

How effectively did Mussolini consolidate political power in Italy?

Exam questions on this key question have tended to focus on either how or how effectively Mussolini consolidated his political power. It is important to remember that Mussolini did not seize power in October 1922, he was asked by the King to become Prime Minister and he led a coalition government (less than a third of his senior ministers were fascists). However by 1928 he was 'Il Duce' in an authoritarian Italy.

Weakness of the king

During his premiership Mussolini still met with the King twice a week, but he never asked for advice. The King had shown his weakness over the March on Rome (see KQ3) and his position was further weakened after 1922. To be fair, the King had traditionally been more interested in foreign affairs, and perhaps saw the fascists as a necessary force to resist socialism. However, Mussolini does seem to have overawed the King. Furthermore, the electoral law of 1928 removed the King's right to choose the Prime Minister, making him instead pick from a list of candidates drawn up by the Fascist Grand Council.

Fascist Violence and Control

It would be easy to see Mussolini's consolidation of power as the result of fascist violence: 'castor oil and rubber truncheons' as he put it. In January 1923 the local *squadristi* were brought into a black shirted national militia which gave Mussolini a private army of 30,000 men. He was willing to use violence to consolidate his political power. When parliament voted on the Acerbo law, armed black shirts roamed the chamber. The 1924 election saw blackshirt violence and vote-rigging. Most famously, in June 1924 fascist thugs abducted the leading socialist Matteotti in broad daylight and stabbed him to death.

However, the threat of fascist violence must not be overstated. Indeed Mussolini often gained wider support by presenting himself as a restraining hand. He increased his personal authority over fascism in 1922 by establishing the Fascist Grand Council which controlled policy and appointments. Mussolini hand picked the members of the council, and thus controlled fascism. Moreover the national militia gave Mussolini greater control of local fascists, while being paid for by the state.

Acerbo Law

This July 1923 law meant that the largest party (if it gained a $\frac{1}{4}$ of votes) would get $\frac{2}{3}$ seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The idea was to end the constantly weak coalition governments. It gained overwhelming support, including from liberals such as Giolitti and Salandra. Many saw it as a necessary, short term, measure. It was incredibly helpful to Mussolini in ensuring that he had overwhelming support in parliament without having to win more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of all votes. Although it was not vital, as Mussolini and his right wing allies won 66% of the vote in the 1924 election.

Failure of opposition

Despite fascist violence and vote rigging, in the October 1924 election, the opposition socialists and communists gained 2.5 million votes and 2 major northern cities (Milan and Turin) did not have fascist majorities. Nevertheless, the opposition failed to

provide a real challenge to Mussolini. The clearest example of this is the '**Aventine Secession**' in the summer of 1924. Outraged at the murder of Matteotti, socialists, communists and some *Popolari* MPs walked out of parliament and hoped that the King would sack Mussolini. However, by the end of the year it back fired spectacularly. Mussolini now had less opposition in parliament, and was able to use the crisis to strengthen his position.

Moreover Mussolini was effective at gaining support or at least reducing hostility from other potential rivals, for example reassuring *Confindustria* that he would support big business, and gaining some support from the church with promises of Catholic education in schools and higher payments to priests.

Personal dictatorship

From the start Mussolini was effective at putting himself into key positions being Prime Minister, Minister of the Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs. As Minister of the Interior he was able for example to instruct the police to ignore fascist violence. The Matteotti Crisis allowed him to increase his power by introducing press censorship (July 1924), and banning all meetings of opposition political parties. The *Leggi Fascistissime* (December 1925) banned opposition political powers and free trade unions. At the request of leading fascists, he announced his decision in January 1925 to create a dictatorship. A new secret police was set up, and a special court to try political crimes. Fascist control of local government was increased with elected mayors being replaced with nominated officials known as *podestas*. From 1923 Mussolini had the power to rule by decree on a temporary basis. However by 1926 this had become a permanent right to issue decrees with the full force of law.

Moreover, his position was increasingly strengthened by propaganda that stressed the genius, strength and importance of '*Il Duce*' for Italy. This 'cult of personality' from 1926 portrayed Mussolini as a violin playing, Shakespeare reading, soldiering, sledging, new Caesar – 'Mussolini is always right' as the popular phrase went.

Relative Importance

Clearly Mussolini's political skills played a significant role in consolidating his position. However, the failure of the opposition was key. Not simply because they failed to provide an effective challenge but because the fear of socialism provided a pretext for many of Mussolini's greatest successes. Fascist violence, often directed at socialists, was frequently seen as a necessary response that would end once the threat was controlled. The Acerbo Law was seen as a necessary response to create a government strong enough to deal with the temporary. The failure of the King to sack Mussolini after the 'Aventine Secession' was based on a fear of civil war. The support or acquiescence of potential rivals such as the king or the church came from a belief that the socialist alternative was worse.

These notes have focussed on how he consolidated power. Some exam questions instead focus on how far he consolidated power and created an effective dictatorship. Here are some additional examples that may help you reach a judgment:

Role of the king

- Fascist leaders had forced him to be bolder in establishing a dictatorship during the Matteotti crisis, threatening to withdraw their support.
- Army swore loyalty to King not Mussolini.

Role of Mussolini

- Mussolini rarely consulted other ministers.
- It was claimed that he worked 20 hour days. Instead a lamp was left on while he usually went to bed early.
- Propaganda is a poor way to judge his real strength or effectiveness. Mussolini was quick to claim credit for successes or blame others for mistakes. He thought the public "are stupid, dirty" but many were skeptical.

Elections and parliament

- Free elections ended and many working class people were not allowed to vote at all. Instead elections were rigged to show 98% support.
- Parliament was abolished in January 1939 and replaced by a Chamber of Fasces and Corporations.

Lateran Agreements

- The 1929 agreements between the Church and Mussolini saw the Pope give his active support to Il Duce. The dispute over the papal lands was solved with £30 compensation and the recognition of the 'Vatican City' as an independent state. Catholic RE was made compulsory in schools. The pope would appoint all bishops, but the clergy could not belong to political parties.
- The Agreements show that Mussolini had decided to accept and use the power of the Church, rather than trying to reduce or control it.

Dictatorship?

- There was no wide spread sackings in the civil service, local government or army so most were not fascists especially in the 1920s
- Many in the army leadership and civil service realised that membership of the fascist party was a good way of getting promoted. Both were largely loyal to Il Duce.
- However dozens of judges were imprisoned for failing to support fascists in court cases. Imprisonment without trial became common, and Mussolini would even give his own verdicts and sentences.

Fascism

- There were no party conferences after 1925 and fascists who disagreed with Mussolini were removed in a series of 'purges'
- Potential rivals were removed e.g. Italo Balbo sent to Libya

How would you organise an answer to this style of question?