

The many problems and failures of Liberal Italy led the establishment to turn to Mussolini

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Summary: At first sight it seems puzzling that Mussolini came to power so long before Hitler. After all, conditions seemed far more likely to produce a revolution in Germany rather than Italy in the early 1920s. Nevertheless, Italians had significant economic and nationalistic grievances, the Communists appeared to pose a real threat and constitutional change helped to destabilise the existing system. There was virtually a civil war in the provinces and the Italian establishment was willing to co-operate with the Fascist party in October 1922, when Mussolini became prime minister. Nevertheless, this early, unplanned accession to power helped to shape the nature of the Fascist regime over the next period.

Questions to consider

- ♦ Why, at first sight, might it seem that Germany and not Italy was ripe for revolution in 1919-23?
- ♦ How severe were the various problems that faced Italy in the immediate post-war period?
- ♦ Do you accept the interpretation that the Fascists seized power at the local level but were presented with it at the national?
- ♦ Why did establishment figures believe they could control Mussolini in October 1922?
- ♦ Which features of Fascist rule in 1922-29 stemmed from the nature of Mussolini's accession to power?

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS WHICH STUDENTS most frequently ask is, 'Why did Mussolini and Italian Fascism come to power so much more quickly than Hitler and German National Socialism?'. It is a good question. Both Mussolini's Fascist movement and Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' party (originally the DAP) were founded early in 1919, yet whereas Mussolini had been appointed prime minister of Italy on 29 October 1922, Hitler did not achieve the equivalent German office of Chancellor until 31 January 1933. In this article, therefore, I shall answer the question as completely as possible. In addition, I shall briefly consider what the consequences of Italian Fascism's early rise to power were to be for the regime which was subsequently established.

The rise of Italian Fascism

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the speed of Fascism's rise to power is the fact that it was an almost *entirely new political ideology and movement*. In fairness, so was German National Socialism. Whereas movements such as liberal democracy, socialism and communism all existed in some form in the nineteenth century, fascism



This cartoon from Germany, after the 1929 Lateran Treaty with the papacy depicts the King, Victor Emmanuel III, begging Mussolini for some restoration of authority such as that accorded to the Pope

emerged as an ideology and movement only in the twentieth, and then only after the First World War. It could therefore be argued that it did not have the experience and tradition required of a political movement to win power. On the other hand, maybe Italian Fascism's very newness was an advantage, that made it difficult for other Italian politicians to understand it, and to appreciate the danger which it posed to the existing parliamentary institutions in Italy. Giovanni Giolitti, who had been prime minister several times since 1892, included the Fascists in his electoral bloc in 1921; and even though the Fascists managed to win 35 seats in Parliament as a result, he dismissed Fascism as 'fire-works' that would soon burn out.

A comparison with the German Nazis

A further puzzle is the fact that, arguably, conditions in Germany in the early 1920s provided a more promising scenario for a fascist movement to come to power than in Italy. Germany was a defeated nation, humiliated by the imposition of the Versailles Peace Settlement, and the territorial and economic losses which that entailed, and many German people blamed the politicians of the

democratic parties for an alleged 'stab in the back' of the front-line soldiers. In a few weeks it had also gone through a traumatic political change, from a semi-autocratic form of monarchical government - Kaiser Wilhelm II had extensive powers and was a reassuring father-figure - to a fully-fledged democratic republic with votes for women. Add to this the privations and starvation endured by the German people thanks to the Allies' continuation of the blockade during the early part of 1919; the fear of Bolshevism provoked by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and, nearer home, by various attempted Communist seizures of power in the Ruhr, Saxony and Bavaria; then the experience of hyperinflation of 1923 when you needed a barrow-load of marks to buy a loaf of bread, and you have the 'Weimar syndrome' (after the name given to the new form of the German state from 1919 onwards), the classic set of conditions in which fascist movements flourished and in which some came to power. So, in theory at least, National Socialism should have come to power in Germany in the early 1920s ...

