

KQ2: Assess the role of, and impact on Italy of the First World War

Exam questions on this key question have tended to focus on comparing the seriousness of the problems, the success of the government in dealing with them, or the reasons for the political instability

Neutrality, entry into the war, and the Treaty of London

Italy remained neutral when the First World War began in 1914. Nationalists such as D'Annunzio were upset as they saw the war as an opportunity to gain land

In 1915 Italy left the Triple Alliance and joined the war on Britain and France's side. The agreement was called the Treaty of London, and it promised Italy the return of irredentist lands at the end of the war (these were parts of other countries where most people spoke Italian)

The decision to join the war created a bitter split in the Liberal Party, for example Giolitti was strongly anti-war while Salandra was pro-war.

Prime Minister Salandra used the King's executive power to make Italy join the war, which made the decision even more unpopular with parliament and the people.

(Mussolini quit the socialist newspaper *Avanti* to support the war)

Military

At the start of the war, the Italian army were poorly trained and equipped.

Italy suffered a humiliating defeat at the Battle of Caporetto (1917). The Italian army retreated for 100 miles and 300,000 soldiers were taken prisoner. General Cadorna blamed his troops and executed hundreds, but was then sacked

In October 1918 the Italian army had a great victory at Vittorio Veneto. By now there had been improvements under General Diaz. *Arditi* (commandoes) were using new tactics. Half a million Austrians were taken prisoner. But in truth, Austria-Hungary was already collapsing, and the Italians had only stayed in the war due to British and French military intervention

Economic Effects

The war did cause some benefits for the Italian economy, particularly in the north. By the end of the war Italy had more artillery than Britain, and was building 6500 aircraft a year. Some areas of industry had doubled production funded by cheap government loans. Big companies and their bosses made large profits, for example Pirelli and Fiat (which became the largest commercial vehicle manufacturer in Europe)

However Italy had borrowed heavily from Britain and the USA to pay for the war. The national debt increased from 16 billion to 85 billion lira. The government also printed money which triggered inflation. Prices quadrupled and savings were destroyed. Although rural peasants were pleased that their debts were wiped out, real wages fell by 25%.

The problems worsened at the end of the war when government military spending was suddenly cut back, and strikes spread across the country.

Social Effects

During the war, workers were put under military discipline. This meant that they were not allowed to strike or even move jobs. Hours were long (up to 75 hours) and many women were brought in to replace the men who had joined the army. There was building unhappiness and occasional food riots. For example 50 people were killed in Turin in 1917.

At the end of the war unemployment rose rapidly to over 2 million in 1919. There was a wave of *strikes as military discipline was ended*.

5 million men, mainly conscripts from the countryside, had joined the war. By its end 650000 were dead and over a million were injured. Many were deeply unhappy with life after the war.

Political Effects

The split in the Liberal party over the war led to even weaker coalition governments, with parliament being rarely consulted. For many on the left it was seen as a 'bosses war'. Resentments that had built up under military discipline were expressed in strikes at the end of the war. In 1919 over 1 million people took part in strikes. While over the course of a year the membership of socialist trade unions more than quadrupled to 2 million. Moreover, socialism itself had become more radical, inspired by the communist revolution in Russia in 1917.

The rise of socialism was helped by Prime Minister Orlando's decision to introduce universal male suffrage in 1918. This was done because of the contribution of many ordinary Italian soldiers. However many chose to support the socialists (32% in 1919). The fear of socialism was heightened when the King was heckled in parliament.

Orlando, Paris Peace Conference and the 'Mutilated Victory'

For many people the Paris Peace Conference confirmed the weakness and incompetence of the Liberals. The Italians actually received nearly all the land promised in the Treaty of London (North Dalmatia, Trieste etc) and gained more land than any other country. However, swelled by Italian pride at the victory of Vittorio Veneto, Orlando demanded more land, in particular Fiume. However he was denied this by the Treaty of St Germain. Moreover, the Treaty of Versailles did not give Italy any of Germany's African colonies. As a result many Italians described it angrily as a 'mutilated victory'.

D'Annunzio and the Nationalists

Throughout the war, and especially after the 'mutilated victory', the Nationalists seemed to give an alternative to the weak Liberals and the red threat.

In September 1919 D'Annunzio seized Fiume with 2000 armed men, showing the power of direct action as opposed to political discussion. He was unchallenged by Prime Minister Nitti who was worried that the army would rebel. Eventually, Giolitti signed the Treaty of Rapallo and had him removed, however Italy had been forced to give up yet more land claims, and D'Annunzio had become a popular hero.