

SUMMER TASKS – GCSE TO AS TRANSITION

Subject: Modern History
Title: Weimar Republic and Liberal Italy reading/ research
Task(s): Please see following pages for explanation of the tasks and reading to complete.
How long should I spend on this? 2 to 3 hours.
How will I get feedback? Through class discussion and tutor feedback at the beginning of the year
Contact email: Twebster@yorkcollege.ac.uk

Modern History: summer work 2025

Please note: both articles for the summer homework are included in this PDF, after the explanation of the tasks.

There are two overview timelines for Weimar Germany and Liberal Italy included here for a useful reference/ context for the articles.

Task 1

Read the article from 20th Century History Review: Mark Rathbone, *The Weimar Republic 1918-24: Why such troubled times?* (April, 2013)

Mark Rathbone identifies four factors about why the Weimar government faced so many problems in its early years:

1. Germany had lost the First World War
2. The government was blamed for the defeat
3. Germany was torn by bitter political divisions
4. Huge burden of reparations created great economic problems

Your task:

1. For each factor make notes on the following questions:

- a. Why did this factor cause problems for the Weimar Republic?
- b. What type of problems did this factor cause e.g. political/social/economic/other factor and why?
- c. What evidence is there of this factor causing a problem?

2. Rank the factors in order of importance (1 = caused the biggest problems and 4 = caused the least problems) and explain your why you have placed each factor in that order. If you can, make **links** between the factors to explain why one was more or less important than another.

Task 2

Read the article from R. J. B. Bosworth, 'A Century of Fascism' from *History Today*, Vol. 72, issue 10, October 2022 and use it to answer the following questions:

1. As you read the article create a glossary. If there are any words you don't know the meaning of, write them down, look up a definition and add this definition to your glossary.
2. What is a coalition government? (You may need to look this up e.g., on the internet).
3. When did Mussolini become Prime Minister of Italy?
4. When did Mussolini become dictator of Italy?
5. What does the word *fascio* mean, and how had the word *fascio* been used in Italy before Mussolini?
6. What is a *fascies*? How had the *fascies* been used by different governments and what did it symbolise?
7. What were the key features/ behaviours of the 'fascists of the first hour'?
8. How did the British writer James Rennell Rodd describe fascism?
9. How did the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* describe Italian fascism?
10. What are the differences between how Rodd, the *Daily Mail*, and *The Times*, describe fascism? Why do you think they had different interpretations of what fascism was/ meant?

Some key terms/people explained:

- **King Emmanuel III** – King of Italy from 29 July 1900 until his abdication on 9 May 1946.
- **Risorgimento** - (Italian: "Rising Again") – a 19th-century movement for Italian unification that culminated in the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.
- **Chamber of Deputies** – the Italian lower house of parliament (a bit like the house of commons in England).

Timeline of Key Events in Liberal Italy (1910-1922):

1910:

March 13: Giovanni Giolitti becomes Prime Minister of Italy for the fifth time.

Giolitti initiates a series of social and economic reforms, including labor laws, education reforms, and land reforms.

The Italian socialist movement gains strength, with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) increasing its membership and influence.

1911:

The Libyan War begins as Italy declares war on the Ottoman Empire in an effort to expand its colonial holdings.

Italy successfully captures Tripoli and other major cities in Libya, but faces resistance from local Arab and Berber tribes.

1912:

Italy signs the Treaty of Lausanne, ending the Libyan War and establishing Italy's control over Libya.

The PSI experiences internal divisions, with some members supporting revolutionary action while others advocate for parliamentary reforms.

1913:

A major labor strike takes place in Turin, known as the "Red Week," where workers demand better working conditions and higher wages.

The strike is met with a harsh government crackdown, resulting in several deaths and arrests.

1914:

World War I begins, and Italy initially remains neutral, as the government is divided between those who support the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and those who favor the Allies (France, Britain, and Russia).

1915:

Italy signs the Treaty of London and enters World War I on the side of the Allies, receiving promises of territorial gains at Austria-Hungary's expense.

The Italian army launches offensives against Austria-Hungary but faces significant challenges and suffers heavy casualties.

1918:

The Italian army achieves a major victory at the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, leading to the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the end of the war on the Italian front.

The devastation caused by the war, combined with food shortages and rising inflation, leads to widespread social unrest in Italy.

1919:

The PSI experiences a split, with the revolutionary faction breaking away to form the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

The PSI and other socialist groups organize large-scale strikes and protests demanding better working conditions and social reforms.

1920:

The "Biennio Rosso" (Red Biennium) begins, characterized by widespread labor strikes, factory occupations, and land seizures by peasants.

Italy faces a severe economic crisis, with inflation skyrocketing and industrial production plummeting.

