

Fascism in Italy

1. *The Birth of Fascism*

AT THE end of the Great War Italy's liberal political system was sickly; as a matter of fact, it had never been robust. After all, the country had been unified for only half a century, and the newly established state had been confronted by gargantuan problems—parliamentary inexperience, intense regional jealousies, hostility from the papacy, widespread illiteracy (especially in the south), economic underdevelopment, a high birth rate, and a tightly stratified social structure. Until 1912 the right to vote was restricted to a small proportion of the population; thereafter a democratic franchise was put into effect for all male literates over the age of twenty-one and for illiterates over the age of thirty if they had seen military service. In the years just before the war Catholics began to participate at last in national politics, now that the Church was worried by the growth of Marxism.

By the turn of the century an industrial revolution had begun to take place, particularly in the triangle bounded by Turin, Milan, and Genoa. This led to the emergence of two Italian societies living side by side in a state of uneasy tension. In the northern cities an industrialized form of capitalism was becoming superimposed on a commercial and agrarian society, while in the more feudalistic south the latter kind of society continued to predominate. Concomitantly, anarcho-syndicalist and socialist currents grew in strength, while landless peasants and urban masses seethed with discontent and erupted in violence from time to time.

After the death of Cavour in 1861 Italy's liberal politicians were mostly third-rate, with the exception of Giovanni Giolitti, who dominated the decade before World War I and instituted some significant reforms, though remaining cynical about electoral procedures. King Victor Emmanuel III, on the throne since the assassination of his father in 1900, was indecisive, uncommunicative, and physically unimpressive.

In retrospect it is easy to see that liberal Italy sealed its fate when it permitted itself to be dragged into the war in 1915 by a willful minority that included the King and some of his ministers, the superheated patriot-poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, and the renegade socialist Benito Mussolini. If Italy had stayed neutral, it is conceivable that in