

The Rise of Italian Fascism

Kathryn Roberts examines how far Mussolini's rise to power can be attributed to the failures of successive Liberal governments.

In 1922 Mussolini was proclaimed Prime Minister of Italy instigating the birth of a dictatorial regime and an end to the rule of the Liberal governments. The factors contributing towards this event are multiple and widely disputed. On the one hand, the modern historian Martin Blinkhorn describes the problems Italy faced after World War One as the cause of the rise of Fascism emphasising, "post war economic crises, mass demobilisation...acute social unrest"¹ but on the other, the importance of the role of Mussolini and King Emmanuel has also been stressed. However, for a convincing case to be made one must look at the problem in the longer term. The continual failings of the numerous Liberal governments from the unification of Italy itself in 1870, exacerbated by the impact of the First World War, were the main reasons why Italy rapidly degenerated into a totalitarian state.

Dennis Mack Clark's assertion that "fascism was not inevitable ... the only way to understand why Italy became Fascist is to study its detailed history"² may be evaluated in three fundamental ways: by examining the long-term impact of social, political and economic changes that the Liberals initiated. In support of Clark's claim a strong case can be made for Italy's social problems since 1870 undermining the integrity of the Liberal state and paving the way for

the rise of fascism in 1922. The elite dominated the unification process and as they had not aimed to include the backward south in the process they neglected their growing problems and were not committed to the major social reforms that were essential. The chronic poverty, particularly prevalent in the South, was worsened by limited spending on social reforms and soaring taxes, the highest in Europe. The mass of Italian people failed to identify with the new state: only allowed 2% of the population was allowed to vote in 1870. Full male suffrage did not occur until. Political elections were often altered, as the elites wanted to retain power for themselves. This resulted in parties failing to reflect the people's wishes or to reduce their social problems, which amplified the growing resentment towards the government.

The wealthy and educated elite led a corrupt government where political alliances played a dominant part. The fragile and fluid loyalties of the politicians led to an ineffective and inconstant 'trasformismo' form of politics causing their unpopularity to increase. Between the years of 1870 to 1922 there were 29 Prime Ministers in Italy reflecting a rapid turnover of governments, rendering them inefficient in improving the situation both economically and socially. Controversial issues were avoided as comparatively minor matters could bring down governments.

We should not ignore the positive achievements of the Liberal State

¹ Martin Blinkhorn, p44

² M.Clark, p260

dating right back to Unification, although these have been overstated by some historians. Mark Robson expresses the significance of the Liberal governments in keeping Italy united for 40 years, gaining a small empire (consisting of Libya, Eritrea and the Somaliland) and sponsoring education for the masses but in comparison with other European countries, such as Britain, these gains were quite trivial. One could argue that although the government was corrupt, the liberal politicians cannot be held fully responsible, as it was a 'natural' part of Italian life and still is today. However the liberals made little effective effort to change this system to improve the lives of Italians.

Economic factors also back up Clark's case for looking at Mussolini's rise in the long-term. The Liberals failed to attempt to transform the economy, which remained backward and unprepared for the World War One, which was one of the principal reasons Italy suffered an economic depression post-war, giving Fascism an opportunity to gain mass support. Economically Italy was far behind the countries of northern Europe both industrially and agriculturally. They made minimal effort to alter the problem, which was predominantly noticeable in the South, where no financial aid was received. The Liberal governments consistently failed to help the people whereas Fascism appeared to offer solutions to vast economic and social problems.

After the war, widespread dissatisfaction with the Liberal government increased causing the birth of many new extreme political parties within the government. In 1918, the electoral system of proportional representation was introduced considerably increasing the political

instability of Italy. This further emphasised the essential weaknesses of Liberalism and increased the difficulty in making effective decisions. The Liberal politicians' solution was to continue with the old methods of trasformismo causing it to become a discredited parliamentary system.

The failings of the Liberal governments transmitted themselves widely throughout society and extended as far as religion, creating another significant long-term factor in the fall and the rise of Fascism. The Liberals failed to make peace with the Church, though this institution exerted a considerable amount of control and influence over the people, in particular, the peasantry. Mussolini however recognised this and minimised anti-clerical feelings within the Fascist party so as to foster a powerful ally and increase the appeal of the party. This emphasized both Mussolini's political ability and the Liberals' failure to realize the significance of the Church.

