

Skills Supplement

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Answering Source-based Questions

The rise of Mussolini

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FOR MANY STUDENTS HISTORICAL SOURCES bring the subject alive. They are also an essential part of many AS and A2 modules. Examiners, however, frequently comment on how students do not tackle source-based examination questions well. This article aims to give some general advice, and then to examine some sources on one of the central events in the History of Fascism, the March on Rome in October 1922.

General advice for source work

The precise nature of source questions varies slightly across the three examination boards, but there are certain key skills that history students need to foster to enable them to analyse sources.

- COMPREHENSION.** This involves understudying what the source or sources mean. Generally, such questions are low tariff, and long answers are not expected. In your answers you should try to paraphrase relevant parts of the source, and not use long quotations, as copying out sections does not illustrate understanding.
If you are asked what a source tells you, you may need to consider what the source implies, or what can be inferred from it.
You could be asked to explain the reference to something. This requires more than just identification of the matter, but a brief discussion of why the source refers to that aspect.
- COMPARISONS.** These can be more challenging questions, requiring you to contrast what one source says with others. You normally will be asked to compare the knowledge contained, but might also need to compare the reliability and value of the sources for a particular purpose.
- STYLE AND TONE.** Some questions directly ask about how the source is written, for example, the language used, its style, the techniques employed, or the overall tone. Tone can be seen as the overall atmosphere, and includes analysing both particular words used, and techniques.
- ORIGINS.** There may be questions just on this aspect, or assessment of this may be needed to discuss wider issues. It is important to use all aspects of its origins, especially points specifically given to you. The exam paper frequently gives considerable detail about the source; that information is provided to help you, so do use all relevant parts.
- RELIABILITY** for a particular purpose. Assessing a source's reliability will involve examination of its content. This should cover not just what is said, but what can be inferred from it, and also important omissions, that is,

something that one might have expected to be in it, but is not. Also consider whether there are any internal inconsistencies. One can also assess reliability in terms of the source's origins, and in relation to other sources, and your wider knowledge.

- VALUE** for a purpose. This is often the key overall issue that establishes how the source will contribute to historical understanding. In many respects, as Chart 2 shows, it is based upon analysis of all the aspects identified above.

Chart 1. Source analysis

This is a scheme for source analysis. You would need to leave yourself a lot more room for the analysis column.

Area	Questions to consider	Analysis
Provenance Type	Who produced it? Position, beliefs, etc What sort of source? When? How? Why? Audience? Purpose?	
Content (1) (facts/opinions)	What does it say?	
Content (2) (more subtle)	What can be inferred from it? Any inconsistencies? Gaps: what might it contain but does not?	
Language, style, tone	Study and select particular words and phrases. Emotive or neutral? What techniques used, such as repetition? Overall atmosphere	
Reliability (for a purpose)	(See also sections 1, 2, 3) Author? Internal inconsistencies? Emotive? Biased? Corroborated by other sources? Accurate compared to other knowledge?	
Value (for the purpose) Strengths / Limitations	(See 1, 2, 4) What does it tell us about: (a) the author; (b) events covered; (c) attitudes at time, etc Does it provide new or corroborating information? How does it fit in with existing knowledge? How representative? Did the source itself have an impact? Overall evaluation: how might it contribute to historians' account?	

as the battle in October 1918 where Italy beat the Austrians. To explain fully the reference, identify how this was, misleadingly, portrayed as a great victory, showing the might of the Italians. Explain how the Fascists liked to link themselves to the soldiers and spirit which won that victory in order to win support.

- Using source A and your own knowledge, explain Mussolini's tactics for gaining power. (10 marks)

Here you need to use the clear evidence in the source of how Mussolini was determined to get power, either legally or by seizing it. He used the threat of mass action to get appointed, and claimed that this would be justified as Fascism represented all that was best in Italy. In order to display your own knowledge you could explain how Mussolini did not just want to become a minor part of yet another new government, but for Fascism to dominate the government. You could also explain how there was an element of bluff in Fascist threats as Mussolini exaggerated the strength of the movement, and how his tactics worked.

