

FOCUS ROUTE

You can find the Focus Route for 'How did Mussolini gain power in 1922?' on page 61. You may find it helpful to look at this now to guide your reading of this section.

■ **Coup d'état**

A coup is a sudden seizure of power, normally by a small group such as army officers or a party. It comes from the French word for 'blow' ('to the state').

■ **Talking point**

What are the requirements for a successful coup?

D How did Mussolini gain power in 1922?

Which way to power? Coup or King?

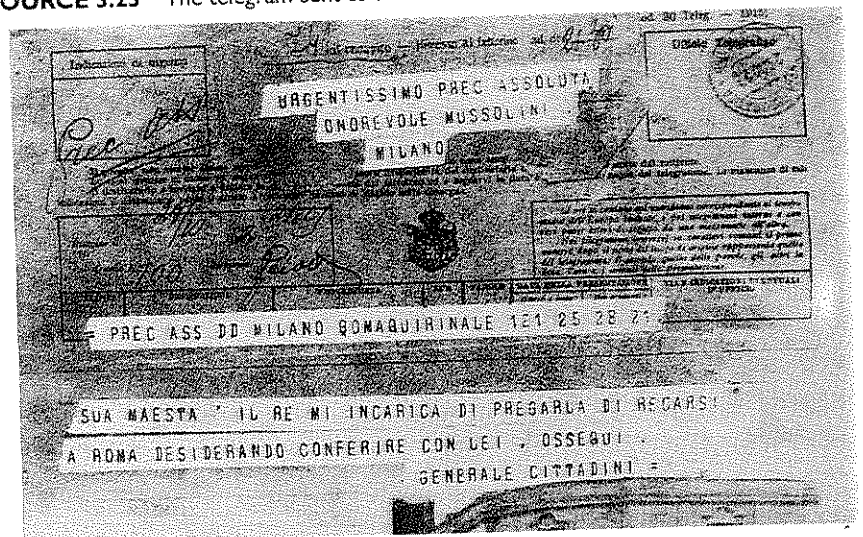
By 1922 many Fascists considered their hour had come. The pressing question was not whether they should take control of Italy, but how. Mussolini was under great pressure from the ras to seize power. He, however, was still considering trying to be appointed legally. In October 1922 he was in contact 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 Rachele 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 3.23 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 QUADRUMVIRS, 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.'

Activity

1 Either:

You are an adviser to Mussolini. Present the case for and against either:

- a) seizing power; or
- b) trying to be appointed legally.

You will need to consider these issues, amongst others:

- i) How likely is each strategy to succeed in making Mussolini Prime Minister?
- ii) What will be the longer-term consequences of each tactic for Mussolini's power? For example, how will each strategy affect his chances of retaining power, and fulfilling his long-term aims?

His relationship with the squads/ras, and with the elite are central issues in these assessments.

Or:

Prepare briefing papers for the King, for and against inviting Mussolini to lead the government. Half the class should take each side. Present your view to the teacher (the King!).

- 2 How did the existence of two possible routes to power strengthen Mussolini's position?

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.

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

Fascism founded, March 1919
Mussolini's base, October 1922

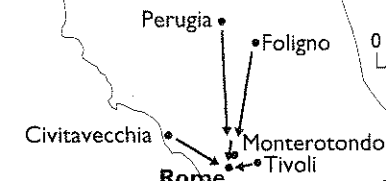
Giolitti in Piedmont, not prepared to go to Rome

The March on Rome

2 Assembly points

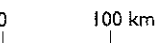
Perugia, Quadrumvirate's headquarters
• 27 Oct Prefect agreed to hand over power

