

Mussolini's Foreign Policy | A1 Sample Answer

How successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy leading up to World War Two

Mussolini's foreign policy from when he came into power after the March on Rome 1922 until the beginning of World War Two in September 1939 was motivated by three main aspects. The first was his egotistical attitude and unattainable aims for foreign expansion after easy victories in 1934 and 1936. He refused to accept that Italy did not have the power for excessive foreign expansion and refused to believe that Italy was a third rate European power. The second was his obsessive need to surpass Nazi Germany as he could not allow himself to be overshadowed by a new fascist power lest it reflect badly on him. The third was that Mussolini needed to distract the Italian people from the failures of fascism. A 'short, sharp war' was needed to convince the Italian people that Fascism was a success. Throughout the 1920s and 30s until the start of World War Two, this is what motivated the achievements and failures in his foreign policy.

In August 1923, four Italian diplomats were killed in Greece. Mussolini demanded a public apology from the Greek government and fifty million lire in compensation for the deaths. The Greek government refused to give in to his demands and Mussolini sent troops to occupy the Greek island of Corfu in retaliation. The League of Nations stepped in and demanded that the Italians vacate Corfu immediately but also insisted that Greece had to pay the money to the Italians. The actual occupation of Corfu cost the Italian economy thirty million lire more than the compensation they were owed but the Italian people were satisfied that Mussolini had stood his ground. They saw it as a great achievement for Italy internationally as they believed Italy was always seen as a pushover nation. Mussolini promoted the event as a step towards Italy gaining the respect he believed it deserved again. He gained immense popularity among his own people due to this which encouraged him to expand his foreign policy further.

Italy had also been promised the city of Fiume, which bordered Yugoslavia, after World War One in the Treaty of London if they agreed to switch sides during the war. Even though they did this, Italy did not gain the territories it was promised and instead Fiume became a League of Nations city instead. Many Italians were bitter about this as it felt like they had been double crossed by the other Allied Forces. However, in 1923, Mussolini sent military officials to occupy Fiume and claimed he was restoring order in the city and

could not allow a city so close to Italy to be chaotic as he claimed Fiume was. Yugoslavia objected to this but could do little about it since France, Yugoslavia's ally, was occupying the Ruhr Valley at the time. Nothing was done to stop Mussolini. Fiume became an Italian city in 1924. After this victory, Mussolini gained even more confidence in his handling of Italy's foreign policy.

Mussolini felt that, to be a strong European power, Italy must be involved in as many multinational conferences and allegiances as possible. He became a signatory to the Locarno Pact of 1925 and the Kellogg-Briand pact of 1928 which encouraged European powers to discuss ways to solve future disputes peacefully without resorting to violence. However, Mussolini was more concerned about the rapid growth of Nazi Germany in the early 1930s when Hitler gained power. He strongly opposed any attempt by Hitler to unify with their mutual neighbour, Austria as he felt threatened by the idea of Germany sharing a much larger border with Italy in case of future aggression. When the Austrian chancellor, Dollfuss, was assassinated by Nazis in 1934, he sent troops up to the border with Austria as a warning to Hitler not to use it as an opportunity to invade. After this, Mussolini set up the Stresa Front with Britain and France to oppose German rearmament and expansion.

In 1935, Mussolini decided to invade the African country of Abyssinia. He was eager for a colonial conquest because Italians were becoming more disillusioned with fascism's corporate state. Abyssinia was primarily located between two other Italian colonies, Somaliland and Eritrea. It was also seen as revenge for the humiliating Italian defeat against Abyssinia in 1896. Even though the Abyssinian army was primitive, the weak Italian army still struggled to defeat them and eventually resorted to brutality. The army infamously used poison gas on the civilian population as well as the army. The League of Nations imposed sanctions on Italy because of this but they were not severe enough to make much of an impact and many countries simply didn't enforce them anyway. 400,000 troops with tanks and airplanes eventually succeeded in conquering Abyssinia but it was at a great cost. Hitler supported Mussolini with this as it distracted the League from his military occupation of the Rhineland. As a result of this war however, Italy's international reputation was severely damaged and the Stresa Front fell apart. Mussolini withdrew Italy from the League of Nations in 1937.

Mussolini also decided to involve Italy in the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939. He wanted to both support the fascist dictator, Franco, and use Spain as a testing ground for the Italian army. He met with the Spanish generals prior to the war to offer his aid and it was accepted. Hitler and Stalin has similar ideas and all major communist and fascist powers used Spain as a testing ground to test out their own

strengths and to evaluate the strengths of their enemy. Mussolini sent 800,000 troops into the war. He hoped a fascist victory would improve his prestige at home and internationally and that it would increase domestic morale. However, the opposite was true. Italian troops were poorly equipped and Franco held them in contempt and ultimately blamed them for some of the major losses of fascism during the war. Hitler too began to see serious problems with Mussolini's bravado and came to view him as a second class fascist dictator, holding him in disdain. Ultimately, Italy faced international humiliation.

After 1936, Mussolini became more dependent on Nazi Germany for support. In October 1936, Count Ciano, Italian foreign minister, signed the Rome-Berlin Axis. This was a statement of common German and Italian interests, around which was presumed Europe would soon heed to. It was presumed that all power in Europe would revolve around an axis connecting Italy and Germany. Mussolini also signed the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan and Germany in 1937 to vouch to fight against the spread of communism. In 1939, the German-Italian alliance was strengthened to one of military allegiance also. It was called the Pact of Steel and meant if one country went to war, the other would also declare war on the opposing country. However when Hitler invaded Poland on the 1st of September, 1939, Mussolini did not honour this alliance. He refused to aid Germany in the war until German victory seemed inevitable which made him look like a coward.

Mussolini's foreign policy continued to breed humiliation for Italy well into the war. Italy's involvement in World War Two was a series of failures and defeats which caused not only Hitler's contempt for him to increase but it also bred animosity among his own people. In 1943, the Italian population overthrew him but he managed to escape retribution until his execution in 1945. Ultimately, although Mussolini had some minor successes with his foreign policy, his overconfident management of Italy internationally was overall a large failure in his regime.