



# To what extent has fascism been completely eradicated from society?

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## Abstract

There has been much political discussion regarding the lack of democracy within Europe, and how dictatorship and fascism are becoming ever more prevalent in society, despite it being supposedly “eradicated” after the Second World War. Henceforth, this paper will evaluate the origins of fascism and the influence of Benito Mussolini. It will then go on to explore the evolution of fascism and how it transformed into the modern ideology the 21st century has adopted i.e., neo-fascism and how it spread beyond Italy to several other states. The latter half of the paper will illustrate how fascism never disappeared completely from society, but rather subtly weaved its way into many European governments, such as in France and even the United States, to prove that pure democracy and freedom are merely a misconception.

## Introduction

What is fascism? The Oxford Dictionary (2002) defines the concept as an “authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization,” yet its basic characteristics are left ambiguous. Fascism is individualistic; although principally it entails a dictatorial style of government, glorification of one’s own nation, opposition to liberalism, and belief in elitism, there are certain characteristics that remain specialized to its nation.

This complex political ideology notoriously originated from Benito Mussolini’s orchestration of the National Fascist Party in Italy from 1922 to 1943. Following a period of intense political fluctuation, and economic turmoil caused by the First World War, Italy’s yearning for stability provoked Mussolini to assume the role of the charismatic, strong leader, as he named himself the “man of the people” (History Matters, 2019). The beginning seemed promising; fascism appeared to embody fortitude and endless possibilities of prosperity for the nation hence alluring support. Yet Mussolini, once in power, annihilated democracy and established an exhaustive

dictatorship, which assembled a plethora of complications for Italy. The end of the Second World War served to extinguish Mussolini and the Fascist Party in Italy, along with its monarchy; the principle of democracy was reinstated within the country (Blakemore, 2022).

From a historical perspective, the regime diminished and was entirely eradicated harmoniously with the demise of the Fascist Political Party. However, significantly, the principle of fascism then evolved after the Second World War into *neofascism*. The fundamentals still apply, *neofascism* encompasses beliefs of racial supremacy, populism, ultra-nationalism, authoritarianism, and opposition to liberal democracy. Neofascists tend to be hostile towards immigration. They label themselves to be democratic to avoid major controversy and to appeal towards a world disillusioned with the belief in inequality and injustice. This philosophy has embedded itself in modern-day governments - the National Front in France, spearheaded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, and the Liberal Democrat Party in Russia, led by Putin. There are even accusations towards Donald Trump alleging that his policies circulate around the enforcement of *neofascism* within America.

Henceforth, there are several causes for speculation that remain: is it possible to completely eliminate fascism from our society? In a world in which the majority of government leaders are endlessly attempting to restore peace, democracy, and equality, could fascism diminish? Or has civilisation engineered itself to permanently have qualities of *neofascism* weaved into certain governments? On the basis of the aforementioned, this research question for this paper is **“To what extent has fascism been completely eradicated from society?”**

This paper aims to explore the different aspects of fascism, both in the present and in the past and prove that fascism has not been completely extinguished from society.

### **The origins of fascism**

Fascism first bloomed as a political concept in Italy for a plethora of reasons - public discontent regarding the detrimental political turmoil generated by the First World War and economic despair which called for a committed leader - nevertheless, it is also extremely plausible that fascism was merely a response to the overwhelmingly powerful revolt against the Italian Socialist Party.

After the wars of Italian unification and prior to the First World War, Italy began attempting to pursue international allies. Led by King Victor Emmanuel III and spearheaded by the Liberal Prime Minister Giovanni Jolide, Italy signed the Triple Alliance in 1882, which was a military pact between Austria-Hungary, Germany and Italy, as protection against the French, yet is it significant to note that Italy was not entirely keen on developing relations with Austria-Hungary. In an attempt to recuperate its Empire, Italy concentrated on acquiring land. Whilst they were successful in attaining Libya, their ambitions to acquire Northern lands were

failing. Towards the climax of the First World War breaking out, the Triple Alliance promised these lands to be given to Italy in return for their support; nevertheless, this promise was unfulfilled. Therefore, due to closer, improved relations with Britain as Italy asked for financial support, on April 26th 1915 Italy signed the Secret Pact of London - a treaty which involved Italy gaining the allegiance of Britain and France, and obtaining Tirol and the Balkans. Consequently, on May 3rd 1915, Italy revoked its position in the Triple Alliance and declared war on Austria-Hungary on May 23rd at midnight (The Armchair Historian, 2018).

