

# Mussolini and fascism essay sample



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The rise of Benito Mussolini and his fascist ideology from conception to acquisition and consolidation of office, was not the product of any single factor, but did in fact have a variety of contributory circumstances and events which ultimately led to the creation of a fascist state. Not only was Mussolini assisted in his political ambitions by incompetent opposition, but there were also a large number of pre-existing conditions that facilitated the growth of an extremist system. Post-war Italian politics and social attitudes were somewhat reminiscent of Germany's Weimar Republic; there was a general feeling of disillusionment and frustration with the parliamentary system (which was one of ineffective proportional representation).

In this time of political uncertainty, it was through his ability to play to the crowd and make popular or politically strategic policies to the public, and to the Roman Catholic Church that Mussolini was able to attract widespread support. Once Mussolini had acquired the support of the general public, he staged his most prolific and extravagant political exploit, his 'march on Rome' - a tremendously successful bluff during which he was able to seize power. A key factor in his consolidation of power was the Acerbo Act of 1923, which guaranteed the majority party in parliament two thirds of all seats, regardless of the degree of that majority. The fascists easily gained a majority of votes in the following elections due to a general desire for strong leadership. Once Mussolini had gained a majority in parliament he took further steps to assure a permanency of that majority by; suppressing all opposition parties through murder, exile and changes to the constitution, through the abolishment of local government and the implementation of localised fascism, a supervised education system where-by children were

indoctrinated into the fascist ideology, and the dissolution of workers unions in exchange for increased work benefits promised by the state. Last, but not least, Mussolini aligned his party with the Roman Catholic Church through the Lateran Treaty of 1929.

One of the main factors that affected Mussolini's rise to power was his widespread public support, and a major aspect of his popularity was the Italian peoples disillusionment at the current parliamentary system. The public perception of the government was that it was designed to prevent decisive leadership through its implementation of proportional representation; it was incapable of protecting the national economy in allowing massive unemployment and decreased value of the lira (and therefore increased costs of living), they felt frustrated that Italy had not been awarded the territories assured to her by the Allies, and they felt angry that the Italian government had given up territories that they had gained, such as Fiume. Mussolini promised a strong and decisive government that would contrast against the weak and feeble governments of the day, and this decisiveness was a popular notion. So a collaboration of disappointment at the gains made from the peace settlements and the perceived weakness of the governments role in assuring Italian benefit, and the perceived negligence of the government in maintaining the Italian economy to avoid the depression, led to a distinct atmosphere of disillusionment and frustration. But this public animosity toward the government was by no means the only contributory factor that led to Mussolini's rise popularity – although a major feature was the incompetence and ineffectiveness of anti-fascist factions of government.

Although there were undoubtedly a copious abundance of factors that contributed to the rise of fascism, by far the most obviously facilitating of these was the unstable political infrastructure of post war Italy, the ineptitude of which can largely be attributed to a dysfunctional system of proportional representation. This system of government induced an atmosphere of discord whereby no party was able to establish a decisive leadership, relying instead upon coalition to take power.

The divided political climate however prohibited the formation of any cohesive government, leaving instead a cumulation of squabbling parties that refused to cooperate with each other - the communists refused to cooperate with the socialists, and the socialists refused to cooperate with the nationalists (the frustration of which eventually led to the resignation of Giolitti - nationalist Prime Minister from June 1920 to July 1921). The net effect was that anti-fascist forces within the government were sufficiently inept in their ability to form a stable government by collaboration - and thereby in their opposition of fascism - that in May 1921 Giolitti held elections so that the fascists could gain some seats in parliament in order to support his government. It was the dysfunctional and inept nature of the government that led to a growing contempt for the parliamentary system, and a desire for strong leadership - Mussolini promised precisely this, and through various means expressed his own contempt for the system, and was able to attract widespread support.

It was Mussolini's ability to appeal to the people by playing on the popular front and exploiting the national mood that allowed him such success. Upon the formation of the Italian Communist Party, many Italians (particularly

property owners) felt somewhat objectionably convinced that some left-wing revolution was taking place – here Mussolini stood to gain more popular support with his strong anti-communist stance. His defiant stance against communism benefited him greatly, facilitating the support of the Roman Catholic Church following several mollifying speeches aimed at appeasing and pacifying the Pope, to counter Mussolini's previously hostile attitude towards the Church. Not only did this appeal to the Papacy, but also struck a chord with the Italian people, who were still frustrated and fearful of a communist uprising.

