

## **D** How did Mussolini gain power in 1922?

### Which way to power? Coup or King?

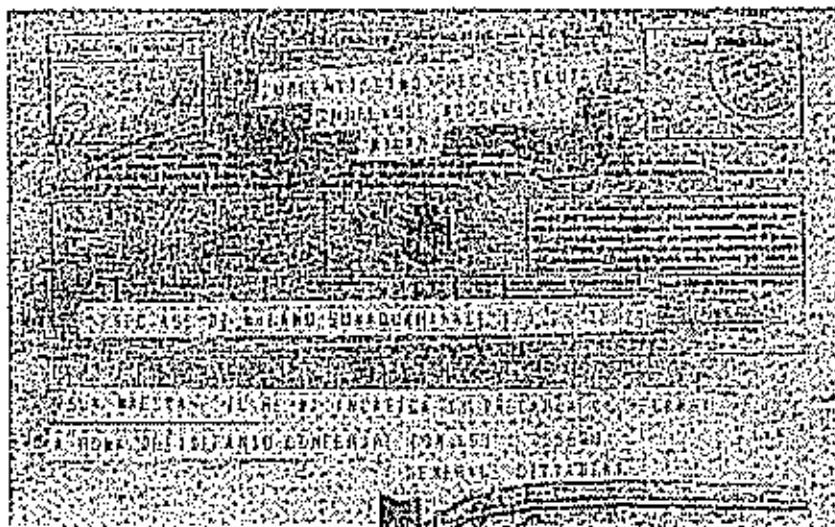
By 1922 many Fascists considered their hour had come. The pressing question was not whether they should take control of Italy, but how. Mussolini was under great pressure from the ras to seize power. He, however, was still considering trying to be appointed legally. In October 1922 he was in contact with most major politicians over the formation of a new government, which would include Fascists.

### Mussolini becomes leader of Italy, October 1922

On 29 October Benito Mussolini received a telephone message that was to change Italy's history. The King needed to see her husband as soon as possible to discuss a new government. Mussolini said he wanted the offer in writing! Shortly after, the following telegram arrived:

'Very urgent. Top priority. Mussolini, Milan. H.M. the King asks you to proceed immediately to Rome as he wishes to confer with you.' It soon emerged that Mussolini was being offered the job of Prime Minister.

**SOURCE 3.21** The telegram sent to Mussolini



Mussolini's strategy had worked. The leader of a recently formed party, that had for three years indulged in violence in the name of saving the country and making it great; of a party that had only 35 MPs, was being asked to lead the country!

How had this extraordinary situation come about? For some time the tide of events had been favouring the Fascists. They had been gaining control of local government. Squads in several towns had expelled Socialist councils and seized power. Since September rumours of a Fascist march on Rome had been rife. Alongside this, various politicians were thinking of incorporating Mussolini within a new government, perhaps with two to five Fascist Cabinet members. Mussolini made it clear he wanted a major role or nothing.

On 16 October Mussolini and six leading Fascists met in Milan and decided the time was right to take power. On the 24th a Fascist Congress was held in Naples. Forty thousand Blackshirts chanted 'A Roma' ('To Rome'). The leaders proclaimed their intention to organise a march on Rome in the tradition of Garibaldi (see page 9), and seize power. They drew up plans. First, Fascist squads were to seize public buildings in northern and central Italy. Others, led by QUADRUPPI, were to assemble outside Rome on 27 October, ready to march into the city on the next day. Mussolini proclaimed, 'Either the government will be given to us or we shall take it descending upon Rome. It is now a question of days, perhaps hours.'

Mussolini himself was having grave doubts about the march, and hoped that he might be appointed legally. But he felt unable to resist his more aggressive Fascists. Besides, the mere threat of a Fascist march might intimidate the King into appointing him.

And so it proved. About 10,000 of the planned 50,000 squadristi began to assemble at three points about 20 miles from Rome. They had been told to avoid clashes with the army. During the night of 27 October local Fascists tried to seize control of key government and public buildings in many towns in North and Central Italy. They met with mixed success, but frightened prefects sent reports to Rome of the Fascist advance.

Many of the squads failed to meet at their assembly points for the March on Rome, as their trains were stopped by sabotage of the lines. Those that did meet were in a bad shape, poorly armed, drenched by rain, with sinking morale. They hardly looked like an irresistible force!

