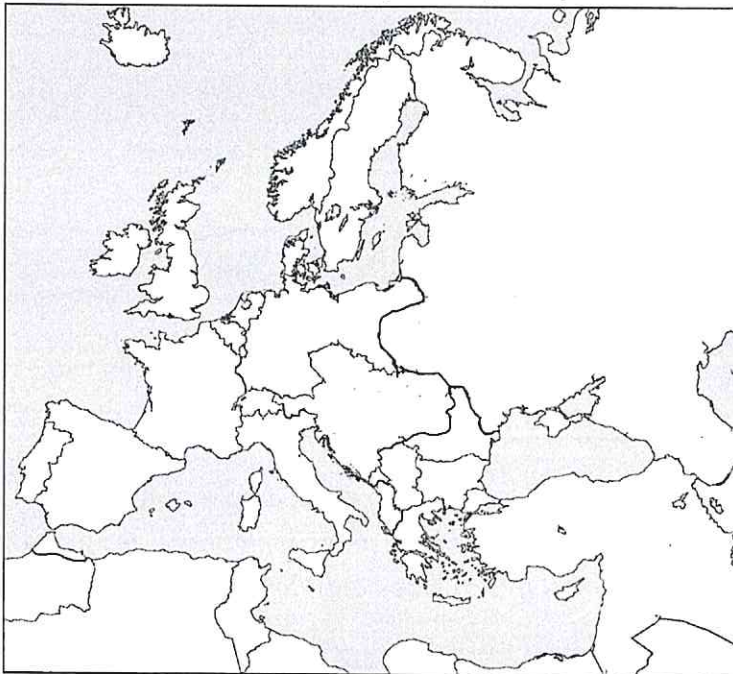


## INTRODUCTION TO A LEVEL HISTORY

### Option 2G.1: The rise and fall of fascism in Italy, c1911-46

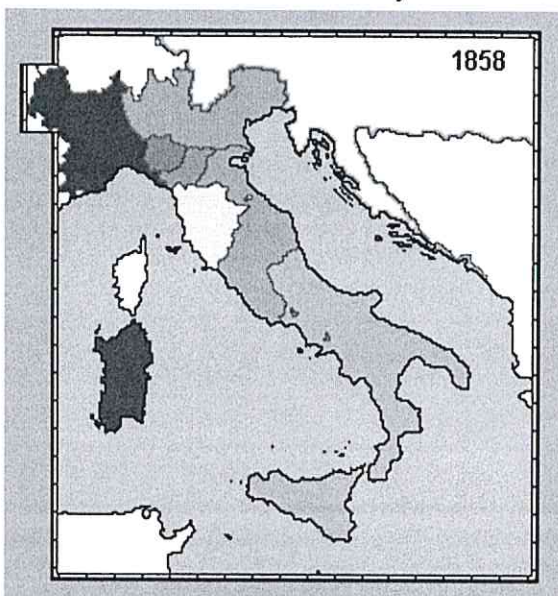
This is a depth study which will give you an understanding of the extent and nature of the profound political, economic and social changes Italy went through as it changed from a liberal state to a fascist dictatorship and a return to democracy during the years c1911 – 1946.

1. Locate Italy and the other major European powers at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Italy
United Kingdom
France
Germany
Russia
Austria Hungary

2. Before 1870 Italy was a collection of independent states.  
Label the Italian states and major cities on the map.



Piedmont	Rome
Lombardy	Florence
Venetia	Venice
Parma	Milan
Modena	Naples
Tuscany	Turin
Papal states	Palermo
The two Sicilies	
Sardinia	