The Italian situation

Italy, on the other hand, was a *victorious* not defeated power at the end of the First World War, and had acquired, not lost, territory as a result. Italy had not gone through dramatic institutional change: its major institutions had not collapsed in the wake of war as in Germany and Austria-Hungary, not to mention Russia in 1917. It remained a constitutional monarchy with an essentially parliamentary form of government. It was suffering from the usual economic and social problems created by the First World War, but they were not as serious as those in Germany, and though many Italians were worried by the threat of Bolshevism, the Communists in Italy made no serious attempt to seize power. So why did Mussolini and Fascism come to power so quickly?

In the first place, though Italy had been victorious in the First World War that victory had been painfully earned. Even worse, many Italians believed that they had been cheated by their Allies - Britain, France and the USA - of just territorial gains, especially from the German and Turkish empires, at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. A particular grievance was the fact that the town of Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia), with a slender Italian-speaking majority, had been awarded to the new Kingdom of Yugoslavia and not to Italy. This prompted Gabriele D'Annunzio, a war-time hero to lead a group of Italian ex-commando troops, the *arditi*, to seize Fiume by force in 1920. So many Italians talked bitterly about their 'mutilated victory' and the right-wing parties in Italy, the Nationalists and Fascists, made a lot of political capital out of blaming this on the weakness of the ruling liberal-conservative politicians.

Though Italy did not experience the trauma of dramatic and sudden political change that happened elsewhere in Europe at the end of the First World War, it did go through a process of political transition in the early 1920s, from a system of parliamentary government dominated by small cliques using traditional methods to manipulate both members of Parliament and the elec-

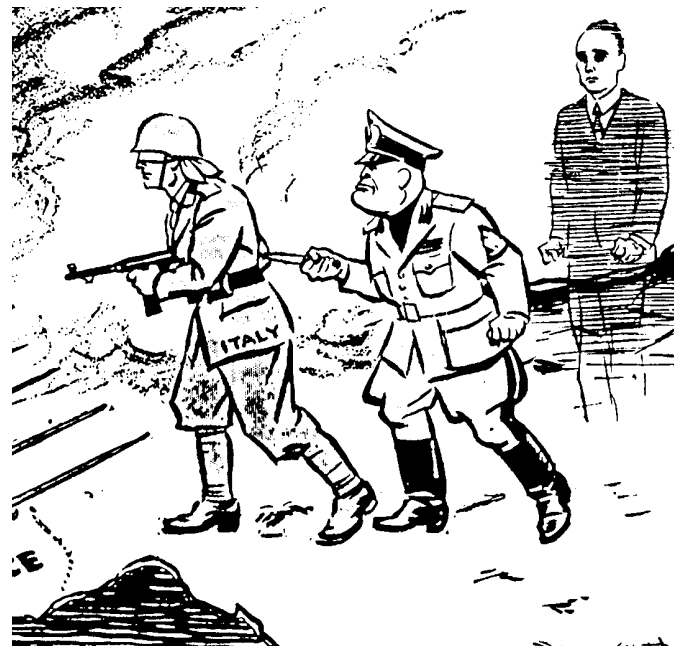
TIMELINE	Mussolini and the rise of Italian Fascism
1919	March Foundation of the first <i>fascio</i> , nucleus of the Fascist movement, in Milan
1920	Summer Occupation of the factories
1920	Autumn 'Agrarian Fascism' takes off as a mass movement in the small towns and countryside of northern and central Italy
1921	May Mussolini and 35 other Fascists are elected to Parliament
1922	Oct Mussolini gives his ultimatum to the authorities in Rome Organisation of the Fascist March on Rome Mussolini forms a government
1923	Jan The Fascist squads are absorbed into a national militia with an oath of allegiance to Mussolini July The electoral law is changed
1924	April The Fascist-based electoral alliance wins a parliamentary majority June Matteotti crisis
1925	Jan Mussolini announces that he will create a dictatorship
1926	Non-Fascist parties, trade unions and newspapers banned
1927	New electoral law
1929	Signing of the Lateran Pacts with the Church

