

In the Inter-War Period what conditions led to the rise of Fascism?

During the inter-war period conditions in Europe made it a truly ideal breeding ground for Fascism. The combined factors of the huge economic depression, the growing threat of communism and the initiative of a few charismatic and ruthless men caused the Italian and German populations to become desperate and seek an alternative to democracy. This alternative was fascism, and the support of a totalitarian leader.

Perhaps the greatest cause of the growth of fascism in the inter-war period were the economic crises. The economies of many European countries were devastated by the first world war, both Italy and Germany. However Germany was undoubtedly in a worse situation. Obligated by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles to pay reparations totaling £6.6 billion Germany was in utter turmoil. To pay for these Germany began to borrow heavily. This then led to huge inflation. In January 1922 £1 was equal to 760 marks. By November inflation was so extreme that the price of a cup of coffee would double in the time it took to drink it. Similarly prices rose by 250% in Italy wages decreased and life savings were wiped out, leading to enormous dissatisfaction. In Germany support for the Weimar republic decreased as they failed to solve the problem. Briefly these issues were dealt with in the Stresemann period until the Wall Street Crash in 1929 when German loans were recalled with disastrous effect on both Italy and Germany. In Germany unemployment was at 1.3 million in 1929 and rose to 6 million by 1932. The economic crises led to the growth of fascism because of the dissatisfaction of the people. Many unemployed and even more barely able to afford to live were deeply unhappy and blamed their circumstances on the government. This pushed ordinary people to turn to radical political parties such as fascist or communist parties as traditional parties failed to tackle unprecedented economic challenges.

Another more minor cause which contributed to the economic crisis as well as the growth of fascism in their own right were the peace treaties, for example the Treaty of Versailles and the treaty of Frankfurt. According to the Treaty of London Italy was promised an area of land called the Dalmatia. However this was never delivered upon after the war. The Treaty of Versailles, signed 22nd July 1919 signed by a few German politicians accepted the entire blame for WW1 and agreed to pay these enormous reparations. They also lost the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine which were rich in raw materials. They lost a lot more land which became a new state, Poland, including what now became the Polish Corridor which intersected Germany. All of these factors contributed to the economic crisis in Germany. As well as this these countries felt humiliated by the Treaties. The general population blamed the government for the disappointing terms of the treaties and gave the fascists another foothold as they trumpeted the reconstruction of national pride. It gave the Weimar government little chance of survival as they were blamed for accepting the treaty and a platform for Hitler for gain support.

One of the big causes of the growth of support for fascism was the failure of democratic governments in Europe. As we've seen already these governments failed to solve prevalent issues in both Germany and Italy. In both countries democratic governments were constantly changing and weak. Coalition governments without common aims were elected and then failed to make any real changes. In comparison Mussolini and Hitler's apparent confidence and clear, key aims were very attractive to the population. In Germany in particular there had been a history of strong male leaders, Kaisers. People wanted to stability which this form of government offered. As the government failed to deal with issues the support for the Nazi party increased proportionately. The constantly changing coalition governments lacked strong stance which fascist groups offered an attractive alternative to. This helped them to come to power. However this largely relied upon the charismatic and talented leaders of the fascist and Nazi parties, Mussolini and Hitler.

The ability of the leaders and their knowledge in manipulating their respective populations using

propaganda are undoubtedly also causes for the growth of fascism. From the very beginning Mussolini presented himself as a strong, healthy, powerful leader whom people could rely on. A huge amount of Mussolini's efforts were put towards maintaining his image. He enjoyed signing treaties and pacts as it made him look powerful, regardless of what they actually said. In 1935 he signed the Stresa Front, which was an attempt to limit Hitler's ambitions. However in 1936 he then signed the Rome-Berlin Axis as it flattered him and strengthened Italy's image. Hitler likewise appealed to the Germans with the image which he presented of himself. While giving the middle and upper classes what they wanted with his staunchly anti-communist stance, he also created the idea that he had risen from the working class to his position. This meant that he had a very high support. He was after all a member of the German Worker's Party, having become its leader in 1923. Hitler was also a very skilled orator. He gave passionate speeches blaming certain groups, the Jews, the communists and the government for all of the countries problems. By publicly denouncing the groups he made fascism seem all the more attractive in comparison. A common characteristic of both Hitler and Mussolini's rise to power is also their initial legal election. Both realised that they would have to come into office legitimately. Hitler first attempted a sort of revolution in 1923, the Munich Putsch. With the support of Ludendorff, an ex-army general and war hero he planned to March on Berlin, emulating Mussolini. However this failed and Hitler was arrested. This is when he wrote his book, explaining his beliefs, Mein Kampf. Another common characteristic is the use of a violent police force. In Mussolini's case the squadristi. In Hitler's the SA. Both men used the intimidation of these forces to gain votes in elections. Both men were clearly shrewd politicians who realised what they must do to gain power. They both realised the value of propaganda and through their own skills instigated a fascist government in their own country. Without these specific leaders the parties would most likely have never come to power. However the role played by these politicians should not be exaggerated. Fascist parties would probably have come into existence and gained support without them, as a reaction to the conditions at the time.

Another huge reason for the rise of fascism was the fear of communism. Following the rise of communism in Russia in 1917, other countries began to fear that it would spread to them. For the

working class this was desirable. For the middle and upper classes it was something to fear. Communist parties were growing as another alternative to the unsuccessful democratic governments. In Germany in May 1928 they held 54 seats in the Reichstag. By July 1932 this had increased to 100. People then began to turn to fascism, seeing it as a more effective barrier to communism than democracy. They poured money into the party, impressed by its nationalism. In 1919 a communist group, the 'Spartacists' led by Rosa Luxemburg attempted to overthrow the government and set up their own. This increased fear in Germany and pushed the upper classes further towards fascism. Hitler's Blackshirts broke up a number of Communist strikes. Amidst the fear Hitler passed the Enabling Act. It was seen as a further safeguard against Communism, welcome in times of crisis. What it really did was allow Hitler to become all the more dominant. The German people had seen how communism had succeeded in Russia in times of crisis. Frightened and panicked they were willing to turn to a different extreme, not realising at the time what that would lead to. Fear of communism was a huge cause as it drove the people to support fascism and vote Hitler into power.

All of these are causes themselves but overall it can be seen that almost all of them are partially if not wholly caused by the first world war, so essentially this was the main cause of the growth of fascism in Europe in the inter-war period. First of all a large cause was the state of the economies in Italy and Germany after the war. The war clearly destroyed these as inflation rose dramatically. In Germany the harsh reparations were also due to the war. As well as this the Treaty of Versailles was a large cause, the end of war treaty. The idea of Dolchstuss, that the German public had been stabbed in the back by the Weimar politicians who signed it. This was just setting the democratic government up for failure. As well as this the German armies armistice in November 1918 led to the Kaiser abdicating. This was the end of Bismarck's form of government. A new one was needed but the system of proportional representation meant that the governments consisted of many different parties with different ideals. The Germans longed for a strong leader such as the Kaiser making Hitler seem attractive as opposed to Hindenberg or Von Papen. Hitler's nature was also born from the first world war as he had fought in it himself, receiving many medals of bravery. The Communist revolution in

Russia was also largely caused by WW1 as Tsar Nicholas II went to fight, leaving Rasputin essentially in charge, as well as being unsuccessful in the battlefield.

Here we can see that all of the causes, significantly or otherwise, can be linked back to WW1. All of them led to a build of discontent within the Italian and German populations and a desire for change. And the new route they chose was Fascism.