

DONALD SASSOON

MUSSOLINI
AND THE RISE OF
FASCISM



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The Conjunction

On the morning of 30 October 1922 Benito Mussolini arrived in Rome, not on horseback, as he may have originally fantasised, but on the overnight wagon-lit from Milan, aware that King Victor Emmanuel III was to appoint him Prime Minister and entrust him with the formation of a coalition government.

While the future Duce was discussing strategy with his fellow travellers and meditating in his sleeping compartment, his supporters were converging towards the capital, some by car, others walking, but mostly by special trains, chartered with the help of the government. It was the so-called 'March on Rome' which had started on 28 October.

Ten years later, in a diary written with more hindsight than is usually the case, Italo Balbo, one of the more violent followers of the Duce, wrote that, from the beginning, fascism possessed the certitude that its destiny was the conquest of power through a violent insurrectionary act that would mark a caesura between old Italy and a new emerging country.¹

It is often the case that those who proceed illegally try to find some legal reasons why they acted as they did. Sometimes revolutionaries insist on the legality of their actions, ignoring the short cuts they had to take. In Mussolini's case it was almost the reverse. He preferred to pretend that he had taken power by force, and that power had been given to him because he had already won it on the battlefield. But Mussolini's advent to power was – strictly speaking – quite legal. As the great liberal politician and former Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti explained to his constituents on 16 March 1922, Mussolini had been appointed constitutionally, had sworn allegiance to the King and the constitution, and had presented his programme to Parliament, from which he had asked and obtained full powers.²

Yet the language used by the fascists at the time and in the following years depicted an uprising and celebrated revolutionary violence – one of several influences of the Bolshevik Revolution on the fascists. On 29 October 1922, Mussolini's newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, announced that 'The whole of central Italy, Tuscany, Umbria, Marche, and northern Latium is occupied by the Blackshirts conjuring up an image of armed occupation.'³ To a reporter of the Milan daily *Corriere della Sera* Mussolini declared: 'Tell the truth. We have made a revolution unparalleled in the whole world ... We have made a revolution while public services continued to function, without stopping trade, and with employees remaining at their desks, workers in their factories, and peasants peacefully tilling the fields. It is a new style of revolution.'⁴

This image of turmoil and radical change was reinforced with the passing of time. The philosopher Giovanni Gentile, writing in 1924, claimed that the March had been a reaction 'against all the ideologies of the previous century: democracy, socialism, positivism, and rationalism; it was the vindication of idealist philosophy.'⁵ The preface to a collection of Mussolini's main speeches published in 1928 enthused thus:

In 1922 He marches on Rome. He is Italy on the move. The Revolution continues. After half a century of lethargy the nation creates its own regime. The State of the Italians arises. Their power emerges. Their virtues appear. Their empire is in the making. This great renaissance ... shall have His name. Throughout the world an Italian century is opening up: the century of

And when Mussolini addressed the Senate on 5 July 1924 he boasted that fascism obtained power by an ‘unquestionably revolutionary act’, by force of arms, marching on Rome ‘*armata manu*’.⁷

Twenty years later, in 1944, as the Duce faced defeat, more sober thoughts surfaced. Having escaped from the prison where he had been confined by the same monarch who had originally appointed him, Mussolini, now a pathetic Nazi puppet, recognised that fascism had not come to power by revolution. A true revolution, he wrote, would have required a fundamental change in the institutional framework of the state, but this had been left untouched by the events of October 1922. ‘There was a monarchy before and there was a monarchy afterwards.’⁸ He forgot to add that the King would not have turned against him had not the Grand Fascist Council forced him to resign. The great dictator had come to power legally, and was removed legally, not just by an old institution, the monarchy, but also by one, the Grand Fascist Council, which he had himself created.

Mussolini had given up on the ‘revolution’ well before his train approached Rome on that fateful late-October morning. The seductive appeal of power had made itself felt some time before, when he had become aware that he could get what he wanted more easily and speedily by compromising with the monarchy – one of the gestures that decisively propelled much of the political establishment in granting him full powers. Mussolini had realised there was no point in launching a major enterprise to grab power if power was his for the taking. His more naive followers had not grasped this strategic point. As they marched under incessant rain they assumed they were making history, but the Duce arrived in Rome before them in his wagon-lit to be driven to the palace, where he declared himself to be His Majesty’s ‘loyal servant’.⁹

This was no act of renunciation. Mussolini claimed that he had wanted to avoid a civil war, but in reality he could not have taken power any other way. His ‘army’ of fascists was not strong enough. They could have been easily thwarted, and Mussolini himself could have been arrested without difficulty in Civitavecchia—halfway between Pisa and Rome – where the army had blocked the line so as to be able to prevent the *camice nere* (Blackshirts) converging on Rome if necessary. Mussolini could have been stopped at any time.

Rome was well defended. General Emanuele Pugliese was given the job of organising the defence of the capital; not an arduous task, since the columns of marching fascists were slow-moving. The army occupied public buildings, set up barbed wire, coordinated troop movements. Pugliese assured the Prime Minister, Luigi Facta, that he would have had no problems in restoring order. In Milan it was no better for the fascists. They had entered into the barracks of the Alpini only to face an irascible colonel who told them that if they did not leave immediately they would be arrested. They left sheepishly.¹⁰

General Pugliese, loyal to the crown, had more than 10,000 troops under his command.¹¹ A further 28,000 troops controlled the roads to the capital. Pugliese ordered the railway lines to Rome to be cut fifty kilometres north of the city, and four hundred policemen would have been sufficient to bring the so-called March on Rome to a complete halt.¹² Thus, as clearly established by army documents, the army was in complete control of the ‘marchers’.¹³ Had it been instructed to stop the fascists, the march would have been halted.¹⁴

General Pugliese had leaflets distributed to officers and soldiers:

In these grave hours everyone must bear in mind the oath of loyalty to the Sacred Majesty the King and to the Statute, fundamental law of the state which safeguards the freedom and the independence of Italy. No one has ever dared march against Rome, mother of civilisation, and suffocate the idea of freedom she represents.

You must defend Rome to the last drop of your blood and be worthy of her history.

*Major-General Emanuele Pugliese, commander of the Division.*¹⁵

The marchers were left free to camp outside Rome. They numbered 30,000 to 40,000. They were amateur soldiers playing at revolution, poorly armed (hunting rifles, old army guns, little ammunition) and no match for regular troops – as the more aware among the marchers realised only too well. A diary kept by a student noted that the marchers were frequently reassured that the army would never fire upon them.¹⁶ In turn the fascists were reminded by their leaders that ‘the Army is the supreme defender of the Nation’, that ‘it must not be involved in the struggle’, that fascism had high esteem for the army, and that ‘fascism does not march against the forces of public order’.¹⁷ Indeed troops were often used to provide food for the Blackshirts, pitifully soaked by the ceaseless rain.

Mussolini was perfectly aware of the weakness of his ‘troops’, which is why he took little interest in their military preparedness and efficacy, receiving only two messages from the marching fascists. He had chosen to concentrate on the ‘political’ front, remaining aloof in Milan, almost as if to signify that he was not a postulant.

The tragicomic aspects of the March should not lead one to underestimate its political significance. The fascists occupied towns of the importance of Cremona, Pisa and Siena, and cut the telegraph and telephone wires connecting Pisa to Genoa and Florence. The link was quickly re-established, without diminishing the symbolic impact of the fascist advance. Cars and trucks were requisitioned and used to convey supporters towards Rome. Fascist activists were freed from the Bologna prison where they had been incarcerated.¹⁹ Much of this encountered little opposition. The fascists had in fact been allowed to behave as a state within a state, parading uniformed supporters, talking openly of ‘seizing Rome, negotiating with local authorities and in some cases being welcomed by them. No left-wing force would have been allowed to behave like this. The legitimisation of the fascists could not have been more obvious.