torate, to a fully-fledged system of parliamentary democracy in which the bulk of the seats in Parliament were now held by modern, mass political parties. As a result of the introduction of proportional representation, the electoral system whereby the numbers of seats which a party gains in Parliament is in direct proportion to the percentage of votes which it wins in the country as a whole, the dominant parties in the Italian Parliament after 1919 elections were the Socialists and the Catholic People's party with 150 and 100 seats respectively, out of 500. It now became very difficult to manage a parliamentary system of government: the Socialists, who believed that a proletarian revolution was just around the corner and that 'all we have to do is wait', refused to participate in government at all and though the People's party did do so, the uneasy alliance between the MPs of that party and the liberal-conservative political leaders like Nitti, Giolitti and Bonomi was like mixing oil and water. The MPs of the People's party had very clear principles and precise ideas about which policies were needed to deal with Italy's problems, whereas the other political leaders preferred compromises, concessions and shady deals: one might even say that their priority was hanging on to power itself. In the four years between the end of the war and Mussolini's appointment as prime minister there were no less than *six* short-lived, unstable coalition governments, each less able than the previous one to deal with Italy's serious problems. It could thus be argued that parliamentary government had effectively broken down before

provincial governors, could report that the local organisations of Fascism had ceased violence and were obedient to the State. So, ironically, Mussolini had to seize state power in order to bring his unruly followers to heel! Nor did the very short time between the founding of the first *fascio* in March 1919 and Mussolini's appointment in October 1922 give the Fascists time to develop a full-blooded ideology before they came to power: there was to be no clear enunciation of its ideas until the publication of Mussolini's article 'The Doctrine of Fascism' in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1932. Neither did it allow time to build a proper party machine, complete with youth organisations and cadres of specialised officials ready to take over the appropriate parts of government, as the Nazis were able to do in Germany after 1933.

The Fascist party's lack of a strong parliamentary position and widely-based popular support meant that they were obliged to rely upon other parties, and this nearly meant the end for them in June 1924 when the suspicion that Mussolini was involved in the murder of the Socialist leader, Giacomo Matteotti, gave rise to popular revulsion against the Fascist government. In the longer term, it meant that the whole Fascist regime, constructed after 1922, was essentially a hybrid of the old and the new, a compromise between Fascism and the establishment - what the deceased Italian historian Alberto Aquarone has described as the 'block of consensus'. Only when Mussolini reached an agreement with the Church in the Lateran Pacts of 1929 could the process of the *consolidation* of Fascist power be said to have been complete. Whereas it took six and a half years, from October 1922, for Mussolini to establish his dictatorship, it took Hitler just over 18 months, from his appointment as Chancellor until his swearing in as *Führer und Reichskanzler* in August 1933, following Hindenberg's death, to consolidate Nazi power.

The rapid rise to power meant a long-term weakness for the Fascist regime, the survival of elements in the 'block of consensus' beyond Mussolini's control. When those elements became disillusioned by Fascism's unending string of military defeats, culminating in the Allied invasion of Sicily, it was not difficult for the King, backed by the armed forces, to overthrow Mussolini on 25 July 1943.



The Socialist Matteotti's death in 1924, and the question of the extent of Mussolini's involvement in it, remained an issue. This cartoon, published after the Italian invasion of France, 1940, suggests that many more Italians will die from Mussolini's deeds

FURTHER READING: P. Morgan, *Italian Fascism, 1919-1945*, Macmillan, 1995; P. Morgan, *Italy 1915-1940*, Sempringham, 1998 and J.F. Pollard, *The Fascist Experience in Italy*, Routledge, 1998.

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Mussolini and the Rise of Italian Fascism by John Pollard
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