

Mussolini's foreign and domestic policies | A1 Sample

Answer

How successfully did Mussolini deal with domestic and foreign policies? (2011 Topic 3 Q2)

Once Mussolini received power in Italy in October 1922, he quickly set to work in creating a totalitarian state where he, Il Duce, was the sole dictator. He consolidated power through the Acerbo Law of 1923, which allowed the largest party in government at any one time to take two thirds of the seats regardless of whether they won them or not. This allowed the fascists a majority government in 1924 through terror, violence and likely cheating the voting system. Soon all other political parties were outlawed and a decree law was passed in 1926 that allowed Mussolini to make whatever laws he wanted without the approval of the people or the state. He used this to further consolidate his power and to take complete control of Italy's domestic and foreign policies through the 1920s and 30s.

Mussolini's main aim was to create what he called the 'corporate state' and to revive the glory Italy had once held in Europe. Living standards in the country were poor and unemployment was very high. Corporations were established and replaced individual employers. Trade unions were abolished. It was hoped that industrial actions, which had been banned regardless, would be no longer needed if prices, wages and employment in general was controlled solely by corporations. Each corporation was chaired by three members of the fascist party or more and if an industrial dispute arose, compulsory arbitration was strictly enforced. This meant a third party came in and assessed the situation before making a final, legally binding decision. However this capitalist economy model was corrupted and the majority of the time would rule in favour of the employer. Working class animosity and discontent rose and, especially after the Great Depression affected Europe, living standards in Italy remained incredibly low.

Fascism promoted self-sufficiency and Mussolini was determined to make Italy self-sufficient in providing its own food. The Battle for Grain was initiated in 1925 and heavy tariffs were placed on any imported cereals to encourage and increase in crop production in Italy. However the Italian climate was never going to be suited to growing such large, industrialised quantities of grain and, while output did increase, valuable agricultural land was wasted when it could have been used to grow much more valuable crops that it would

have been better suited to. However, Mussolini did not listen to any of his advisors on the matter and continued the failure of a scheme for the rest of his reign.

Mussolini also started the Battle for Land Reclamation where he allocated large amounts of money to drainage, irrigation and afforestation. Because of this, Rome's Pontine Marshes were drained to cater for 750,000 poor families in the south of Italy. He started public works projects where he constructed motorways, railways and hospitals. He also started schemes to restore historical monuments. For a short period of time, this succeeded in lowering the unemployment levels in Italy and brought them down to a record low of 100,000. However, he made the mistake of re-valuing the lira in 1926 and that, coupled with the Great Depression, saw mass inflation problems and in 1932 the number of people unemployed rose to one million once again.

One of Mussolini's only lasting domestic achievements was improving Italy's relationship with the Catholic Church. The church's stance on fascism was friendly as they approved of its anti-communist stance and at Mussolini's attempts to increase Italy's birth rate. However there had been a 59 year rift between the governments of Italy and the church since the Pope's land had been confiscated in the 19th century. The Lateran Treaty of 1929 resolved this as it gave the pope new land known as the Vatican City. It also promised that Catholicism would always be the primary religion in Italy and would have an official stance in the state. This meant it would be taught in schools. This was in return for the pope's support of the regime. It succeeded in healing ties with the church that had been broken for a considerable amount of time and it was very popular among the Italian people who were predominately Catholic. This was one of Mussolini's only major domestic successes.

However, the fascist propaganda machine was as rampant as it was in other dictatorships such as Hitler's Nazi Germany. Mussolini had his 'blackshirts' terrorise the public into submission. Criticising Il Duce was not tolerated at all. Those who objected to the fascist practice were terrorised, assaulted and even killed. The murder of the socialist deputy, Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 showed fascism's intolerance of any opposition to its regime. The secret police, the OVRA, were formed in 1927 with the intent of rooting out any dissent. Special courts were created to sentence 'enemies of the state' but the use of witnesses was prohibited and the defendant would nearly always be found guilty. Appeals were not allowed under any circumstances. The legal system soon was under complete state control to the point where you had to be a member of the fascist party if you wanted to vote. This meant elections were a complete farce. Police brutality led Italy to become

a state built entirely on fear and dubiety as opposed to the people having any real respect or loyalty to their fascist government.

Mussolini did not have any greater success in his foreign policy. It was motivated by three main aspects- his overconfidence and unrealistic ideological aims; his obsessive need to keep up with and surpass Nazi Germany; and his need to distract the Italian people from how much his domestic policies were failing. He wanted to revert Italy back to how it was in the glory days of the Roman Empire and needed a short, sharp war to motivate the Italians in working with him to achieve this unrealistic goal.

In the 1920s, Mussolini's foreign policy led him to invade both Corfu and Fiume in 1923. Corfu was occupied after Greece refused to issue an apology and pay a 50 million lire compensation settlement after 4 Italian diplomats were murdered there. The League of Nations intervened and demanded that Mussolini withdraw and that Greece pay the compensation. The occupation of Corfu actually cost 30 million lire more than the compensation was worth but Mussolini still played it to his advantage by telling the people it was an important victory for fascism. The Italian people believed this and were instilled with faith in their previously thought hopeless country. Later, Mussolini sent troops into Fiume, a League of Nations city bordering Yugoslavia that had been promised to Italy after World War One. Since France was occupied with the Ruhr Valley, it did not help Yugoslavia when they asked for aid and Fiume became an Italian city in 1924. This was considered a considerable victory for the fascists.

The invasion of Abyssinia, a country located between two other Italian colonies Somaliland and Eritrea, was a mixed victory for Mussolini. He wanted revenge for the Italian defeat there in 1889, the Abyssinian army was primitive and the Italians had 400,000 troops with tanks and planes but the fascist army still struggled. Eventually they resorted to brutally subjecting the population to poison gas and were victorious, but just about. The League of Nations condemned this and tried to impose sanctions but they were ineffective and Mussolini withdrew from the League in 1937. Italy's national reputation was damaged but Mussolini earned the support of Hitler as he was grateful for Mussolini's conquests distracting Europe from his occupation of the Rhineland.

Mussolini was also involved in important treaties and alliances. He was a signatory to the Locarno Pact of 1925 and the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928. He formed the Stresa Front with France and Britain in 1934 to stop German rearmament. However this fell apart after the invasion of Abyssinia. Mussolini portrayed himself as a peacemaker in the Munich Conference over the fate of the Sudetenland and secured the area for Hitler. He signed the Rome-Berlin Axis with Germany in 1936 which allied the two countries. This became a

military alliance called the Pact of Steel in 1939 which was vital assurance for Mussolini that Germany would help Italy in any war. The Anti-Comintern Pact of 1937 with Japan and Germany allied them in the fight against the spread of communism which was popular domestically. As a whole these treaties and allegiances were successful foreign ventures.

However Mussolini's atrocious failings in foreign policy during World War Two were enough to blemish any achievements he might have made. He lost Abyssinia and failed to occupy Greece and Egypt successfully. The Italian army was crushed on nearly every battlefield it went on to. No amount of fascist propaganda could cover up these failings and his domestic policy completely collapsed, leading to him being overthrown in 1943. While Mussolini made some minor domestic and foreign policy achievements, his regime was ultimately a resounding failure.