3. Define the following words and phrases:

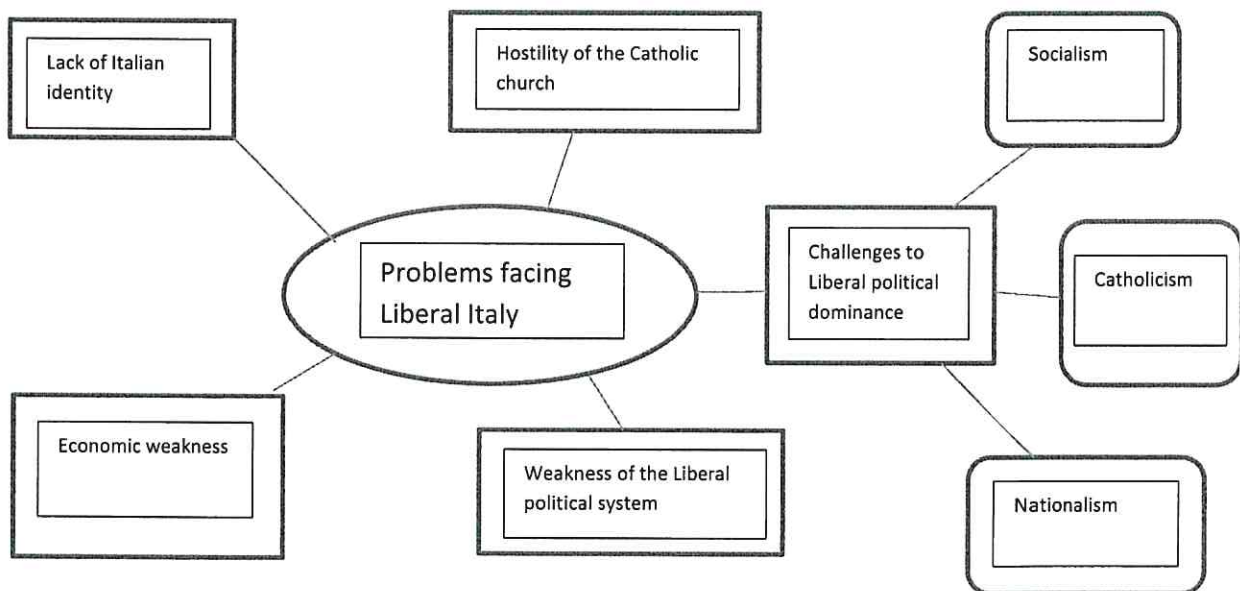
- Liberal .....
- Constitutional monarchy.....
- Democracy.....
- Fascism.....
- Reactionary.....
- Socialism.....
- Nationalism.....
- Universal suffrage.....

4. On the handout, read through The Unification of Italy.

- a) What did Risorgimento mean?
- b) How did the unification of Italy come about?

5. Read through Problems Facing Liberal Italy 1870 – 1915.

Complete a mind map of Italy's problems:



## 2 Problems facing Liberal Italy 1870–96

► How serious were the problems faced by the Liberal rulers of Italy?

### KEY TERM

**Liberal oligarchy** A regime controlled by a relatively small group of politicians, in this case Liberals, who formed a wealthy, educated elite.

The political unification of the states of the Italian peninsula was thus complete by 1870. With only two per cent of the population possessing the vote, the new state was to be dominated by the representatives of the wealthy and middle classes, and these were overwhelmingly Liberals. This **Liberal oligarchy**, as they have sometimes been referred to, saw themselves as an educated elite who would lead Italy forward to national unity, economic prosperity and great power status. They were, however, to find formidable obstacles in their path.

### Lack of Italian identity

The long history of political division had done little to foster a sense of national identity among Italians. Only a very small proportion of Italians had played any role in bringing about unification and loyalties tended to be towards the family or the immediate locality rather than towards the Italian nation. To complicate matters, only about two per cent of the population actually spoke Italian. The great majority spoke dialects that were virtually unintelligible outside their local area. What was known as 'Italian' was simply the local dialect of Tuscany, the province centring on Florence. Liberal governments believed that if Italy was to become truly united and a great power in Europe then the public must view themselves as Italians rather than Sicilians or Piedmontese.

### Hostility of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church was a powerful force in Italian society, claiming at least the nominal allegiance of the vast majority of the population, and it was bitterly resentful of the new kingdom of Italy that had seized the Papal States and Rome from the Church. In retaliation, the Pope refused to recognise the Italian state and instructed loyal Catholics to boycott all elections. This ban was lifted in the 1890s but distrust between the Church and the Liberal regime remained a factor in Italian politics up to and beyond the First World War.

### Economic weakness

Italy was still predominantly an agricultural country, with some 68 per cent of the population dependent on the land for at least part of their livelihood. Most peasants and farm labourers, particularly in the south, lived in poverty. Industry was also relatively undeveloped. Most enterprises were small scale, centring around workshops and skilled craftsmen. Heavy industry was at a disadvantage because of the lack of natural resources, principally coal and iron ore. There was some development in iron and steel and shipbuilding, but this was largely

limited to military purposes and railways and was concentrated in the north. Economic underdevelopment meant the government received relatively little in taxes and made it more difficult for them to finance such projects as the expansion of schooling or the build-up of the Italian armed forces.

