Benito Mussolini (1883-1945)

Benito Mussolini was born in 1883, to a poor family who lived in Predappio, Italy. His father was a blacksmith, and a follower of socialism; his mother taught elementary school. Although Mussolini was an intelligent boy, he was a poor student. He was violent and had a large ego—he actually stabbed another student at a boarding school he attended and was expelled. When he graduated in 1901, he briefly taught secondary school. He went to Switzerland in 1902 to avoid military service, where he grouped himself with other socialists. He returned to Italy in 1904, spending time in the military and engaging in politics full time.

When Mussolini joined the Socialist Party in 1900, he began to attract attention. He was extreme and violent in his speeches and articles, but he was well spoken. He emerged in the 1912 Socialist Party Congress. His powerful writing excited the Socialist ranks. He called for revolution at a time when revolutionary feelings were sweeping the country.

In 1914, Mussolini deserted the Socialist Party to cross over to the enemies: the Italian middle class. He foresaw problems that World War I would bring, and thus began to prepare for what was to come. He began his own movement, the Autonomous Fascists. He became close to the extreme middle-class youth and made himself their spokesman. Mussolini began two more movements, the Revolutionary Fascists in 1917 and the Constituent Fascists in 1918. He was defeated when he ran for office in the 1919 parliamentary elections.

In March 1919, Mussolini founded a fourth movement: the Fighting Fascists. He finally won over the Italian youth and waited for events to turn in his favor. The elections of 1921 sent him to Parliament where he headed 35 Fascist deputies. The National Fascist Party was born and gained more than 250,000 followers over which Mussolini was the uncontested leader.

In October 1922, Mussolini led a so-called March on Rome. This show of force convinced Italy’s king to put Mussolini at the head of Italy’s government—he was the first Fascist prime minister. Mussolini now had the support of important groups, such as industry, farmers, military, and the church. These groups accepted Mussolini’s solution to their problems: organize the middle-class youth, control workers harshly, and set up a tough central government to restore “law and order.” Mussolini ended up attacking the workers and spilling their blood all over Italy—it was the complete opposite of his early views of socialism.

Once in power, Mussolini took steps to make certain he would remain in power, such as fixing elections. And he did not want power over only politics—Mussolini wanted to control all aspects of Italians’ lives. This is called totalitarianism. One of his most important programs for spreading his totalitarianism was his use of propaganda to promote Italy’s greatness. He also established festivals and holidays that reminded modern Italians of their proud Roman heritage.

Mussolini also attempted to make Italy a strong military power. In order to do so, he searched for an easy target and found one in Ethiopia. Ethiopia was located between two Italian colonies in Africa and was not equipped to fight back. Italian forces gained control of the Ethiopians in 1935.
Joseph Stalin (1879-1953)

Joseph Stalin was born into a dysfunctional family in a poor village in Georgia in 1879. As a young boy, Stalin contracted smallpox, which left him scarred for the rest of his life—he also had a slightly deformed arm. These occurrences, along with an alcoholic father, led him to believe he was unfairly treated in life. Because of this, he developed a strong, romanticized desire for greatness and respect.

Stalin was sent by his mother to a seminary in Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the capital of Georgia, to study to become a priest. However, he never completed his education. He was, instead, drawn into the city’s revolutionary circles. Stalin specialized in the routine of revolutionary activity, helping to organize workers, distribute illegal literature, and robbing trains.

Vladimir Lenin, ruler of the Soviet Union after he led the Bolshevik Revolution and civil war in Russia, valued Stalin’s loyalty and appointed him to various low-priority leadership positions. In 1922, Stalin was appointed as General Secretary of the Communist Party’s Central Committee. He used this new position to solidify power by controlling all appointments, setting agendas, and moving around Party staff in a way so that everyone who counted owed their position to him. When Lenin died in 1924, Stalin became the leader of the country.

As leader of the Soviet Union, Stalin methodically destroyed all the old leaders of the Party. At first, these people were removed from their posts and exiled abroad. Later, when he realized they could still make a difference from afar, he began a reign of terror, accusing them as “enemies of the people” and having them executed. These “purges” extended beyond the leaders of the Party, reaching down into every local Party cell and nearly all of the intellectual professions.

Stalin pursued an economic policy of mobilizing the Soviet Union to achieve the goal of rapid industrialization, so that it was equal to capitalist powers. He forcefully collectivized agriculture—taking back the land given to peasants by Lenin—because he felt larger, mechanized farms would produce more than millions of small, individually owned farms. When peasants resisted, Stalin responded with violence. Thousands of people were executed and many more were sent to a remote region in the Soviet Union, called Siberia. In Siberia, these Soviets worked, often dying, in a system of labor camps called the Gulag. Ukrainians especially resisted the collectivization of farms. Stalin punished them by refusing to send food to aid them when a famine struck in 1932. Millions of Ukrainians died.

Another part of Stalin’s plans for strengthening Soviet communism was to modernize the economy. In 1928, he devised a system: Five-Year Plans were introduced, in which the state set a goal that each factory and mine had to produce. As he had hoped, these plans did lead to increases in industrial output. During the first two Five-Year Plans, Soviet production of oil doubled, while coal and steel production quadrupled.

Stalin led with totalitarian rule, controlling all aspects of Soviets’ life. Children encouraged to join youth organizations, where they were taught the attitudes and beliefs he wanted them to have. Religion was discouraged. Portraits of Stalin decorated public places, creating an idealized image of Stalin.