So lacking in revolutionary secrecy was the preparation for the March that the chief conspirators when they met a few weeks earlier in Bordighera on the Italian Riviera, were invited to lunch by Queen Margherita, the Queen Mother, whose villa was nearby and who openly sympathised with the fascists.²⁰

It is difficult to stage a coup against an army, particularly in the absence of civil war, desertion, economic catastrophe or widespread civil disorder. The March on Rome was little more than an ill-coordinated demonstration aimed at increasing the pressures on the politicians in Rome. Mussolini, who had considerable strategic flair – realised that much was to be gained by remaining broadly inside the limits of legality while permitting regular forays outside it. But such a strategy could only work if wider liberal opinion had been prepared to tolerate the fascists’ ambiguous attitude to legality.

The outgoing government of Luigi Facta had drafted a decree declaring a state of emergency which would have empowered the army to take drastic measures against the marchers. The King had been expected to sign it, but he refused. Instead he asked Mussolini, the leader of one of the smallest parties in Parliament, to form the next government.

When Mussolini arrived in Rome he was welcomed by a few hundred well-wishers. The reporter

the *Corriere della sera* – a paper that despised Mussolini but had come to regard him as an inevitable and necessary evil, indispensable to keep the socialists at bay – described the welcoming crowd ‘immense’, the image enhanced by the description of women throwing flowers at the man’s destiny.²¹

The ‘march’ had not been in vain. It was part of a symbolic theatre aimed at highlighting the exceptional circumstances surrounding the Duce’s accession to power. Its purpose was not to conquer Rome but to provide the choreography, the necessary human material, for what was later glorified as *la Marcia su Roma*.

Thus at eleven on the morning of 31 October, Mussolini, a black shirt visible under his formal suit as if to symbolise the two faces of fascism – respectability and barely concealed violence – turned up at the Quirinale Palace to receive his new appointment and submit the list of ministers who would serve in the new government. ‘I beg Your Majesty’s forgiveness,’ he said, ‘if I am still wearing my black shirt, but I come from a battle which, fortunately, has left no casualties... I am Your Majesty’s loyal servant.’²²

The new government was a genuine coalition. The fascists were far too weak to hog for themselves the lion’s share of ministries. Apart from Mussolini – who kept the Foreign and Interior ministries – only three ‘real’ fascists obtained portfolios: Aldo Oviglio (Justice), Alberto De Stefani (Finance) and Giovanni Giuriati (in charge of ‘recently liberated lands’, i.e. those which had been under Austrian rule until the end of the Great War). There were also two members of the armed forces (General Armando Diaz at the War Ministry and Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel at the Navy), one nationalist (Luigi Federzoni at the Colonies), one right-wing liberal (Giuseppe De Capitani at Agriculture), and two Catholics of the Partito popolare (Vincenzo Tangorra at the Treasury and Stefano Cavazzoni in charge of Labour and Social Security).

It looked almost like a ‘normal’ conservative government. Many of the ‘true’ fascists were disappointed, but the political elites were relieved. Mussolini’s deferential behaviour towards the institutions seemed to confirm their belief that, while mouthing revolutionary rhetoric, he would be able to check the black-shirted hotheads surrounding him.

He had, after all, repeatedly given signs of moderation. And when, on 3 August 1921, he had negotiated a pact (the *patto di pacificazione*) with the socialists aimed at bringing violence on both sides under control, he had irritated the more militant *squadristi*, people such as Dino Grandi, Italo Balbo and Roberto Farinacci, who did not hesitate to accuse him of being excessively accommodating. Faced with what amounted to an internal revolt he had threatened to resign, thereby resolving the crisis.²³ The opposition he had faced showed that his control was not yet absolute, but the incident played into his hands because it confirmed that, unlike his acolytes, he was a shrewd politician able to play on several registers at once.

With their man now Prime Minister, the foot-soldiers of fascism went home triumphantly confident that this was the first stage of a revolution that would sweep throughout Italy, transforming the country. Many of their comrades, however, were quickly seduced by the charms of the political establishment they had sought to destroy. They began to experience the pleasures of wielding power, of being feared and envied, and of basking in the respect of those they had hitherto viewed with awe.

The old elites, of course, despised Mussolini, the son of a blacksmith and a schoolmistress. They were alarmed by his plebeian tones and his rough and populist language, yet they recognised him as someone prepared to do the dirty work they themselves were not able or willing to do. Some

intellectuals openly admired him, or were not prepared to criticise him. The distinguished historian Gioacchino Volpe praised Mussolini well before the March on Rome.²⁴ Benedetto Croce, the most revered philosopher in Italy, sent his good wishes to the new Prime Minister, while keeping his distance. Writing in 1944 of his contacts with Mussolini, Croce, in what were essentially self-justificatory notes, while barely able to disguise his pleasure at being esteemed by the Duce, explained that he had refrained from ever meeting him because they just did not belong to the same social circles: ‘There were differences between us to do with differences of social milieu, family and culture and I have always held the view that men get on together if they have had a similar education rather than if they share the same abstract ideas.’²⁵

Mussolini too made sure that everyone knew he did not belong to the same class as Croce. In 1931, wildly overemphasising his antecedents as a ‘man of the people’, he wrote with some pride that he belonged to the class of those who shared a bedroom that doubled up as a kitchen, and whose evening meal was a simple vegetable soup.²⁶ It is true that life in his native Predappio, a small town near Forlì, was hard, but in reality his parents were not poor: they both worked – his father as a blacksmith, his mother as a teacher – and his father owned a bit of land which he rented out.²⁷ Mussolini was baptised in the local church and received a religious education. Yet his father was a socialist, who had named his son Benito after the Mexican revolutionary Benito Juárez, and given him the middle names Amilcare and Andrea after two Italian socialist leaders, Amilcare Cipriani and Andrea Costa.

Locally, Mussolini’s parents were people of some importance, not quite the dispossessed peasants described in later hagiographies; yet compared to the politicians who had ruled Italy since its unification, Mussolini was certainly a ‘man of the people’. The twenty-five Prime Ministers who preceded him may have been very different from each other, but they all belonged to Italy’s elite. Some, such as Cavour, De Rudini, Menabrea, Ricasoli, Sonnino and Lamarmora, were aristocrats; the majority were *grands bourgeois* – lawyers, academics, doctors and army officers. All had university degrees or had been to the military academy. Mussolini had left school at eighteen to be a primary school teacher. For a man of such humble origins to have become Prime Minister was a remarkable feat.

What are handicaps in some circumstances occasionally turn into advantages. During the First World War Mussolini had shared the lot of the ordinary soldier, the boredom as well as the fear. He could speak about life in the army with some authority, unlike the overwhelming majority of politicians. His war diary has the ring of truth. It avoided the absurd rhetoric of D’Annunzio (who had fought with considerable valour): ‘After two months I am beginning to know my comrades ... Do they love war, these men? No. Do they hate it? No. They accept it as a duty that cannot be questioned. Those from the south have a song that goes like this: “And the war must be made, ‘cos that’s what the King wants.”’²⁸

A humble start in life may have prepared Mussolini to be more in tune with what ordinary people thought, and may have helped him to perform in the public sphere, embellishing his rhetoric with language more vivid and more readily understandable than that deployed by his socially more polished rivals. But it would be a mistake to assume that rabble-rousing populism was a major factor in Mussolini’s advent to power. Electorally speaking, fascism had not been a great success. The first election the fascists fought, that of 1919, turned out to be disastrous. It is true that the party, or rather the movement – since they refused to call themselves a party until 1921 – had just been founded, but so had the Catholic PPI (the Partito popolare italiano) – and this immediately won a major victory

the 1919 election. If anyone could be deemed to represent the 'new' Italy it was, in 1919, not Mussolini but the PPI, which was the *de facto* representative of the Catholic masses, or perhaps the Partito socialista italiano (PSI), still the main party of the urban workers and the new intelligentsia. The fascists did a little better in the election of May 1921, but only because they were part of Giolitti's *blocco nazionale*, along with liberals and right-wing nationalists. Giolitti had hoped to neutralise the fascists, and Mussolini had been ready to compromise to achieve parliamentary gain, though as soon as they were elected the fascist deputies sat at the far right of the Chamber, in opposition to Giolitti. Even so, they had not been able to muster more than thirty-five MPs out of 530. One cannot say that Mussolini had been swept to power by a wave of electoral support.