### Weaknesses of the Liberal political system

The parliamentary system had been partly based on the British model but in certain vital respects it was very different: there were no clearly defined political parties and there was no **two-party system**. As the urban and rural poor did not vote, politicians were drawn mainly from the professional, wealthy middle class and represented this narrow social class in parliament. These Liberals were not divided by ideology and, in fact, had relatively few major differences of opinion. Consequently, there seemed to be no necessity for formal political parties that might draw up policy, elect leaders and discipline dissenting members.

In the absence of well-organised parties, members of parliament, or deputies as they were known, clustered around prominent politicians and formed factions. A number of factions would agree to support each other and form a government, dividing up the ministerial posts between them. This was the politics of **Trasformismo**, where former political opponents might temporarily put aside their differences and come together in government. Of course, such alliances were fragile and when a leading politician felt aggrieved over an issue he would withdraw his faction's support and the government would fall. In fact, such was the turnover of governments that Italy had 29 prime ministers between 1870 and 1922.

To critics, these ever-changing governments indicated that Liberal politics was not about principle or the good of the nation; it was simply the pursuit of power for its own sake.

#### KEY TERMS

##### **Two-party system**

A political system, as in Britain, where there are two dominant and distinct parties competing for power.

**Trasformismo** Different political factions forming a coalition government regardless of ideological differences.

### 3 Growing challenges to Liberal political dominance 1896–1915

► *Why did the Liberals face growing challenges to their political dominance?*

#### Context: political and economic crisis 1893–6

There was economic growth in the first twenty years of Liberal Italy but, by the early 1890s, the economy had fallen into depression, the result of foreign competition and trade disputes with France, Italy's main export market.

 **KEY TERM**

**Lire** The Italian currency from 1861 to 2002. (Singular: lira.)

Companies and even banks began to go bust. One of these banks, the Banca Romana, had issued banknotes on behalf of the Italian state. On its collapse, it became apparent that it had printed and issued a large number of banknotes illegally – in effect it had literally printed its own money, to the tune of 60 million **lire**, for its own use. The public outcry caused by this scandal was increased still further when it was revealed that the bank had also lent large sums of money to leading politicians. These loans had been interest free. The prime minister, Francesco Crispi, had received 55,000 lire and his political opponent, Giolitti, had borrowed at least 60,000 lire. This was an enormous sum at a time when the annual income per person in Italy was under 2000 lire. This clearly smacked of corruption and lowered the reputation of Liberal politicians even further.

The economic depression of the early 1890s not only caused bankruptcies and a political scandal, but also led to protests and public disorder. The first signs of trouble appeared in Sicily, one of the poorest parts of the country. Workers, at first in towns but soon in the countryside as well, organised strikes and demonstrations to demand higher wages and lower rents. Crispi's government took fright, viewing these protests as a revolutionary subversive movement, perhaps sponsored by the Pope and hostile foreign powers. In January 1894 the government ordered the arrest of the workers' leaders. Sicily was placed under military rule and 40,000 government troops were despatched to restore order. Crispi feared that not only Sicily but also the whole of Italy was on the brink of revolt. To prevent this, opposition political groups were banned throughout the country and critical newspapers were censored.

Crispi's government survived this domestic crisis but a catastrophic defeat in foreign affairs destroyed both the government and the career of its leader. Crispi was determined that Italy should become a 'Great Power', the equal of Britain and France. By the 1880s these two countries were carving out empires in Africa, and many Liberals believed that Italy should have its share. Eritrea, in East Africa, was seized in 1890 and, in 1895, Crispi ordered Italian troops to occupy part of Ethiopia (known then as Abyssinia). War broke out and in the Battle of Adowa in March 1896 an Italian army was utterly defeated, leaving 5000 Italian soldiers dead.

This was a national humiliation which was etched into the Italian consciousness and only exorcised in 1936 when Mussolini's Fascists finally conquered Ethiopia (see page 121). Crispi's career came to an abrupt end. He had tried to make Italy a Great Power but had seen his army lose its first major campaign, the first European forces to be defeated by an African state in modern times.

The events of 1893–6 severely damaged the prestige and self-confidence of Liberal politicians and spurred economic depression, national humiliation and political corruption, which encouraged the growth of opposition movements that would challenge the Liberals' monopoly of power. These movements took the form of socialism, Catholicism and nationalism.

