

What were the most significant factors that caused the formation of dictatorship under Benito Mussolini?

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources | 3 |
| Section B: Investigation | 5 |
| Section C: Reflection..... | 9 |
| Bibliography | 10 |
| Appendices | 11 |

Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

The focus of this investigation will be: **What were the most significant factors that caused the formation of dictatorship under Benito Mussolini?** To address this question, multiple causing factors must be considered from 1922-1924 that formed the eventual dictatorship.

The first source being evaluated is *Fascist Italy* by John Hite and Chris Hinton. This was of particular relevance to my investigation as in this textbook it included various historian views that I would implement in my investigation to provide multiple perspectives/views. John Hite was trained to teach at Sussex University in 1976 whilst Chris Hinton started his teaching career in London in the mid-70s and became head of history at Sussex university.¹ The source's **Origin** is valuable as the authors have a good educational background and basis of understanding when it comes to history. The **Purpose** of this textbook is to educate and teach about the topic, which is of value to me, as I previously had no knowledge about the topic and reading the textbook allowed me to grasp a holistic view of fascist Italy. The **content** of the source was on fascist Italy specifically in regard to the Matteotti crisis. The **value** of the source is that it provides a general overview of the events of the Matteotti crisis in hindsight. The **limitations** of the source is that being an educational tool that is a secondary source. It doesn't offer insight to the events as you may be able to get in diaries or personal journals. However, it does include the speech of Mussolini's declaration of taking up a dictatorial role which is one form of **value** in the form of insight (Appendix B). Another value is that the source includes a cartoon (Appendix A) that can give us a sense of what public opinion was after Matteotti's death as cartoonists often respond to popular views.

The second source is: *Aspects of European History 1789-1980* By Stephen J Lee. This was of particular interest to me in my investigation in learning about the King's reluctance to oppose Mussolini and his justifications. Lee was head of history at Bromsgrove school in Birmingham.² The source's **origin** serves as credible as Lee's experience in the education sector and in writing countless other books on European history. The source's **purpose** is to provide historical accounts of historical events and historians views on the events. The **content** of the source is much broader and not specifically centred to my research topic, as it focuses more on the

¹ "Interview with John Hite, 11 July 2010." Interview with John Hite, 11 July 2010 & "Interview with Chris Hinton, 11 January 2010." Interview with Chris Hinton, 11 January 2010

² "Stephen J. Lee." Wikiquote

entirety of Europe rather than specifically Italy and Mussolini. Which is a **limitation**, but it did include **valuable** information about the king's reluctance to oppose Mussolini and of the nature of the “march on Rome”.

Section B: Investigation

On January 3, 1925 Benito Mussolini delivered a speech to parliament asserting himself with supreme power and the role as dictator; later adopting the title “Il duce” (“the leader”). However, Mussolini didn't become the dictator overnight; a series of events stretching from 1922-1924 saw events that ultimately led Italy to a totalitarian state. One of these events saw an opposing socialist Giacomo Matteotti murdered after producing evidence of violence and terror during the election campaign.³ Many historians argue this is the most significant event that led Italy to a dictatorship under Mussolini. However, some argue the new laws such as Acerbo electoral law or King Victor Emmanuel III, reluctance in opposing Mussolini as more significant factors to why a dictatorship formed under Mussolini. Thus, the research question guiding this investigation will be: **What were the most significant factors that caused the formation of dictatorship under Benito Mussolini?**

Mussolini was a part of a Fascist movement that aimed to eradicate the “threat” of socialism in Italy. His popularity increased as well as his hunger for power. On 24 October, 1922 at a meeting in Naples of 40,000 Fascists Mussolini threatened, “Either the government will be given to us, or we will seize it by marching on Rome.”⁴

Firstly, the plan called for the assailing of public buildings throughout north and central Italy as the first stage in the taking of power; in the second stage three columns would march on the roads converging on the capital.⁵ However, the march on Rome was a colossal bluff. The city was well defended by 12 000 men.⁶ This force would have easily been able to disperse the march. The armed fascists were poorly armed and were short of food.⁷ The coup d'état that was the march on Rome could never have succeeded in taking Rome by force. Instead, only by putting pressure on the King and government as well as creating an atmosphere of confusion and widespread collapse of state power could they attain success.^{8 9} It was this among two other factors that led King Emmanuel III to appoint Mussolini as prime minister. First of which was that the king had rendered the military unreliable and that it was absurd to stop Mussolini when

³ Mark Robson, *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 52

⁴ “Rise to Power of Benito Mussolini.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*