Votes, of course, are not everything, not even in a democracy. The real strength of the Fascist Party, as measured by the size of its membership, had been growing steadily throughout 1921. In March of that year the fascists numbered 80,000. By June the party had 204,000 members (62 per cent of the total in the north). By May 1922 there were 322,000 members, and the Fascist Party had become the strongest in Italy.²⁹ The tipping point had been their inclusion in Giolitti's national bloc at the March election. This somewhat legitimised them in the eyes of many, for in the course of the electoral campaign they recruited substantially, and at a faster rate than ever before, more than doubling the numbers from March to reach 187,000 at the end of May 1921. This surge was overwhelming and concentrated in some regions of the north and the centre, so that their activities appeared far more important and greater than if their support had been spread throughout the peninsula.³⁰

The liberal establishment was scared of the fascists, but even more scared of the left and the trade unions. This explains why the violence of the *squadristi* remained unchecked; and the more unchecked it was, the more it grew. The fascists, while allowed to use violence, were never sufficiently strong to be able to topple the existing political order, yet not so weak as to be ineffectual. Besides, political violence was far more prevalent in the years following the First World War than it is now. When a left-wing revolt threatened the Weimar republic in 1919 even a social democrat such as Friedrich Ebert, then Chancellor, was prepared to use the Freikorps (a right-wing militia of veterans) to crush it, murdering in the process Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

After the fascists came to power, in just over five years, at a speed dictated by events rather than by any carefully-worked-out strategic plan, what was still, technically, a constitutional government had turned into a dictatorship. The existing system of proportional representation – the cause of parliamentary fragmentation – was abolished in 1923, and a new electoral system was devised aimed at guaranteeing an overwhelming majority to the victorious coalition. Then, by a combination of brutality and questionable legal proceedings, the opponents of fascism – socialists, communists, trade unionists, democratic liberals and the few conservatives who had repented of their early support for fascism – were eliminated, stripped of power, beaten in the streets by fascist squads, forced into exile or jailed. New laws and new institutions finished off the old liberal state: a Special Tribunal with unreliable judges armed with retroactive legislation cowed what was left of the opposition. Press restrictions muzzled the few remaining independent newspapers. New, pliable, fascist trade unions replaced the rebellious *sindacati* that had held, or so it was said, the country to ransom. A new law for the 'defence of the state' abolished all political parties. Even the Fascist Party lost its importance. The instrument of Mussolini's seizure of the state, the party had become irrelevant to the wielding of power. As the new social order emerged and the old one withered away, local fascist-led brutalities subsided and law and order were restored. Normality and routine were back on track. By the late 1920s the constitutional regime which existed when Mussolini had become Prime Minister was defunct. A

the communist leader Palmiro Togliatti explained, the dictatorship was not established in 1922, but the years between 1925 and 1930.³¹ Yet the social, educational and foreign policies Mussolini pursued in government in these first years in power were perfectly in continuity with those of its predecessors.

The resulting political system was one envisaged neither by the radical wing of fascism nor by the conservatives. The former thought they would get rid of the monarchy, of the old ruling classes, of clericalism, of a timorous bourgeoisie which had sold Italy to foreigners. The new fascist society, as they dreamed, would demarcate itself sharply from the pathetic liberal Italy which had achieved so little in its sixty years or so of existence. The March on Rome became their foundation myth. In truth it had been – as we have seen – little more than a paltry gathering of useful idiots, but in the telling and the retelling of it, the March was transformed into a revolutionary movement, the vanguard of patriotic Italians of all classes, concerned and dismayed by the corruption and decadence of the old liberal state. According to this narrative, they had rallied around a new leader, Mussolini, and his new party, the unsullied and uncorrupted Partito nazionale fascista, that had denounced the inability of the old governing classes to stand up to the Great Powers and to make Italy great again. In so doing the patriots had also definitively repulsed the menace of Bolshevism and socialism, and the strikes and subversion which had threatened hard-working citizens and led the country to the verge of the abyss. Responding to the call of destiny, the Duce had led thousands, perhaps tens of thousands – even, in some hyperbolic accounts, 300,000 – to Rome (the *Corriere della sera* estimated the number of demonstrators to be between 45,000 and 50,000³²). With the country at his feet, Mussolini could have, as he declared later, transformed Parliament into a bivouac for his legions. Instead he demonstrated his love of country and his sense of responsibility and accepted the offer to become the King's Prime Minister.

Power, however, is seldom found in a single place, a handy central control room whose keys, once acquired, provide one with complete mastery. Even in a dictatorship, especially one in which the conventions are always changing, power is the result of a constant and extenuating negotiating process. The real losers are the outsiders. Isolated from the power structure, they do not see the compromises, the bargaining, the positioning, the back-stabbing, the fear of losing, the joy of winning, and the ephemeral nature of what appears permanent. From the outside a dictatorship looks like a formidable 'totalitarian' machine, in control and unassailable. When it crumbles (one thinks of Portugal in 1974–75, Spain in 1975–77, Iran in 1979, the Soviet Union in 1989–91, and South Africa in 1990–94), almost everyone is taken by surprise, except perhaps the more alert among those who led the old regime.

The key question to be addressed here is not how the dictatorship was consolidated, or why Mussolini succeeded in transforming a constitutional government into an undemocratic regime, or even why he was able to maintain himself in office so effectively for twenty years, and lost power only because he dragged his country into a devastating war. The key question is why Mussolini obtained office in the first place; that is, why, given the circumstances described, the leader of an electorally unpopular party, with no nationwide support and no control over the military, became Prime Minister.

Events developed in the way they did because of a unique conjuncture in which each participant, unlike a chess grandmaster, could not plan his next move in advance, with the knowledge that the commonly agreed rules bind the players, that each must wait his turn, that only certain moves are allowed. Like all political grand games, the Italian crisis of 1922 brought to the fore a multiplicity of actors, with no fixed rules, with no clear boundary between friend and foe, and no obvious resolution.

Only later, when the dust had settled, could each side count its losses and its gains, curse the wrong moves made or congratulate itself on its mettle and luck.

Mussolini realised – partly from experience, partly by instinct – that in order to be accepted by a country as the supreme leader, he had to please those who had not been entirely convinced by his performance so far, and inevitably to disappoint some of his supporters. The views of the country began to matter to him more than those of the party. By 1923 he was warning his supporters that ‘The country can tolerate one Mussolini at most, not several dozen.’³³

What were the circumstances which made reasonable and rational people hold the view that the country had become ungovernable, or at least that it could not be governed in the old way? In 1917 Lenin, who knew a thing or two about revolutions, explained to some of his excessively enthusiastic followers that one cannot make a revolution at will, but that it can only occur when two conditions are fulfilled: ‘It is only when the “lower classes” *do not want to live in the old way* and the “upper classes” *cannot carry on in the old way* that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nationwide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters).’³⁴

In Italy in 1922, the first condition was no longer extant. The ‘lower’ classes, the workers and peasants to whom Lenin had successfully appealed in Russia in 1917 and in the immediate succeeding years, had been soundly defeated. The trade union unrest which had manifested itself in the ‘red years’ of 1918–20 had been quelled. As for the agricultural workers of central and northern Italy, they had been brutally put down by sheer fascist violence, violence which was often justified in terms of re-establishing order. The rural workers of the south had remained silent, barely aware of the momentous political game being played elsewhere. The second condition (‘the “upper classes” cannot carry on in the old way’) applied to a limited extent. The ‘upper classes’, if one can use that terminology to designate interlocking elites seldom able to present a monolithic face, realised that they could no longer go on in the old way, but they were not sure what the new way might be. They looked for an option whereby, to paraphrase Tancredi’s famous remark in Tommaso de Lampedusa’s novel *The Leopard*, ‘Everything must change so that everything remains the same.’ As the uncertainty of the elites grew, their unity, never their strongest card, faltered. Mussolini was one of several options they considered. They hoped that he would clear the ground from under the socialist and communist rabble, wipe out those trade unions before which they had trembled, and would then settle down, content with the trappings of power, cutting ribbons, strutting around, visiting schools, ennobling friends and relatives. Mussolini’s assigned role was to cleanse the country of the republican menace and then turn himself into a figurehead. The old establishment would rule in the shadows, as it had always done.