Despite the Italians being victorious in the First World War, they were coerced to endure a great deal of sacrifices and pernicious repercussions; simultaneously, in the years leading up to the war, and during, Italy experienced political upheaval and saw the rise of Mussolini and the fascist regime. Waves of resentment towards the government began to arise in the early 20th century after conservative leader, Antonio Salandra, assumed control over Italy in 1914; he chose to adopt a position of neutrality in WW1. Multiple nationalist associations, such as the group formed by Enrico Corradini in 1910, were established, as well as the Socialist Party, which included Mussolini. This augmented and eventually led to “Red Week” (7 June 1914 to 14 June 1914), in which there were demonstrations. Eventually, the government was pushed into embracing a war policy. The new Prime Minister, Paolo Boselli, took over the Salandra government; yet this did not last long. He orchestrated the military disaster of Caporetto, in which 11,000 Italian soldiers were dead, and a further 350,000 Italian soldiers deserted or missing. Henceforth, and rather inevitably, Boselli resigned in October 1917, after one year in power, and the Salandra government was abolished. As the war progressed, so did the myriad of military defeats, until eventually, the Italians won the Battle of Vittorio Veneto on the 4th of October 1918 (Fred Frommer, 2022).

The detrimental consequences the First World War imposed on Italy catalysed political reform, particularly regarding both the Socialist and Fascist parties. Although Benito Mussolini originally enrolled in the Socialist Party, he was expelled in 1914 due to his encouragement of Italy’s entrance into the war. Nevertheless, rather than discouraging Mussolini, his desire to reform Italy was further magnified. Michael R. Ebner, an associate professor of history at the Maxwell School at Syracuse University, and author of *Ordinary Violence in Mussolini’s Italy* argues that “with the outbreak of World War I, he came to see nationalism and militarism as the keys to revolutionary upheaval. He, therefore, left behind Marxist economic determinism and pacifism.” Hence Mussolini devised his own initiatives to gain ground - he founded the newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia* (the people of Italy) (Fred Frommer, 2022). During Mussolini’s campaign to rally support, the Socialist Party also attempted to gain true precedence; whilst they did manage to become the largest party in the newly elected coalition government in November 1919 with 156 seats, there was a multitude of faults and disadvantages that accompanied and therefore limited their potential to fulfil their aspirations of controlling Italy. For example, the Socialists could never attain the support of the Catholics. Regardless of the unmistakable tensions between the associations of Catholicism and “whiteness”, and Socialism and “redness”, the ideological differences, such as contrasting beliefs related to means of violence, alienated the Socialists from the Catholics. The Socialist Party

too disregarded the workers, peasants and middle classes by concentrating their reforms on overthrowing the capitalist regime Italy had adopted, thus diminishing their overall national support (Giuseppe Di Palma and Russel L. King, 2019).

Simultaneously, as the end of the Socialist Party began to loom, Mussolini's movement was undergoing radical change, and support was plummeting. Mussolini focused on maintaining a strong relationship with the Catholic Church, and due to his nationalist ideologies matched with his desire to expand territory to authorize Italy as a global power, Mussolini was able to obtain widespread support. He believed in an equal society; he strived to extinguish the class divide in Italy. In May 1921, after the Fascists began to establish themselves as a major political force, accompanied by the backing of the middle class, students, workers, landowners and business owners, in the elections, for the first time, 35 fascists were enlisted in a government body of 275 people. Hence, in November, Mussolini formalized his regime by constructing the National Fascist Party, named after *fascio* - the bundles of rods used in Ancient Rome to symbolize strength through unity. This then led to Mussolini being elected to the Chamber of Deputies, and Fascist squads were incorporated into the Voluntary Militia for National Security (Fred Frommer, 2022).

