Mussolini’s rise to power

Why did the leader of a fringe political movement, which won no seats in the 1919 election, become prime minister of Italy only 3 years later?

Mussolini’s appointment as prime minister in October 1922, which provided the springboard for the establishment of a Fascist dictatorship, was the product of a number of factors. Three features of the situation in Italy were particularly important in creating conditions that Mussolini was able to exploit to his advantage:

- The long-term weaknesses of the Liberal political system established in Italy after the unification of the country in 1870.
- Nationalist dissatisfaction with the outcome of the First World War for Italy.
- Social and economic unrest in the wake of the First World War, which created a widespread fear of communist revolution among the property-owning classes.

This article will examine each of these factors in turn before considering the political crisis of 1922 itself.

The weakness of Italian liberalism

Italy was politically united by 1870 under a constitutional monarchy, similar to the one in Britain. Parliament consisted of an appointed upper house or Senate and an elected lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, from which government ministers were usually drawn. Until 1912, the Chamber was elected by fewer than 3 million men and political power was therefore in the hands of a restricted social elite. The parliamentary system was dominated by a group of liberal politicians, who formed a series of loose coalitions using a procedure known as trasformismo. This meant that members of the governing class moved in and out of office as a result of bargaining. In other words, either of the politicians’ supporters or of the constituencies that they represented, sided the wheels of politics.

The political elite did little to resolve the underlying social and economic problems of a country which, by 1914, was still only partly industrialized. The south remained largely rural and backward, with a poor peasant class exploited by a small number of landowners. In the north, agriculture was more advanced and profitable, but rural society was dangerously divided between farmers and insecure landless labourers. Northern Italy was also industrializing rapidly from about 1890, with government encouragement. This led to the growth of an urban working class, which was largely alienated from the liberal political order.

From 1900, the apparently prospering world of trasformismo was being challenged by the growth of new political movements. The urban workforce supported a new Socialist Party (the PSI). Some socialist deputies were prepared to take part in the political bargaining of the dominant liberal group, but others refused to do so, seeing themselves as defenders of the class interests of their supporters. Another problem was that of the Catholic Church, which initially stood aloof from united Italy because it did not accept the state’s right to control Rome. Catholics started to take part in politics in the early 1900s, in order to protect church interests, but they did not become involved in government. They formed their own political party, the Popolari (PPi) in 1919. Finally a nationalist movement, which saw the liberal state as weak, and which demanded a more assertive overseas policy, began to organize. Nationalists believed that Italy had been left behind in the empire-building efforts of European powers in the late nineteenth century.

The political failure of these groups made it much harder to sustain the narrow parliamentary liberalism of the ruling elite. In an attempt to broaden their support, the liberals agreed in 1912 to extend the vote to all men aged 20 — a move which expanded the electorate from 3 to 8 million men. This partial democratization of the system, in a country where there were large social divisions and four-fifths of the population was illiterate, was to increase the instability of politics.

The ‘multilat victory’

Although Italy had been allied to Austria-Hungary and Germany since 1882, it chose to remain neutral at the outbreak of the First World War. In May 1915, the right-wing liberal government of Antonio Salandra chose to intervene in the war on the side of Britain and France, in the hope of making territorial gains at the expense of the Austro-Hungarian empire. This decision was deeply divisive. Neutrality had been supported by a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, including key liberals such as former prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti. Catholics were enthusiastic about the war, while most socialists were opposed to it. Support for intervention came from the nationalists, who were joined by some radicals and ex-socialists, including the left-wing journalist, Benito Mussolini. He was expelled from the Socialist Party and sacked at editor of its leading newspaper, Avanti, for switching his support to the war.

Division was worsened by military failures, culminating in the defeat at Caporetto in October 1917. The memory of this humiliation damaged the prestige of the liberal regime that had taken Italy into the war. Although ultimately victory was secured in 1918 with the taking of Vittorio Veneto, nationalists were bitterly disappointed that Italy did not make more gains in the Paris peace settlement. Italy extended its frontier northwest, into former Austrian territory, to gain Trentino, South Tyrol,
The social and economic impact of war

In order to finance the war effort, the government borrowed heavily so that the national debt increased by five times between 1914 and 1918. Inflation also became a major problem, with food prices outstripping wage increases and leading to massive discontent among the urban workforce. They joined trade unions in growing numbers in order to protect their standard of living. In the countryside, inflation helped the peasants to pay off their debts and many began to dream of owning their own land. This brought the threat to the property-owning classes. These problems were worsened at the end of the war, when the demobilisation of 5 million troops created a pool of unemployed men, seeking both jobs and recognition for their wartime role. At the same time, businesses which had been encouraged to speculate in industrial production for the war found that demand for their goods had collapsed.

The government was unable to reassure the middle classes and the landowners that it was capable of protecting their interests against a rising tide of lower-class militancy. In the towns, a series of strikes and protests by workers marked the so-called "Benevento treason" or "red years" of 1919-20. A large-scale occupation of the factories in September 1920 was ended by Giolitti's government, only after a prolonged fight that had given the trade unions more influence in industry. In the country-side demobilised soldiers occupied land. Farm labourers joined labour leagues: socialist-controlled organisations which opposed the farmers' wage rates. The liberal government's failure to intervene against these developments, which seemed to raise the threat of 'red revolution', led to a collapse of confidence in the political system.