⁵ Brown, Richard, and Christopher Daniels. *Twentieth Century Europe*. pg. 70

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 71

⁹ Lee, Stephen J. *Aspects of European History 1789-1980*. pg. 192

everybody seemed to insist that the fascists should be included in the government anyway.¹⁰ The second, being that reports also suggested that he was fearful that his pro-fascist cousin, the Duke of Aosta, would take power if he didn't yield to the fascists.¹¹ A combination of these factors led to the king's surprising refusal to sign his prime minister's decree on martial law. Instead, he replaced the prime minister with Mussolini and so, on 30th October 1922, Mussolini arrived in Rome to become the prime minister of Italy.¹² Before the Matteotti crisis had ever happened, some historians argue that this moment of appointing Mussolini and his fascist movement, was the most important cause of Italy becoming a dictatorship. This moment marked the beginning of fascist control and ultimately later on, would see Italy become a totalitarian state. (Political system in which those in power have complete control and do not allow people freedom to oppose them).¹³ In a textbook called *Fascist Italy* by John Hite and Chris Hinton, which includes many renowned historians' views on the matter in the form of extracts. One of which is by Cassels: "The reluctant attitudes of King... summarised the problems in a nutshell: the Italian power structure was slow to admit that its creature, Fascism, was out of control, and without leadership from the power structure, the anti-Fascist opposition remained fragmented and embryonic".¹⁴ This harsh critique outlines that it all began with the King and his reluctant attitude against the fascists, is what led turmoil within Italy. Then ultimately, leading to the dictatorship. Another historian in the extracts, Clark also alludes to the king's reluctance to use his army against the fascist movement. "His victory, once again, owed much to the militant squads and to their power in the provinces; and, once again, it owed much to the King's unwillingness to use the army against the Fascists".¹⁵

The new Prime Minister was eager for more power and didn't want to lose his momentum from the "march on Rome".¹⁶ He took immediate action and demanded the government grant him powers to rule by decree for 12 months.¹⁷ He did this by stating that only a strong government could take the stern measures that were necessary to restore law and order and to put the country

¹⁰ Brown, Richard, and Christopher Daniels. *Twentieth Century Europe*. pg. 72

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 47

¹³ "Totalitarian." *Cambridge Dictionary*

¹⁴ Hite, John, and Chris Hinton. *Fascist Italy*. pg.79

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 47

¹⁷ Ibid, pg. 48

back on its feet.¹⁸ The MPs voted in favour of granting emergency powers in which he could create laws without consolidating the parliament.¹⁹ He quickly made use of his extreme powers and created the Grand Council of Fascism in which he would hold ultimate authority over the council and have the ability to control fascist policy. He also in January 1923 merged fascist squads (“Squadristi”) to form the MSVN (volunteer militia for national security) also known as the “blackshirts” which had effectively given him an army of 300 000 men.²⁰ He also pushed for the Acerbo law; the new electoral law guaranteed seats to the party that received only a relative majority (at least a quarter) of the votes cast.²¹ This is another significant moment as he now had supreme powers and more dominance over parliament as he didn’t need to form a coalition government.

On 30 May 1924 outraged by the violence caused in recent elections by Mussolini and the blackshirts, Giacomo Matteotti a socialist opponent, prepared a 30-minute speech calling for an annulment of election results and denouncing violence caused by the fascist regime.²² He was repeatedly interrupted while making the speech as the fascists knew the consequences it would have on the reputation of their regime. If it was made in full however after two hours it was done. As he left the chamber of deputies he said, 'Now you can prepare my funeral oration.' Matteotti was right he had predicted his own death and his prediction came true.²³ Eleven days later, Matteotti was abducted, stabbed and killed by fascist bandits.²⁴ The murder surprised not only Mussolini's political opponents but also many pro-Mussolini liberals who thought that the Fascists had finally gone too far.²⁵ Mussolini denied responsibility of the crime but, as evidence linking the Prime Minister to the murder began to appear in the press, public opinion began to turn against him: At this point, opposition MPs left parliament to create their own rival breakaway parliament.²⁶ These MPs hoped that their 'Aventine secession (named after a similar event in ancient Rome) might encourage the King to dismiss Mussolini.²⁷ Mussolini appeared vulnerable for the first time.²⁸ A portrayal of Mussolini can be found in appendix A, a cartoon

¹⁸ Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 49

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Palla, Marco. *Mussolini and Fascism*. pg. 38

²² Hite, John, and Chris Hinton. *Fascist Italy*. pg. 76

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 52

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 52 & Hite, John, and Chris Hinton. *Fascist Italy*. pg. 77

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 52

showcasing Mussolini “keeping the lid closed on Matteotti’s death” showcasing the fascist regimes censorship deployed in an attempt to calm the situation. The King refused to contemplate the dismissal of Mussolini, fearing that such a decision would, only strengthen the revolutionary left and might lead to civil war.²⁹ For this reason, and the opposition being split on whether to want the fascism regime to continue. Many fascist radicals longed for Mussolini to take initiative and set up a totalitarian state and become a proper dictator.³⁰ Yet he still denied his lust for power as seen appendix B (“realise that what I am planning to do is not the result of personal whim, of a lust for power, or of an ignoble passion, but solely the expression of my unlimited and mighty love for the fatherland.”)