The pivotal moment that truly consolidated Mussolini's authority in Italy was on the 31st of October 1922, when he was finally appointed Prime Minister, after the fascists defeated the Socialists' anti-Fascist protest strike and due to the tens of thousands who marched in Rome, demanding this be enforced. Once in power, Mussolini revealed his ruthless nature as on 10 June 1924, Giacomo Matteotti, the leader of the Socialist Party, disappeared' - on January 3rd 1925, Mussolini took responsibility for the assassination. He famously appeared before the Chamber and stated that he "personally assumed the whole political, moral and historical responsibility for what has occurred" and that he declared "that if the Fascists are an association of malefactors, then (he) is head of that association of malefactors." Attendees began to applaud, praising him by exclaiming "Vivo Mussolini! Vivo Fascismo!" (Fred Frommer, 2022). The Times named this "the greatest triumph of Mussolini's whole political career." Henceforth, Mussolini catapulted, with his newfound omnipotent position, Italy into the fascist regime (The Times, 2022).

Mussolini began by enforcing extreme censorship - he banned elections and legalized the death penalty as punishment for opposing his regime. In 1927, Mussolini created the "Organization for the Vigilant Repression of Anti-Fascism (OVRA)" - an organization of spies, specifically tasked with extinguishing any forms of rebellion. The Head of the Secret Police, Arturo Bocchini, wired citizens' phones in order to ensure no suspicious conversations were occurring. In 1929, Mussolini invoked the High Commission from the Press which 'actively intervened' with political publications to control the public perception that the fascist regime was supreme (Giuseppe Di Palma and King, 2019). The rail system was improved, which benefited the economy as it

improved trading and decreased unemployment; in fact, the Fascist party boasted more than one million seekers and workers (Weird History, 2021).

Towards the beginning of the 1930s, Mussolini's ideologies, ambitions for Italy, and policies began to evolve similarly to Hitler's regime in Germany. Whilst in Italy, Mussolini enforced the Fascist Youth Organization, a policy that trained young men with military skills, and to be avid believers of his regime, Hitler adopted the Nazi Youth Movement, which focused on instructing young men on the same policies. Both Hitler and Mussolini held traditionalist socialist views - they heavily endorsed women remaining at home, and Italy imposed heavy taxes on single men and tax breaks for families to encourage an increased birth rate. If women did not comply, they were sent to an asylum. Men were engineered to fight in the military, with the responsibility of their families. Italy had broadcasted its fascist regime across the country; Mussolini decorated the Palazzo with a sea of pictures of his face. He also ordained government buildings across the country with "Me Ne Frego" (I don't care), which soon became the fascist slogan. Both Italy and Germany adopted anti-Semitic policies; in 1938, Italian Jews could no longer own land, hold public office, or vote - their rights were completely stripped. In 1939, all books had been burned by Jewish authors. Germany followed the same principle and began sending German Jews to concentration camps (Weird History, 2022).

Evidently, Germany and Italy, though they named their regimes differently (Nazism and Fascism) began to become indistinguishable regarding their country's aspirations and the radical changes they pursued, particularly in relation to expanding their territory. Therefore, in the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War, Italy decided to send troops to support Germany and the nationalist uprising. Germany and Italy cemented their relationship in the signing of the 1938 Rome-Berlin Axis, and later the Pact of Steel in May 1939 which signified the allegiance of both countries. During this period, internationally, tensions were high. Italy was ruthless in obtaining land - in October 1935, they invaded Ethiopia and in April 1939, they conquered Albania (Lacey, Greg and Keith Shephard, John Murray, 2003). Though Britain, France and the League of Nations repeatedly condemned Hitler's expansionist policies and invasion of other countries, Germany ignored these threats and as a result, a Second World War was looming. On September 1st 1939, Hitler catalysed the war by invading Poland, however, Mussolini insisted on remaining neutral, despite the various pacts and good relations (QlickLearn, 2018).

