

**TIMELINE**

- 1922** Law to break up large estates (not enforced)
- 1924** Battle over the Southern Problem
- 1925** Battle for Grain; Vidoni Pact
- 1926** Battle for Land; Battle for the Lira
- 1927** Battle for Births; formation of the ONB; Charter of Labour
- 1928** Catholic Scout organisation banned
- 1929** Lateran Treaty and Concordat
- 1931** Same-sex relations made illegal; laws passed against divorce and abortion
- 1933** IRI set up
- 1936 Oct:** Rome-Berlin Axis signed between Italy and Nazi Germany
- 1937** Membership of GIL made compulsory
- 1938 Jul:** Charter of Race drawn up  
**Sep-Nov:** Racial laws and decrees carried out

**Overview**

- Once in power, Mussolini launched a number of economic 'battles', many of which were intended to make Italy self-sufficient and strong enough to pursue an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy.
- These 'battles' had varying degrees of success. In addition, other economic policies tended to benefit some social classes and groups more than others.
- From the late 1920s, despite various social policies and the creation of an Institute of Industrial Reconstruction (IRI) in 1933, many Italians experienced a decline in their standard of living.
- Women were particularly affected by fascist policies – the 'Battle for Births' attempted to restrict women to the traditional 'housewife/mother' role.
- Mussolini's government maintained generally good relations with the Catholic Church. However, disputes did arise – mainly over fascist attempts to control Catholic youth movements, and then over the introduction of anti-Semitic laws after 1938.
- Concerted efforts were made to control education and to establish strong fascist youth movements for boys and girls. In 1937, membership of these groups was made compulsory.
- Despite all of Mussolini's efforts to influence the views of different sections of Italy's social groups and organisations, he never managed to create a totally authoritarian state. This was confirmed in 1943 when internal opposition led to his dismissal as prime minister.

**KEY QUESTIONS**

- What were Mussolini's economic and social policies, and what factors influenced them?
- How successful were Mussolini's economic and social policies?
- What were the main religious policies in Mussolini's fascist Italy?
- What were Mussolini's policies towards women, ethnic and other minorities?
- What were the main fascist policies on education, young people and the arts, and what impact did they have?
- To what extent was authoritarian control established in fascist Italy?

## 2.10 What were Mussolini's economic and social policies, and what factors influenced them?

Mussolini had no real understanding of, or interest in, economics. However, he realised the importance of a strong economy to consolidate his regime, and lay the foundations for an aggressive and expansionist foreign policy. Thus, in many respects, Mussolini's main concern was not so much to create fascism as a viable 'third way', as it was to make Italy a rich and great power.

To achieve this, Mussolini believed it was necessary to make Italy economically self-sufficient in both food and in raw materials for industry. This would require not only overcoming problems of poverty and improving agriculture at home, but also conquering a large empire to supply Italy with raw materials.

**third way:** In its early stages, fascist leaders often claimed that fascism was a 'third way' between capitalism on the one hand and revolutionary socialism on the other. However, most historians agree that, once it became the dominant power, fascism supported capitalist interests. This often caused problems with more radical fascists, who had believed earlier promises about helping the 'little man'.

### SOURCE A

Fascism was not, and never claimed to be, an economic system ... Throughout the life of the Fascist regime, it is true, a minority in the Party and the corporate structure continued to feed the guttering flame of Fascist 'leftism' with somewhat qualified anti-capitalist rhetoric. Such restlessness, and the implicit challenge to private wealth it contained, had its uses for Mussolini in his dealings with the captains of industry, agriculture and finance – just as long as he could be seen to possess the power equally to suppress, control or release it ... From his crucial initial compromise with big business and the agrari in 1920–2 down to his fall in July 1943, Fascist 'leftism' was never allowed significantly to influence major policy decisions or initiatives.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Routledge. pp. 43–44.

### QUESTION

To what extent does **Source A** support the view that fascism did not represent a 'third way'?

## Mussolini's economic 'battles'

To achieve the economic greatness he desired, Mussolini decided to launch a series of initiatives or campaigns that he called 'battles'. The first of these was announced in 1924 and was directed at the widespread poverty in southern Italy. It was known as the Battle over the Southern Problem, and promised the building of thousands of new villages in Sicily and the south. It also included attempts to destroy the power of the Mafia.

In 1925, a much more serious campaign, the Battle for Grain, was launched in response to a poor harvest and a consequent increase in grain imports. The aim was to get Italian farmers to grow more cereals (especially wheat), in order to reduce Italy's dependence on foreign imports.