The crisis of the liberal regime

In 1919, the government attempted to broaden the base of the parliamentary system by granting the vote to all men. The electoral system was changed by the introduction of proportional representation, based on party lists of candidates in 54 large constituencies. These developments worked in the interests of two parties which were capable of winning mass support, the socialists and the Christian Democrats. In the elections of 1919, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats won a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The Socialists were allowed to form a government, but they were unable to pass any laws. In 1920, the Christian Democrats formed a coalition government with the Socialists. However, the Christian Democrats were unable to win the 1921 elections, and the Socialists returned to power. In 1922, the Socialists were once again in power.

Prime ministers of Italy 1914-22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914-16</td>
<td>Antonio Salandra</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916-17</td>
<td>Paolo Boselli</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917-19</td>
<td>Vittorio Orlando</td>
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<tr>
<td>1919-20</td>
<td>Francesco Nitti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-21</td>
<td>Giovanni Giolitti</td>
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<tr>
<td>1921-22</td>
<td>Filippo Benito</td>
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The growth of fascism

Fascism remains hard to define. Although its followers, Benito Mussolini, made great claims for it as a philosophy, to a large extent fascist ideas developed later, as a way of justifying actions taken for pragmatic reasons. The first meeting of the so-called Fasci Italiani di Combattimento (Italian Combat Group) was held in Milan in March 1919 and was attended by about 100 people, mainly discontented with the armistice and revolutionaries of various kinds. The early ideas of fascists were mainly on left wing, and included proposals for the transformation of Italy into a republic, confiscation of Church property and high taxation of the wealthy. More important than specific ideas, however, were the Fascists' rejection of the liberal parliamentary system, loyalty to Mussolini as their leader and the use of violence as a political weapon. They were stridently nationalistic, and were hostile to the socialists, who had opposed intervention in the war. The Fascist claim to power was based on Mussolini's statement that: 'the right to the political succession belongs to us because we are the will of the country into the war and led it to victory.'

Nevertheless, fascists did not win mass support through its nationalist agenda, or through its left-wing domestic programme. They won no seats in the 1919 elections. Only when the Fascists aligned themselves with the forces of property did they begin to emerge as a serious political force. When fascist thugs, organised in squadristi, went out into the countryside and burnt down a socialist newspaper. Simultaneously in the towns, the Fascists aligned themselves with the industrialists by taking on the trade unions. They were helped by the readiness of the police to turn a blind eye to strong-arm tactics, provided that these were employed by the political right.

The skill of Mussolini lay in his capacity to condone squadrismo violence, and to retain the approval of the radical elements in the Fascist movement, while promising the proper classes strong, orderly government. This was a delicate balancing act, because if the violence went too far, it might provoke the government into using the army against fascism. Therefore he had to demonstrate a willingness to work within the constitutional framework, for example by agreeing to the pact with Giolitti prior to the 1921 elections. In October 1921, however, Mussolini conceded his predominance within the Fascist movement by formally turning it into a national party, the Partito Nazionale Fascista or PNF. During the summer of 1922 he allowed Fascist Brownshirts, such as Balbo Balbo in Ferrara, to seize control of the local administration in the northern towns. At the same time he was able to show the 'responsible' side of fascism, when the Socialists tried to stop him by calling a general strike. By helping to maintain essential services, the Fascists reinforced their credentials as defenders of order and propriety.

The march on Rome

By October 1922, Mussolini was simultaneously pursuing two different tactics. He negotiated with the liberal leaders, with a view to keeping Fascists out of the government. Meanwhile, he publicly prepared for a "march on Rome", ostensibly to save Italy from anarchy and socialism. This enabled him to put pressure on the government, while also reassuring fascist radicals that he remained committed to seizing power. The prime minister, Facta, hesitated, but eventually asked King Victor Emmanuel III to agree to the introduction of martial law in other words to use the army to suppress the Fascists. This the king declined to do.

*Stalinism under communism 1919: harvest under fascism 1923: Fascist postcard, 1925.*
The king's refusal to sign the martial law decree was crucial because it provoked the resignation of Faure as prime minister. The alternative liberal candidate for the post, Salandra, persuaded himself that he could form a government only with the cooperation of the Fascists. When Mussolini reneged his terms, the king invited him to come to Rome and to accept the post of prime minister. This meant that Mussolini was able to assume the highest political office by legal means, even if illegal acts of violence, and threats of violence, had played a crucial part in making this step possible.

In later years the Fascists claimed that they had seized power in a revolutionary overthrow of the old order. In reality there was no 'march on Rome'. The Fascists arrived in the capital only after Mussolini had been invited to form his government, and most of them came in vehicles, not on foot. They then held a victory parade in the city. As the historian Richard Bosworth writes, the march on Rome was 'a change in government to be achieved by negotiation at least as much as by naked violence'.

Ultimately it was a failure of will on the part of the king and the old elites that allowed Mussolini to take power. The army could have overwhelmed the Fascist squads physically, although it is also true that the king had been advised not to put the loyalty of the military to the test. Victor Emmanuel's motives are not entirely clear but it seems that he feared the outbreak of civil war if he tried to resist the Fascists. In any case, like the liberal leaders, he was more fearful of a threat from the left. By October 1922, the key figures in the Italian establishment had persuaded themselves that Mussolini should be invited to see if he could resolve the country's political crisis. They also mistakenly believed that fascism could be moderated by the experience of taking responsibility for government. In this sense they miscalculated to a catastrophic degree.

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