Prime Minister Facta, who, like many of his Liberal colleagues, for so long had failed to take a stand against the Fascist threat, now had to decide whether to organise firm government action against these blatant threats, or to capitulate. His government resigned, but he was asked to stay on. He requested that the King declare MARTIAL LAW, so that the army could take steps to crush the revolt. Was the Fascist bubble at last going to be burst?

The fate of Italy now rested in the hands of King Victor Emmanuel, a weak man quite incapable of providing firm leadership. As historian Lyttleton has said, 'The only man who could do anything was convinced of his impotence [powerlessness]'

Like many others in the elite, he overestimated the strength of Fascism. His mother sympathised with the movement, as did his cousin, the Duke of Aosta, who was in close contact with the Quadrumvirs. The King feared the Fascists might replace him with Aosta. He received conflicting reports from his generals as to the attitude of the army to a Fascist march. Some generals were deeply involved with the Fascists. The army and country might split apart; he might provoke civil war.

The King hesitated. Then at 2 am he agreed to Facta's request for martial law. Italy would be saved from the Fascist thugs. Twelve thousand troops began to be deployed around key buildings, behind sandbags and barbed wire. But this decisive action was short-lived. Eight hours later Victor Emmanuel changed his mind, and refused to agree to martial law. He had decided to try to compromise with Mussolini.

Facta resigned, and the King persuaded ex-Prime Minister Salandra to lead a government which included Mussolini. However, Salandra failed to gain support, and Mussolini himself refused to join Salandra's government. Mussolini insisted he would join the government as Prime Minister or nothing. For some time business circles had been advocating this solution. To the King there seemed no alternative but to ask Mussolini to be Prime Minister. So he sent the fateful telegram.

Mussolini, who had plans to escape to Switzerland if the march failed (as he thought it well might), had won. He caught the overnight train to Rome.

It arrived in Rome at 10.42 am on 30 October and Mussolini, wearing his blackshirt, was taken to meet the King. He apologised for his appearance, explaining, 'I have come straight from the battle, which, fortunately, was won without bloodshed.' He was formally asked to form a government.

The next day, wearing a borrowed morning coat and spats (ankle covering worn by the upper classes), he attended the King at his palace and was sworn in as Prime Minister, as well as Foreign and Interior Minister. There were only three other Fascists in a coalition government.

His squads now travelled to Rome by train, to celebrate their victory. Fifty thousand Blackshirts, interspersed with regular army troops, paraded in front of their leader, and the King. This was the real March on Rome, which was to go down in Fascist history as the heroic revolution by which they had seized power. The Fascists expected Italy now to be handed over to their tender care. Things were not, however, going to be that simple.