1921:

The National Fascist Party (PNF) is founded by Benito Mussolini, initially as a nationalist and anti-socialist movement.

The PNF gains support from disaffected war veterans, conservative landowners, and industrialists who fear socialist and communist influence.

1922:

The March on Rome: Mussolini and the Blackshirts, paramilitary squads affiliated with the PNF, march on Rome, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Luigi Facta.

King Victor Emmanuel III, fearing civil war, appoints Mussolini as Prime Minister.

Timeline of Key Events in Weimar Germany (1918-1933)

1918:

October 28: German sailors stationed in Kiel mutiny, triggering the November Revolution.

November 9: German Emperor Wilhelm II abdicates, and the Weimar Republic is proclaimed.

Philipp Scheidemann becomes the first Chancellor of the Republic.

1919:

January 5: The elections for the National Assembly take place, leading to the formation of the Weimar Coalition (SPD, DDP, and Center Party).

June 28: The Treaty of Versailles is signed, imposing heavy reparations and territorial losses on Germany.

1920:

January 10: The Spartacist uprising begins in Berlin, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

January 15: Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht are arrested and later executed.

March 13: The Kapp Putsch takes place, a failed right-wing coup attempt against the Weimar government.

August 11: The Weimar Constitution is adopted, establishing a democratic parliamentary system.

1923:

January 11: France and Belgium occupy the Ruhr region in response to Germany's failure to meet reparation payments.

November 8: The hyperinflation crisis reaches its peak, leading to the introduction of the Rentenmark to stabilize the economy.

1924:

August 10: The Dawes Plan is implemented, providing Germany with a loan and reorganizing its reparation payments.

December 1: The Rentenmark is replaced by the Reichsmark as the official currency.

1925:

May 1: Paul von Hindenburg is elected President of Germany, defeating Wilhelm Marx.

October 24: The Locarno Treaties are signed, guaranteeing Germany's western borders and improving relations with France and Belgium.

1929:

October 29: The Wall Street Crash in the United States triggers the Great Depression, severely impacting the German economy.

1930:

September 14: The Nazi Party (NSDAP) gains significant support in the German federal elections, becoming the second-largest party.

1932:

January 30: Adolf Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany by President Hindenburg.

July 31: The Nazis become the largest party in the Reichstag after winning the federal elections.

November 6: President Hindenburg is reelected, defeating Hitler in the presidential election.

1933:

January 30: Hitler becomes Chancellor for the second time, establishing a Nazi-led government.

February 27: The Reichstag building is set on fire, leading to the Reichstag Fire Decree and increased Nazi control.

March 23: The Enabling Act is passed, granting Hitler dictatorial powers.

June 22: The Nazi Party bans all other political parties, effectively ending the Weimar Republic and establishing the Third Reich.

The Weimar Republic, 1918–24

Why such troubled times?

Mark Rathbone examines the reasons behind Germany's period of turmoil in the first 6 years of the Weimar government

AQA AS The development of Germany, 1871–1925

AQA AS Anti-Semitism, Hitler and the German people, 1919–1945

Edexcel AS From Second Reich to Third Reich: Germany, 1918–45

Edexcel A2 From Kaiser to Führer: Germany, 1900–45

OCR (A) AS Democracy and dictatorship in Germany 1919–63

Argument



The price of defeat

The most fundamental reason for Germany's problems during the period 1918–24 was that Germany had lost the war. There was little loyalty among Germans to the Weimar government, which was associated with national humiliation. Bitter political divisions, inflation and a lack of effective political leadership made the problems worse.

On 9 November 1918 Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany abdicated and sought political asylum in the Netherlands. In his place, the Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed Germany a republic (known as the Weimar Republic as its first meeting was held in the city of Weimar) and a new government, led by Friedrich Ebert, was

formed. 'Everything for the people! Everything by the people!' urged Scheidemann. 'The old and rotten, the monarchy, has collapsed. May the new order live. Long live the German Republic!'

Yet the optimism of that moment was short-lived and the next 6 years were to bring tremendous political and economic turmoil for Germany. This article examines the reasons for this.

Reason 1

Germany had lost the war

This may seem blindingly obvious, but the most fundamental reason for Germany's difficulties is that it had been defeated in the First World War. As Scheidemann's declaration acknowledged, 'The consequences of the war, need and suffering, will burden us for many years.' If Germany had won, it would not necessarily have been without problems in the succeeding years (Britain and France, which did win the war, had plenty), but they would certainly have been different and much less severe. As you read the rest of this article, think about which of the other reasons would not have applied if Germany had been victorious in 1918.

