

KQ3: Assess the factors that brought Mussolini to power in October 1922

Exam questions about Mussolini's rise to power tend to lend themselves nicely to a 'factors based' essay. They often ask you to assess one factor as being most important. What is more, you can also use some of your learning from key question 2 because one of the factors in Mussolini's rise to power was the legacy of the First World War both economically and politically.

Economic Problems in Agriculture and Industry

Focus on the impacts of the First World War on the economy 1919-1922.

Rise of Socialism and 'biennio rosso'

The 'biennio rosso' refers to the two red years (1919 and 1920) of increased strikes and violence. For example, in September 1920 a dispute over engineers pay led to 400,000 workers walking out of factories in the north. Despite appeals from the factory owners Giolitti stayed neutral. This angered many factory owners and members of the middle classes who thought that this weakness might be opening the door for a communist revolution. There was increasing trade union membership in the countryside as well, and in some areas such as Ferrara and Bologna it was impossible to work without the support of the Socialist Labourers Union. By the end of 1920 a third of the provinces, especially in central and northern Italy were run by Socialists.

However socialist actions were never close to revolution and were often counter productive, encouraging their opponents, or discrediting themselves. For example the general strike against fascism in July 1922 only lasted 2 days before collapsing, but provided a huge propaganda opportunity for the fascists.

Fascism

It is important to note the vague and ever changing aims of the fascists. Only 100 people attended the first meeting in Milan in March 1919. This disparate group was only really united by a hatred of the liberal state and a distrust of the socialists. They failed to win any seats in the November 1919 election.

However providing a response to the socialist threat gave the Fascists increased support, for example in Bologna in November 1920 when a new socialist council was met with a riot. These small *squadristi* used often brutal methods, e.g. forced drinking of castor oil, to oppose the socialists. Over the winter of 1921 80 trade union offices were destroyed with 200 dead, a further 100 were killed in the May election, and a socialist was even beaten up in the chamber of deputies.

By the end of 1921 there were 200,000 fascist supporters, over half ex-soldiers, and many young and middle class. However, the chance of violent revolution seemed slim. Fascism was also becoming more conservative, with more radical left wing ideas dropped, which helped to broaden the parties appeal.

Role of Mussolini

Mussolini was editor of 'Il Popolo', and a powerful, persuasive journalist. He was able to use the fascist violence to his advantage, but was also clever in gaining control over the *Ras* to promote his own position. He skilfully turned fascist violence into part of a 'crusade' to create a better Italy. Moreover, he was able to portray himself to Liberals as the only man able to control such violence, although at times even he could not do so (for example when the *ras* rejected his Pact of Pacification). With the establishment of the National Fascist Party in October 1921, Mussolini was increasingly in control of the fascist movement and was able to impose greater discipline so that the government were not forced to control it. Moreover, Mussolini worked skilfully to reassure the Church about fascism's aims, for example over the Roman question in November 1921. He also gained the support of leading industrialists such as Pirelli.

The weaknesses of the Liberal governments

The First World War had left the Liberals even weaker and more divided (see your notes on KQ2). The adventures of D'Annunzio at Fiume seemed to underline this. The old statesman Giolitti was called upon to form a coalition, but this anti-clerical (anti-church) politician now relied on the votes of many *Popolari* deputies as many Catholics had voted for the church approved party after it was formed in January 1919. *Trasformismo* politics did not work in an age of universal male suffrage.

When the crisis came with the March on Rome, Facta wavered too long to call for martial law, Salandra refused to form a coalition without the fascists, and Giolitti stayed well away from Rome.

Electoral Pact 1921

Giolitti invited Mussolini's candidates onto his list, so that he would be able to form a coalition after the 1921 election. This helped the fascists gain 35 seats. However, Giolitti had been mistaken in his belief that the fascists could be tamed and brought into *trasformismo* politics. Mussolini's withdrawal of their support and fundamentally weakened the Liberals. The divided factions of Salandra, Facta, Orlando and Giolitti could not even get the support of the *Popolari* who were worried about taxes on the church. Indeed there were 3 governments between May 1921 and October 1922, which added to the sense of chaos.

Facta, Role of King and the March on Rome

Mussolini only started planning the March on Rome in October 1922 because he was under pressure from the more radical fascists for a coup d'état (taking power by force). The plans to seize major towns and cities before 30,000 fascists headed to Rome was seen by some as a real attempt to take power. Certainly, by 1922 the *squadristi* did have control of key northern industrial towns. However, for Mussolini they were more political blackmail and he began to personally reassure and appeal to the King. In the end there was no real March on Rome. The liberal government of Facta dithered and only asked the King to allow the use of force against the fascists at the last minute. Although the King agreed, he changed his mind by the next morning. Acting from a mixture of fear, overconfidence, and a dislike of the liberal politicians, the King appointed Mussolini as Prime Minister. The March on Rome that followed, with 70,000 fascists being saluted by the king, was a propaganda exercise rather than a fascist coup d'état.