World War One was a catalyst in the rise of Fascism as it brought to a head many Italians' increasing dissatisfaction regarding the Liberal government and amplified the extensive underlying problems of Liberal Italy. Although Italy's involvement in the war was less far-reaching in comparison with that of Britain and France it did have devastating effects on the lives of many Italians. The war created economic and social problems that Italy could not recover from, and for which the Liberal government took the brunt of the blame. The Liberals failed to recompense the soldiers for their suffering and many felt bitterness and resentment towards the government as a result. The war had further

exacerbated the divisions within the society, which added to the vast north/south division. C.C.Bayne-Jardine wrote that “distrust between the more industrial North and the primitive South ... was deepened by the growing disillusion and poverty.”³ During the war the Liberals had promised national unity and integration within society but not only did it never occur the situation worsened. This increased the attraction of Fascism and hastened its rise.

The historian Michael Mann lays special significance on the state of the Italian war economy and the Liberals' ensuing incapability in improving the situation. There is a considerable amount of evidence to support his assertion as the Liberals' actions for many were proof of their incompetence. This can be shown by the vast quantity of money the Italian governments spent in the three years preceding Mussolini's rise to power. The national debt increased to 85 billion lire, five times the amount it had been in 1914. Inflation increased by 400% destroying people's savings; the ensuing 25% wage cuts and food shortages only worsened the situation. The Liberals ineffectively dealt with the economic crisis and by 1919 post-war inflation caused the lira to lose half its value. The Liberals' policies to solve these problems were half-hearted, widely disliked and futile. The government's failed attempt to manage the crisis, let alone remedy it, was an integral reason in the fall of Liberalism and the rise in Fascism.

Despite the overall strength of Clark's case, post war Italy also played a part in Mussolini's rise. In 1918 The Fascist party evolved, and grew in strength, as the Liberal government

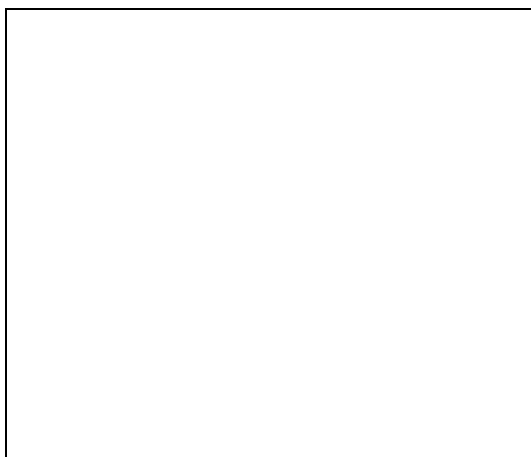
was weak, susceptible and unpopular. Their unpopularity was exacerbated by the Liberals' decision to join a war that many deemed inadvisable. Italy was not economically, socially or militarily prepared for a world war and they therefore suffered harder in comparison to other victorious countries. The outcome by 1918 was known as a 'mutilated victory.' The Italian people had high expectations of a favourable settlement from the Paris Peace conference but, through the Treaty of St Germain in 1919, they failed to receive Fiume or any colonies. Many felt cheated, humiliated and embittered and they blamed the Liberal government for mishandling the negotiations. Prime Minister Orlando walked out in protest but this changed nothing. The government was criticised for being unassertive.

The war and its after effects proved the Liberals' incapability of dealing with the disastrous social and economic problems of the country. This significantly contributed to the rise to power of a Fascist Party, seen as more competent in comparison. The symbolic capture of Fiume in 1919 by the nationalist d'Annunzio and the Liberals' decision not to take action against him emphasised the feeble and ineffectual nature of their government. The Fiume incident gave inspiration and confidence to radicals in Italy as it demonstrated that force and action could be successfully used to achieve political aims. Both Fascism and Socialism could, and did, take advantage of this when attempting radical changes within Italy.

Though historians have tended to deride him, Mussolini's own role was also important. His pragmatic character played a significant role in his accession to government and the

³ C.C.Bayne-Jardine, p10

creation of an influential and powerful pressure group. However this was only significant in the context of an already failing Liberal Italy where the government had consistently fallen short of expectation. His skill of creating a middle way between the hopes of different groups in Italian society was crucial. Mack Smith has written, "Fascism had elements of both [Left and Right]... it was revolutionary, but could also sometimes claim to be conservative. It was monarchist but also republican." The contradictions were derided as a "fascist cocktail" but he was trying to keep his regime as flexible as possible. Kedward refers to "the wide appeal and attraction of Fascism" which gained Fascism support from many groups and classes within the Italian society. The British Ambassador to Rome in 1919 described Mussolini as "an unscrupulous politician ready to adopt any policy that would pay". Fascism appeared to offer all that the Liberals neglected to. Therefore many Italians who formerly supported Liberalism converted to either Fascism as an alternative way of improving their lives.