Reason 2

The government was blamed for the defeat

The government was blamed for the humiliation of defeat and the Treaty of Versailles. Two days after its creation, the new government signed an armistice with Britain, France and the USA. In the minds of many Germans this created an irrevocable link between the republic and national humiliation. The **November Criminals**, it was alleged, had 'stabbed Germany in the back' by surrendering, when the German armed forces were undefeated.

It was true that German territory was intact when the armistice was signed and the German Army remained for the most part in good order. Yet Germany's allies — Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria — had already surrendered, the German Army had been in retreat since the **Battle of Amiens** in August 1918, and the German Navy was in open mutiny. Kaiser Wilhelm's abdication had been an acknowledgement that the country was on the point of defeat. But this did not stop the Weimar Republic's right-wing detractors from rewriting the history of November 1918 to suit their own political agenda.

The Treaty of Versailles

The guilt of the November Criminals was, furthermore, compounded by a second act of betrayal: they had gone on to sign the Treaty of Versailles. To Germans it seemed a harsh treaty: Article 231 said that Germany and its allies were entirely responsible for the war and this was used as a pretext to impose reparations on Germany, subsequently set at £6.6 billion.



Armed demonstrators during the Spartacist revolt in Berlin, January 1919

Alsace and Lorraine, Malmédy, North Schleswig and the **Polish Corridor** were to be handed over to other countries, so there would be millions of Germans living under foreign rule. The Rhineland was to become a **demilitarised zone**, German armed forces were severely restricted in size, and they were banned from having tanks, submarines or military aircraft. Worst of all, the Germans had not been consulted: they saw Versailles as a *Diktat* — a dictated peace.

Yet their government had signed the treaty. All this meant that few Germans felt any sense of loyalty to their new government. Walter Rathenau, the first Weimar foreign minister, declared, 'Now we have a republic. The problem is we have no republicans.' The truth of Rathenau's analysis was dramatically confirmed by his assassination in 1922.

Reason 3

Germany was torn by bitter political divisions

Left versus right was the dominant political conflict of the Weimar Republic, inherited in its essentials from the monarchy that preceded it (Table 1). While

November Criminals

Term used to describe the Weimar government by right-wing critics, especially Nazis, implying that the surrender to the Allies in November 1918 had been a betrayal of German interests.

Battle of Amiens

A turning-point battle in August 1918, when a British, Canadian, Australian and French counterattack, supported by hundreds of tanks, drove the German Army into headlong retreat.

Polish Corridor

A strip of land that connected Poland with the Baltic Sea, separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

demilitarised zone

The Germans were not permitted to station any troops or build any defences in the Rhineland region.

Table 1 Principal political parties of Weimar Germany

Party	Acronym	Politics	Support
Communist Party	KPD	Left	Radical workers and some middle-class intellectuals. Opposed to Weimar Republic — favoured revolution.
Social Democratic Party	SPD	Left	Workers, trade unions and progressive middle classes. The core of Weimar governments, it was the largest party 1919–32.
Democratic Party	DDP	Centre left	Mainly protestant and middle-class. Support declined during 1920s.
Centre Party	Z	Centre	Roman Catholics. Was part of every cabinet from 1919 to 1933.
People's Party	DVP	Centre right	Owners of small and middle-sized businesses and white-collar workers.
Nationalist People's Party	DNVP	Right	Landowners and industrialists, some skilled workers and farmers, anti-semites.
National Socialist German Workers' Party	NSDAP or Nazi	Right	Lower middle classes, shopkeepers, skilled workers, anti-semites. Limited support in early 1920s.

Spartakusbund A Communist group, named after the leader of a slave revolt in ancient Rome.

Alexander Kerensky Menshevik leader of the Provisional Government in Russia after the revolution of March 1917. He tried to establish a democratic republic but was overthrown by the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917.

Freikorps Militias made up of groups of ex-soldiers, who supported right-wing political parties.

democratic parties such as the SPD, the DDP and the Centre Party supported the new republic, on both left and right there were extremists who sought to destroy it and impose their own preferred forms of government. They wasted no time before trying to do so, moreover.

Between them, the parties of the left — the Communists, the SPD and the Democrats — had enough support to put them in a dominant position. But just as Lenin and the Bolsheviks had opposed the Provisional Government in Russia in 1917, so the German Communists refused to cooperate with Ebert and parliamentary democracy.

Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg had founded the *Spartakusbund*. The Spartacists argued that only a Marxist revolution could bring about a government that was truly of the people, and in December 1918 they launched one on the streets of Berlin. Fearing he would meet the same fate as Alexander Kerensky in Russia a year earlier, Ebert appealed to the army and to the *Freikorps* to save the government. By mid-January 1919 these forces of counter-revolution were victorious and the Spartacist revolt had been crushed. Luxemburg and Liebknecht were shot.

