

How well did Italian governments deal with internal problems between 1896 and 1915?

Italian Identity

Italy had only been united since 1870. In 1896 only 1 in 15 Italian men were allowed to vote, many could not read or write, and some did not even think of themselves as Italian. There was a strong north/south divide with a poor, agricultural south, where malaria was still responsible for 20% of all deaths.

Italy was still far from a great power. In 1896 the Italian army was humiliated by the Abyssinians (Ethiopians) at Adowa. Moreover, many Italian speakers still lived in Austria, Switzerland and France, in the so-called irredentist lands.

However, national military service and free primary education had helped to increase the sense of Italian nationhood. Moreover, the conquest of Tripoli and Libya in 1911 had boosted national confidence.

Economic and Social Issues

Italy was predominantly an agricultural country. There had been some developments in iron, steel and ship building but this was largely for the military and railways in the north. There was considerable unrest in the 1890s with poverty leading to violence. In 1893, 40,000 soldiers had been used to end violence in Sicily, while in 1898, 100 people lost their lives in violent unrest in the industrial city of Milan alone.

Nevertheless, progress had been rapid; often as a result of government action, for example when the railways were nationalized in 1905. National income rose from 61 billion lira in 1895 to 92 billion in 1915, whilst foreign trade increased 6 fold. Hydroelectric plants and engineering increased in the north. New crops, such as sugar beet, had been introduced in the north alongside mechanization (using machines) and the use of fertilisers.

Taxes on food had been reduced and Giolitti's governments had spent money on improving roads, railways and drinking water supplies. However there was still widespread poverty. Wages were still low, and hours were long compared to the rest of Europe. Benefits were also low. Between 1871 and 1915, 5 million Italians, mainly from the south, emigrated to the USA and South America. Indeed economic improvements only increased the divide between North and South.

Political System

There were not strongly different ideologies amongst the wealthy middle class liberals who ran the country. As a result there was not a party system. Instead there was *trasformismo* politics, where deputies were brought together into governments by influence, alliances and even corruption. As a result, governments were weak. There were 29 Prime Ministers between 1870 and 1922. Governments could be destroyed by domestic and international events, or even personal rivalries. For example in 1911 the Libyan war had caused the coalition of moderate Socialists, Catholics and liberals to collapse.

However, in some ways there was stability. Giovanni Giolitti was Prime Minister for all but 3 of the years 1903 - 1914, and coalition governments had included both moderate Socialists and Catholics. He had also reformed the system by more than doubling the electorate in 1912, so that nearly all adult

men could vote. The English historian Trevelyan, writing before the First World War stated that "nothing is more remarkable than the stability of the Italian kingdom" However, the increased electorate made *trasformismo* increasingly difficult to maintain. When the liberals then split over whether to join the war in 1914, that stability was further undermined

Socialism and Nationalism

Socialists were starting to gain support, especially in the North of Italy. The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) had been set up in 1895. By 1900 it had over 200,000 members and a popular newspaper *Avanti*. They were still a minority and their demands, such as universal male suffrage (right to vote), were quite moderate. However socialism was deeply feared by the middle classes, and by the Catholic Church.

Nationalists were also small in number, but they were influential in the newspapers. Often middle class intellectuals argued that Italy should expand abroad and build an empire to rival Britain and France. They felt contempt for the weakness of the liberals who they believed had failed to make Italy a truly great power, and instead had made deals with socialists and Catholics. For example, they saw the collapse of the coalition government in 1911 over the Libyan war as classic Liberal weakness. Giolitti, they claimed, had been too conciliatory to the socialists. Italy, they argued, needed an authoritarian state.

Italian politics was polarizing. Nearly all men were able to vote by 1914, of who it is thought 70% were illiterate. The elite liberal politicians were rapidly losing out to socialists, nationalists and the Catholics.

Catholic Church

The Catholic Church was hostile towards the liberal governments, as the unification of Italy had seen the Pope lose land and influence (particularly in central Italy). However, faced with the threat of socialism, the Church began to soften its attitude to liberal Italy. From 1909 Catholics were allowed to stand in elections. However there was still a feeling that the liberals were an urban elite who were not interested in the problems of real (poor, rural) Italy. Indeed, they started to push the Church's beliefs in politics, for example in 1913 the Catholic Electoral Union sought guarantees on education and divorce. The head of the union, Count Gentiloni claimed its pressure had strongly influenced the election results in over 200 constituencies.

Could you group any of the examples from this document around Giolitti's reforms or Industrialisation

(Remember, Giovanni Giolitti was Prime Minister on 5 separate occasions)