

MUSSOLINI'S RISE TO POWER



Weak economy (Post-war depression 1919-1922)

- 3 million men de-mobilized after WWI
- Widespread unemployment (2 million people in November 1919)
- Widespread poverty in the south (especially among the landless peasants)
- Huge inflation (560% between 1914-1921)

The threat from socialism in Italy

- The growing force of socialism (stimulated by the industrial growth of the late 1880's and the early 1890's) had about 25% of the electoral votes before WWI.
- The socialists were weakened by constant divisions and many of the leaders preferred reforms in stead of revolution.
- In 1920 over 2000 strikes occurred (280 in Milan in 1919). Many of the wealthy landowners and industrialists feared a Bolshevik style take-over.
- In the south peasants began to seize land in 1920.
- In July 1921 Mussolini made the "*Pact of Pacification*" with the socialists. This pact only lasted a few months but won some respect among the population of Italy.
- The crisis in Italian politics continued to work at the advantage of the fascists. The "*Squadrisimo*" were very "active" against the socialists in **the general strike of August 1922**. The strike was badly organized and ill-led and it collapsed within 24 hours. Though the fascists got the credit for "saving" the country.
- The "*Squadrisimo*" continued the struggle against the socialists. By October they had burnt down 500 workers' meeting places and broken up about 900 meetings (esp. in Milan and Bologna)

The bitter legacy of the war

- Italy lost nearly 700.000 men and 1 million men were wounded in WWI. After the war Italy therefore made extensive claims. They received South Tyrol, Istria and Trieste (just as promised in London 1915). They also claimed but did not receive Dalmatia, several Aegean islands and the town of Fiume. This made Italians frustrated and was used in the propaganda of the nationalists. The ex-servicemen became an important ingredient in the fascist combat groups
- The writer and war-hero D'Annunzio (together with 2600 legionaries) occupied the town of Fiume in September 1919. They transferred it into a city-state and established an authoritarian government. There wasn't any reaction from the Italian government until December 1920 when regular troops attacked and seized the city. Several of D'Annunzio's black-shirts were killed or wounded. This event is therefore referred to the "**Christmas of Blood**". The public saw the late reaction as a "*weakness*" of the government and when they finally did something the action was viewed as "*unpatriotic*". (In the Treaty of Rapallo 1922 Fiume became an international city. In 1924 it was acquired by Italy in agreement with Yugoslavia).
- The fascists supported the actions of D'Annunzio. Mussolini learned that "Angry Nationalism" wins public support...

Transforism – weak Italian governments before 1922

- Italy had a debased and corrupt form of parliamentary system - "*Transforism*" - welding together large and sometimes unlikely coalitions in support of ministries. They lacked true party spirit and ruled out any real clash to alternative party principles.
- In 1919 Italy introduced a proportional system in the parliament. This didn't seem to change the political instability. Without a political tradition no party would gain an absolute majority. So the coalitions between different parties continued (and the quarrels continued). Italy had five different governments between 1919-1922.
- In 1921 the Prime Minister - liberal Giovanni Giolitti called for new elections. Under the impression of the growing support of the fascists Giolitti accepted Mussolini's offer of an electoral pact. As part of a government alliance the fascists won 35 parliamentary seats in the elections (in a parliament of 535). This was a small start

but it gave Mussolini "a new authority, and respectability and a valuable freedom from arrest". (Denis Mack Smith). Noticeable is that the socialists won 122 seats, the Catholic People's Party 107 seats and the small Communist Party 16 seats.

March on Rome 1922

- On 27 October of 1922 the fascist movement mobilized and attempted to cut off all lines of communication to the capital in order to prepare for a march on Rome to seize power in a *coup*. This *coup d'état* succeeded. Why? - It was **not** because of Mussolini's position of strength but on the *active and passive support from local governments*, the *unwillingness of the political, economic and social establishment to resist the fascists* (they had the hope Mussolini might put an end to the perceived socialist threat) and in the end *the surprising refusal of King Victor Emmanuel III to sign his prime minister's decree on martial law*. Some historians claim that the king was afraid of being replaced by his cousin - the pro-fascist "Duke of Aosta". Mussolini exploited this situation and demanded the premiership. Mussolini became the youngest Prime Minister in Italian history.