It is evident that Mussolini was not the principal reason the Fascists came to power as he was purely exploiting the situation the Liberals had caused for themselves. He saw the

weaknesses of the current Liberal government and realised that many Italians desired strong leadership, law and order restored and national greatness. Stapleton argues that Mussolini was a "talented opportunist and brilliant self-publicist to manipulate a decaying parliamentary system and grab office by deception."⁴ He has been recognised for his ambitious nature and astute political ability. However, his personal attributes were not the single reason for the political revolution that took control of Italy's government.

A number of historians have convincingly argued for some of the blame for Mussolini's rise to be attached to King Emmanuel. However, his weaknesses and failings were only truly important because of the long-term context in which they occurred. One could argue that Emmanuel was a key individual in Mussolini's appointment to Prime Minister as his position was one of influence and power within the political system. He not only controlled the army but also selected the Prime Minister and therefore determined which political party dominated the government. T. Abse has argued that "if only the King had woken up in a different frame of mind one morning in October 1922 there would have been no Fascist regime⁵." This historian is underestimating the character of Mussolini and the potential of the growing Fascist movement. Although the King's naïve and cowardly nature made him an easy target for Mussolini to manipulate, the King felt he had no other option as the Liberal governments had failed Italy for so long. Therefore the King could not rely on the Liberal group to solve,

⁴ F.G.Stapleton, p44

⁵ T.Abse, p52

or deal with, the many problems within Italian society. Both C.C.Bayne-Jardine⁶ and G.Carocci believe that a “show of strength would have failed if the King had opposed it”⁷. Indeed, he failed to behave confidently and assertively at the moment of crisis. The King’s actions, and in particular his reaction to the Martial Law “merely gave confidence to the fascists.”⁸ His hesitation encouraged Mussolini to abandon his cautious approach and act in a more revolutionary way to gain a place in government. Mack Smith wrote, “Vittorio Emmanuelle took on his shoulders a huge responsibility by ignoring the facts and rejecting his ministers’ unanimous advice”⁹. It is apparent however that the King was only reflecting what many Italians’ desired, which was an end to the succession of futile Liberal governments, preferring to put his faith in the violent radical Fascist group, which only had 35 MPs.



The Liberals’ passivity and weakness in resisting extremist groups caused, and encouraged, the behaviour and growth of pressure groups which indirectly led to the rise of Fascism. By 1919 the Socialists had become the largest single group in the Chamber. They evolved into an active, potentially dangerous group to the

Liberal State due the nature of the Liberals’ failings in satisfying the masses by improving their living and working conditions, supported by the high unemployment rates which had reached two million by 1920. Many, in particular the ruling elite, feared this growing movement in the light of the recent Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. The threat of something similar occurring in Italy panicked the middle-class and they looked elsewhere for support as the Liberals appeared inept at crushing, or even standing up to, the movement. Through exploiting the people’s fear of Socialism and exaggerating their own strength, the Fascists seemed to be the only political group who would

ward off a socialist revolution. In reality, though, the internally divided Socialist group was never a genuine threat to the stability of the Italian state but the Liberal government failed to demonstrate this, whereas Fascism showed they could act and get results.

To conclude, although the precise timing of the rise of Mussolini was due to World War One and the short term factor was the appeal of Fascism, it is evident that the failings of Liberal Italy from the day of unification, in 1870, were the primary and long-term reason the Fascists came to power. E. Tannenbaum wrote that “the first well-organised attack against the liberal regime succeeded in destroying it all

⁶ C.C.Bayne-Jardine, *passim*

⁷ G.Carocci, pp26/7

⁸ F.G.Stapleton, p47

⁹ D.Mack Smith

together ... the war and its immediate aftermath aggravated existing tensions and created new ones in other victorious nations without seriously threatening their liberal parliamentary regimes. One must therefore assume there was something different about the Italian setting, at last since unification.”¹⁰ The Liberal governments failed to address the vast social issues of the day, to overhaul the ‘trasformismo’ approach to politics, to improve the economy or to defeat Socialism, thereby creating an environment in which Fascism could flourish. Their inability to maintain law and order and protect Italy and its population led directly to their own downfall and the rise of Fascism.

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¹⁰ E.Tannenbaum, pp6-7