It was partly the frustration and disillusionment of the Italian people that led to a wave of strikes during 1919 and 1920, from which Mussolini benefited in two ways: through contrived shifts in support from the factory workers (whom he supported in order to secure votes), to the private enterprise and property owners (in order to both secure votes and attract financial support from wealthy business interests); and through the exploitation of events as a demonstration of the weakness of parliament. The public perception of the rampant looting and rioting that accompanied the strikes was that the government was incapable of preventing the looting and discord, and it was Mussolini's shared contempt for the government's policy against the strikes that led him to be revered and supported by property owners in general as a guarantor of law and order, and he himself made it known that his aim was to "rescue Italy from feeble government". Indeed, during the attempted general strike of 1922 instigated by the socialists, Mussolini demanded that if the government hesitated to suppress the strike, that he would do so himself with his black-shirts. When the strike collapsed due to lack of support,

Mussolini was able to masquerade as a defender against Communism, and shortly after staged his 'march on Rome' - a tremendously successful bluff during which he was able to seize power.

Once Mussolini had secured such widespread public support he sought to gain some legitimate power, and so came his infamously prolific 'march on Rome' in which he ordered over 50 000 of his black-shirt militia to converge on the capital, and several other smaller contingents of fascist militia to occupy several important towns to the north. For this bold, audacious feat Mussolini was rewarded greatly - far from a battle between the fascists and the regular army and police in which the black-shirts would have surely been dispersed, Mussolini was invited to Rome by King Victor Emmanuel III, to form a new government. Mussolini had seized power, but contrary to popular rumour it had been obtained legally with merely the threat of violence persuading the king's appeasement. Much historical debate has taken place over the king's motives for allowing this fascist takeover, as the uprising could have easily been defeated by the army or police, but despite this, Victor Emmanuel refused to declare a state of emergency to quell the insurrection.

It has been suggested that a number of influences led to his decision to allow a fascist government, first and foremost was a lack of confidence in Prime Minister Luigi Facta. Aside from this lack of confidence, Emmanuel was also concerned at the possibility of insubordination from fascist sympathisers within the army, and in this same vein of concern he was also worried about the possibility of an abdication forced by his generals in favour of his cousin, the Duke of Aosta, to be king. Emmanuel may also have had concerns about <https://assignbuster.com/mussolini-and-fascism-essay-sample/>

the possibility of a long and drawn out civil war in the event of a failed attempt to trounce fascism. Alternately, it is entirely possible that following Mussolini's abandonment of the republican component of his programme, that the king was genuinely partial to Mussolini. Regardless of his reasoning, the effect of his not declaring a state of emergency was to empower Mussolini, and place him in office. Once Mussolini had managed to seize some power, he took steps to increase the magnitude of those powers, and to gain a monopoly over the parliamentary system.

It is important to note that directly preceding the march on Rome, Mussolini was still only the leader of the majority coalition in parliament, of which the fascists only had four of the twelve seats of cabinet, and so his powers were somewhat limited - however, the king had granted him special powers to last until the end of 1923 in order to affect some change. This was the Acerbo Act (November 1923) and guaranteed the majority party in parliament a full two thirds of all seats, regardless of the extent of that majority. This majority was easily won by the fascists in the 1924 elections, which resulted in 404 seats going to the fascists, and only 107 to their opposition - an easily explicable result given the rising popularity of Mussolini, who's government was expected to contrast sharply against the weakness of past minority governments as a strong, decisive leadership.

Once the Acerbo Act was in place Mussolini took some major steps in assuring the legality of his totalitarian regime, including the suppression of all other political parties through murder, exile and changes to the constitution. As the fascist stranglehold on Italy increased, so did the number of amendments to the constitution; in 1925 it was decided that the Prime

Minister would only be responsible to the king, in 1926 an amendment was made such that the Prime Minister could rule by decree - thus surpassing the legal requirement of discussion in parliament (the important matters came to be decided upon by the Fascist Grand Council, which was dictated by Mussolini - by then Il Duce). The electorate was also vastly reduced from around ten million Italians to around three million of the richest Italians (primarily Mussolini's electorate), to ensure the democratic nature of government did not impede upon his totalitarianism.

