

The Growth of Fascism | A1 Sample answer

What were the conditions that led to the growth of fascism between 1918 and 1939?

The economic and social conditions that prevailed in the inter war period of 1918 to 1939 provided a perfect climate for the growth of authoritarian regimes such as Franco's in Spain and Salazar's in Portugal. But it also led to more brutal fascist dictatorships such as Mussolini's in Italy and Hitler's in Germany. In the aftermath of WW1 the old system of imperial power was in decline, and this left a power vacuum to be filled. In some countries, such as Britain and France this prompted a renewed faith in democracy while in other countries the chaos and instability of the age pushed the populous towards ruthless fascist leaders. Although individual circumstances differed, in general dissatisfaction with the treaty of Versailles, hard economic conditions, weak governance and social unrest contributed to the growth of fascism.

Both Italy and Germany were left feeling very aggrieved by the Treaty of Versailles. Italy had joined the war on the allied side in 1915 and at the 'Treaty of London' had been promised large territorial gains in Fiume and Dalmatia. After the war, at the Paris Peace Conference, these changes did not materialise. This perceived injustice led to the nationalist poet D'Annunzio leading the occupation of Fiume and contributed to a general feeling of nationalistic fervour, which Mussolini capitalised on by promising to make Italy "great, feared and respected" again. In Germany too the public were deeply unhappy with the Treaty. The 'War Guilt' clause meant they had to pay £6.6bn in reparations to the allies, which they could ill afford. They also lost the Saar region to France (pending a plebiscite), a lot of land to

Czechoslovakia and all their overseas colonies. This was coupled with the humiliating limitations on their armed forces and a demilitarized Rhineland. As a result, the proud German people naturally gravitated towards Hitler, who derided the 'November Criminals' and promised to throw off the shackles of the Treaty of Versailles.

Economic conditions also led to the growth of fascism. Following the war many countries were left with huge debts. Italy was 85bn (lira) in debt and following massive military demobilization they were saddled with more than 2 million suddenly unemployed soldiers. Army pensions for the 600,000 dead also had to be paid. This led to cut-backs and tax-hikes and naturally pushed the electorate towards the extremes of fascism and communism. In Germany, economic conditions were poor but stable for most of the 1920s, thanks to the helpful 'Dawes Plan' and the shrew leadership of Gustav Stresemann. But after the Wall Street crash in 1929, American banks recalled their loans, which led to a total economic crash. Money became virtually worthless due to hyperinflations and unemployment soared to more than 6.6 million. Germans looked for a radical solution and found one in Adolf Hitler who promised full employment, autarky (self-sufficiency) and stability.

The inter war years were a period of great social unrest. In Italy Bolsheviks in the south had already begun taking over farms. A red terror swept the country, bolstering support for Mussolini. Support came in particular from industrialists who feared a socialist society and from the church who feared the rise of 'godless' communism. Similar social chaos was visible in the Weimar republic as Hitler's brownshirts (SA) fought running battles with red-shirts.

The failure of democracy in both Germany and Italy helped fuel the rise of fascism. In Italy between 1919 and 1921 there were 5 coalition governments. Italians wanted a more stable

system of government. In Germany democracy worked for a long time, but it eventually failed when 'Hunger Chancellor' Brüning was forced to exercise the power of 'rule by decree' to bring in cutbacks. This illustrated the inherent weaknesses of democracy and set a dangerous precedent which Hitler would later use when he came to power.

When contextualised, the appeal of fascism is obvious. Lines of uniformed men, marching in step was a very impressive sight in a time of civic unrest and disorder. The fascist propaganda presented themselves as the last line of defence against chaos. The oratorical skills and charisma of both Hitler and Mussolini (and the cult of personality developed around them) made it easy for the public to feel secure. Simple slogans such as 'Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer' (one empire, one people, one leader) and 'Mussolini is always right' were appealing in a time of moral ambiguity and soul-searching. The gilded promises of fascism contributed to its growing popularity.

Internal politics of individual countries also helped the growth of fascism. For example, in Italy Mussolini gathered 25,000 followers for an awe-inspiring 'March on Rome'. This convinced King Victor Emmanuel to appoint Mussolini as the youngest Prime Minister ever, at the age of just 39, much to the disgust of P.M. Fada who had urged him to call in the army. Mussolini manipulated the situation to make it seem as if he had come to power in a coup d'état, and thus he further consolidated his power. In Germany, the naiveté of the established parties led them to underestimate the fascist movement and inadvertently help it to gain power. A leader conservative M.P, Von Papen, felt he could control and 'tame' Hitler, so he persuaded President Hindenburg to appoint him Chancellor. But once in power Hitler immediately called an election and threw the full weight of the states resources into his campaign, resulting in him assuming full control of the country. Thus, he used democracy to destroy democracy. In

both cases, existing governance structures, the monarchy in Italy and the Reichstag in Germany, helped bring fascist regimes to power.

A whole host of historical circumstances conspired to aid the growth of fascism in the inter war period. Economic difficulties, social chaos and foolish politician played their part, but the mass appeal of fascism was the largest factor in its own success. This only goes to show the dangers of populism.