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 13,000 left



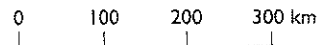
Tivoli
• 8000 assembled
• 31 Oct left

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

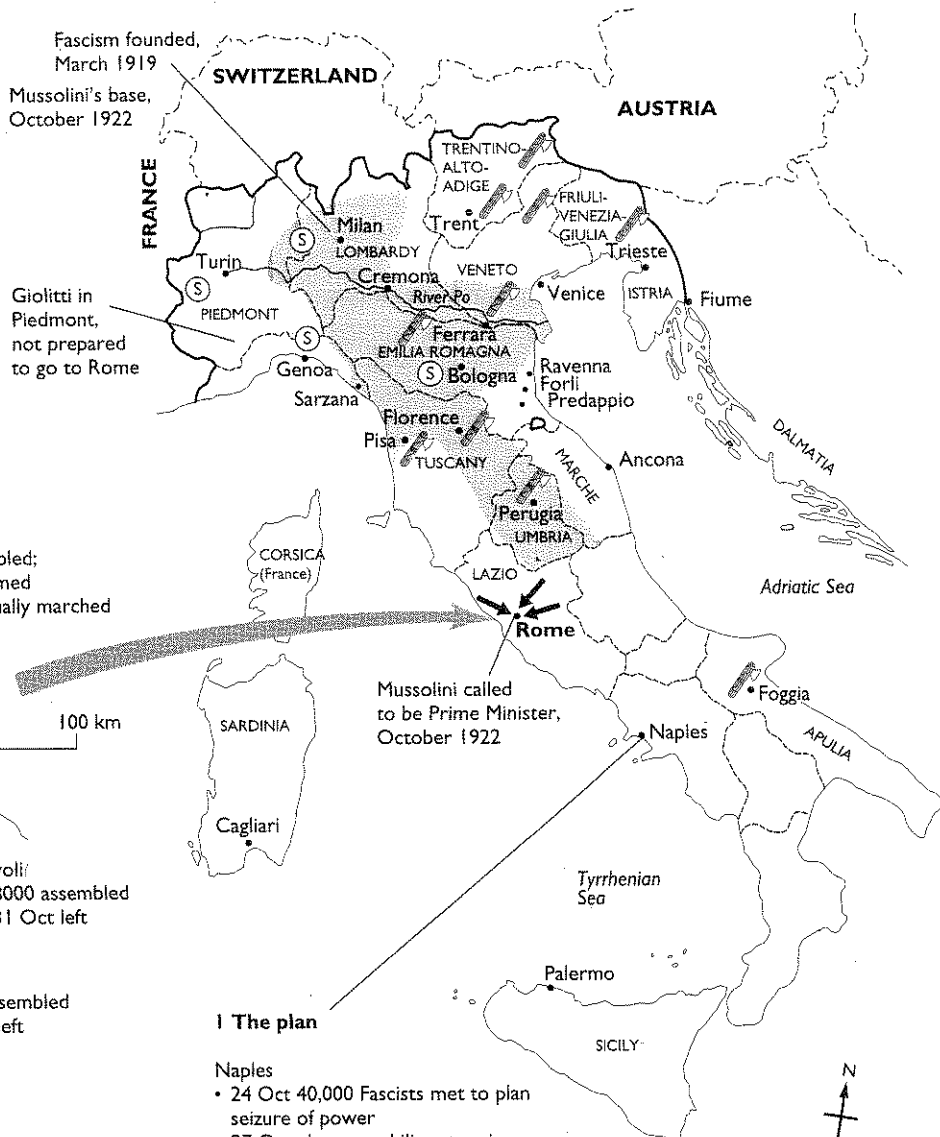
1 The plan

- Naples
- 24 Oct 40,000 Fascists met to plan seizure of power
 - 27 Oct plan to mobilise at various local bases, then 27–28 Oct seize power in their areas; some squads would stay in their home base, others would meet at four concentration points for March on Rome



Key

- Ⓢ Socialist strongholds
- 🔪 Fascist takeover of local government, October 1922
- ➡ March on Rome
- ▨ Areas of growth of Fascism, 1919–21



The March on Rome: a detailed chronology

There are some events in history when it is important to be clear what was happening day by day, and even hour by hour. This detailed chronology is designed to help clarify events during the crucial period 27–31 October.

Background

Liberal politicians quarrelling; many considered bringing Mussolini into the government. Some favoured d'Annunzio as a potential new strong ruler.

