

Observation no: 62

Country-year: 1939

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

Mussolini may not have come to power by coup in the strictest sense, but there was certainly a complicit understanding between many high ranking military officers and the Fascists that the military would not stand in Mussolini's way. Additionally, while the military didn't seem to have an organizational role in Mussolini's rise to power, the ranks of the Black Shirt squads were filled with many military veterans, young officers, and enlisted who actively participated in much of the early protest movement in Italy.¹

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No.

Though some army officers and King Vittorio Emanuele III did contemplate overthrowing Mussolini in 1935.²

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No.

However, Mussolini was drafted into the Italian military in 1915 and served as an enlisted man during World War I, achieving the rank of corporal. His experiences in the war and his relationship with other war veterans would prove influential in the formation of the fascist movement. Additionally, Mussolini would make himself minister of war, navy, and the air force by 1933.

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No.

¹ Marco Mondini, "Between subversion and coup d'etat: military power and politics after the Great War (1919 – 1922)," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11, no.4 (2006: 445-464); John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); P. Crociani and P.P. Battistelli, *Italian Blackshirt 1935-45* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010).

² Brian Sullivan, "Fascist Italy's military involvement in the Spanish Civil War." *Journal Of Military History* 59, no. 4 (October 1995): 697-727.

Mussolini generally left the officer corps to set their own requirements, none of which privileged any particular sect or group of people over another.

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

Mussolini left the ranks of the senior officers intact when he first took power and then hired and fired new officers as time went on. This hiring and firing was less of an attempt to solidify support to Fascist ideology and more a preference Mussolini had for officers who would cede control of operational and strategic planning. His first few replacements, in fact, were solely based on picking an Army commander who was willing to support a decreased Army budget. Similarly, Mussolini picked Air Force officers based on their adherence to his particular beliefs about the role of aircraft in combat and not related to the strength of their support for Fascism.³

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

However, many of the senior appointed officers were Fascists and this number increased as Mussolini cemented his power leading up to 1940. Originally, Mussolini actually strove to keep the military and the party separate, cementing his own control over the armed forces and therefore ensuring his personal survival over the party.⁴

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

No.

Though the army, starting in 1927, had lessons on Fascism in their officer training curriculum, there was very little additional political education.⁵

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

³ Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*; Macgregor Knox, *Common Destiny* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴ Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 72.

⁵ Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 85.

No.

Though the paramilitary organization, the Black Shirts, was used to repress dissent.

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years

No.

The military, while leaning conservative, generally stayed out of politics.

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

Yes.

Starting as early as 1919, armed fascist squads called the Black Shirts (Camicie Nere) were used by Mussolini to ensure control over Mussolini opponents and grab power in the march on Rome in 1922. Shortly after the March on Rome in 1922, the Black Shirts were formally codified into the Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale (MVSN) as an official militia underneath the regime. Three units were sent as combat legions to Libya in 1923 and were reorganized into the Italian armed forces in 1924, though these units were separate from regular military units. By 1935, there were 132 blackshirt legions operating within the armed force structure and attached to Italian army divisions. 29 of these legions were mobilized for deployed combat and 5 legions saw combat in Eritrea. In 1936, Mussolini sent 3000 blackshirts to take part in the Spanish Civil War, where the units performed poorly . . . even in comparison to the Italian regular military.⁶ With the onset of World War II, blackshirt legions saw combat in Libya, the Western Alps, Greece, and the Soviet Union.⁷ The use of these units abroad represented Mussolini's concern that regime survival would not be possible without international conquest. So, while the units were no longer used in the mainly domestic role from the mid 20s, they were seen as an extension of Mussolini regime survival.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

No.

⁶ Sullivan, Brian R. "Fascist Italy's military involvement in the Spanish Civil War." *Journal Of Military History* 59, no. 4 (October 1995): 697-727.

⁷ Crociani, Piero, and Pier Paolo Battistelli. *Italian Blackshirt 1935-45*. Vol. 144. Osprey Publishing, 2010.

Nothing I could find indicated that Mussolini paid enough attention to the military to launch any concerted effort to monitor the general rank and file, even with the Black Shirt paramilitary squads.⁸

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

No.

However, there were significant shake ups in senior officer leadership from 1922 all the way until Mussolini lost power. Mussolini appointed most of his senior officers and seemed to use a trial and error approach to whom he chose to trust and whom he removed from office. This led to the appointment of Mussolini sycophants over promotion based on expertise or proven record.⁹

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

Yes.

The Commissione suprema di difesa was formed to co-ordinate the civilian political institutions with the military. The commission only met once a year for a few days and so made slow progress in major decisions about the manning and equipping of the Italian military.¹⁰

⁸ Knox, *Common Destiny*.

⁹ Sullivan, "Fascist Italy's military involvement in the Spanish Civil War"; Knox, *Common Destiny*; Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*.

¹⁰ Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*.