Mussolini’s capture of power was seen by many of his contemporaries, at home and abroad, as the result of his exceptional qualities of leadership. He was the true ‘man of destiny’, the embodiment of *die Weltseele* (the World Spirit), to use Hegel’s description of Napoleon when he saw the Emperor riding through the city of Jena on 13 October 1806, the eve of the battle.³⁵ Mussolini was one of the first modern leaders to achieve power in exceptional circumstances, outside the normal rules of politics. He had not been anointed by divine right, as under the *ancien régime*, nor – as in modern democracies – gone through the legitimate process of succession as the leader of a major established political party. In the course of the twentieth century such men of destiny appeared with alarming regularity, and they continue to do so in the twenty-first. But Mussolini’s predecessors were rare.

Only in Latin America had dictators or *caudillos* come to the fore in the course of the nineteenth century, men like Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina, Antonio de Santa Anna in Mexico and José Antonio Páez in Venezuela; but they all owed their accession to their military positions. Like the first Napoleon and Oliver Cromwell, they were men on horseback. Louis Napoleon (who eventually crowned himself Napoleon III) did achieve office, like Mussolini, by exploiting a paralysis among the leading political forces, but unlike Mussolini he obtained power by winning a genuine presidential election – in 1848, with an overwhelming popular mandate, to the surprise of the political establishment. Only then did he proceed, on 2 December 1851, to stage a *coup d'état*. Unlike Mussolini he had no organised party to back him, nor did he need to compromise with an existing monarchy.

The nearest European predecessor of Mussolini was his contemporary Primo de Rivera, who in September 1923 was appointed dictator by the King of Spain, Alfonso XIII; but his dictatorship was short-lived. In Poland Józef Piłsudski was, like Mussolini, a former socialist leader, but unlike him he became a national hero in the course of the Soviet–Polish war of 1919–21, at the end of which he proclaimed an independent Polish republic and became the first head of state of the newly resurgent Poland. Having resigned this position in 1922 he returned to power in 1926, when the country, like Italy, was in the throes of parliamentary paralysis, and controlled the destiny of Poland until his death in 1935. Thus there were few if any historical precedents for Mussolini. This explains, at least in part, both his rapid rise and the difficulties even his contemporaries faced in trying to explain the phenomenon.

Mussolini was systematically underestimated by both allies and opponents. The initial reaction of the Italian Communist Party was muted. The Theses of Rome (March 1922) – the communist party's founding document – do not mention fascism at all. Even an astute thinker like Antonio Gramsci, at the time of the seizure of power, dismissed the possibility that Mussolini might hold the fascist movement together, and like many commentators assumed that eventually it would split between an intransigent wing and a legalistic one. Writing in August 1921, Gramsci had suggested that by concentrating on Bologna instead of Milan, fascism was 'in fact freeing itself from elements like Mussolini – always uncertain, always hesitating as a result of their taste for intellectualist adventures and their irrepressible need for general ideologies – and becoming a homogeneous organisation supporting the agrarian bourgeoisie, without ideological weaknesses or uncertainties in action'.³⁶

Even in 1924, when the construction of the regime was well under way, Gramsci's writings on Mussolini stressed the importance of the image of the dictator, rather than his policies:

*He was then, as today, the quintessential model of the Italian petty bourgeois: a rabid, ferocious mixture of all the detritus left on the national soil by the centuries of domination by foreigners and priests. He could not be the leader of the proletariat; he became the dictator of the bourgeoisie, which loves ferocious faces when it becomes Bourbon again, and which hoped to see the same terror in the working class which it itself had felt before those rolling eyes and that clenched fist raised in menace?*³⁷

This is not to say that the image or the personality of the new leader was unimportant. While it is true that the seizure of power would not have taken place without a favourable conjuncture, personalities do matter. Mussolini was in the right place at the right time, but he was also the right man. Marx, who tended to overestimate impersonal forces in history at the expense of personalities, perceptively pointed out, in the second paragraph of his famous 1852 essay on Louis Bonaparte, that 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'

In this book I will follow this suggestion and seek to reconstruct the ‘circumstances given and transmitted from the past’ – the conjuncture – that enabled Mussolini to reach power. But no inevitability or determinism is assumed here. Matters could have gone differently. Circumstances made it possible for Mussolini to become Prime Minister of Italy, and further factors made possible the subsequent itinerary of the regime; but there is a world of difference between the possibility of an event and that event occurring.

Mussolini did not just appear as a new leader. He *was* a new, modern leader, one who possessed, to use a word now abused but then recently given a new meaning, ‘charisma’, a magnetic personality exuding power not because power had been foisted upon him by established political rules, but by virtue of some God-given, unfathomable qualities. Max Weber had defined charismatic authority by contrasting it with more usual forms of authority (traditional and legal-rational) – as a quality of ‘an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’.³⁸

Mussolini’s merit was to have exploited to the full the cards that fate (history) had handed him. There was, of course, an element of luck – a concept seldom deployed by historians – for even the ablest of men cannot be aware of all the possibilities. In the end, one has a ‘good’ hunch and acts accordingly. After all, Mussolini’s demise came about, at least in part, because of a ‘bad’ hunch: a miscalculation regarding the probable outcome of the Second World War. His initial (correct) instinct had been to keep out of it, just as his instinct almost twenty five years earlier had been to enter a war. Of course, in 1940 it was not unreasonable to assume that Hitler would win the war, and that it would be more advantageous to be in than out. But Nazism was defeated, dragging along with it into the maelstrom fascism and its man of destiny. Another dictator, Francisco Franco, had tried to join Hitler’s war, but, luckily for him, he was rebuffed by the Germans.³⁹ He thus ruled Spain until his dying days, allowing his apologists to celebrate his cunning in staying out of the war.

Italian fascism was wiped out by a world war, but it was also born out of war. Of all the factors that made fascism possible, the First World War was the most important. The war accelerated changes in Italian society, destabilised the country’s parliamentary system and realigned its politics, thus contributing decisively to the conjuncture which enabled Mussolini to become Prime Minister in 1922. But it was far from being the sole factor. The changes brought about by the war made it difficult to return to the unstable system which had preceded it. Without the war, Italy may have had the opportunity to evolve otherwise and to follow a different, liberal, path towards modernity. Equally, it would have been possible to resolve the post-war crisis without creating the conditions for a fascist takeover of the state. As Paul Corner has argued, ‘The identification of possible origins of fascism in the decades before 1922 is a very different matter from suggesting that these origins had a necessary and inevitable outcome in the March on Rome.’⁴⁰

A Divisive War – a Lost Victory

The war that erupted in 1914 had been widely expected. In many countries it had even been welcomed. Imperialist rivalries, an arms race, the inexorable crumbling of the Ottoman Empire which opened a new political vacuum in the eastern Mediterranean, the growth of nationalism – particularly disruptive for the Austro–Hungarian Empire – the visible weakness of Russia (defeated by Japan in 1905), and a complex and unstable system of alliances all contributed to the outbreak of war after Gavrilo Princip's bullet pierced Archduke Franz Ferdinand's jugular vein at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914.