Summer 1922

Squads controlled several areas, e.g. Ferrara, Ravenna, Parma, Alto-Adige. Government took no action.

1 Aug Socialists called a general strike. Poor response, called off after one day. 'Caporetto of Italian Socialism'. Raised spectre of Socialist revolution, and allowed Fascists to portray themselves as protectors of the state.

March on Rome

16 Oct Mussolini and other Fascist leaders agreed to plan an insurrection.

24 Oct Fascist Congress in Naples. Mussolini publicly told squads that Fascism would either be appointed or would seize power. Authorities took no action.

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 at 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. In many provincial cities, they succeeded.

(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 3.24 Mussolini with the Quadrumvirs: General de Bono, 58, old-style nationalist; Balbo, 26, violent extremist, ras; de Vecchi, 37, ultra-conservative landowner, monarchist; Bianchi, 39, Syndicalist, ex-Socialist, journalist



King Victor Emmanuel

He told a confidant he had refused to agree to martial law 'to save a Cabinet of poltroons [idiots]' and that in Mussolini he had a Prime Minister who was 'really a man of purpose who will last sometime and has the will to act and act well'



Mussolini in 1922



Giovanni Giolitti



Chief of Staff Badoglio

He was prepared to oppose the Fascists with force. Commander of Rome, Pugliese, said the army was loyal. His 12,000 well-armed troops in Rome would succeed against an estimated 17,000 badly armed squadristi. He made military preparations against the Fascists



Pope Pius XI



CHART 31 Who mattered in Mussolini's appointment? The key people

The King

- Disillusioned with parliamentary leadership
- Accepted, then rejected unanimous government advice to enact martial law; first time he had acted against his ministers' advice in 22 years
- Feared civil war and Duke of Aosta, his pro-Fascist cousin, as a rival monarch
- Queen Mother Margherita was pro-Fascist
- Doubted whether the army would be able to resist the march
- Cowardly, pessimist; lacked confidence
- Appointed Mussolini PM as Salandra advised

Mussolini

- Wavered over idea of march
- Used threat of coup to gain power
- Remained in Milan whilst march organised as it was the centre of Fascism, or because it was near to Switzerland
- Rejected offers of becoming a minister; wanted to be PM
- Realised his success rested as much on the ineptitude (failings) of his opponents as on his own strength

Facta

- Led a weak government Feb–Oct 1922
- Failed to act against Fascist threats and violence
- Asked King for martial law and when it was refused, resigned

Salandra

- Unable to persuade Mussolini to join his government, so advised his appointment as PM to stop his rival Giolitti

Giolitti

- 80-year-old master of Italian politics, and the politician Mussolini most feared
- Failed to come to Rome from Piedmont in October to be directly involved in negotiations over a new government
- Eventually supported Mussolini's appointment

Liberal politicians in general

- Facta, Salandra, Giolitti, Nitti, Orlando intrigued against each other, all looking to include Fascists in a new government led by themselves.
- Governments left it to prefects to take action against the Fascists.

The army

- Some generals sympathised with the Fascists.
- Six generals involved in the March
- Marshal Diaz told Victor Emmanuel, when asked about the army putting down the Fascists, 'The army will do its duty. However, it would be well not to put it to the test.'

The squads

- Thirty thousand squadristi gathered for the march, some unarmed.
- Other squads took over some local councils but failed elsewhere.

The Left

- Socialists did not call a general strike in response to Mussolini's appointment.
- Some saw Fascism's success as a sign of the collapse of the Liberal state, and a prelude to Socialist revolution.

The elite

- Leaders of the General Confederation of Industry, the Confederation of Agriculture, and the Bankers Association telephoned Rome asking for Mussolini as PM, 28 Oct.
- Pirelli and Olivetti (industrialists) urged a Mussolini government.

Pope Pius XI

- Friendly with Mussolini
- As bishop of Milan, allowed Fascist banners in church
- Oct: urged need for a peaceful settlement

The press

- Liberal press, e.g. *Corriere della Sera*, justified Fascist violence as the only alternative to anarchy.