Revolutions and putsches

This was not a promising start for the new Germany, not least because it left the Weimar government dependent on the nationalist forces of the right. They were soon to take their turn to try to seize power. On 13 March 1920 several thousand *Freikorps* soldiers, led by Wolfgang Kapp, began a rebellion in Berlin. Ebert's government quickly lost control of the city and, unable to rely on the support of the army, fled to Dresden and then Stuttgart. Ebert called for a general strike to defeat Kapp. The strike met with overwhelming support and Berlin ground to a



Children playing with bundles of German mark notes, which had become worthless due to hyperinflation

Weblinks



A US website that includes essays, primary sources and biographies relating to Weimar Germany can be found at <http://weimar.facinghistory.org>

Also useful is a collection of short articles about Weimar Germany at www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/GERweimar.htm

There is a detailed study of the 1923 hyperinflation at www.usagold.com/germannightmare.html

standstill. Unable to govern, Kapp and his followers fled to Sweden after only 4 days.

Away from Berlin, in November 1918 Bavaria declared independence and was later declared to be a Soviet Republic. The *Freikorps* crushed the revolution in May 1919, with over 1,000 deaths in the fighting and several hundred summary executions afterwards. Four and a half years later there was a further attempted revolution in Bavaria, this time from the right — Adolf Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch. There were more rebellions or attempted revolutions in other parts of Germany, including the Ruhr, Saxony and Hamburg.

All in all, the existence of substantial forces of both left and right, which refused to accept the legitimacy of the Weimar government and were prepared to take up arms against it, made it difficult for the new government to maintain order and govern Germany effectively for several years after 1918.

Reason 4

The huge burden of reparations created great economic problems

As well as political conflicts, Germany also faced enormous economic difficulties during these years, of which the most severe was inflation. This had started during the war, for which the Kaiser's government had paid by printing banknotes, but the problem escalated after 1918. Germany could only pay the amounts demanded in reparations under the Treaty of Versailles by again printing even more banknotes. Banks and financial institutions, understandably, lost confidence in German currency and on the foreign exchanges the mark's value continued to slide (Table 2). It became increasingly expensive for Germany to import food and raw materials from abroad and prices consequently continued to rise steeply.

In January 1923, because Germany missed the deadline to pay an instalment of reparations, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr. The Weimar government responded by ordering workers in the Ruhr to refuse to cooperate with the occupying forces. Without the income generated by Ruhr industries, Germany's financial situation deteriorated further and the government printed yet more banknotes, leading to the final slide into disastrous hyperinflation.

Table 2 Inflation in Weimar Germany

Date	Exchange rate (marks to the US dollar)
July 1914	4.2
January 1919	8.9
July 1919	14.0
January 1920	64.8
July 1920	39.5
January 1921	64.9
July 1921	76.7
January 1922	191.8
July 1922	493.2
January 1923	17,972.0
July 1923	353,412.0
August 1923	4,620,455.0
September 1923	98,860,000.0
October 1923	25,260,208,000.0
November 1923	4,200,000,000,000.0

Reason 5

The Weimar governments lacked leadership

If there had been a strong government, it might have overcome the political conflicts and managed the economy more responsibly. But the Weimar governments between 1918 and 1923 proved to be too weak to govern effectively. The Weimar Constitution (Table 3) was one of the most democratic in the world, but with a multiplicity of parties and a proportional voting system no party ever secured anything approaching a majority in the Reichstag. The resultant coalitions were weak, unstable and irresolute.

Table 3 Main features of the Constitution of Weimar Germany

President	Elected every 7 years. Mainly a figurehead, but could be given extensive powers in a national emergency.
Chancellor	Leader of the government. Appointed from the Reichstag by the president.
Reichsrat	Upper House of Parliament. Contained representatives from the regions of Germany. Had limited powers.
Reichstag	Equivalent to the House of Commons. Elected every 4 years by proportional representation. This made it difficult for one party to gain a majority, so governments were coalitions.
Guarantee of rights	Rights such as freedom of speech and freedom from arrest without trial were guaranteed, but could be suspended in a national emergency.

Question

Might the Weimar Republic have survived if only four of the foregoing five elements in its weakness had been in force? Plot the likely outcomes by removing one element at a time to suggest the effect on the other four.

It was not the fact that they were coalitions that made them weak, however: it was the lack of a leader of real stature. The governments from 1923 to 1929 were also coalitions, yet this was a period when the Weimar Republic prospered. In August 1923 Gustav Stresemann, leader of the DVP, briefly became chancellor and was then foreign minister for 6 years. During his tenure the currency was renewed, the economy recovered to its pre-war levels and Germany's international relations were transformed. This demonstrated that it was lack of leadership, not the fact that they were coalitions, that had made the earlier governments so weak.