In conclusion, many can argue that the King's reluctance to stop Mussolini first in the march on Rome and not to intervene to remove him after the Matteotti crisis. Was the most significant factor in the eventual dictatorship. Especially, in the first instance since if he had put a stop to Mussolini, then he and his violence should never have come about in the first place. His justifications of which not to intervene were obscure. Yet, his Acerbo law and reforms contributed greatly to the setup of power. The most important in my opinion and most historians alike as seen in Fascist Italy, was the Matteotti crisis. The only way he could politically survive the crisis was to respond positively to his radical supporters' demands to take full control, set up a totalitarian state so that no one could oppose him and use his blackshirt militia to keep control as dictator. As historian Eatwell puts it “Mussolini was under considerable pressure, but he was far from resigning.”³¹ All three factors were important to the formation of the dictatorship; however, the king's reluctance to oppose Mussolini and the Matteotti crisis were of greatest significance. It’s worth mentioning that only the king's reluctance could have propagated on its own to the eventual dictatorship. Since the other factors discussed were built on the king's reluctance and thus, could not stand on its own as the only cause of the dictatorship.

²⁹ Robson, Mark. *Italy: The Rise of Fascism 1915-45*. pg. 53

³⁰ Hite, John, and Chris Hinton. *Fascist Italy*. pg. 78

³¹ *Ibid*, pg. 79

Section C: Reflection

This task presented me with various challenges. The main being able to find sources that included historian views. I believe that this was hard since historical accounts during my time period may have been subject to censorship, as the fascist regime tended to do so once they had their power. The other is being objective in my investigation as in constructing arguments and narratives to present in my investigation. I partook in “cherry picking” because it's impossible to include all views and historical accounts within my word limit and in general. I suppose this is the main limitation or difficulties historians face. When examining challenges facing historians versus mathematicians or scientists. I found that mathematics and science investigations usually lead to black and white yes or no answers and are mainly objective. While carrying out my history investigation I have to consider different perspectives of different sources and carry out my own conclusion since the questions in history are not framed as yes or no questions. That requires perspective gathering. The role of historians is to draw conclusions by considering perspectives in their justifications to why they drew their conclusions. It doesn't matter what their conclusions they draw are, as long as they are grounded in historical knowledge and perspective gathering. I found this notion as the most valuable take away from my investigation process.

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Appencies:

Appendix A: Extract of a cartoon from: Hite, John, and Chris Hinton. *Fascist Italy*. John Murray, 1998.

SOURCE 4.19 A 1924 cartoon from the Italian underground newspaper *Becco Giallo*



Appendix B: Speech by Benito Mussolini assuming his right as dictator of Italy taken from: Hite, John, and Chris Hinton. *Fascist Italy*. John Murray, 1998.

SOURCE 4.17 Extracts from Mussolini's speech to the Chamber, 3 January 1925 (reported in the parliamentary record)

The speech I am going to make may not be classifiable as a parliamentary speech

...

I here declare, before this chamber, and before the whole of the Italian people, that I, I alone, assume full political, moral and historical responsibility for all that has happened. (Most lively and repeated applause; many shouts of 'We are all with you! We are all with you!') ... If Fascism has been nothing more than castor oil and the club and not a proud passion of the best Italian youth, the blame is on me. If Fascism has been a criminal association, then I am the chief of this criminal association (vigorous applause). If all the violence has been the result of a particular historical, political, and moral atmosphere, the responsibility is mine, because I have created this atmosphere with a propaganda from the days of intervention down till today ...

When two irreducible elements are in conflict, the solution is force ... In history there never has been any other solution, and there never will be ...

You thought Fascism was finished because I was restraining it, that it was dead because I was punishing it and because I had the audacity to say so. But if I were to employ the hundredth part of the energy in unleashing it that I have used in restraining it, you would understand then (vigorous applause). But there will be no need for this, because the government is strong enough to break the Aventine's sedition completely and definitely (vigorous, prolonged applause). Gentlemen, Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary (lively applause).

You may be sure that within the next 48 hours after this speech, the situation will be clarified in every field (vigorous, prolonged applause). Everyone must realise that what I am planning to do is not the result of personal whim, of a lust for power, or of an ignoble passion, but solely the expression of my unlimited and mighty love for the fatherland (vigorous, prolonged and reiterated applause. Repeated cries of 'Long live Mussolini!').