

# Fascist Regimes| A1 Sample answer

## **What were the common features of fascist regimes in Europe during the inter-war period, 1918-1939?**

From 1918 to 1939 a number of fascist regimes sprung up across Europe, arising mainly from the framework of old authoritarian regimes and the discontent of the masses. Each of these regimes, from Franco's in Spain, to Mussolini's in Italy to Hitler's in Germany, had certain common features including a dependence on propaganda, secret police, a strong centralised economy and the restriction of civil liberties.

Propaganda was central to the success of both Hitler's and Mussolini's regimes. In Italy, a cult of personality was created around Mussolini; he was referred to as 'Il Duce' and was often pictured with his pet lioness Italia. He was held up as a model worker, statesman, sportsman and father of the nation. Slogans were developed such as 'Mussolini is always right'. The state also assumed control of the media, to spread the propaganda. For example, the manufacture of radios was encouraged and from 1926 to 1939 the number of radios in the country grew from 27,000 to 1 million. This allowed the whole country to listen to Mussolini's stirring speeches.

In Germany, as in Italy, propaganda was used to create a sense of national unity and loyalty to the leader. The Nuremberg rallies, for example, were an effective way of spreading the 'National Socialist' message. Hitler appointed the very competent Josef Goebbels as 'Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment'. He took great control of the media and held a

daily press conference instructing news outlets on how they should 'present' certain news items. He also recognised the potential of new media such as radio and film. The acclaimed film director Leni Riefenstahl was commissioned to produce a number of propaganda films such as 'Olympia', which told the story of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and 'The Triumph of the Will', which brought the mass appeal of the Nuremberg Rallies to the silver screen. A cult of personality was also developed around Hitler his birthday was celebrated as a national holiday and simple slogans like 'Ein reich, ein volk, ein führer' inextricably linked German national identity with the leader. Propaganda and censorship were ubiquitous features of fascist regimes.

Indoctrination was also used by fascist regimes, as an effective way of creating an entire generation of loyal foot soldiers. In Italy it became compulsory for children to join the Balilla, which taught boys to be soldiers and educated children on the glories of the Roman Empire. In Germany boys were required to join Hitler Jugend and girls were required to join the League of German Maidens. Boys were trained to be disciplined soldiers and girls learned the importance of "Kinder, Kurche, Kirche" (children, church, kitchen). Indoctrination was just another way of seizing complete control over the population.

All fascist regimes also used terror to some extent, as a way of dealing with 'undesirables' and creating a superficially harmonious society. For example, In Germany the Gestapo, led by Reynard Heydrich dealt with suspected state enemies. Concentration camps such as Dachau were also set up to remove insidious elements (such as tramps, homosexuals and gypsies) from the population and between 1933 and 1939 16,000 people were sentenced to imprisonment in these camps. Mussolini on the other hand preferred non-lethal methods of crushing revolt. His secret police, OVRA identified state enemies and potential threats, over

4000 of whom were exiled from Italy. He also set up special courts to deal with his political enemies.

Another feature of fascist regimes was the noticeable lack of any political opposition. In Italy, Mussolini used the Acerbo law to consolidate his power and then banned all other political parties and trade unions. By 1927, Mussolini had the power to rule by decree and a fascist Grand Council had to first vet any candidates seeking elected office. In Germany, Hitler quickly combined the office of Chancellor and President and used to 'enabling act' allow him to rule by decree. Most of his political opponents were killed during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 and he replaced trade unions with the state run 'German Labour Front'. He also pursued a policy of Gleichshaltung or 'Coordination' whereby the state assemblies were abolished and all power was centralised in the federal 'Reichstag', which he kept as a puppet parliament.

Fascist regimes were also, by their very nature, ultra-nationalistic. Nationalism was used as an emotive tool, to stir the masses making them more pliable. For example, in Mussolini's Italy, he used the acquisition of Fiume, a city claimed by Italy, to give him credibility. Later he stressed the need to expand and conquer, and promised he would make Italy 'great, feared and respected'. This was visible in the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1936 and his expansionist ambitions in WW2. He wanted to create a Mediterranean empire to rival Rome. Similarly, Hitler used excessive jingoism to appeal to the masses. He promised to throw off the humiliating shackles of The Treaty of Versailles and to reclaim German honour. He then launched an aggressive policy of expansion which manifested itself in the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the occupation of the Sudetenland in 1938 and the Anschluss with Austria in the same year. The zealous brand of nationalism was common to all fascist regimes.

Another recurring feature was the economic policy of Autarky (self-sufficiency). In a sense this was closely linked to the spirit of nationalism that permeated fascist countries. In Italy, this came in the form of a series of 'battles' designed to increase production. E.g. 'The Battle for Wheat' and 'the battle for land reclamation' (the draining of the Pontine Marshes). In Germany, synthetic materials were developed and many materials were recycled and reused. But in the end neither of these two regimes achieved complete self-sufficiency because both still relied heavily on imports of oil and rubber.

While there were substantial differences between fascist regimes across Europe, there were also many common threads. These included strict censorship laws, huge propaganda machines, secret police organisations, political oppression and extreme nationalism.