Seldom was the start of a war so popular – at least in cities; peasants remained indifferent, and women were probably more dubious than men.¹ It was widely held that the war would be short, and crowds in Paris, St Petersburg, Vienna and London cheered the beginning of the conflict. In Berlin crowds of between 2,000 and 10,000 people joined in patriotic demonstrations.² Outside Buckingham Palace there were people shouting 'We want war!'³ The citizens of the belligerent countries accepted the onset of war, though perhaps not with the massive enthusiasm described in numerous recollections.⁴ Recent scholarship notes that the evidence, at least in the United Kingdom, of popular joy at the prospect of war 'is surprisingly weak'.⁵ But, at least when war broke out, there was sufficient public enthusiasm to attract the notice of newspapers, and those who opposed it were subdued, divided and resigned.⁶

Jean–Jacques Becker's *1914: Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre*, still, after more than thirty years, the most thorough study of public opinion in a particular country at the start of the First World War, gives a complex picture of the divergent attitudes in France. These included sadness and resignation as well as patriotic enthusiasm, the latter being far less widespread than was commonly thought.⁷ But some were thrilled with excitement. Adolf Hitler, writing in *Mein Kampf* in 1924, recalled his elation at the news: 'To me those hours seemed like a release from the painful feelings of my youth. Even today I am not ashamed to say that, overpowered by stormy enthusiasm, I fell down on my knees and thanked Heaven ... for granting me the good fortune of being permitted to live at this time.'⁸ Hitler's enthusiasm may not be surprising, but more sober minds were also caught up in the ferment, including intellectuals of the calibre of Stefan Zweig and Max Weber.⁹ Max Beckmann, the Expressionist painter, was exhilarated.¹⁰ Rupert Brooke, in October 1914, wrote in his famous sonnet 'Peace': 'Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour'. Rainer Maria Rilke celebrated the advent of the conflict in his *Five Cantos* in August 1914: '... the battle–God suddenly grasps us'. The Viennese playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Rudyard Kipling, turned into war propagandists. Thomas Mann declared: 'How could the artist, the soldier in the artist, not praise God for the collapse of a peaceful world with which he was fed up...' Sigmund Freud too, at least initially, rejoiced in partisanship.¹¹ And during the war the French philosopher of perception Henri Bergson travelled repeatedly to the USA to encourage Washington to enter the hostilities on the side of the Allies.

The popularity of the war can be gauged by the behaviour of the socialists. Before the eruption of the conflict they had repeatedly committed themselves to averting war by all possible means.

However, on 3 August 1914 the parliamentary group of the German Social–Democratic Party stood unanimously behind their Emperor in defence of Germany. The French, Belgian and Austrian socialists also adopted a vigorous patriotic position. In Great Britain Labour MPs and the trade unions did the same (though some Labour leaders, such as Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, did not).

In spite of the war fever raging elsewhere, in Italy a wait–and–see attitude prevailed at first. The unwillingness to be plunged into the fighting was paralleled in other European states such as Holland, Spain and Sweden, which stayed out for the duration, and Romania, Greece and Portugal, which, like Italy, eventually joined in.

It would be wrong to assume that pacifism had much to do with Italy's reluctance to go to war. There were, at the time, two main strands of opinion which might be labelled 'pacifist': the Catholic and the socialist – but neither was committed to pacifism as a matter of principle. Catholics accepted the idea of just wars, but were hostile to the Italian state, whose foundation originated from a war of conquest against the Papacy. Socialists accepted the possibility of revolutionary violence, but regarded wars as the result of capitalist greed. There was also (and there still is) a common perception that Italians were ill–suited to wars and had a predisposition towards non–bellicose activities: Italians as '*brava gente*', that is decent and good–hearted folk.¹² Such stereotypical attitudes occasionally had the imprimatur of major philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, who remarked that Italians had put their genius 'in music, painting, sculpture and architecture'.¹³ Italian intellectuals had often lamented the lack of warlike qualities in their fellow countrymen. Even Alessandro Manzoni, a Catholic novelist and playwright consecrated by Italian nationalism and revered by all, despaired at how centuries of foreign invasions had reinforced the supine attitude of Italians. In the first chorus of his 1822 tragedy *Adelchi* he described the Italians as 'a scattered people with no name' ('*un volgo disperso che nome non ha*'), uncertain, timorous and undecided, eternally waiting for a foreign invader to liberate them.

The reluctance to enter the war could more profitably be explained in terms of Italy's past rather than of national stereotypes. Italy's recent forays into imperial adventures had not turned out to be successful. In March 1896 at Adua in Ethiopia a large Italian expeditionary force of 17,700 men was annihilated by the armies of Emperor Menelik, the most scorching defeat of any European army in Africa. The dead and some of the prisoners were castrated in traditional Ethiopian custom. The disaster ended the political career of the then Prime Minister, Francesco Crispi.¹⁴ The rush to colonialism divided Italy far more than it divided Great Britain, Germany or France. In 1911–12 Italy declared war on Turkey and occupied Libya, Rhodes and the islands of the Dodecanese. This proved an easier enterprise than Ethiopia, but almost as controversial. The shame of Adua was redeemed, and Italy had become a colonial power, albeit a second–ranking one. Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, who had agreed to the war on Libya with some reluctance, had been supported by the liberal press, above all by Luigi Albertini's *Corriere della sera*, as well as by some Catholic organisations who saw the expedition as another crusade against the heathens. Libya, however, did little for Giolitti's prestige while considerably enhancing the influence and power of Italian nationalists. Organisations such as Enrico Corradini's *Associazione nazionalista italiana* exploited the Libyan adventure, thereby assuming a much greater weight in national life than its numbers warranted, and made inroads into the civil service, the armed forces and intellectual life: 'By the conclusion of the war, the nationalistic movement had burrowed its way into Turinese, Milanese, Venetian, Roman and Neapolitan centres of journalism.'¹⁵

Intellectuals played a role in legitimising a bellicose attitude. The futurists, who were again bourgeois conventions, including liberalism, parliamentarism and pacifism, glorified war and violence, regarding the artist, seen as a kind of Nietzschean superman, as in charge of his own destiny and showing the future to others.¹⁶ Artists were supposed to abandon their ivory towers, approach the masses and lead them with deliberately shocking slogans worshipping war and violence – ideas soon annexed by the fascists. In the Futurist Manifesto, published in the *Figaro* in Paris on 20 February 1909, Marinetti, with the evident desire to *épater les bourgeois*, wrote that the futurists ‘will glorify war – the only hygiene of the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gestures of libertarianism, the beautiful ideas that kill, and contempt for woman’.¹⁷ Marinetti also wrote enthusiastically about the Italian conquest of Libya in 1911 as the correspondent for the right-wing Paris newspaper *L’intransigeant*. Much of this provided a fertile intellectual ground for fascist ideas. But such a nationalist position was far from being the sole prerogative of futurists and modernists. Giosuè Carducci, Nobel Prize-winner (1906) and revered man of letters whose influence on Italian education and intellectual life cannot be overestimated, often glorified patriotic and warlike themes, evoked the greatness of ancient Rome and exhibited a ‘visceral dislike of parliamentary institutions’.¹⁸

The Italian election of 1913, the first held under universal male suffrage, demonstrated, however, that the extreme nationalists had been kept in check: the liberals, though deeply divided, still had a majority, while the socialists improved their position considerably. This explains, at least in part, why the Prime Minister Antonio Salandra, a right-wing liberal, and the Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino, also a man of the right, felt that the country was not strong enough to enter the war in 1914, and declared that it would remain neutral. Meanwhile they prepared the terrain for intervention.

Initially the majority of members of Parliament had declared themselves against the war, unlike their counterparts in the belligerent countries. Neither Giolitti’s liberals, the dominant faction in Parliament, nor the socialists had been in a mood for entering the conflict. They argued that the Italian economy was much too weak, and too delicately balanced between the need to import raw materials and the need to export food (mainly to central Europe) in order to pay for imports. The labouring masses had only recently seen their conditions of life improve, and were not yet ready to feel part of a single nation. Besides, the war was seen as a struggle between two empires, the British (and/or the French) and the Germans, and there was no reason to shed Italian blood. The Church tried to maintain a degree of neutrality, since there were Catholics on both sides (in France, much of Austria-Hungary and southern Germany).

Interventionism, however, was not just supported by the military and the arms lobby, but also by a significant section of public opinion. It is unlikely that this was representative of the country as a whole, since the rural masses were not in a position to express a choice, and few Italians participated in any pro-war demonstrations. The pro-war elements of the nation, however, were vociferous, and connected their interventionism to a widespread lack of confidence in the existing institutions of the state, above all in Parliament, widely seen as the repository of corrupt practices and dominated by untrustworthy politicians.