Intellectuals

- Croce (see pages 120–21) and others sympathised with Fascism as a form of Italian renewal.

■ 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.

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 After reading the account of how Mussolini became leader of Italy, and looking at the chronological chart, note down what you consider to be the key steps from 24 October to his appointment.
- 2 With which of the following points do you agree? Note down evidence to support your choice.
 - a) Mussolini was not in full charge of the Fascists.
 - b) Mussolini was hesitant over the potential for a march to succeed.
 - c) Mussolini brilliantly masterminded the Fascist seizure of power.
 - d) Mussolini used bluff to gain power.
 - e) The Fascists would have been far too weak to seize power if the authorities had been determined to resist.
 - f) The King had good reasons to appoint Mussolini.
- 3
 - a) Complete a chart like the one below about the role of various groups in Mussolini's appointment.
 - b) Then write a brief explanation of who you think was most responsible.

Person/ group	What he/they did (or did not do) that contributed to Mussolini's gaining power	Mark out of 5 for degree of responsibility 1 = low, 5 = high
King		
Facta		
Giolitti		
Army generals		
Prefects		
Economic elite		
Pope		
Socialists		
Others		

- 4 Note down several points where events could have taken a different course, resulting in Mussolini not being appointed Prime Minister.

E Review: Why was Mussolini, the Fascist leader, appointed Prime Minister of Italy in 1922?

In this chapter you have looked at the growth of Fascism and the development of Mussolini's career from humble origins to his appointment as Prime Minister. You should now know the following points:

FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 To ensure you have understood the key features about Fascism, summarise what you have learnt about:
 - a) Fascist programmes
 - b) Fascist violence
 - c) Their supporters (joiners and users)
 - d) Attitude of authorities
 - e) Role of Mussolini.
- 2 What were the main problems Mussolini had to face in achieving power, and what skills did he employ to overcome them?
- 3 Do you think Fascism would have come to power without Mussolini? Jot down three points where Mussolini's role seems indispensable, and then any counterpoints.

Key points from Chapter 3

- 1 Mussolini, a radical Socialist, broke with the PSI over his support for the war.
- 2 In 1919 he set up his own Fascist movement with a nationalist but left-wing programme; it gained little initial support.
- 3 Fascism began to attract support from groups frightened by the threat of Socialism. It moved to the Right politically.
- 4 Fascism's genuine mass base was in the petty bourgeoisie, but it also had key tactical support from the elite.
- 5 Fascist squads, led by *ras*, attacked Socialists, often with the compliance of the authorities.
- 6 In the 1921 elections the Fascists gained seven per cent of the vote, and 35 MPs were elected to Parliament.
- 7 In 1921 Mussolini formed the PNF (Fascist Party), with a right-wing programme.
- 8 In October 1922 the Fascists planned a march on Rome; and seized control of some northern cities.
- 9 King Victor Emmanuel hesitated to take firm action, and decided to appoint Mussolini as Prime Minister.
- 10 The March on Rome happened after Mussolini's appointment.

CHART 3] The rise of Benito Mussolini: power in four stages

1 'Enter stage left'

- Leader of Revolutionary Socialists
- Inspired by his father and humble background, becomes a radical Socialist
- His extremism and powerful oratory increase his influence.
- Leads opposition to reformists at 1912 PSI Conference
- 1912 becomes editor of *Avanti!*

2 'A national editor: from anti- to pro-war'

- Under his editorship, *Avanti!* circulation rises dramatically.
- Supports PSI line opposing First World War, then changes his mind
- Abandons stress on class for new force, the nation; switches from anti-war to pro-war
- Resigns from *Avanti!* and becomes editor of new *Il Popolo d'Italia*

3 'Mix and match: a new alignment'

- Founds Fascism. Builds up movement from 1919 electoral failure on the Left, to major force in Italy, attracting support from the Right

4 'From Blackshirt to top hat'

- Uses threat of Fascist coup to be appointed Prime Minister in October 1922