The role of the king - Victor Emmanuel III

Why did the king give in to the fascists and Mussolini?

- The king was informed that about 100.000 fascists had gathered outside Rome around the 18th of October 1922
- He feared revolution and/or a civil war between socialists and fascists
- Salandra (the liberal leader) and his supporters told the king that the army was outnumbered by the fascists
- The king was convinced that the military were unreliable and that it was absurd to stop Mussolini when everybody seemed to insist that the fascists should be included in any government anyway
- The king feared that his pro-fascist cousin, the Duke of Aosta, would take over the reign if he didn't yield to the fascists

1922-1929: Steps taken by Mussolini to build up totalitarian power

Mussolini and the fascists ruled in cooperation with the old elites, in a government that involved many non-fascists. In November 1922 Mussolini took the first steps towards establishing a single-party state...

- On the 16th of November the Chamber gave him a vote of confidence (306 votes to 116) in a massive reversal of his previous fortunes
- On the 25th of November the king gave him dictatorial power to restore order and introduce reforms. This power was to last until the 31st of December 1923
- In January 1923 the fascist squads were transformed into the "MSVN", a volunteer militia for national security. They took the oath to the state and not the king like its predecessor the Royal Guard. This provided Mussolini with a private army of 300.000 men!
- Throughout 1923 there were changes of personnel in key jobs, like the police force, the prefectures and local governments
- In March 1923 a new group of senators, including several leading fascists, was created
- In November 1923 the Acerbo electoral law was debated. By this law, the party that received the highest number of votes in an election, provided that it won at least 25% of the votes, would automatically receive two-thirds of the seats in the Chamber. The rest of the seats would be divided proportionally. This would put an end to the weak coalition governments that had for so long plagued Italian politics. For this reason, it was supported by Parliamentarians like Giolitti and Salandra.
- The election of 1924 was a huge victory for the fascist electoral alliance. Several Right-wing and liberal politicians, such as Orlando and Salandra, had joined this alliance. The fascists and their supporters won some two-thirds of the votes (4.5 million) and the divided opposition one-third (2.5 million). After this it was hard to prevent Mussolini and the fascists to do as they liked. It also provided the king with reasons to take no action against the fascists, whatever they did... The people had shown their overwhelming support for them...
- It's important to note that the economy improved during the period 1922-1925. Unemployment fell from half a million to just under 100.000. Small businessmen and the professional classes went through a boom and most people seemed to think that fascism equaled prosperity
- Big business and many Catholics supported Mussolini's struggle against Communism though when Matteotti was murdered in 1924 came the first major crisis for the fascists and Mussolini...
- Matteotti crisis. Giacomo Matteotti, a socialist parliament member, made a very outspoken speech in the parliament on May 30th 1924. He accused Mussolini and the fascists of corruption and intimidation as well as he condemned the elections as a sham. Matteotti ended his speech by motion that the election results should be declared invalid. Mussolini was furious and said that somebody should "teach Matteotti a lesson"... At June 10th Matteotti was kidnapped in the middle of Rome and he was found murdered August 16th. Mussolini was now accused of murder – both directly and indirectly. The opposition parties in the parliament showed their criticism by refusing to participate in the political work with the fascists – they walked out of the parliament. They set up a committee that took the name Aventino. This incident is referred to as the "Aventine Secession". Once again the king came to play an important role. The Aventine group appealed to the king, but he refused to support them. Instead, he openly showed his support for Mussolini... The biggest pressure now came from Mussolini's own party. They had supported him and his promises of an authoritarian rule under the fascists. They now demanded that he fulfilled these promises.
- On January 3rd, 1925 in a speech to the Chamber Mussolini assumed all responsibility for what had happened – as a leader of the fascists. Several historians say that this speech marks the beginning of the fascist dictatorship in Italy. Mussolini had the support of the king and he now also received support from the army and the industrialists. The Aventine Secession made it possible for the fascists to run the parliament as they wanted to so instead of being an obstacle it became a support for Mussolini. In the beginning of 1925 Mussolini gave free hands to the stronger critics within the party and they launched a miniature "reign of terror". Houses were searched, hostile newspapers were closed, political opponents were harassed, and the fascists constantly attacked the freedom of association and of speech.
- In November 1925 a plot against Mussolini's life was revealed. Former socialist deputy Zaniboni was accused (the real facts behind this episode remains in question) and the fascist started the official suppression of the socialist party. Several other attempts against Mussolini's life were made during

1926 which played the fascists in the hand as they used them to step up the suppression against all political opponents.