The Second World War not only exposed the inadequacies within Italy and its government, but it also served to annihilate fascism, globally. The most severe complications for Italy first erupted in October 1940, in which their attempt to attack Greece failed, which forced Germany to interfere to preserve Italy's survival. In October 1942, the battle of El-Alamein occurred, which impelled Italy to surrender its North African colonies. At this point, Mussolini's stubborn attitude, with regard to his obsessional desire to fight and succeed, led to a plethora of issues nationally. From a military perspective, Italy lacked the infrastructure, due to the Allies' bombing, to produce enough weapons and raw materials were scarce. Food shortages grew increasingly normalized in

society. Politically, there was chaos - the communists capitalized on Mussolini's failures to create stability, whilst the Roman Catholics formed the Christian Democratic Party in 1943. Due to Mussolini being preoccupied with international affairs, national dissatisfaction grew and calls for change were widespread. After the Allies invaded Sicily in July 1943, on July 24th the Fascist grand council arranged for the King to reinstate his constitutional powers to dismiss Mussolini and end Italy's deprivation of steadiness and security (Giuseppe Di Palma and King, 2019).

On July 25th 1943, Mussolini was replaced with Marshall Pietro Badoglio, however, Italian politics was still unresolved. In September 1943, partisan Resistance groups emerged, and the Communist party, reigned their skills in 'underground organization' and maximized Yugoslav support, to gain ground and hence led the 'largest group of partisans (at least 50,000 by summer 1944)'. The new Party of Action were also instrumental in bringing about radical change - they comprised one-fourth of all partisan units. Meanwhile, Italy was still facing various attacks, with Florence being obtained by the Allies, as well as Northern Italy in April 1945. Amidst this political havoc, Mussolini 'fled to Milan' as he attempted to avoid a life sentence in prison or the death penalty. "disguised as a German soldier, he attempted to cross the border to Switzerland." However, he was found by Communist partisans, and on the 28th of April 1945, he, and several other avid Fascists were executed in front of crowds at a service station. Accompanying his demise, the fascist regime died too. Mussolini's policies and ideologies were far too extreme; his omnipotent dedication to 'world domination' far superseded his focus on the civilians living in his own country. Additionally, the First and Second World Wars proved to world leaders that citizens craved peace, stability and security far more than gaining international territory; from food shortages, and unfathomable living conditions, it was mandatory for Italy to adopt a leader who comes from a place of understanding and willingness to better the welfare of the state's people, which encompasses everything Mussolini was deficient in (Giuseppe Di Palma and King, 2019).

Eventually, political stability arrived in Italy, but after an abundance of adaptations to satisfy the new democratic system the people desired. In May 1946, Victor Emmanuel III abdicated; after an election result that revealed 54% were dismissive of continuing the monarchy in Italy, consequently, the royal family left. A Constituent Assembly was elected by "universal suffrage - including women for the first time" to create a constitution to ensure that fundamental human rights were protected for all Italians. After three years of collaboration between Liberals, Socialists, Communists, and Christian Democrats, the constitution was established in 1947 and was enforced on January 1st 1948 (Jones-Nerzic, 2021)

### **Neo-Fascism - resurgent fascism**

Neo-Fascism first emerged after the Second World War, and after the collapse of Mussolini's government. Although its main principles are similar to fascism seen previously - the fundamental belief in ultra-nationalism,

a strong focus on increased militarism, and ultimate illiberalism in society - both political ideologies vary on multiple degrees. Neo-Fascism is not primarily focused on “lebensraum” (living space); it concentrates on pursuing anti-immigration policies and enforcing economic controls to ensure financial superiority in the world market, as well as anti-Semitism. Overall, this political ideology is driven by racial motivations and establishing a prosperous and competitive country (Britannica, 2023).

After the Second World War, throughout the world, countries were still battling both financial and social impacts; however, despite the defeat of fascism, political upheavals and right-wing nationalist organizations began to pose threats once again. In Italy, the Socialist Movement, which was later renamed the National Alliance, was founded in 1946. They used violent means to attract attention, such as invading schools and attacking leftists and were heavily influenced by the actions of Mussolini. Although there have been numerous attempts to diminish the right-wing power within Italy, as stated in the Declaration of Fini by an elected party secretary in 1987, “fascism was a part of the history of Italy and the expression of permanent values.” From a political perspective, Italy, due to Mussolini’s influential long-lasting legacy, has neo-fascism and beliefs of right-wing nationalism permanently weaved into its systems (Soucy, 2022).