# CHARTER Fascism in 1922

## Fascist local takeovers

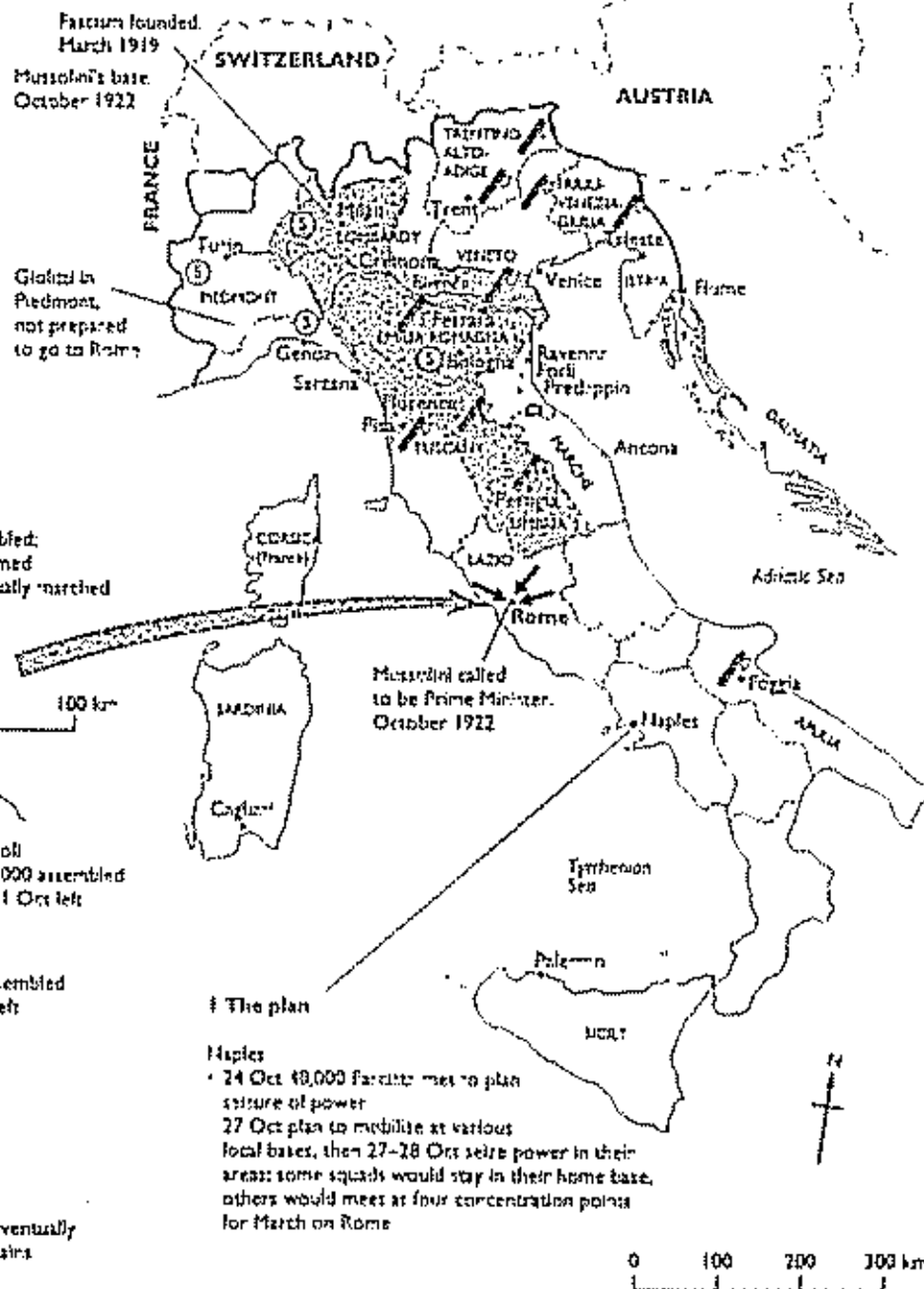
Generally authorities allowed Fascists to take over key buildings, as they waited for the national government to take lead in opposing the Fascists

### Successful takeovers 27-28 Oct

- Alessandria, Bergamo, Brescia, Como, Venice, Padua, Vicenza, Trieste and virtually all Po Valley, e.g. Parma, Ferrara, Modena
- Pisa, Florence
- Some in South: Foggia, Apulia

### Failed to gain full control

- Turin, Milan, Cremona, Bologna



## The March on Rome

### 2 Assembly points

Perugia, Quadrumvirate headquarters  
 • 27 Oct Prefect agreed to hand over power

**Foligno**  
 • Reserves  
 • 3000 assembled; only 300 armed  
 • 5000 eventually marched

**Civitavecchia**  
 • 28 Oct 4000 assembled, no rail transport  
 30 Oct 6000 left for Rome

**Monterotondo**  
 • 28 Oct 2000 assembled  
 • 30 Oct 12,000 left

### 3 The Marchers

- 28 Oct total 14,000 met
- Poorly armed, inadequate food, pouring rain
- By 30 Oct over 30,000; impatient to move; eventually did so on 30 and 31 Oct, mainly by special trains
- 31 Oct paraded through Rome

### Key

- ⊙ Socialist strongholds
- 🗡 Fascist takeover of local government October 1922
- ➔ March on Rome
- ▨ Area of growth of Fascism, 1919-21

## Power in four days, 27-30 October

- 27 Oct Mussolini seemed on the verge of accepting a ministerial post in a new government. He was persuaded to hold out for more by other Fascists, and by government inaction.  
Fascists concentrated in three main areas within marching distance of Rome. Blackshirts were under secret orders not to clash with the army. Quadrumvirs of Perugia (see Chart 3H) issued a proclamation, 'against a political class of half-wits and idiots which in four long years has been unable to give a true government to our nation'  
(Overnight) Fascists tried to seize control of telephone exchanges, police stations, government offices. In some areas, e.g. Milan and Bologna, they failed. In others, they took control, then lost it e.g. Pisa.  
(Midnight) PM Facta agreed to take military action against the Fascist threat; he asked the King to use the army.
- 28 Oct (2 am) King agreed to martial law. Some measures taken. Mussolini's arrest ordered. Milan prefect Lusignoli refused to act.  
(9 am) King refused to sign martial law decree. Facta resigned.  
Salandra tried to form a government; Mussolini refused to join.
- 29 Oct Salandra advised that Mussolini be appointed PM. King agreed.  
(Midday) King told de Vecchi to phone Mussolini to invite him to form a government. A telegram was sent confirming the offer. Mussolini left by night train.
- 30 Oct Mussolini arrived in Rome. Victor Emmanuel appointed him PM. The squads started arriving. Twelve were killed in minor skirmishes.
- 31 Oct Most squads arrived by train for a parade before the King and Mussolini.