Conclusion

Losing the war was the foundation of Germany's problems, and the inevitable association of the Weimar government with national humiliation damned it from the start in the eyes of many Germans. Bitter political divisions were inherited from the monarchy but exacerbated by the circumstances of the end of the war. Inflation — again inherited from the pre-1918 regime — was made far worse by the burden of reparations and the occupation of the Ruhr. All this was too much for a nation that, until Stresemann gave it a few years of remission, had no effective political leadership.

Further reading



Fergusson, A. (2010) *When Money Dies: the Nightmare of the Weimar Hyperinflation*, Old Street Publishing.

Henig, R. (1998) *The Weimar Republic 1919–1933*, Routledge.

Kaes, A., Jay, M. and Dimendberg, E. (1995) *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, University of California Press.

Layton, G. (2005) *Weimar and the Rise of Nazi Germany 1918–1933*, Access to History (www.hoddereducation.co.uk).

Lee, S. J. (2009) *The Weimar Republic* (second edition), Routledge.

Weitz, E. D. (2009) *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy*, Princeton University Press.

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A Century of Fascism

Fascism would plague the 20th century, but when Benito Mussolini seized power in October 1922 few could agree on exactly what it was.

[R.J.B. Bosworth](#) | Published in [History Today Volume 72 Issue 10 October 2022](#)

Benito Mussolini leading the March on Rome, October 1922. Getty Images.

On 31 October 1922 King Victor Emmanuel III charged Benito Mussolini to head a coalition government in Italy. Mussolini's Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) had been founded less than a year earlier on 9 November 1921 and his arrival into office had been advanced by violence, through the activities of the armed 'squads' of the Fascist movement, the *fasci di combattimento*, a paramilitary organisation established by its *Duce* in Milan on 23 March 1919. Mussolini and Fascism were destined to govern for a generation, with the Duce proclaiming himself dictator in a speech on 3 January 1925. When they framed a history for themselves, Fascists maintained that their movement had gained power through a 'revolution', which they dated to 28 October 1922. Soon they also boasted that they had invented a 'totalitarian state', which in a novel manner would unite and discipline all the Italian people in every aspect of their lives and ready them for global greatness.

From their origins in Italy, the words *fascism* (most usefully spelled with a small 'f', leaving capital 'F' Fascism as exclusively Italian) and *totalitarianism* spread into every language. Wikipedia informs its readers that fascism was (and is) 'a form of far-right, authoritarian ultranationalism characterized by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regimentation of society and of the economy, which came to prominence in early 20th-century Europe'. Many add genocidal racism, antisemitism and an obsession with war to this list. Fascists, most agree, perpetrated the horrors of Auschwitz, and so brought the world to the nadir of human civilisation. Naturally, an academic industry exists aiming for a more subtle or compelling definition, one that can cover every form of fascism in every place. Unsurprisingly, given the Second World War and the seemingly permanent triumph of liberal and neo-liberal democracy, most interpretations are sure that fascism was, above all, liberty's foe.

Yet anachronism stalks the corridors of history. Was the meaning of fascism that emerged from the Second World War and Auschwitz recognisable from the origins of a fascist (or, rather, Fascist) movement in Italy? After all, during his rapid rise to power between 1919 and 1922 Mussolini frequently rejected suggestions that his movement had a set ideology and meaning. Always a capable and inventive journalist, he was given to urging that his movement was practical in its essence and so the reverse of its prime enemies, the Marxists, with their intellectualised delusions (and the splits and divisions between communism, 'maximalist' and reformist socialism). As he told his followers in September 1922, in a country where there was too much ideological purism and too many 'programmes', the aim of his movement was simpler: 'We want to govern Italy.' In an article published in October, revealingly released to the international press, he added that he badly wanted to improve the condition of the working class, but in a nation where citizens acknowledged that they had duties as well as rights. 'Our policy therefore will basically be liberal', he stated, but in a disciplined manner: thrifty with government expenditure and firm, but sensible, in foreign affairs.

Mussolini with King Victor Emmanuel III in Rome, 30 October 1922. Getty Images.

Once in office, there were many further, by no means consistent, efforts to typify the regime. One aphorism, repeated more than once in the 1920s, was that Fascism, Italian-style, was

‘not for export’. Perhaps, Mussolini stated in a speech on the third anniversary of the March on Rome, it had created a totalitarian society where ‘all was for the State, nothing was outside the state, nothing and nobody was against the state’. Yet, the clearest and simplest statement of the regime’s nature was made in June 1927 in the key fortnightly magazine *Critica fascista*: ‘Fascism is Mussolinism ... Without Mussolini there would be no Fascism.’ In power, propagandists maintained, it had imposed on Italians – to their approval – authoritarian rule by an exalted person, Europe’s first and principal modern dictator.