## Socialism

Rapid industrialisation in northern Italy from the 1880s produced a sizeable working class who were attracted to **Socialist** ideas concerning pay, working conditions and the ownership of industry. A Liberal reform of 1881, allowing some 2 million more Italians to vote, provided an added incentive for Socialists to organise. The first determined attempt to create a single, united Socialist party was made by Filippo Turati, a middle-class lawyer, when, in 1891, he organised an Italian Workers' Congress in Milan.

At the Genoa Congress of 1892 the movement divided into two broad groupings. The first dedicated itself to revolutionary strikes and refused to participate in elections or parliamentary politics. The second and larger group also committed itself to workers' control of the state, but realised that this must be a long-term aim. It argued that in the meantime, and to achieve this ultimate goal, Socialists should work to extract better pay and conditions from employers, and should involve themselves in local and national politics, even if this meant dealing with the hated Liberals.

This more moderate group, including Turati, became the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in 1895. By 1897 it had 27,000 members and ran its own newspaper, *Avanti!* In 1900 it received over 200,000 votes in the general election and secured 32 seats in the chamber of deputies, the lower house of the Italian parliament. According to its manifesto, these deputies were resolved to demand the introduction of **universal male suffrage**, an eight-hour day, income tax and women's rights. But despite the fact that socialism still had relatively little support by the turn of the century and had adopted moderate policies its emergence had provoked great fears. Such fears were particularly pronounced in the Catholic Church.

## Catholicism

For the first decade or more after unification, the Catholic Church focused its hostility on the Liberal regime, but by the 1890s the Papacy had turned its attention to the rise of socialism. To the Church, socialism was a direct competitor for the hearts and minds of ordinary Italians, challenged the traditional social order and even rejected religion (see Source A).

### SOURCE A

**The Bishop of Verona writing to Catholics in his region, 1901, quoted in Martin Clark, *Modern Italy: 1871 to the Present*, Routledge, 2014, p. 177.**

*Socialism is the most abject slavery, it is flagrant injustice, it is the craziest folly, it is a social crime, it is the destruction of the family and of public welfare, it is the self-proclaimed and inevitable enemy of religion, and it leads to anarchy.*

### KEY TERMS

**Socialist** Socialists argue that the existing political and economic systems of Europe oppress the poor. They work to improve the political and economic status of the working class. Some believe that the existing political systems can be reformed peacefully; others argue that only violent revolution can bring about meaningful change.

### Universal male suffrage

The right to vote for all men over the age of 21, introduced in 1912.

Why was the Bishop of Verona, writing in Source A, so concerned about socialism?



## KEY TERMS

**Anticlericals** Those politicians, mainly Liberal, who opposed the claims of the Catholic Church that it deserved a privileged position within the Italian state. Liberals who were particularly anticlerical, and who demanded greater social reform, were known as Radicals.

**Irridentism** The demand that Italy seize from Austria those lands on its northern and eastern borders where a majority of the population spoke Italian.

To head off the danger of Socialist gains in parliament, the Church removed its ban on Catholics voting in general elections. By 1909 Catholics were even permitted to put themselves forward as candidates for election.

The Pope remained opposed to the formation of a Catholic political party that might rival his authority over the faithful, but the Catholics still presented a major challenge to the Liberal regime. Now that the Catholics were active participants in national politics, was it possible to ignore them, or must some form of accommodation be attempted? If there was to be co-operation, what would the terms be, and how could leading Liberals deal with the remaining **anticlericals** in their own ranks?

## Nationalism

Nationalists, often middle-class intellectuals, were few in number but they found many supporters in the media. They accused Liberals of putting their own careers before the good of the country. In particular, they condemned the regime for failing to make Italy a great power, the equal of France or Britain. They demanded a larger Italian Empire in Africa and higher military spending. They also favoured **irridentism**, demanding that Italy seize those areas of the Austrian Empire where most of the population spoke Italian, namely South Tyrol, Trentino and Istria (see the map on page 33).

Nationalists argued that a more aggressive foreign policy would help to forge an Italian nation and reinvigorate Italian politics. It would be the Nationalists who would lead the calls for Italian entry into the First World War and who would be an early influence on fascism.

Summary diagram: Problems facing Liberal Italy 1870–1915