Salandra and Sonnino were in tune with such sentiments, since they negotiated Italy’s entry into the war in the spring of 1915 without consulting Parliament. They thought the war would not last long, even though by then such views had less foundation than they appeared to have in 1914. It was widely held – and not only in Paris and London, but also in Rome – that one more push along the southern flank of the Central Powers and Germany would have to send troops to help its Austrian allies.

(outnumbered by the Italians), and would end up fighting on three fronts.¹⁹

Italian foreign policy had been auctioned off to the highest bidder. Germany and Austria had been prepared to concede Italy significant gains as long as she kept out of the war. The French and the British promised more: not just the Trentino with its Italian-speaking majority, but also the southern Tyrol (Alto Adige) all the way to the alpine pass of the Brennero (Cisalpine Tyrol's geographical and natural frontier); Trieste, Venetia-Giulia, Dalmatia and various Adriatic islands (but not Fiume); recognition of Italian sovereignty over the Dodecanese islands; a part of the Turkish region of Adalia (now Antalya) in the event of a partition of Turkey in Asia; a share of any eventual war indemnity; and, 'in the event of France and Great Britain increasing their colonial territories in Africa at the expense of Germany, those two Powers agree in principle that Italy may claim some equitable compensation'. This, plus the promise of a loan of £50 million, sealed the deal. Article 16 of the Treaty of London, signed in April 1915, which sanctioned Italy's intervention, stated quite simply, 'The present arrangement shall be held secret.'²⁰ Italy entered the conflict on 24 May, declaring war on Austria. The hope that Italy's intervention on the southern flank of the Central Powers would lead to the quick collapse of Austria turned out to be unfounded.

In Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium and Austria, the war united the population until the end of the conflict. Afterwards the inevitable recriminations, at least among the victors, remained relatively muted. Even in Germany, where the image of 'the stab in the back' was used by nationalists and later by the Nazis to berate social-democrats and pacifists, the war did not engender permanent divisions. Not so in Italy. Neutralists and interventionists existed in all parties, and remained bitterly at odds after the war. The weeks preceding Italy's entry into the war had been characterised by a climate on the verge of civil war. As participation in the conflict seemed increasingly inevitable, the neutralists virtually gave up the fight. There was a general strike against the war on 17-18 May. Then there was an eerie calm. The socialists adopted the slogan of *nè aderire nè sabotare* ('neither supporting the war nor sabotaging it'). The Catholics declared that they would be loyal to the state, though the Italian state had been created in the face of opposition from the Catholic Church.²¹ As the troops marched off to war, it became difficult to preach an anti-war message. The pull of national unity was almost irresistible.



Later, as the war turned sour, anti-interventionists could declare that ‘our boys’ were dying in a useless conflict for the benefit of arms manufacturers, while interventionists maintained that division on the home front demoralised the troops and encouraged the enemy. But when the war started, patriotic pressures were difficult to resist and opposition was muted. Few had the courage to appear disloyal. The formula *nè aderire nè sabotare* was an invitation to do nothing. Giolitti, who had opposed the war, announced, from his self-imposed quasi-retirement in his constituency in Piedmont, that he would support King and country. Some notable neutralists, such as the literary critic Cesare Lombroso, head of the anti-war ‘Italia Nostra’, volunteered for the front. Yet the events leading to the war confirm that Italy had entered it in a less exalted mood than other participants. War fever was confined to the more active part of the population: politicians, journalists, students, the urban middle classes. Various reports, including some from foreign diplomats, suggest that most Italians chose to remain silent, apathetic or indifferent. Those who supported the war found it easy to express their views. Those who did not found it preferable to remain silent. As for the apathetic many ... How does one voice apathy? How does one measure it?

In 1914 Europeans were not used to expressing their opinions. There were, after all, hardly any channels through which to do so. Demonstrations needed to be called and organised by the political activists. Opinion polls were in their infancy. Writing letters to newspapers was confined to an elite. Confiding to one’s elected representatives was a prerogative used by very few. Italians were less inclined than many other Europeans to participate. Not only was illiteracy very high, but so was electoral abstentionism, even when the suffrage increased from less than two million in 1909 to over five million in 1913. The division between neutralists and interventionists was confined to a relatively narrow section of the population. But this was the section that mattered: the opinion-formers, the intellectuals, the army officers, the students – above all those in the north.²²

The interventionists were by no means all nationalistic right-wingers. They included some belonging to the left – the so-called ‘democratic interventionists’ such as Leonida Bissolati and Gaetano Salvemini – both of whom volunteered. Bissolati had been the first editor of the socialist paper *Avanti!* (1896–1904), then the leader of the reformist faction of the PSI. Expelled from the party in 1912, he founded, with Ivanoè Bonomi, the Partito socialista riformista. By 1916 he was in the

government. Salvemini, who had left the Socialist Party in 1911 because it had not opposed the adventure in Libya energetically enough, had urged Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente. Like the other democratic interventionists he hoped that Italy would be able to complete the programme of the Risorgimento: the union of all Italians under a single flag, with the 'return' of the Trentino to Italy, as well as Trieste and all territories on the Dalmatia coast where the Italian language prevailed.

The position of democratic interventionism could be traced back to Mazzini and his desire to remove from the map of Europe a 'reactionary' empire such as that of Austria, which many felt would pave the way for a series of revolutions throughout central Europe. This seemed to justify joining the side in the conflict which included both the Tsarist and the Ottoman Empires, arguably more 'reactionary' than that of the Austrians.

Interventionists did not hesitate in advocating firm measures against the pacifists and the neutralists. In some cases democratic interventionists turned out to be even more authoritarian than the right-wing nationalists. Thus Bissolati, in December 1916, thought that *Avanti!* should have been suspended, and complained that the reason Salandra, the Prime Minister, had not done so was because he thought the war would not last very long.²³

The Church had hesitated to take sides in the conflict. Austria and Italy were both Catholic countries, but Italian Catholics had fewer qualms than Pope Benedict XV. Don Luigi Sturzo, the priest who would found the Partito popolare italiano (PPI) in 1919, was an interventionist himself. Military chaplains were in fact as war-loving as nationalist officers. Mussolini recollected in his diary that the most patriotic speech he had heard in sixteen months of war was in a church, on 31 December 1916 when he went to hear Mass.²⁴

Thus the interventionist front was variegated. Its main pillar was constituted, of course, by the nationalist bloc, but alongside it was a motley crew of liberals and socialists of various hues. The interventionists had the advantage which in times of war always goes with those who wrap themselves in the national flag, since every defeat can be attributed to the demoralisation induced by the opponents of the war, while every victory is a vindication of one's position. Thus the debacle suffered by the Italian armies at Caporetto in October 1917, essentially due to military causes, had spectacular political consequences, not only because it led to the replacement of General Luigi Cadorna as Chief of Staff and the resignation of Paolo Boselli as Prime Minister, but because it was used to excoriate the entire political establishment. The defeat, it was widely held, was due not just to Cadorna, but also to the defeatist attitude and the lack of patriotism of so many Italians (a view enhanced by the surrender of a large number of Italian troops at Caporetto), to the weakness and pusillanimity of those who had ruled Italy since unification – a judgement made not only by Cadorna, as was to be expected, but also by communists such as Antonio Gramsci and liberals such as Luigi Albertini, editor of the *Corriere della sera*.²⁵ Caporetto led to a renewed bout of febrile patriotism. By then this had already overtaken most socialist members of Parliament, including the veteran leader Filippo Turati, and leading trade unionists, even though the PSI refused to abandon, at least officially, the slogan of *aderire nè sabotare*. But there was also a corresponding surge of anti-war feeling. Economic difficulties compounded the opposition to the war, causing unrest in the countryside and in factories. Emergency measures and legislation permitting the banning by the military of religious processions and military-style parades were introduced. Legally binding agreements were introduced to achieve some social peace in the countryside.²⁶

