Life in Fascist Italy

Life in Mussolini’s Italy was little different from other dictatorships which existed between 1918 and 1939.Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Russia were to use (and expand) on developments that had been in existence in Fascist Italy since the 1920’s. People had little control over their personal life and the state controlled as much of you as they could. Those who opposed the state were suitably punished.

Dealing with opposition

All Italians were expected to obey Mussolini and his Fascist Party. Authority was enforced by the use of the Blackshirts – the nickname for the Fasci di Combattimenti. Those men in this unit were usually ex-soldiers and it was their job to bring into line those who opposed Mussolini. It was the Blackshirts who murdered the socialist Matteotti – an outspoken critic of Mussolini. The motto of the Blackshirts was “Me ne frego” (I do not give a damn”)

Though they were probably less feared than Hitler’s SS, the Blackshirts did maintain an iron rule in Italy. One favoured way of making people conform was to tie a ‘troublemaker’ to a tree, force a pint or two of castor oil down the victim’s throat and force him to eat a live toad/frog etc. This punishment was enough to ensure people kept their thoughts to themselves. The murderous tactics used by the Gestapo and SS in Germany were rarely used in Italy.

When Mussolini said:

“Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary.”

the message was clear – those who wanted to rock the boat would be suitably dealt with.

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Mussolini in uniform

Italy did have a secret police under Mussolini. It was called the OVRA. It was formed in 1927 and was lead by Arturo Bocchini. The death penalty was restored under Mussolini for serious offences. Yet up to 1940 only ten people had been sentenced to death. Only 4000 people were arrested by the OVRA and sent to prison. This figure was massively overshadowed by the actions of the Gestapo and SS in Nazi Germany.

Prisons were set up on remote Mediterranean islands such as Ponza and Lipari. Condition for those sentenced to the prisons here were crude and many anti-Fascists simply left Italy for their own safety.

Education in Fascist Italy

Adults who opposed Mussolini were dealt with harshly. However, the children were the Fascists of the future and Mussolini took a keen interest in the state’s education system and the youth organisations that existed in Italy. Hitler used the same approach in Nazi Germany.

Mussolini wanted a nation of warriors. Boys were expected to grow into fierce soldiers who would fight with glory for Italy while girls were expected to be good mothers who would provide Italy with a population that a great power was expected to have.

Children were taught at school, that the great days of modern Italy started in 1922 with the March on Rome. Children were taught that Mussolini was the only man who could lead Italy back to greatness. Children were taught to call him “Il Duce” and boys were encouraged to attend after school youth movements. Three existed.

Organisation

Age Group

Uniform

Sons of the She Wolf

4 to 8

Black shirt

Balilla

8 to 14 Black shirt, black cap, shorts, grey socks

Avanguardista

14 to 18

Same as Balilla except knickerbockers instead of shorts.

Boys were taught that fighting for them was a natural extension of the normal male lifestyle. One of the more famous Fascist slogans was “War is to the male what childbearing is to the female.” Girls were taught that giving birth was natural – while for boys, fighting was the same – natural.

Children were taught to obey those in charge. This was not an unusual move in a dictatorship. Once the OVRA had dealt with those adults who challenged the authority of the state, all future adults of Fascist Italy would be model civilians and not a challenge to those in charge.

Boys took part in semi-military exercises while members of the Balilla. They marched and used imitation guns. Mussolini had once said “I am preparing the young to a fight for life, but also for the nation.”

Members of the Balilla had to remember the following:

“I believe in Rome, the Eternal, the mother of my country……I believe in the genius of Mussolini…and in the resurrection of the Empire.”

The glory of the old Roman Empire always lurked in the background of much of what children did. A child in a youth movements was a “legionary” while an adult officer was a “centurion” – a throw back to the days of when the Ancient Roman army dominated much of western Europe.

Women in Fascist Italy

As in Nazi Germany, women were seen as having a specific role in Fascist Italy. The task of young girls was to get married and have children – lots of them. In 1927, Mussolini launched his Battle for Births.

Mussolini believed that his Italy had a smaller population than it should have. How could it possibly be a power to reckon with, without a substantial population and a substantial army? Women were encouraged to have children and the more children brought better tax privileges – an idea Hitler was to build on. Large families got better tax benefits but bachelors were hit by high taxation.

Families were given a target of 5 children. Mothers who produced more were warmly received by the Fascist government. In 1933, Mussolini met 93 mothers at the Palazzo Venezia who had produced over 1300 children – an average of 13 each!

Mussolini wanted Italy to have a population of 60 million by 1950. In 1920, it stood at 37 million so his target was a tall order. However, the Battle for Births was a failure. Though the population grew as people were living longer due to better medical care, the birth rate actually went down between 1927 and 1934.