**THE RISE TO POWER OF MUSSOLINI**

How to use this booklet:

* This is a **summary of the narrative of Mussolini’s Rise to Power** to help you fill in any gaps.
* You should use this as a prompt and support with your class notes and textbook.
* As you work through the booklet, you should be seeking to use the information to support your own analysis.
* The details on the Golden Age of Weimar etc here are primarily of relevance to Paper 3 students.

**a) Build your analysis:**

Remember this equation when revising the rise to power of any of the leaders:

**CHARISMA / APPEAL OF LEADER** (personal qualities, ideology, party strengths)

**+**

**RIGHT CONTEXT** (economic, political, social, cultural challenges facing a country that explain the appeal of the charisma)

**+**

**WEAKNESS OF THE OPPOSTION** (existing government, alternative groups seeking power – e.g. for Hitler the long term issues of Weimar and the backstairs intrigue explain why the existing government fell, but you need to do more to explain why it was Hitler and not the communists who replaced them)

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**RISE TO POWER**

**b) Types of questions:**

Questions will often pick one of the areas above, or a component of them, as the statement to be challenged in the question. By keeping this three part thematic approach clear in your mind you will be able to frame an analytical response to any question that requires this challenge or that is evaluative.

**c) In your revision, complete a table using this structure:**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Analysis (Long / short term is a useful split within each section)** | **Evidence** |
| **Context** |  |  |
| * **Economic** |  |  |
| * **Social/cultural** |  |  |
| * **Political/WW1** |  |  |
| **Weakness of Opposition** |  |  |
| * **Existing government** |  |  |
| * **Rivals** |  |  |
| **Charisma** |  |  |
| * **Of the leader** |  |  |
| * **Of the organisation** |  |  |
| * **Appeal of Ideology** |  |  |

**d) Now start to identify links and connections between them. This will develop your analysis.**

*e.g. The disunity within the left wing of Italy, and their refusal to compromise to work with the liberal parties, meant that it was impossible to form strong coalition governments by the early 1920s. This, coupled with the chaos of the bienno rosso, allowed Mussolini to present himself as the only effective protector of the middle classes and Church.*

**A. The Long Term Weaknesses of Liberal Italy to 1900**

**1. Lack of National Consciousness:** *“We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians”.* The unification of Italy did not really have a historic basis & had been led by the kingdom of Piedmont. Most Italians still put their region first and did not feel particularly loyal to the new state. There was regional friction and division, especially between the wealthier industrialising north and poorer agricultural south.

**2. ‘Legal Italy’ vs ‘Real Italy’:** There was a division between ‘legal’ Italy – the upper and middle classes who controlled all government positions and voting power – and the ‘real’ Italy of everyone else. Only 2 out of 32 million adults could vote until 1912 when the franchise was extended to all males over 30. The long term attitude of ‘real’ Italy to the state was therefore suspicion and separation – there was little support for it within the popular culture.

**3. Catholic Church vs the Liberal State:** The Catholic Church actively encouraged its members not to support the new state (the large papal states had been taken off the church as a result of the unification). Until 1904, Catholics were even forbidden to vote etc. This undermined support for the Liberal State throughout the whole period.

**4. ‘Transforismo’**: Liberal Italy was essentially an oligarchy which ran on bribery, corruption and patronage. The governments, despite changing regularly, followed broadly conservative policies that represented only their class interest – they also used considerable repression in the 1890s to crush left wing workers protests in the north. This meant that the new, growing, industrial working class in particular had no democratic way of expressing their more socialist views – leading to the growth of revolutionary movements.

**B. Medium Term Weaknesses – 1900-1914**

**1. Socio-economic pressures peak**

**a) Working Classes:** From 1896 industrial growth in north-west Italy boomed – new hydro-electrical plants, steel mills, and ship yards grew rapidly, creating a new proletariat who often worked in dangerous conditions created by rapid growth.