- Compare the impression given of the Fascists in Sources C, D and E. (10 marks)

With comparative questions it is far more effective to compare the sources directly, rather than to summarise what each source says, and then make your comparison. It is a useful tactic to use directly comparative words like 'whereas'. Thus, you could identify how whereas Source C shows considerable disorganisation within the Fascists with the leaders unable to communicate with their followers, who are divided, Source E implies that Fascism is a powerful, organised movement as it 'cannot be contained', and is gaining power throughout Italy. Similarly, whereas Source C identifies how the Fascists are poorly supplied, and Source D refers to them as panic stricken over the prospect of fighting, in Source E they are identified as having taken some police headquarters by assault, and others without resistance, which suggests considerable strength and organisation. Both D and E indicate how the Fascists boasted about their power ('Swagger; sweeping Fascist triumph' in D, and 'the movement cannot be contained'; 'tremendous victory' in E).

Although you are not directly asked to evaluate the sources it would probably be useful to make a *brief* comment that the diary extracts of Source C are more likely to be accurate than Source E given its propagandist nature. Explain how Source D is clearly hostile to the Fascists, and is written by someone present at the time, but with hindsight.

- How useful is Source B as evidence of the aims of Fascism? (10 marks)

This question explicitly requires you to make an evaluation of the source. To do this you need to identify what the source says directly about aims, such as how Fascism intends to replace the current corrupt and inefficient politicians who are, as the term 'political class' implies, self seeking, with a truly national force who will restore 'order and discipline', and Italy's greatness, both economically and militarily, freeing her from its current problems. Then you could make a judgement on this, probably that this is a good summary of the overall impetus behind Fascism. As it is a formal

proclamation it is clearly indicative of how the Fascists wanted to be seen in order to gain support. It also shows how they want to gain power not by fighting against the Army and Police, but by winning them over to their cause. However, as it is a public proclamation it may not indicate other less attractive aspects of the Fascists' aims, such as personal ambition, nor the extent to which they were divided, with more socialist and conservative elements within a diverse movement. Furthermore, as a brief proclamation it does not go into any detail as to their aims. You could also comment on the emotive tone of the source, with its reference to Roman glory, the Italian war dead, and God, and the use of extreme language like 'passion', 'impulse', 'determined battle', 'struggle' which confirm its value as indicating the extent to which Fascism was a movement exploiting a general mood of disillusionment and offering a simple image of national rebirth, rather than a sophisticated political programme.

- Using all the sources and your own knowledge, explain how far you agree that the Fascists came to power mainly because of their own strengths. (24 marks)

Most examinations end with questions like this which require use of most or all sources and own knowledge to make a sophisticated judgement. In many cases, as here, this final question builds on some of the ideas covered in earlier questions. That is why such questions should always be done at the end. You must, however, take care to leave enough time. With nearly half the marks for the question you should leave yourself roughly the same proportion of time to answer it.

You really need to treat these questions almost like an essay, and plan your answer carefully. You should have enough time to make a brief note about what each source says about Fascist strengths (and weaknesses), so that you can then merge these points with your own knowledge. It would also be impressive if you demonstrated clear criteria by which to assess the strength of Fascism, for example, in terms of support, clarity and relevance of aims, leadership, strategy and tactics, resources, organisation. At the same time note what each source says, if anything, about other reasons, apart from their strengths, why the Fascists came to power.

It is important that you do not turn this into a general essay on why Fascism came to power, but respond to the exact question set. So, after you have jotted down the above points, start writing your answer by assessing the strength of Fascism and try to write about half to two-thirds of your answer about this. Then make sure you address the 'mainly' aspect by discussing other reasons why Fascism came to power, such as the weakness and mistakes of the Italian government, the disillusionment with the Peace settlement (and how, as Source B shows, this was exploited by the Fascists), the fear of socialism, etc. Try and make judgements about importance throughout your answer, not just a simple statement at the end.

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