- Several decrees were made in 1925-1926; the President of the Council of Ministers (Mussolini) received more power among them the power to establish laws directly. This side stepped the legislative part of the Italian government. The police forces also received much more powers to be able to act against anything that threatened “public safety”. In the local districts politically elected leaders “podesta” were installed instead or beside the mayor. A law against secret societies was also introduced.
- **ROCCO LAW** (April 1926) - Strikes and lockouts were banned. Any disputes should be settled by a labor court (there were 16 different kinds) against which there was no appeal. By 1926 the Fascist unions were grouped into 13 corporations (6 for employers, 6 for employees - agriculture, banking, commerce, industry, land+transport+internal navigation and sea+air transport. The 13th corporation represented the intellectuals like priests and artists). In theory the **CORPORATIVE STATE** were set up to advise the government on economic matters and to help coordinate the economy but in practice they were meant to facilitate government control (In 1934 the corporations were increased to 22)
- A secret political police force, the **OVRA**, was formed in September 1926.
- In October 1926 a decree banned all other parties except the fascist party
- **CHARTER OF LABOR** (April 1927) - Regulations for work. (Night work, overtime, dismissal, social insurance etc... but not 8-hour day or a minimum wage).
- In September 1928 a new electoral law decreed that the whole composition of parliament should be determined by the Fascist Grand Council headed by Mussolini. They (the Council) suggested a list of 400 nominees. The electorate could accept or reject the list. Morris writes that “*it is surprising that as many as 136.000 voters rejected the list in 1929*”. After this the number of rejections fell.
- **1929: Lateran Treaty, Lateran Accords** also called **Lateran Pact** of 1929, treaty between Italy and the Vatican. Upon ratification of the Lateran Treaty, the papacy recognized the state of Italy, with Rome as its capital. Italy in return recognized papal sovereignty over the Vatican City and secured full independence for the pope. A number of additional measures were agreed upon. Catholicism – Rome accepted as the “*center of the Catholic world and place of pilgrimage*”, Italian state religion, compulsory religious education also in secondary school in Italy, divorce outlawed but all bishops were to take an oath of loyalty to the state and had to be Italian subjects speaking the Italian language.

STEPHEN LEE – CONSOLIDATION OF POWER: Textbook writer Stephen Lee makes the following points about Mussolini and his consolidation of power:

- He left the previous administrative structure standing
- The personality cult “*Mussolinianism*”

Three constitutional laws enabled Mussolini’s consolidation of power:

1. 1923 – Electoral Law (Acerbo Laws) – two-thirds majority to the governing party (at least 25%)
2. 1926 – Mussolini was enabled to govern by decree
3. 1928 – New electoral law gives a new system with a Fascist Grand Council (They suggested 400 candidates that could be accepted or rejected en masse)

Other factors:

- OVRA – the secret police force was formed in 1926
- Mussolini implanted his own methods of control over the economy through a series of “*battles*” and public programmes
- Mussolini also introduced the “*corporate state*”
- Mussolini left part of the old system intact – ex. the system of local prefects (above fascists)
- Mussolini played members of the Fascist Grand Council against each other
- Mussolini insisted on a wide-spread membership of the Party
- Mussolini made the administrative machine very complex...
- Mussolini ruled by balancing the state and the Party!
- Mussolini deliberately weakened the Fascist organizations so no one could challenge his authority
- Mussolini was the center of convergence for all major forces
- Mussolini emphasized his role by reactivating Italy’s great past (fasces, salute, eagle & wolf)