The banality of fascism

It was only when Fascism was celebrating ten years in office in October 1932 that Mussolini, his pen guided by philosopher Giovanni Gentile, formally set out a ‘doctrine of Fascism’ in a 35-page article. It authoritatively reversed the insistence on Italy alone, from which Mussolini had started to distance himself in October 1930 with the claim that the ideology was ‘universal’ (like the Catholic Church). From 1932 the regime insisted that, globally, the Duce’s ideology had become ‘the characteristic doctrine of our time’. A few months later, as if proving that fascism was very much for export, Adolf Hitler became German chancellor. Thereafter, given Nazism’s role in causing the Second World War, the Nazi dictatorship took over the definition of ‘fascism’ and skewed attempts to explain the Italian version or to re-assert its primacy.

But what was the situation during Mussolini’s rise to power? Before 1919 the word *fascio* had surfaced often in Italy, meaning little more than a somehow united group. In a country already obsessed by its Roman past, it sounded good to imply that the association of the members of one body or another evoked a Latin *fasces*, the bundle of rods tied together and armed with an axe that, in classical times, had symbolised magistrates’ power. The Italians were not original in such historical evocation. Throughout the 19th century new societies had readily added fasces to their shields or other icons. In the US, fasces appear on either side of the flag behind the podium of the House of Representatives and in many other places. Statues of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are ornamented with them, as are the escutcheons of a number of states and Harvard University. Ecuador, Cameroon and Cuba include them on their national coat of arms. After 1789, revolutionary France was given to affirming an inheritance from the Roman Republic and the fasces reflected in the country’s great seal.

Entrance to a camp run by the state youth organisation Opera Nazionale Balilla, 1930s. Getty Images.

After the Italian Risorgimento, the most evident use of the word had been by a radical group of Sicilian peasants, the *fascio italiano dei lavoratori*. During the early 1890s they campaigned for social justice against the nationalist and imperialist prime minister Francesco Crispi, destined after 1922 to be painted as a Fascist precursor by the regime’s historians. But the banality of the word is better displayed in the pre-1914 *Fascio Medico Parlamentare*, which routinely convened doctors who had won parliamentary seats.

Italy’s First World War gave a new thrust to fascism’s meaning. From 1917 pro-war deputies joined together as a *Fascio parlamentare di difesa nazionale* (parliamentary union for national defence). The liberal journalist Luigi Albertini argued that such *fascisti* ‘from now on must take over from the old parties’. With rather different hopes, syndicalist and other radical intellectuals – Mussolini among them – had late in 1914 already set up a *Fascio d’azione rivoluzionaria* (union for revolutionary action), favouring political and social revolution and intervention in the war. They thereby separated themselves from orthodox Italian socialists who were trying to follow a line of ‘neither support nor sabotage’, weakly hostile to the Liberal government’s war of aggression with its huge sacrifice of ordinary Italians’ lives. Nonetheless, in 1919 Mussolini was anything but alone when he adopted the word *fascio* as the name for

his own new movement. Anarchists founded a *Fascio socialista comunista* and school children a *Fascio degli studenti delle scuole medie*. No one owned the meaning of fascism.

Fascists of the first hour

Between 1919 and 1922 Mussolini became the pre-eminent Fascist and the PNF its political expression. The movement's novelty lay in its unapologetic employment of violence against its opponents, with a boasted revival of the wartime slogan of *me ne frego* ('I don't give a damn') and the wearing of black military shirts. As their anthem, Fascists took up the song *Giovinezza* ('Youth'), composed in 1909 and deployed by the crack *Alpini* regiments during the war. From 1924 they added an obligatory worshipful reference to Mussolini.

These 'Fascists of the first hour', as they were to be honoured under the dictatorship, had two special zones of operation. One was in the Po Valley, Umbria and Tuscany, where, in 1921-22, the squads viciously overthrew the power of freshly unionised 'Marxist' peasants to the applause, and with the financial and material support, of landowners and, more covertly, the authorities of the state. The second was in the borderlands, territories that Italy annexed as a result of its victory in the First World War. There, its chief enemies were non-Italian speakers. In July 1920 local squads attacked and burned the Hotel Balkan, the key urban redoubt of Triestine Slovenes. By spring 1921 Trieste was the city where membership of the fasci was highest.

A crowd gathered in Piazza del Quirinale, Rome, 31 October 1922. [akg-images](#).

