

Mussolini's Strengths & Weaknesses

Sample Essay

What were Mussolini's strengths and weaknesses as a political leader 1922-1939?

Mussolini had both strengths and weaknesses as a leader of Italy. He was very successful in his consolidation of power, his use of propaganda and in mending relations with the Catholic church. However areas in which he was weak were his ill-thought out economic policies, his foreign policy and his Nazi relations.

Mussolini founded the fascio party in 1919. By 1922 he was prime minister of Italy. This itself shows one of his biggest strengths. Mussolini came to power in 1922 after his March on Rome. In 1922 his fascio squadristi had helped landowners to squash strikes of their workers so he had plenty of support. As well as this there was enormous political instability at the time so people welcomed a strong leader. After the March on Rome King Emmanuel III but Mussolini in power. He quickly moved to consolidate this power, bringing in the Acerbo Law in 1923 which gave total power to the party which possessed 66% of the vote. The law was welcomed by the public as an end to the political instability and Mussolini ensured that he had two thirds of the vote using his squadristi to intimidate voters. In this way Mussolini had total control and was soon ruling by decree. However he nearly lost it all due to the murder of Giacomo Matteotti in broad daylight by his squadristi. It was only thanks to the Aventine

Succession that he managed to retain power. This shows Mussolini's strengths in his knowledgeable use of his fascist squads, as well as the well thought out Acerbo law. However he was very lucky not to use power after the Matteotti crisis.

One of Mussolini's weaker areas was the economy. He bought in a series of 'battles' to improve the Italian economy in various ways. In 1925 he began the Battle for Grain. He gave grants to farmers to grow grain instead of fruit and olives despite the unsuitable climate. Then when American bread prices dropped he deserted these farmers, leaving them in poverty. The purpose of this battle was to create an economically self-sufficient country, an autarky. However this clearly failed. His next project was the Battle for Land. He had limited success here as he managed to drain the Pontine Marshes but little else. Next was the Battle for Lire. Mussolini fixed the lire at the artificially high rate of 90 lire to the pound by borrowing heavily from America. In 1929 after the Wall Street Crash America demanded their money back and Mussolini had to halve wages in order to prevent the country from going bust. Without doubt this was a failure. Finally Mussolini had the Battle for Births which aimed to create a future army by increasing the population from 40 to 6 million. This had little success. Clearly economic planning was one of Mussolini's weaknesses as many of his battles were poorly thought out and unrealistic. However Mussolini can't be blamed for the prevailing economic situation at the time. Also naming these projects battles was an example of his skillful use of propaganda.

Mussolini used propaganda extremely effectively and this was certainly one of his strengths. He became known as Il Duce and slogans such as "Work. Obey. Fight" were commonly used. He was always portrayed as strong and athletic to convey an image of power to the population. Furthermore his office light was left on 20 hours of the day to give the impression

that he was working incessantly. He also set up a number of youth organisations to further expose them to his propaganda. The Balilla was for younger children who then graduated on to the Avanguardisti. He also had schoolbooks rewritten to glorify Italy, Mussolini and Ancient Rome. The Romanita movement was another propaganda campaign which attempted to revive Italy to its former glory of Ancient Rome. All of these campaigns served to indoctrinate the population and further increase Mussolini's power. This was definitely a success of Mussolini's although the youth movements had only limited success, with membership of only 60% of the population. This was not as extensive as Mussolini would have hoped. He failed to take into account that many children left school at 11 and weren't presented with this propaganda.

An area where Mussolini was arguably weak was his foreign policy. He had few political stances. He signed the Kellogg-Briande pact which rejected war as a means of solving problems but in reality did little to stick to it. The main characteristic of his foreign policy was his invasion of Abyssinia on Oct 23rd 1935. He used the British and French preoccupation with Germany as a distraction. He wished create once again a Roman Empire. Abyssinian President Haile Sallaisee appealed to the League of Nations but they took up a policy of appeasement. Addis Ababa was taken in 1936. In this way Mussolini had varying success. He realised England was more concerned with Germany at the time and took advantage of this. However this served to isolate him further from the European powers and he had little power over European affairs.

An aspect which I think was a weakness of Mussolini's was his Nazi relations. In 1936 he attended the Locarno Conference which aimed to limit Hitler's power in Europe. However by 1938 he had signed the Rome-Berlin Axis. This shows Mussolini's changeable foreign policy and lack of political stance, which was a weakness. Germany and Italy had grown closer during

the Spanish Civil war 1936-1937 as they both supported Franco. Relations became friendly and Mussolini was flattered by the Rome-Berlin Axis. They then signed a Pact of Steel in 1939 which stated that should one country go to war, the other would support it. Mussolini didn't realise however how soon this would come into play as Germany entered the war soon after. Realising that Italy didn't have the strength Mussolini made a series of unrealistic demands and when they were not met refused to enter the war. He soon changed his mind when he entered the war in 1940. This was a major weakness as essentially he chose the wrong side to support in WW, although Germany did appear very strong in 1938.

Mussolini's biggest strength was in his Church-State relations. In 1922 he brought religious education into schools and in 1923 he had his children baptised. By 1926 there were friendly relations between church and state. In 1929 came his greatest success in the form of the Lateran Treaty which solved 40 year long conflict between Italy and the Catholic church. The Treaty stated that Catholicism was recognised as the official religion of Italy and that the Vatican was an independent state. The Church was also paid 750 million lire in reparations. In return the Catholic Church agreed to recognise the state. This gained Mussolini enormous support among the mainly Catholic population which we did lose even when relations went bad again due to the Charter of Race of 1935 which discriminated against Jews in an attempt to gain further favor with the Nazis. Overall the Lateran Treaty was a propaganda success for Mussolini.

Mussolini clearly had a variety of strengths and weaknesses as identified. He had varying success in different areas but overall was successful in gaining and keeping power.

