The Fascist rise to power, 1922

Could Mussolini's achievement of power have been prevented?

Key concept

Causation
Before you read this
Make sure that you are familiar with the record of Liberal Italy (1910–1914) and the terminology used in discussing reasons why liberal governments broke down.

O n 29 October 1922, King Victor Emmanuel III appointed Benito Mussolini as thirteenth prime minister of the liberal democratic Italian state. Mussolini was 29 years old and had no previous governmental experience. He was in control of a party that had only attained 35 seats by the proportional representative voting system and he led an extra-parliamentary paramilitary force riddled with internal dissension which had recently challenged Mussolini for his title of Il Duce (Leader). It seems an astonishing fact that Mussolini would have been even offered a governmental ministry, let alone the premiership.

Historians take differing views of how Mussolini was able to achieve power with so few political advantages, and this article examines these.

Historian M. Blaikham suggests that, 'The underlying conditions... arose from the failure of Italian liberals during and immediately after the Risorgimento (1861–1870–1911) to involve more of the population in the nation's affairs.' After all, universal suffrage was only brought in between 1912 and 1922. Historian T. Abe, however, believes that, 'Any analysis of the Italian political crisis stretching from the Armistice to the March on Rome which ignores or even minimises the role of class conflict is absolutely valueless.'

The causal hierarchy

The crucial question, therefore, is which of the long-, medium- and short-term causes proved to be most crucial in Mussolini's rise to power. Let us evaluate them individually.

The impact of the war

A small, but vocal, nationalist elite drew Italy into the First World War in 1915. To keep a largely peasant conscript army in the field, wartime prime ministers Antonio Salandra (1914–16), Paolo Boselli (1916–17) and finally Vittorio Emanuele Orlando (1917–19) had continuously to exaggerate the spoils of war awaiting the Italian people. For example, irredentist lands from Austria-Hungary, a Dalmatian cession, land reform, economic growth and greater democracy were some of the postwar carrots held before the poorly equipped and, at times, incommensurately armed forces fighting on one of the most physically challenging fronts of the conflict.

Similarly, the pressure on the domestic scene was equally traumatic, with escalating food prices, inflation and longer and longer working hours. Historian G. Procacci suggests that, 'The domestic effects of this war, which had lasted beyond the most pessimistic estimates, were enormous, and their importance can be hardly calculated.' The Treaty of Versailles would indeed return irredentist lands, but US President Woodrow Wilson's self-determination policy handed the Dalmatian territories to Yugoslavia. With no German colonies to compensate, Italy was handed a mutilated victory, which cost it 600,000 dead and 1 million wounded, of which 650,000 were permanently disabled, awaiting state pensions. On top of this, the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1919–20 killed 500,000 people.

Economic depression

Italy's geological deficiency in natural resources (gas, coal and iron ore) meant that economic stability always closely aligned to the buoyancy of the global market. Nevertheless, Italy's pre-war growth rates had been extremely good, especially in the north. But the postwar slump left Italy extremely severely, as statistics in Box 1 reflect.

The unrecorded taxation structure meant that increasing poverty affected the working and lower middle classes disproportionately hard, inevitably exacerbating class divisions in Italian society.

The failure of liberal government

For the first 50 years of the state's existence, Italy was ruled by a relatively small elite of largely anti-clerical liberals who formed temporary coalitions, based on self-interest, around key political personalities. This league system depended on a tiny electorate. In 1912, Giovanni Giolitti radically extended the electorate to all male adults over the age of 30. In the relatively tranquil atmosphere of post-First World War politics, the new franchise reform continued the liberal hegemony. However, two factors undermined trasformismo complacency.


economic system policy: part of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points of 1917 that promised sovereignty and independence for all in Europe who desired it.

self-determination: method of making a flexible, centrist coalition government which involved the extremes of left and right Italian politics after the unification but before the rise of fascism.
Questions

1. How do you explain the ready capitulation of King Victor Emmanuel to Mussolini's demand to form a government?
2. How realistic was fear of a Communist coup d'état?
3. Do you agree that 'Tony Abbott is wrong in saying, in some cause hierarchies, the shortest of short-term factors are the really crucial features of Historical mutation?'

In 1915, three basic voting blocks were in the Chamber of Deputies. By 1921, this rose to 11.

Gliottini Liberals, Right-wing Liberals, Socialists, Reformist Socialists, Popolari, Radicals, Nationalists, Communists, Slavs/Germans, Free Radicals, Independents and Fascists all voted for power. Typically, the two largest parties (Socialist and Popolari) were too ideologically divided to work together. Thus, the longevity of postwar governments tended to be short — for example, Francescon Ninis: June 1919–June 1920; Giulini: June 1920–July 1921; Ivarone Bonomio: July 1922–February 1922; Luigi Facta: February–October 1922. Only Giolitti seemed to have any idea of how to respond to postwar political flux. He instigated a commissio

Key Points

1. Liberal long-term development had a patchy record but, before the First World War, the state was generally politically stable and Italian citizenship achieved universal suffrage in 1912, 8 years before Great Britain.
2. The impact of the First World War and the cost of the Italian-Austrian campaign devastated the Italian economy and left 500,000 Italians dead and over 1 million wounded.
3. The corporatist model associated to the new, united corporative representative franchise that had been inspired upon the insipid Italian electorate fragmented the political spectrum, making stable progressive coalitions far more difficult.
4. A popular swing to socialism and the emergence of a Communist party terrorized the Italian establishment. Left-wing tactics, rather than action, played into the hands of the right.
5. The failure of the Popular front to achieve Pius XII's confidence and the defeat of moderate Socialists to oust Mussolini from the fascist coalition foreclosed the populist project in the parliamentary system.
6. Mussolini's charismatic opportunistic policy manoeuvring between 1920–22 created the Fascists and broad right-of-centre a support network that was willing to extract concessions for the price of order.

WebLink

There is a useful and concise overview on Italy and the rays of Mussolini at: staff.npsa.dnr.gov.au/invasion/AgeOfAnxiety-RiseOfMussolin.htm

There is an informative website on totalitarianism which covers Mussolini at: www.thecorner.org/hicks/totality-italy.htm for an interesting view that sheds light on the first question above, see: www.socialistworker.co.uk/int/pt.php?id=4023.

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Further reading

Binkovitz, M. (1964) Mussolini and Fascist Italy. Methuen. A brief introduction that nevertheless highlights the main historiographical controversies that still rage.


Key words

- Fascism
- Italian
- Mussolini
- Nationalism
- Proportional representation
- Squadrone d'Assalto
- Terrorism