**SOURCE 1.24** Mussolini with the Quadrumvirs: General de Bono, 58, old-style nationalist; Balbo, 76, violent extremist, ras; de Vecchi, 37, ultra-conservative landowner, monarchist; Bianchi, 39, Syndicalist ex-Socialist journalist



### ■ Learning trouble spots

#### 1 The March on Rome and the Fascist seizure of cities

Many people have believed Fascism's claim that Mussolini was appointed Italian leader after the heroic Fascist March on Rome. They also ignore the Fascist seizure of provincial cities.

In fact, the March happened after Mussolini was appointed. It was still important in his appointment; but it was the (exaggerated) threat that mattered.

However, the Fascist threat did not just come from the planned march; the actions of the squads in the provinces, where they actually took control in many cities, were vital in persuading the King not to resist the Fascists.

#### 2 The appeal of Fascism

Many students exaggerate the support for Fascism between 1919 and 1922. Mussolini is often regarded as the leader of a vast

movement which appealed to millions of Italians, similar to the Nazis in Germany in 1932.

In fact, Mussolini had won no more than seven per cent of the vote in the 1921 election. Fascist propaganda stressing a great national renewal in 1922 must not be taken at face value. It seems likely that many Italians (far more than seven per cent) did welcome the promise of a more vigorous form of government under Mussolini, standing up for Italy's interests. However, he was clearly not swept to power primarily through the mass appeal of Fascism.

Later on, as we shall see, Mussolini became genuinely popular, and Fascism increased its appeal far beyond its limits in 1922. Even then, it was more a case of the great popularity of Mussolini as an individual rather than great commitment to Fascism.

### The March on Rome

*Did Mussolini and the Fascists seize power illegally (via a coup d'état) or was he appointed to power legally?*

**Coup d'état:** a coup is a sudden seizure of power, normally led by a small group such as army officers or a party. It comes from the French word for "blow to the state."

Describe the various methods a Prime Minister could be appointed legally to power in Italy in 1922

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- 1 Create the T-Chart below on a separate sheet of paper and find evidence from the sheets provided, and arguments that you formulate to support both sides of the debate

Evidence that Mussolini Became Prime Minister Illegally via a Coup D'état (March on Rome)	Evidence that Mussolini was Appointed Prime Minister Legally

- 2 After completing the T-Chart make a reasoned judgment: Did Mussolini become Prime Minister via legal means or through illegal means (a coup d'état in the March on Rome)? You must explain why/how you came to your conclusion and provide evidence from your chart to support your position

**Marking Rubric**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Incomplete/Does Not Meet Expectations 1</b>	<b>Approaching Expectations 2</b>	<b>Meeting Expectations 3</b>	<b>Exceeding Expectations 4</b>
<b>Chart Section Mussolini Became PM Illegally Includes All Important Information and Arguments</b>	Chart is incomplete or does not include important information or arguments	Chart section is missing several important arguments and details	Chart section includes most important information and arguments	Chart section includes all important information and arguments
<b>Chart Section Mussolini Became PM Legally Includes All Important Information and Arguments</b>	Chart is incomplete or does not include important information or arguments	Chart section is missing several important arguments and details	Chart section includes most important information and arguments	Chart section includes all important information and arguments
<b>Final Conclusion on Mussolini Fully Explains Why and How You Arrived At Your Conclusion, and Reasoning is Sophisticated</b>	Final conclusion does not explain why or how conclusion was arrived at	Final conclusion on Mussolini briefly explains why and how you arrived at conclusion	Final conclusion explains why and how you arrived at conclusions, but reasoning is too simple	Final conclusion explains how and why you arrived at your conclusion, and reasoning is highly sophisticated
<b>Final Conclusion on Mussolini is Historically Plausible and Fully Supported With Evidence From the Background Sheets</b>	Final conclusion on Mussolini is not plausible or lacks sufficient evidence to make a plausible judgment	Final conclusion is plausible but explanation is lacking evidence, or includes inaccurate evidence or understandings	Final conclusion is plausible and is supported with an adequate amount of accurate evidence from the background sheets	Final conclusion is fully plausible and is supported with a great deal of rich and accurate evidence

TOTAL:     /16