**b) Agricultural:** Modernisation of agriculture in the same region, especially the fertile Po Valley, meant that capitalists began to invest on a large scale – their use of new machinery and chemicals gave them a huge advantage over local peasant farmers who, consequently, saw their incomes and standard of living plummet as a result of the competition.

Both of these developments encouraged protest and strikes in the 1890s that were met with aggression by the government. This effectively politicised the working and agricultural masses, leading to the creation of the Socialist Party (PSI) that was the start of a growing left wing movement that essentially opposed liberal Italy.

**c) Failure of Giolitti to bring unity**

Giolitti was a unique political leader of the Liberal State who actually saw the need to make concessions to unify the country – he was Prime Minister from 1903-14.

* Initial success in gaining the support of the PSI – he passed laws improving working conditions, social security and extending the right to vote to the working classes in 1912.
* He wooed the Catholic Church into supporting the Liberal State by allowing them to re-enter the education system where local authorities agreed.
* He sought to increase Italian nationalism through foreign conquest, seizing Libya from Turkey in 1911.

**BUT…** His initial successes were undermined by an economic recession that occurred from 1909, which led to unemployment and worsening working conditions – leading to increasing dissatisfaction and support for groups more extreme than the PSI. His invasion of Libya also infuriated the PSI itself (who saw it as a right wing capitalist war of exploitation), breaking the positive relations he had been creating and pushing them further to the left, ending any further collaboration with the Liberal State. The extension of the vote did not benefit the parties of the Liberal State, but the PSI and PPI (Catholic party formed in 1919).

**The growth of the right** – At the same time, sections of Italian society were increasingly critical of the Liberal State for failing to increase the strength of Italy – ‘Futurism’ developed as an artistic / cultural movement critical of Italy’s failure to become a great power. While Libya was seen to be an achievement, there had been humiliation at the Battle of Adowa in 1896.

By 1914, the Liberal State was facing increasingly powerful opposition from both Left and Right. It had further undermined its power through electoral reform that had increased support for the PSI, at a time when it had been alienated from the Liberal State.

**C. The Impact of WW1**

i) The debate over whether to intervene in WW1 cripplingly divided Italy:

**The Interventionists:**

a) The Nationalists: Politicians of the Liberal State were split. Many, such as the new PM Salandra, felt that it was an opportunity to come in on the winning side (with the Triple Entente) and reap the benefits by seizing land from Austria after the war finished. The Futurists supported this camp with their dream of creating an Italy that included all Italian speakers. The King, Victor Emmanuel, was persuaded to sign the Treaty of London (starting the war) by Salandra without consulting parliament.

b) Ironically, the extreme faction of the PSI – the syndicalist movement - actually supported the war. They felt that this would lead to a worsening of conditions in Italy that would accelerate their desired revolution. Mussolini was a member of this group and founded his newspaper, ‘Popolo d’Italia’ to argue for this. The PSI expelled both him and the other syndicalists from the party. This is key as this new excluded group can be seen as the forerunner of the Fascist Party.

**The Opposers:**

The PSI opposed the war on socialist principles, while the Catholic Church also opposed it on the grounds that they would be fighting fellow Catholics in Austria. Giolitti’s supporters within the Liberal State also opposed the war – he could see no long term benefit to Italy, only great cost.

**ii) The Impact of the War Itself**

The war took a huge toll in Italy. The fighting lasted for three years – during which almost no progress was made. 600,000 Italian casualties were taken and the economy crippled. It crucially destabilised the Liberal State – rather than uniting the people behind a common cause it actually increased social and economic divisions:

* Politicisation of the soldiers – 5m soldiers were increasingly frustrated by their experience of the war. They were exposed to propaganda and political ideas that were heavily critical of the Liberal State, often for the first time.
* Industry was completely focused on the war effort, employing thousands of workers. However, when conflict ended this cease abruptly and left factories with equipment etc that was no longer relevant.
* Inflation began to spiral upwards– prices quadrupled over the course of the war, lowering standards of living. The government became extravagantly indebted – the amount of debt equalled the entire amount that it has spent since 1861!
* As conditions worsened, so did protests and strikes by the workers. The government responded brutally – many were killed in violence. This strengthened support for the PSI and further alienated people from the Liberal State. Trade Unions became increasingly militant and revolutionary.