Three qualifications need to be made about 'squadrist' as typifying the Fascist movement. The first is that 'Liberal Italy' was hardly a state that controlled social violence effectively. Institutions like the Mafia in Sicily, the *'Ndrangheta* in Calabria and the Camorra in Naples did not behave with kid gloves. In 1900 Italy had six times the murder rate of France and nine times that of Britain. Detailed study of a desperately poor region like Puglia has demonstrated that, before 1914, landowners were ready to arm and employ local toughs against peasants who endeavoured to associate politically. Through the decades before the war, the criminologist Cesare Lombroso, from a Northern Italian rabbinical family, acquired an international reputation from his argument that criminals exhibited their racial inheritance. Certain that race degenerated the further south you went in Italy, Lombroso highlighted southern crime (though Fascism spread more quickly in the north).

Another comparison demands attention. During the years of the Fascist rise to power in Italy some 3,000 men and women died as a result of political violence. But Italy was not alone in this. From Ireland in the west and especially through what Timothy Snyder has vividly called the 'bloodlands' of Central and Eastern Europe, following the formal end of the First World War, mini-civil wars raged, often fostered by ethnic difference and insecure borders. When, in March 1921, the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci made one of his various efforts to understand what was going on in Italy, he maintained that the best parallel was postwar Spain, a country which had not fought in the war but where, he stated, 'the organisation of petty and middle bourgeoisie into armed groups occurred before it did in Italy'. King Alfonso XIII of Spain called the dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera 'my Mussolini' when he curbed the powers of parliament in September 1923.

A final point needs to be made. The years between 1919 and 1922 saw Mussolini moderate or fudge the ideological radicalism of the early fasci, while erratically and partially disavowing its violence. From demanding a republic, the PNF became monarchist. From anti-clerical, it began to cosy up to the Church. Soon its framing of Fascist unions or syndicates into a 'corporate state' indicated that, in office, Fascist administration was to direct more assistance to big business than to workers, whose socialist, communist (and Catholic) unions were rigorously suppressed.

Given to superlatives

If the great majority of respectable Italians convinced themselves that nothing untoward had happened when the young Mussolini (he was still only 39, 20 years younger than the average first appointment to his office) became prime minister, liberal and conservative foreigners were also tolerant. Take the United Kingdom, for example. On 11 November 1922, the fourth anniversary of Allied victory, readers of the *Spectator* could ponder a letter to the editor offering expert evaluation of recent events in Italy. The writer James Rennell Rodd was a commentator of distinction, at Oxford in his youth where he was an associate of Oscar Wilde, later as a young diplomat critical of the stridently Germanophobic elements in the Foreign Office and, from 1908 to 1919, as a long-serving British ambassador in Rome. In regard to the word 'Fascism', Rodd explained that he wished to correct a widespread 'misleading impression'. In its Italian form, 'Fascismo' did not mean reaction or violent tyranny but union. In essence, Fascists stood for 'patriotism, sound and healthy national life, efficiency, economy' and deflating bureaucracy. The impotence of liberalism and the 'Red' threat demanded drastic action. Fascist ideals were no different 'from ours', he concluded, although Italians were more given to 'superlatives' than were Britons. There was no need to worry about foreign policy issues. Fascism did not mean war, merely national pride. Mussolini had donned a frock coat on assuming office. He must be a gentleman, a reader could conclude.

Mussolini with the British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, 1924. Alamy.

This eminent commentator, therefore, was certain that 'Liberal' Italy had not matched the standards of Liberal Britain where, as W.S. Gilbert had put it, 'every boy and every gal, who is born into the world alive, is either a little liberal or else a little conservative'. Italy may have been governed by a parliament, but its Chamber of Deputies was not made up of modern mass parties equipped with detailed political programmes. It had been an ally, but not an equal, in the First World War. It needed to repel Bolshevism and to reform the 'corruption' of its inferior version of liberalism. Rodd would not have used the word 'democracy' as a touchstone of virtue and certainly did not deploy it to describe Italy. Nonetheless, he thought of himself as a liberal who endorsed parliamentarism, legal process, capitalism and 'freedom', responsibly defined. In his mind, Mussolinian Fascism offered no threat to these ideals.

He was not unusual in this judgement. In the conservative and liberal press, there was some wariness about Fascist violence. The *Daily Telegraph* on 30 October, with first reports of the March on Rome coming in, noted that 'even a sympathetic critic must censure their [Fascist] methods'. A few days earlier the *Observer* had worried that Fascism was rousing 'national feeling to white heat', some of it anti-British. Yet the *Telegraph* was soon comforting its readers with the news that the 'Fascist army, which has occupied Rome' proved itself 'most orderly and marvellously disciplined'. It had presided over a 'revolution with little bloodshed'. The *Observer* underlined that Mussolini's movement was 'essentially a reaction to Bolshevism' and published an interview with ex-prime minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, a Liberal, whom, it was emphasised, was fully confident about 'the beneficial effects of Fascism'.