Furthermore, local government was all but abolished - elected town councils and mayors disbanded, and instead towns were run by Rome appointed officials, but the real power of local government lay in the hands of local fascist party bosses - the ras. This hailed the implementation of localised fascism, and therefore the augmented saturation of the Italian people in fascist ideology, which began to affect them in a direct manner as the ras enforced fascist policy at an intimate level through these micro-governmental institutions. In order to secure his position as Il Duce however, Mussolini had not only to politically conquer Italy, but also to conquer the hearts and minds of his people, and although local fascist government policy began this process, Mussolini needed more.

He took steps to impose his totalitarian system of government on the Italian people, and attempted to permeate every level of society with his ideology. Strict censorship was enforced in the press and in entertainment, with either bans placed on anti-fascist entities or changes in management to fascist supporters. Along with this censorship which is a central aspect of any totalitarian state, came a 'revision of education', and the close supervision



of all educational institutes. Not only was the content of the educational material supervised, but the manner in which it was taught was also effected. Teachers were required to wear uniforms, and pupils were encouraged to 'dob-in' unpatriotic teachers who were not showing appropriate enthusiasm for the fascist party and its ideology. Furthermore, youths were obligated to join government youth organizations.

The purpose of this total immersion in fascist propaganda was to indoctrinate youths and establish a new generation of fascists who would remain loyal to the fascist ideology. Mussolini realised the importance of both propaganda and youth support, seeing that the children were the future and it was in the interest of the party to indoctrinate them into the ideology of Il Duce. He continued to infiltrate the lives of his people by implementing the dissolution of workers unions, and substituting the Corporate State into its place as the governing body of trade and industry. The concept was that the state would dictate the nations economy, and workers would accept the loss of freedom to strike for the compensated of benefits such as free Sundays, annual paid vacation, social security, and cheap holidays. This was another control mechanism that was used in order for the fascist party to obtain more power and assert its influence over Italian industry, in doing so Mussolini attempted to control the economy and thus increase the influence of fascist. It was through these techniques that Mussolini hoped to permeate every aspect of Italian life, and in doing so consolidate his power enduringly - but there was one last anomaly which he had to right before his state would be stable, the Roman Catholic Church.

The Church had been hostile towards Italy since 1870 when territories belonging to the Papacy were stripped and incorporated in the new Italian kingdom, and its hostility was only heightened by irritation and aggravation over the increasingly totalitarian nature of Italian politics. Mussolini however, saw the power of the church and realised that in order to fully secure his place as Il Duce, he would have to align Italy with the Roman Catholic Church. So in 1929 the Lateran Treaty was signed - an agreement by which Italy acknowledged the Vatican City as a sovereign state and accepted Catholicism as the official religion of Italy, and promised compulsory religious education in all schools (which was incidentally phased out as the state progressed). In return the Papacy recognised the kingdom of Italy, and in doing so completed one of the most important final stages of the consolidation of Mussolini's dictatorship.

Mussolini exploited several key aspects of the social and political climate in Italy during the twenties, and his wiliness and public appeal ultimately led to the establishment of the fascist state. His rise was facilitated by the ineffectiveness of his opposition in collaborating in a united effort to quell fascism, and it was this ineptitude and impotence - bred of the inherent flaws of proportional representation in any unstable state - that led the Italian people to disillusionment and frustration at the current parliamentary system, and thereby to the support of Mussolini, who's party promised a strong decisive government. Furthermore Mussolini was able to masquerade as a defender against communism in his opposition to the socialist led strikes of 1922, and subsequently seized power in his prolific march on Rome.

There were a number of events that constituted the consolidation of Mussolini's power, but the fundamental root of his power was to be found in the initial implementation of the Acerbo Act in 1923 which enabled him to carry his motions to amend the constitution. Following this, he utilised much propaganda and censorship in order to indoctrinate the people of Italy (particularly the youths) into the fascist ideology. He then placed restrictions on the function of the economy by implementing his Corporate State by which he hoped to control the Italian economy, and forged amicable relations between the fascist state and the Papacy - a powerful ally. As such, he was able to obtain office and consolidate his position of power in a relatively short period of time; by 1930 this process was almost complete.