**D. The Post War Crisis 1919-22**

**1. The Mutilated Victory:** While Italy was regarded as one of the ‘Big 5’ at the Paris Peace conference, it failed to achieve many of its aims. It did receive territory on its Northern border, gaining South Tyrol and Trentino. Nationalists were extremely disappointed as they failed to claim Fiume in the Balkans – a long standing symbol for them.

D’Annunzio, one of the leading Futurists, seized Fiume with a band of armed supporters – he was seen as a great hero and inspiration. This contrasted with the government who did not know how to respond – in the end they negotiated a deal with Yugoslavia making the city independent. This uninspiring compromise lost the government a great deal of support, especially from nationalist soldiers who expected more from their sacrifice. D’Annunzio’s actions, using his private army, was also a tactical lesson for Mussolini.

**2. The ‘Bienno Rosso’ (1919-20):** In addition to the economic consequences discussed, the de-mobilisation of 5m soldiers massively increased unemployment. Trade Unions became increasingly aggressive in their actions as they sought to protect their existing members from lower wages caused by the glut of extra labour. Peasants in the countryside benefitted from the inflation as their debts, which had kept them tied to the big property owners, were wiped out – many began to seek to buy their own land. These developments threatened the position of both the industrialists in the cities and the landlords in the countryside – it increasingly appeared as if the Liberal State would be unable to prevent a communist revolution.

Throughout 1919-20 the unemployed soldiers occupied the farms of the great landowners and, in the cities, trade unions occupied factories all over Italy. Towns were almost completely taken over by the protesters and revolution seemed likely – until Giolitti’s new government gave the unions much more power in the workplace. The Liberal state was teetering on the edge – it had survived the immediate chaos but at the expense of its traditional supporters.

These events explain why the Liberal State, which had never adjusted to the new environment of popular politics it had created through electoral reform, was doomed to fail but does not explain why it was Mussolini who replaced them.

**E. Why did the Socialists fail to take Power during the Bienno Rosso? (weakness of opposition 2)**

Given their growth in popularity from 1900, it is surprising that the left were not able to seize power. However, as was often case with the movement on the left, there was disunity and division around ideology and the desirability of revolution vs election.

* The PSI had been split and weakened by the debate over whether they should support WW1.
* Due to the economic and social pressures after WW1, the left fragmented further. Many of the employed, better off workers and their Trade Unions did not want to see the chaos of revolution – they were willing to wait for democratic change. Meanwhile, others were pushed into the extremes – the PCI (communist) party was formed which agitated for revolution.
* The socialists also refused to cooperate with Giolitti’s Liberals (who wanted to compromise), believing that ‘all they has to do was wait’ (Avanti newspaper) & because they rigidly refused to compromise on their ideology. This meant they could not get a majority and take power legally (parallels with the Socialist and Communist split in Nazi Germany).
* The Left’s popularity in general began to decline among the middle classes as the chaos of the bienno rosso continued, losing them many votes.

**F. Charisma – how did the Fascists Grow in popularity?**

Mussolini was an intelligent propagandist who realised the importance of making his ideology / political programme fit the context of the time.

Early: Prior to WW1, he was a committed member of the SPI and was editor of its newspaper Avanti – he learnt his rhetorical and propagandist skills in this capacity & that you could be flexible in your opinions from week to week without being challenged.

1914: Mussolini’s stance of advocating participation in WW1 was quite influential due to his newspaper. This also meant that the SPI could not tolerate it and he was expelled. This placed him firmly in company with a group of extreme syndicalists who formed the basis of his later movement. He founded *Il Popolo,* his own newspaper (ironically funded by right wing industrialists who liked the pro-war message). Mussolini served in the army and was wounded in 1917 – adding to his credibility later and giving him a sound understanding of the grievances of working class soldiers.