The rest of Europe was also faced with neo-fascist organizations, which were proving to be a threat to the government. For example, Germany, infamously dictated by Hitler and his extremist, Nazi regime, saw the rise of the Socialist Reich Party, led by Otto Ernst Remer, a former army general who arranged a coup against Hitler in 1944, and Frtisz Dorls, however, the party had little influence and was banned in 1952. Although, in 1992 - 1993, Neo-Nazi Youth gangs began emerging who spearheaded campaigns against immigration. In Austria, the Freedom Party of Austria was established in 1956 and was led by Haider, who respected the Nazi regime. In 1999, the Party won 42% of the electorate’s vote, yet their power was diminished by mass demonstrations against implementing them into government. Hence, they formed a government with the Conservative Austrian People’s Party (Soucy, 2022).

Neo-fascism also began appearing in parts of Latin America and the Middle East too. In Argentina, Juan Peron was elected president in 1946; he infamously regarded Mussolini as the “greatest man of our century” and stated that “he committed certain disastrous errors. (He) who has the advantage of his precedent before (him), shall follow in his footsteps but also avoid his errors.” Evidently, Peron’s public appraisal of Mussolini established him as a neo-fascist leader. He obtained the support of the working class by introducing higher wages and greater benefits; he also enticed businessmen and the Catholic Church, which worked massively in his favour. His presidency ended in 1955, however in 1973, he returned by winning a special election - his second wife, Isabel Peron became vice president. However, his term was largely unsuccessful. The economy collapsed as inflation rates tripled in 1975, and there was public dissatisfaction. Eventually, a military coup overthrew Peron in March 1976. Meanwhile, in South Africa, the South African Gentile Nationalist Socialist Movements were established

in 1945, although they were ineffective in creating mass movements. The Middle East saw a much greater change. In Libya, Muammar al Qaddafi overthrew the Libyan King in 1969 in a military coup; he encouraged true democracy, and state ownership, and endorsed militarism (attributed greatly to his military background). However, his regime quickly escalated to an authoritarian government. He eradicated elections and introduced public executions, as well as heavy censorship, which motivated multiple attempted coups (Soucy, 2022).

### **Fascism today**

There are some areas where neo-fascism is prevalent in governments today. The USA adopted certain characteristics of neo-fascism under Donald Trump; his nationalistic principles were embodied in his main slogan - "Make America Great Again," which is strikingly similar to the traditional fascist regime. In September 2020, Joe Biden told MSNBC that Trump is "sort of like (Joseph) Goebbels;" "You say the lie long enough, keep repeating it, repeating it, repeating it, it becomes common knowledge." In this case, Biden is comparing Trump to the infamous head of Nazi Germany's propaganda machine. Robert Paxton, a leading authority on fascism stated that "make the country great again," "sounds exactly like the fascist movements... that is a fascist stroke." Evidently, Trump's aspirations for the USA seem concerningly similar to those of the Fascist regime. His encouragement for some of his violent supporters also illustrates this; he has sent federal forces where protests were suppressed, and his tweets in support of the attack on the Capitol building on the 6th of January 2021, due to supporters condemning Trump's loss of the elections, demonstrates his authoritarian style of government. Although, it is important to acknowledge not all of Trump's ambitions are linked to fascism. He hasn't proposed nor obsessed over indoctrinating children, and his military policies campaign for troops to come home, as opposed to fighting. However, the general consensus is that Trump's campaign is a threat to democracy and possesses distressing similarities to the traditional values of fascism (Leslie Gornstein, 2020).