The *Daily Mail* was less cautious in charting Mussolini's promotion. 'Fascisti', as it called the squads, were 'ardent Nationalists and patriots'. They were 'young men' who had 'out-terrorised the [Bolshevik] terrorists'. Mussolini's appointment had been greeted in Rome with 'indescribable enthusiasm'. As a special correspondent put it a few months later, 'Fascism has fought a holy war. A nation has suddenly risen from its lethargy'. An editorial agreed that the Fascisti had triumphed because 'they were young and brave and earnest'.

The *Times* was less convinced. On 30 October it commented that 'there are very wholesome and very evil elements in Fascismo; it still has to be seen which will triumph'. Yet, it, too, was sure that 'the "revolution" had been surprisingly rapid and surprisingly bloodless'. There could

not be much regret over Italian Liberalism, it added. In the Chamber of Deputies, 'the old parties are effete, and for years past, they have not had any real grip on the nation'.

Fellow travellers

In so far as respectable British opinion was concerned, Mussolini might yet behave in an unpredictably foreign manner. But, almost by accident and with little damage, he had revised the meaning of Italian Liberalism and perhaps might give it a chance to equal British virtue. And his real foes, those whom he had worthily defeated, were the Marxists, the Bolsheviks, those who, in imitation of the Russians, wanted to wreck 'civilisation'. In Britain, sure that its own country was governed by virtuous liberal democracy, Italian Fascism was not yet seen as a foe, nor did it seem equipped with an ideology destined to become a menacing global force.

When it came to that interpretation, it was Mussolini's Marxist antagonists and victims who sought to find universal danger and evil in fascism. After all, Marxists were dedicated internationalists, certain that class behaviour ran across national borders. The Soviet Union went on to fight its Great Patriotic War against fascism not, as might seem more logical, against Nazism. From 1922 to 1940 and beyond, the diplomatic relationship between the Fascist and communist dictatorships was usually normal. From time to time Italy helpfully exported technologically advanced arms to Moscow, even if one leading Italian observer was certain that the Soviets were 'staunchly uninterested in Italian issues'.

Left: Antonio Gramsci, 1921. Right: Palmiro Togliatti, 1930s. Both Getty Images.

While Fascism was rising and installing itself in power, Italian communists were splitting in January 1921 from the main body of the Socialist party to establish the *Partito comunista d'Italia* (PCd'I). All socialists, even communists, were given to debate and personal rivalries. But members of the PCd'I necessarily had to report to the Comintern in Moscow and accept guidance from the home of the proletarian revolution. Gramsci, its leader from 1924, died in 1937 following a decade of Fascist imprisonment. He was to be manufactured into a saint and seer after 1945. By then he was especially applauded for his gradual and often hesitant realisation that Mussolini's regime had succeeded in creating what Marxists called a 'genuine popular base', one that could be unpicked in class terms.

Like all his comrades, Gramsci was certain that an Italian Fascist dictatorship worked in the interests of the bourgeoisie, those who owned the means of production, whether in the city or countryside. In September 1924 he was still stressing that Fascism had no proper 'essence' and was backed by its sometime liberal bourgeois fellow travellers 'in the way that the rope supports the hanged man'. For him, 'democracy' (he did use the word) and fascism constituted different tactics exploited by the bourgeoisie at different times for the same purpose: the repression of the proletariat. The leading Liberal Democrat anti-Fascist, Giovanni Amendola, was therefore in Gramsci's understanding a 'semi-fascist', almost as much an enemy of workers and peasants as was Mussolini.

For export

Yet Gramsci did maintain that Mussolini had 'for the first time in history ... successfully organised the petit bourgeoisie' and had won over to his cause quite a few other sectors of Italian society. At the Lyon Congress in 1926 he argued that Mussolini's Fascism must be viewed as a 'social movement'. Now he implied that communists should examine its national origins in the Italy forged in the Risorgimento in a fashion that was not the same as other European nations. Such subtlety soon seemed out of place as Stalinism spread and Italian communists, led by the crafty Palmiro Togliatti after Gramsci was jailed, accepted that

fascism was for export well before Mussolini got around to expressing that view. Comintern policies against fascism twisted and turned through the next decade. It could even embrace the idea that ordinary Fascists, if not party chiefs, could be 'brothers in black shirts' (*fratelli in camicie nere*) to communists, since each hoped to make genuine revolution. But the assumption that the Italian regime was not unique in its behaviour and ideology remained firm among communists and other leftists, whether in Italy or abroad. Ironically, therefore, more quickly than the Fascists themselves, anti-Fascists led the way to a global definition of fascism. But the Marxists among them scarcely shared the view that Mussolini's rule aimed first and foremost to destroy liberal democracy. They knew that its prime purpose was to check and divert the working class.

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