Russian Revolution.

Despite fighting alongside Great Britain, France, the United States and other Allied Powers during World War II, the Soviet Union was the only totalitarian nation among the leaders of the Allies. As soon as the Second World War concluded in 1945, the Soviet Union faced a new conflict with the United States and much of Western Europe: The Cold War. Joseph Stalin ruled until his death caused by a stroke in 1953. He was likely responsible for the deaths of **tens of millions** of Soviet citizens.