France is also notorious for its resemblance to the neo-fascist regime, particularly under Le Pen. Between the elections of 2017 and 2022, the results gave an insight into the social antagonisms which illustrated a huge polarization between the urban and suburban areas - the suburban where radical left voters reside, and the rural holding fascist voters. However, Le Pen, leader of the National Rally, managed to obtain votes which were more geographically spread, but Mélenchon's Union Populaire Movement saw an impressive result in the main cities. Prior to 2017, France was under Le Pen's rule, but in 2017, 100,000 people marched for constitutional change, which Mélenchon supported. Mélenchon condemned islamophobia and anti-racist activities and began the larger reconciliation between the Muslims and non-white demographics with the left and the working class. This is contrary to Le Pen's campaign which targeted degrading Muslims in public life, encouraging racism and xenophobia, and attacking the LGBTQ+ community. Whilst there are organizations such as the NPA that are active in challenging the regime, there is a significant absence of a wider movement to completely eradicate this ideology from society. In 2022, Mélenchon was defeated; it was evident that there was a connection between this



and the “rising tide of fascism” (Selma Oumari, 2022).

Whilst Russia’s government, under the power of Putin, has been regarded as extremist, experts would argue that its link to the fascist regime is weak. The most significant act of Putin occurred on the 24th of February 2022 when he launched a massive military invasion of Ukraine. Whilst this alludes to Putin’s desire to expand Russia’s territory and reintroduce the USSR’s empire, from a holistic perspective, his ideologies differ from the fascism seen post World War 2. Stanley Payne, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin and author of multiple books on European fascism, argued that Putin’s Russia “is not equivalent to the fascist regimes of World War II, but it forms the nearest analogue to fascism found in a major country since that time.” Putin manipulates the proto-democratic system to be more authoritarian, however, he does not reject the principles of most 21st-century governments. It is also important to acknowledge that Putin’s regime, as explained by Payne, is “a centralized, right-wing, authoritarian dictatorship” which is “much more reactionary than revolutionary.” Russia’s “weak economic and demographic base” is “more a declining than a rising power.” Russia’s economy is currently shrinking; as a result of the numerous sanctions from trading countries due to the invasion of Ukraine, its financial power is slowly diminishing. Along with this, Payne notes that “Putin did not come up as a charismatic leader. He came up as an apparatchik” and he is a “product of the Russian state, which has tried to turn him into a more charismatic figure,” yet he lacks “dynamic and charismatic movement in the fascist style.” Mussolini and Hitler, both advocates for similar goals as Russia, were extremely charismatic, strong leaders, which benefitted them significantly and was instrumental in them gaining support. Yet, Putin is deficient and his personality is one of his main weaknesses. Thus, whilst Russia may be depicted as a spitting image of the fascist regime, it would be unfair to conclude this. There are certainly similarities, however, Putin has entered into another form of extremism, which is growing evermore dissimilar to the traditional fascist regime (Robert Coalson, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

The current perception, particularly in the western world, is that democracy is continuing to proliferate in the 21st century as our governments are implementing more liberal ideologies - however, this is a proven misconception. Whilst some authorities are attempting to extinguish their country’s past extremist political policies and learn from failed fascist movements, this has evidently not been successful. Mussolini’s fascist regime has diminished, but simultaneously evolved into a more modern movement named “neofascism” - one which is more widely accepted in this decade for its less militaristic approach, stronger emphasis against immigration and focus on generating financial superiority for its country. This has been weaved into certain countries such as Le Pen’s French government and the USA under Donald Trump’s control.

Another misconception regarding fascism and its origins is that it purely stemmed from Mussolini in Italy as a result of his omnipotent desire for control and authority; however, this is a rather simplistic conclusion. Fascism was adopted as a result of the country's dissatisfaction towards the Italian government's weak position in the Second World War, as well as fear of the socialist party from taking over; hence, the fascist regime, particularly in Italy, did not have substantial enough power to launch itself into world domination as it was principally a response to circumstances in Italy, and was not in itself, its own political ideology. However, as governments learn from the mistakes of the past, authorities implemented neo-fascism - a political movement with a much more credible basis as they are able to enforce similar ideologies of fascism, yet hide behind the perception that they are a democratic system to satisfy the public.

Therefore, whilst Mussolini's party in Italy was eradicated and the traditional fascist establishment had disappeared after the Second World War, some areas of 21st-century governments have still incorporated this into society. Henceforth and evidently, fascism has not been completely eradicated from society, but rather has been adapted to suit more modern views.

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