Mussolini's early decision to support the war added to the complexity of the pro-war bloc. At first he had been a neutralist, but he soon changed his mind and embraced interventionism on the unfounded ground that the war would bring about a major social transformation in Italy. As a member of the 'left' of the Socialist Party, he had long been disdainful of the timid reformism of traditional socialists like Turati. When, in the pages of the socialist paper *Avanti!*, Mussolini declared himself a supporter of 'active neutrality', arguing that 'those who win will have a history, those who were absent will have none. If Italy is absent she will be the land of the dead, the land of the cowards,' he was immediately expelled from the PSI (29 November 1914). Mussolini's interventionism permitted him to break with the left of the Socialist Party and situated him in a political milieu far more profitable for his subsequent political career, even though at first his 'revolutionary interventionism' caused some anxieties in the Ministry of War and the high command of the armed forces.²⁷ He was still a man of the left, but as he was increasingly trusted by the nationalists, he became less and less 'revolutionary' and more and more nationalist. By January 1915 the motivations he gave for entering the war had become indistinguishable from those of the traditional nationalist right: 'We have to decide: either war or let's stop this farce about being a Great Power. Let's build casinos, hotels, brothels and let's get fat. A people can have even such ideals. Getting fat is the ideal of inferior zoological specimens.'²⁸

The language used and the sentiments expressed tallied with the nationalist interventionist narrative which contrasted the new and young Italy, looking optimistically towards the future, with the old Italy – conservative, neutralist, dominated by parliamentary imbeciles whose vacuous debates paralysed the country. Mussolini's polemical attacks on the old establishment were conducted vigorously from the columns of his new, staunchly pro-war, newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. This made him popular among young veterans as well as modernists and avant-garde poets *à la* Marinetti.

Intellectuals such as Giovanni Papini and Giuseppe Prezzolini seized upon the occasion of the war to point out how 'sick' Italy had become under the existing political establishment. A revolution of ideas had become necessary, and it would have to be one which would not be afraid of using *teppisti* (thugs), for as Prezzolini wrote in 1914: 'One doesn't make revolutions either with scholars or with people who wear white gloves. A *teppista* counts for more than a university professor when one is trying to throw up a barricade or smash down the doors of a bank ...'²⁹ Perhaps Prezzolini was already thinking of Mussolini.

The ambiguity in Mussolini's ideology, far from being a handicap, turned to his advantage. The ideological realignment occurring in the country as a whole favoured those in search of novelties, and as we know, new ideas are far more flexible and formless than old ones. The Italy which was coming out of the war was quite different from the country which had entered it. The 'total' nature of the war was evident in all belligerent countries, but it hit Italy more than France, Germany or Great Britain. Not in the sense that more people died – casualties were proportionately higher in France – but because, before the war, there had been less of a national consciousness in Italy than in most of the other participants. The war helped shape it.

Southern peasants – hitherto barely aware they were Italians – had been drafted in large numbers, dressed in the same uniform beside students and workers from other parts of Italy, and led to fight under one flag in the north-easternmost corner of a country they hardly knew. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these recruits developed a strong sense of national consciousness, but they certainly developed a discipline they had never experienced before, and a marked feeling

community for those who fought and died alongside them. They also experienced violence and brutality. The number of Italian casualties in the Great War was extremely high: 650,000 dead and one million wounded. The number of casualties would have been even higher had not the high command acted far more prudently in 1918 (when the casualties fell to 143,000, against 520,000 in 1917). The victory of Vittorio Veneto in 1918 partly compensated for the losses suffered at Caporetto, and was exploited to the utmost by the Italian chiefs of staff. In reality, by then the morale of the Austrian troops had completely collapsed, and many were in open rebellion against their officers.³⁰

War anger united disparate veterans around the vision of a different Italy, where those who had paid a high price would see their suffering recognised by a grateful motherland. Most, of course, saw the war as an inevitable evil over which they had little control. Used to obey and to be subservient, they accepted the war as one accepts a natural catastrophe. Giuseppe Capacci, a soldier in 1915–16, kept a diary written with uncommon literary skill (in civilian life he was a Tuscan sharecropper who had had only three years of schooling), in which there is hardly a word of hatred towards the enemy or a whiff of patriotism. The main theme is a resigned acceptance of his fate: ‘We wanted to know where we would be taken,’ he wrote, ‘but it was useless: a soldier knows nothing until he has arrived. Some thought we were going to Albania, others to the Isonzo ...’³¹ In October 1916 he got lucky: he was wounded in the arm and taken to the relative safety of a military hospital, where the presence of nurses from the Red Cross reminded him of the comfort of feminine company, of mothers and sisters. ‘Those who have not experienced the war do not know how pleasurable it is to return to a semblance of civilian life.’³² The only social criticism he expressed was when, on the train taking him home, he was ejected from the second-class carriage to the third-class to make room for some *signori* (ladies and gentlemen), though he was visibly wounded: ‘This is the love, the care that these gentlemen have for us soldiers; I shall say no more about this, though I could write much.’³³

A collectivist spirit developed among many of these soldiers who until recently had been peasants. The war was a transforming experience. Removed from their normal situation, affections and interests, soldiers became absorbed in the task at hand. Their rural passivity turned quickly into a humble devotion to their officers and love for their fellow soldiers.³⁴

The war was seen as a test of comradeship, youth, discipline and courage. It was celebrated by those who had fought and survived it, and who had been, to some extent, brutalised by it and by the demonisation of the enemy.³⁵ Regardless of the reality of war camaraderie, about which we have only unreliable evidence constructed after the events, what united many veterans of the war was a common narrative. While the soldiers suffered, the ‘others’, the rich, the protected and those with well-placed friends and relations, had managed to avoid – or so it was thought – the pain and suffering of the war and became richer. War enthusiasts and neutralists alike blamed the politicians who bickered in Rome, far from the trenches. The traditional anti-political attitude of many Italians grew in the trenches.

That the war had been a watershed is not in question, but so was the Second World War; yet, as George Mosse showed in an illuminating essay, the Second World War never generated a myth of shared experience and pooled memories in the way the First did.³⁶ The profusion of war memorials which dotted the countryside and small towns in France, Great Britain and Italy after 1918 was not replicated after 1945.

It was agreed, even at the time, that the conflict of 1914–18 had changed Italy completely. When the war was over the then Prime Minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, called it ‘the greatest political and

social revolution in our history'.³⁷ Salandra, who had taken the country into the war, admitted that would be impossible to return to the spirit of the pre-war age.³⁸

The new spirit was embodied in the returning soldiers. These veterans would provide the terrain for the proliferation of violent right-wing paramilitary associations from which the fascists recruited their most fervent supporters. Much of the symbolism of the far right was acquired during the war. The black shirts they wore were inspired by the uniform of the elite crack troops – the Arditi – created in the summer of 1917 by General Luigi Capello. The hymn of the Arditi, '*Giovinezza*' (Youth) became the official anthem of the Fascist Party. The word *fascio* (bundle or bunch) itself had been somewhat in vogue well before Mussolini appropriated it. It originated during the Risorgimento, and was later used by left-wing protest movements of peasants and workers based mainly in western Sicily – the *fasci siciliani* crushed in the early 1890s by the Prime Minister Francesco Crispi. In October 1914 some left-wing trade unionists who wanted to join the war founded the Fascio rivoluzionario d'azione internazionalista. Then, in February 1917, a group of eighty pro-war MPs formed the Fascio nazionale di azione, which included not only conservatives but also socialist reformists such as Bissolati and liberal interventionists like Luigi Albertini, the editor of the *Corriere della sera*. Finally, in December 1917 a large group of nationalist MPs (over 150 deputies and nine senators) including Salandra formed the Fascio parlamentare di difesa nazionale. They were hailed by Mussolini as 'the 152 fascist deputies'.³⁹

Thus many of the elements of fascism – symbols, potential recruits, attitudes and ideological elements – were already extant when Mussolini was still barely known and had few followers. Had the fascists been more of a threat they might have been crushed by the ruling political establishment, but it was far more concerned with the danger represented by the left than with what was still an inchoate and ill-defined movement on the nationalist right.

