



Fascist Histories, Part I

By Amy Elizabeth Robinson

The 1920s and 30s were politically unstable and fascist regimes gained power. How did they use race, gender, and other categories of difference to divide communities? What were the horrific results?



Fascism¹ still exists in the world today. But where did fascism come from? Why did it become so powerful? How did twentieth-century fascists use race, gender, and other categories of difference to divide communities? There are numerous theories, and there probably isn't just one explanation. Let's explore several historical trends, all of which may have contributed to the rise of fascism.

Origins of Twentieth-century Fascism

When you consider fascism, you may first think of the years 1941-1945, the horrors of the Holocaust, and the "total war" violence of World War II. This is understandable, as Hitler's rule during World War II was particularly powerful and horrific.

But scholars consider the two decades before the start of the war to be periods of escalating fascist movements taking root across the globe. Italian Fascists waged violent colonial warfare. The Nazi Party set up laws that segregated different groups, and put in place policies that included forced sterilization of people with disabilities. The Japanese occupied Manchuria (1931). An authoritarian government arose in Spain under Francisco Franco (1892-1975), and in the Soviet Union under Josef Stalin. Why was this happening in the 1920s and 1930s? One set of theories begins with changing ideas and shifts in society.

Social and Intellectual Origins

Ideas about human behavior and society were changing in the early-twentieth century. Some of these new ideas sought to explain how people made choices in the world. Others reflected unhappiness with nineteenth-century theories. Many fascist leaders based their political movements on these new ideas.

Regenerative Nationalism

For example, classical nineteenth-century liberalism asserted that individuals make political and economic decisions in rational, straightforward ways. But society had changed quickly and drastically because of industrialization, migration, and especially war. "Liberal" and "rational" theories didn't seem to make sense to a lot of people who were trying to understand the rapidly changing world around them.

One way of explaining the world came from the French philosopher Georges Sorel (1847-1922), who believed that violence was a good thing for a society. He wrote that violence was "regenerative" or gave new life to the community. This stress on emotion, rather than reason, in politics was new and radically different. Benito Mussolini was a strong supporter of Sorel's work.

Social Darwinism and Eugenics

The theory of Social Darwinism became popular in the late-nineteenth century, in particular in Europe and America. It also undermined ideas about rational choice. According to this theory, history was seen as a matter of "survival of the fittest." Human populations were driven by biology (just like plant and animal populations) to compete against each other. Scientific racism was an important part of this theory. By the early twentieth-century, Social Darwinism was increasingly connected to ideas about racially pure, competitive nations.

The "science" of determining racial and national fitness was called *eugenics*, and it started in the United States. Eugenacists wanted to stop the reproduction of all human beings who did not fit an ideal "Nordic"

¹ You'll remember that fascism was defined earlier in this lesson. But to refresh your memory, fascism is a name given to a form of politics that uses violence, authoritarian leadership, and extreme nationalism to attract followers and seize power. Benito Mussolini in Fascist Italy and Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany are the best-known fascist leaders. Their fascism was particularly directed against socialists, feminists, and Jewish Europeans.

stereotype, basically educated white Europeans. They were supported by well-known individuals and research institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation. Eugenacists managed to pass forced sterilization² laws and supported segregation. Hitler admired American eugenics laws. “I have studied with great interest,” he told a fellow Nazi, “the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny [children] would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock.”



Supporters of the eugenics movement advertise their cause on Wall Street, New York, c. 1915. One sign reads, “Would the prisons & asylums be filled if my kind had no children.” Public domain.

“Disease” as a Metaphor for Society

Another new branch of scientific thought concerned theories of contagion, or the spread of disease. Some theorists began to treat humans as if they were diseases, as well. For example, people were anxious about rapid urbanization and immigration. These anxieties often involved images of contagion and sickness. One of the first European immigration laws was Britain’s Aliens Act of 1905. It was directed mostly at Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe. One supporter of the law wrote in an editorial in the *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, “that the dirty, destitute, diseased, verminous and criminal foreigner who dumps himself on our soil and rates simultaneously, shall be forbidden to land.”

It is important to realize that by the interwar period these were all widely accepted ideas. Medical, military, economic, and social fears were all connected. Studying them now helps us understand how they played out in the everyday lives of people under fascist regimes.

² Forced sterilization is a medical procedure that prevents reproduction. Segregation divided people based upon ethnic, racial, or gender differences. Racial segregation laws were passed in the majority of states in America.

Political and Economic Context

In retrospect (review of the past), we can see the global rise of fascist movements as the result of many decades of social, intellectual, and political change. But we also need to look at the specific problems and historical context of the 1920s and 1930s. It was a dizzying, disorderly time. Change seemed hard to control and people grasped for possible answers.

World War I and National Mobilization

Europe was devastated after World War I. It was transformed in many ways. Political boundaries were redrawn. Multiple ethnic groups were promised national self-determination. Distinctions between civilians and combatants were no longer clear. States intruded on private lives in new ways. For fascists, the combination of nationalism, industrialism, and militarism together seemed like a grand promise to reform and reshape society.

