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The Rise of Fascism and Communism

On June 28, 1914, the shot heard around the world marked Franz Ferdinand's death and the start of World War I, one of the greatest, most devastating wars in history up to that point. For the first time, war was waged on a global scale, leading to casualties and destruction on a scale never seen before. After the war, even some of the allied forces, the victors, faced many challenges as they struggled to completely recover from the war, leaving the defeated nations in an even worse state. Furthermore, largely as a result of how the war was dealt with by the victors, many nations were left completely devastated and in dire need of assistance, assistance they ended up almost entirely needing to create for themselves. In an attempt to more efficiently recover from the devastation and aftermath of the Great War, many European countries turned to new political ideologies that would shape the future of the nation for decades to come, most prominently in Russia, Italy, and Germany.

Russia's infamous turn to communism came not after the war, but during it. At the beginning of the war, Russia, an allied power, faced the brunt force of the Axis powers, which eventually cut deep into Russian territory. This quickly resulted in the near depletion of Russia's resources as the war effort cost the nation many soldiers and plenty of necessities such as food and raw materials. As Russia continued to fail time and time again in their endeavors to defeat the Axis powers, and as their country became ravaged by the constant fighting, the Russian public lost more and more competence in their government and began to look towards new leadership. Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Party quickly capitalized on this and introduced their alternative ideology in which everyone was promised equality of economic status and

prosperity, a form of government known simply as socialism. In a time of war and great starvation, Lenin promised the Russian public “Peace, Land, and Bread,” something the current government could not manage. As the war raged on, socialism and the Bolshevik party gained popularity and by 1917, Russia was ready for revolution. The revolutions of 1917 resulted in the Bolshevik Party taking control of the government with Lenin as the supreme leader of the new Soviet Union. Socialism, later known as communism, quickly swept throughout the nation and later to surrounding nations. Following Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin came to power through a vicious power struggle and began his tyrannous dictatorship soon after. Under the guise of reaching the perfect communist state, Stalin committed numerous atrocities, such as the “Holodomor” in Ukraine where millions of Ukrainians were starved to death by the Soviet government, and took away many freedoms, such as freedom of press and religion. Despite all of this, countless Russians/Soviets had energetically supported the transition to socialism only years prior.

Italy also saw a tremendous change in ideology as a result of the Great War. During the war, despite being in the “Triple Alliance” with Germany and Austro-Hungary, remained neutral in the war, seeing it as a pointless conflict. Later, however, Italy joined the allied forces after making a deal (known as the Treaty of London) with Britain, France, and Russia for various pieces of the land of the defeated nations after the war. At the Paris Peace Conference (the post-war meeting of the warring nations to discuss the next actions that would be taken regarding the victors and the defeated), the “Big Four” (a group of leaders comprised of Woodrow Wilson of the US, Vittorio Orlando of Italy, David Lloyd George of Britain, and Georges Clemenceau of France) met to discuss the various ways in which the losing nations would be dealt with, one controversial topic being how the land and colonies of these nations would be distributed to the

victors. After much debate, Italy only received a small portion of the land they were initially promised in the Treaty of London, leading Vittorio Orlando and the rest of Italy to feel robbed since one of the main motivations their entrance into the war was to expand their empire. The Fascist Party (founded in 1915 as the Fascist Revolutionary Party), under Benito Mussolini, capitalized on Italy's perceived mistreatment at the Paris Peace Conference by encouraging strong nationalism and arguing that the country deserves to return to its former glory and be comparable to Roman Empire. They centered their campaign partially around the idea of "vittoria mutilata," or "mutilated victory," since many Italians felt cheated out of what they were promised in victory over the central powers. Further, Mussolini pushed the fascist agenda forward by capitalizing on the great labor unrest in the country during the period from 1919-1920 known as "Biennio Rosso," or "Two Red Years." This unrest was caused by the great economic hardship Italy faced after fighting the Great War and receiving little reparations. High unemployment and inflation ensued, leading to over 3,500 industrial strikes in the period of Biennio Rosso as workers wanted social change. The Fascist Party quickly sided with industrial companies, promising to bring Italy's economy to new levels of prosperity through fierce nationalism and cooperation between workers and companies. The Fascist Party quickly gained popularity and by 1922 was in control of the self-proclaimed "Kingdom of Italy," with Mussolini at its head. The Italian people had turned to fascism in a desperate effort to mend all of the problems the country was facing, giving in to all of the promises Mussolini and the party offered. Mussolini quickly took advantage of the power he was given, making himself the country's sole dictator and stripping Italian citizens of many of their fundamental freedoms and rights in the name of creating national prosperity and growth.

Germany, another powerful country of the 20th century, similarly turned to a new form of ruling after the war. Germany was ravaged by the war just as Russia and Italy were, except to an even greater extent, as it was the main losing nation. Germany had spent billions of dollars on the war only to lose it and gain nothing, leaving them in a very dire economic situation, one that was only worsened by the Allied Nations' treatment of Germany after the war. At the Paris Peace Conference, the "Big Four" were merciless with Germany (all except Woodrow Wilson, whose Fourteen Points called for a much more merciful treatment of the losing nations). France and Great Britain were especially eager to make Germany pay for the war they were all forced to fight. This festering resentment towards Germany inevitably led to the creation of the Treaty of Versailles, the infamous peace treaty Germany was forced to sign that sent the nation into a downward spiral from which it would try to recover with drastic, radical measures. In signing this treaty, Germany took all blame for causing the war, and assumed \$31.4 billion (USD, worth roughly \$431 billion now) in debt in reparations, as described in what is now known as War Guilt Clause (Article 231). The Treaty of Versailles thrust Germany into tremendous economic upheaval, one that would make them receptive to the new form of government proposed by the Nazi Socialist German Workers Party. The Nazis promised economic recovery and prosperity, blaming the country's current economic depression on the currently-in-power Weimar Republic, the government that had signed and accepted the Treaty of Versailles. The Nazis, under Adolf Hitler, argued that the current government shouldn't have accepted the Treaty of Versailles and therefore didn't deserve to rule, and the people bought it. Hitler rose to power by the 1920s and quickly got rid of all of his political opponents and installed a fascist regime, preaching nationalism over individual freedoms. The rest of the story is common knowledge; Hitler quickly

became the benevolent dictator of the nation and committed many unspeakable crimes against humanity which will not soon be forgotten.

But why did all of these people in these tremendously powerful nations quickly turn to these risky, radical ideologies and leave behind those of old? The answer, most likely, can be explained by basic human nature. By nature, humans, as well as many other animals, are problem solvers: if one strategy doesn't work we try new strategies to address our problems. In the case of Russia/the Soviet Union, Italy, and Germany, the nations in question were all in great political and/or economic upheaval, and powerful orators with new ideas quickly took advantage, promising a new strategy to solve these problems, and were astonishingly successful. They promised new results with new methods, a very logical argument. As a widely-accepted definition of insanity from Albert Einstein goes, insanity is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." While this quote arose in society years after these events occurred, it likely held true at the time of these ideological changes in Europe. The people of these various nations knew they were in a very bad situation, one they had likely never faced before, as a majority of Europe was in shambles after the war. They logically thought that a different method could yield the results they all desperately hoped for and were promised: economic recovery and prosperity, and likely believed that their current government could not achieve that for them. While these new ideologies did not work out in the long run, what motivated their acceptance is quite understandable.