A negotiated end to the war – as urged by the American President Woodrow Wilson in 1916 – would have favoured Giolitti and that section of the old liberal establishment which would have preferred to stay out of it. But the war ended only in 1918. Since Italy had been on the side of the victors, the interventionists appeared to have been vindicated. Before the war Italy was 'the least of the Great Powers', or perhaps not even a Great Power at all. Italian nationalism wallowed in a feeling of inferiority.

After the war, the situation was favourable for a complete realignment of the system of international relations in Europe. It is true that the real victors had been the United States – the new Great Power – without whose intervention the war might have gone on for longer, and on whose financial resources many in Europe relied for reviving their economies. It was equally true that though weakened, Italy's main imperial rivals, France and Great Britain, had emerged with their colonial empires intact. But all the other Great Powers had been humiliated. From the point of view of Italian diplomacy, the situation for a major improvement in Italy's international prospects could not have been better. Its main enemy, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had not only been defeated but was about to be dismembered. Germany had lost the war. Russia, having withdrawn from the war after the Revolution, was in the midst of civil war and, having become a pariah state, was faced with foreign intervention. The impending demise of the Ottoman Empire also offered rich colonial pickings to the victorious coalition. It was therefore perfectly rational for Italian nationalists – such as the Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino – to assume that the higher status they had aspired to for so long could be achieved. After all, Italy had paid a high price in terms of lives lost.

Under the terms of the Treaty of London (articles 4 and 5), Italy was supposed to obtain Trentino and Cisalpine Tyrol with its geographical and natural frontier, as well as Trieste. But the terms of the treaty also included Dalmatia, where the majority of the population was not Italian. The implementation of these terms would have encountered the bitter opposition of the southern Slavs: the new Yugoslav kingdom, quite legitimately, regarded Dalmatia as an integral part of itself. And Yugoslavia had a new and powerful supporter: the United States. The US had not been a party to the London Treaty and its President, Woodrow Wilson, had opened his famous Fourteen Points with a declaration of intent ('Open covenants openly arrived at') hostile to the kind of secret diplomacy epitomised by the treaty. Since the United States had become a major player in European diplomacy and Great Britain and France were busy negotiating on their own behalf, Italian diplomats had few friends. Besides, they were divided. The more liberal members of the political establishment, realising that the cards were stacked against the complete fulfilment of Italy's war aims, began to seek a solution, but they constantly ran the risk of being denounced by those on the right. Italian politicians were in an objectively difficult situation. In order to extract more gains from the post-war settlement they would have to negotiate 'hard', soliciting the overt backing of public opinion, but in so doing they would fuel the war party, and if they were unable to obtain significant concessions, they would be seen to have failed.

Italy's negotiators (the team was led by the Prime Minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando) at Versailles had a narrow perspective, and concentrated almost exclusively on specific Italian demands. Their views were disregarded. Characteristically scathing of their endeavours was André Tardieu, who assisted the French Prime Minister Clemenceau: 'Signor Orlando spoke but little. Italy's interest in the Conference was far too much confined to the question of Fiume, and her share in the debates was too limited as a result. It resolved itself into a three-cornered conversation between Wilson, Clemenceau and Lloyd George.'⁴⁰ An influential Italian newspaper editor, Olindo Malagodi, lamented the lack of Italian interest in all general questions.⁴¹ Even more damning was the view of the Italian delegates expressed in a letter by Lord Hardinge, Permanent Under-Secretary at the British Foreign Office:

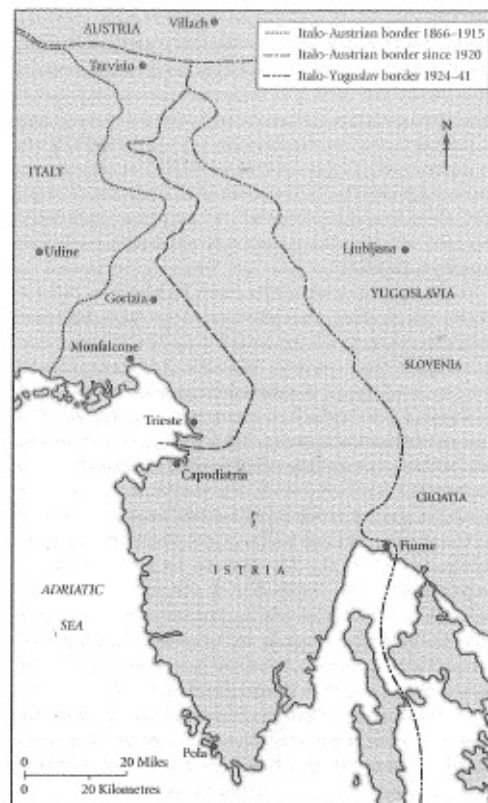
*Their incapacity and vanity are extraordinary ... They have been the most difficult element of the Conference, and much as I sympathise with Italy in every way, they are, in my opinion, the most odious colleagues and allies to have at a Conference. I am not pessimistic as to a compromise being arrived at, for there is a good deal of bluff in the Italian attitude and 'the beggars of Europe' are well known for their whining alternated by truculence.'*⁴²

Italy wanted to be given equal rights with the Great Powers, yet she was still far from behaving like a major European power with a Europe-wide view of international politics. To return empty-handed from the Paris negotiations would be to admit that Italy had been 'swindled' by the Allies, above all by the British and the French, who had managed to hold on to and even increase the size of their own empires. It would have meant recognising that perhaps the neutralists and the socialists had been right all along. Above all, it would have meant that all the war dead and wounded, and all the suffering in the trenches, had been for nothing.

What seemed at the time the most sensible course of action was to hold on to the real gains – above all to Trento, which was not in dispute – and to forget about pressing overtly ambitious claims not only over Dalmatia, but also over Fiume, which – though it had an Italian majority – had not been specifically mentioned in the Treaty of London. It is true that Fiume was Italian, but its surrounding territories were Slav. Had the principle of self-determination been adopted *in toto*, Fiume would have

lacked a continuous land connection with the rest of Italy. The British and the French had been ready to accept the Italian compromise: Zara to Italy, Dalmatia to Yugoslavia, and the granting to Fiume of the status of 'free state'. But Woodrow Wilson was in no mood to make any concession to Italian nationalism – he understood little of Italian politics – and used the aid he was giving Italy as a means of exercising pressure during the Paris Treaty negotiations.

Wilson wanted Zara as well as Dalmatia to be part of a strong Yugoslavia, with Fiume a free city under the League of Nations. Wilson's dominance was linked to a simple fact: the USA had become the main economic power in the world, and Italy needed US credit in order to proceed with post-war reconstruction – the real priority of Francesco Saverio Nitti, who had succeeded Orlando as Prime Minister in June 1919. Wilson was in no doubt, as Nitti wrote in 1922 in his *Peaceless Europe*, that 'without the intervention of the United States of America the War could not have been won by the Entente. Although the admission may prove humiliating to the European point of view, it is a fact which cannot be attenuated or disguised.'⁴³



The war had been of considerable benefit to many industrialists, since they could pay old debts and the huge war profits permitted new investments. This was particularly true of Ansaldo (a steel shipbuilding and arms manufacturer), as well as FIAT and Pirelli. But once the war was over it was difficult for the state to continue to sustain the economy, and for Italian industry to find new markets abroad. The favourable balance-of-payments situation characteristic of the Giolittian era, which had helped promote rapid economic growth, was no longer extant in the post-war period.⁴⁴ There was, after the war, less foreign currency to buy much-needed raw materials and food, and the trade situation continued to deteriorate, particularly when the USA introduced protectionist legislation such as the Emergency Tariff Act (1921) and the Fordney McCumber Tariff Act (1922). The situation was further aggravated by the American block on Italian immigration, which caused a diminution of remittances from Italian emigrants abroad, since 84 per cent of all such remittances came from the USA.⁴⁵

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