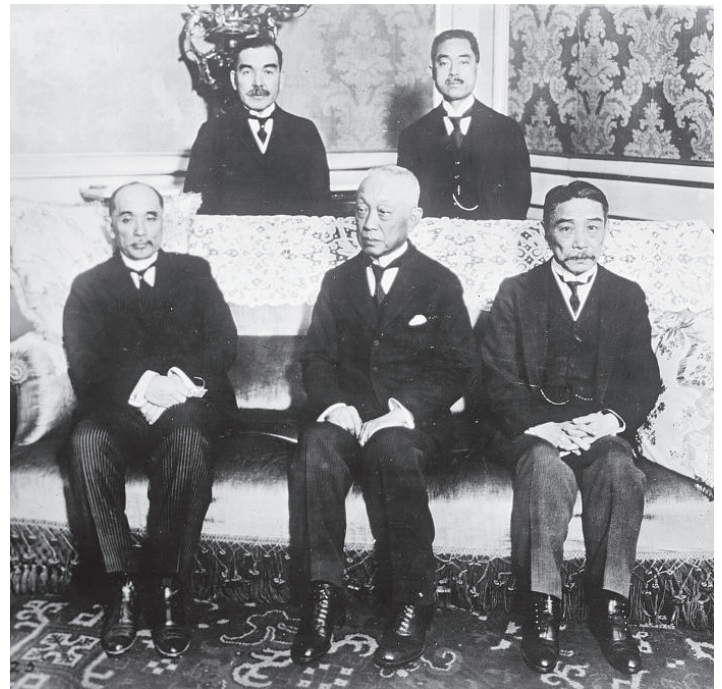
Several countries also became disillusioned by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I. Germans were asked to pay crippling reparations. This contributed to resentment towards Triple Entente powers. Also, the Italian representative to the Paris Peace Conference left with less territory than he hoped for. In response, Mussolini's National Fascist government launched multiple military assaults, from Corfu to Libya, in order to acquire more *Spazio Vitale* ("vital space") for Italian rule. Lastly, the Empire of Japan sent a large delegation to Versailles, and made only two demands: Japan wanted to include "racial equality" in the League of Nations covenant, and they wanted to rule the former German colonies in the Pacific. They failed to get the first, and received only half of the second. Spurred by anger and resentment, nationalism surged in Japan in the years after the conference.

From Socialism to Fascism

Many people think that fascism had its roots in socialism. After all, both were a rejection of nineteenth-century liberalism, which seemed to have failed in the wake of the First World War. But fascism was also very much a rejection of socialism with its focus on "class". Fascists preferred to think of people as divided into "nations" rather than "classes." Also, by 1917 socialism was inevitably associated with the communism of the new Soviet Union, which both Mussolini and Hitler feared and opposed.

Fascists were happy to call on the anger of workers when they wanted action. But they did so only when it was convenient to help them gain or take power. And unlike socialists, fascists readily made alliances with business owners, religious leaders, and authoritarian rulers. Here, too, however, they did so largely because it was convenient to their ability to rule. "They ask us [fascists] 'What is our program,'" said Mussolini. "Our program is simple. We want to govern Italy."

In 1922, Mussolini's "Blackshirt" Fascist paramilitary groups took control of parts of Northern Italy. They staged a "March on Rome" and murdered a Socialist



Japanese delegates at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919. By U.S. Library of Congress, public domain.

member of Parliament. After the murder, King Viktor Emmanuel agreed to make Mussolini Prime Minister rather than face more unrest. Hitler's Nazi Party also tried to seize power in Germany in 1923. They marched on Munich. They failed, however, and it seemed for a while that only Mussolini's Fascists would actually rule a country.



[Benito Mussolini](#) (second from left) with members of the “Blackshirts” during the March on Rome, 1922. Public domain.

The Great Depression

Then, the Great Depression hit. Historian Philip Morgan says that “the onset of the Great Depression...was the greatest stimulus yet to the diffusion and expansion of fascism outside Italy.” By the early 1930s, many nations in almost all parts of the world had fascist movements. In 1933 the Nazis in Germany finally assumed power. The leaders of these movements used this time of poverty to build nationalism. They blamed the depression on scapegoats and minorities. Their targets were usually “Bolsheviks”(communists) or Jewish “internationalists.” Where they could, they also set to work “cleansing” the nation of “unfit” groups of people. These included the Roma (sometimes known as Gypsies), gay people, and the disabled. People were suffering in these economically hard-hit countries. For them, fascism seemed to promise a well-organized, energetic, strong way to return to wealth while also blaming others for their problems.

The famous philosopher Hannah Arendt, who was herself a Jewish refugee, wrote after World War II that “totalitarian” systems like fascism and Stalinism thrive when traditional community bonds have fallen apart and everyone feels like a lonely individual. Certainly early twentieth-century people felt overwhelmed by the rapidity of change and the devastations of imperialism and war, and fascists criticized modern life for its loss of “organic” community bonds.

By the mid-1930s, all of these elements had come together in a perfect storm, which ended in the largest and deadliest global war people had ever experienced.

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Image credits

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