**1918 – The Left Wing Fascists Party**

Mussolini founds the Fascist movement – he uses the term fasci rather than party to indicate it is something new – not a political party but a movement or ‘brigade’. Given his past views, and the fact that his main supporters are revolutionary syndicalists, is not surprising that his first platform was extremely left wing in parts. However, he also attracted the support of nationalists who wanted to see a stronger government. His programme was something unusual – a fusion of left wing economic attitudes and right wing ideas of a strong state:

* Abolish the monarchy and parliamentary system. BUT… establish universal male and female suffrage to elect a National Assembly who would meet to write a more authoritarian constitution for Italy
* Minimum wage and worker involvement in managing factories
* Confiscation of war profits and Church property

However, in the 1919 election the new Fascist movement did dreadfully – winning no seats!

**1920-22 The Right Wing Fascist Party**

Mussolini rebranded his movement to the right. He benefitted from the fear and chaos of the *bienno* rosso – portraying himself as the protector of the propertied elite and the middle classes. His strong man approach won him respectability in the eyes of these groups and attracted support from tough ex-soldiers. He formed them into *squadrista*, units who roamed the countryside fighting and killing the land occupiers and left wing revolutionaries – this was particularly important in northern and central Italy (he got little support in the impoverished south). His *squadrista* also broke strikes and trade unions in the towns, appearing to restore law and order. In total, his men killed some 3000 socialists.

He kept much of his left wing ideas, such as the corporate state, but simply changed his message to the conservative elites – he presented himself as their saviour from communist revolution and simply denied that his movement had ever been opposed to the Catholic Church, which reassured many. He also claimed that he was a monarchist.

In May 1921 elections were held and the Fascists won 35 seats – while a low number, it represented huge growth and also led to Giolitti to seek his support to form a coalition government. While this effort fell apart, it indicated Mussolini’s acceptance into the mainstream.

Mussolini realised he should exploit his new reputation for respectability, signing the Pact of Pacification with the Socialists in Aug 1921 following the end of the *bienno rosso* – this made him appear reasonable. Many key figures in his movement, the Ras, opposed this move – Mussolini took the opportunity to impose his authority over his party by resigning. It was soon recognised that his new status in Italy, his oratorical skills and propaganda gift, made him indispensable – he re-joined the party as undisputed leader, assuming the title *Il Duce*. He now publicly rejected the Pact of Pacification - his movement was now clearly re-branded as extreme nationalist and the only bulwark against communism.

*“Fascism had elements of both Left and Right… it was revolutionary but could sometimes claim to be conservative. It was monarchist but also conservative at different times. It was Catholic, but also anti-clerical…it claimed to be Socialist, but could also be strongly capitalist when he wanted it to be…” historian Mack Smith.*

**G. The Final Steps – March on Rome**

**Bonomi’s** liberal coalition fell apart in Feb 1922 and was replaced by a very weak coalition in 1922 under **Facta**. The socialists/communists decided to strike to highlight the danger of the Fascists – this was a disaster as Mussolini’s *squadrista* effectively broke the strike with violence, increasing his prestige among the middle classes.

Mussolini was intent on being appointed Prime Minister by the king – to do this he needed to do a deal with Facta in order to get a coalition majority in parliament. In order to apply pressure, Mussolini began publicly preparing for a large scale march on Rome. This was a calculated bluff – his army was no match for the professional soldiers of the government. Facta persuaded Victor Emmanuel to call out the army. However, the King lost his nerve and later cancelled the order – Facta resigned in protest.

The final step was for the liberal politicians close to the King to persuade him to appoint Mussolini as Prime Minister – they believed that he could be controlled within the Liberal State. They still had not learnt that the politics of *transformismo* had long since passed. There are clear parallels with the rise to Hitler and the backstairs intrigue of the final days of the Weimar Republic.