As well as imposing import controls (which really just ensured that the inefficient farmers in the south could continue farming without having to modernise), more land

**Fact:** The poverty and social problems in the south gave criminals an easy field in which to operate, and the most notorious of these criminals belonged to the Mafia. Although a 'Battle against the Mafia' began in 1925, it soon stopped pursuing Mafia leaders because several important members of the Italian élites had connections to the Mafia. The Mafia leadership simply went underground. In 1943, they cooperated with US forces and soon reclaimed their former power.

was made available for growing grain. This was done by ploughing up pasture land, olive and citrus orchards, and vineyards. In addition, medals were awarded to the most productive farmers, and their stories were reported in the newspapers. In the more prosperous north, farmers began growing wheat rather than maize, and farms became more mechanised. The increased use of tractors and fertilisers also benefited industrial firms such as Fiat, Pirelli Rubber and Montecatini Chemicals.

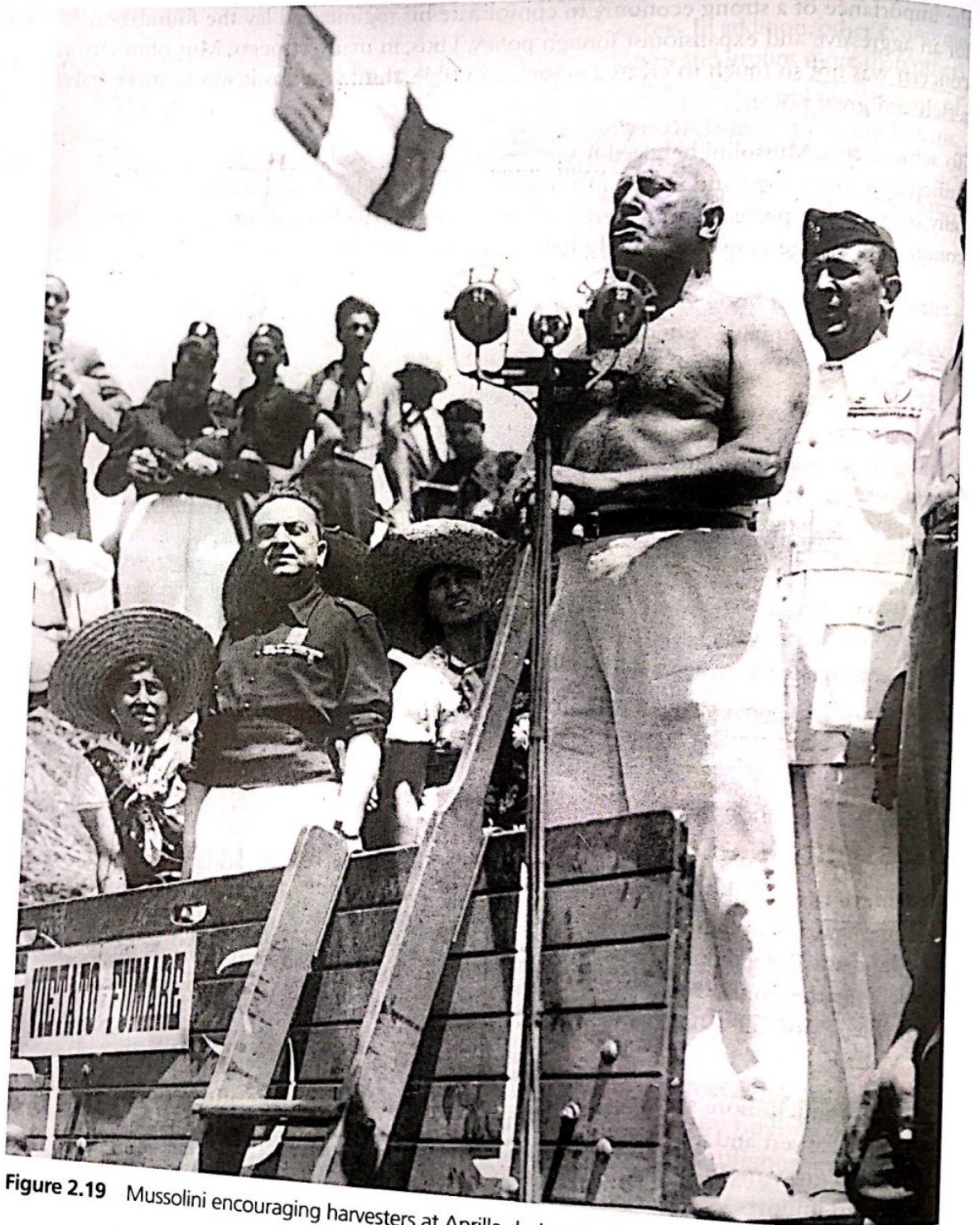


Figure 2.19 Mussolini encouraging harvesters at Aprilla during the Battle for Grain

**SOURCE B**

Wheat was the vital commodity that could feed an army, and Italy did not grow enough of it. In the early 1920s about 2.5 million tonnes a year, nearly one-third of the requirement, had to be imported, at a cost of almost 3 billion lire. This was about one-fifth by value of all imports. Italy already had to import coal and oil; and could not import basic foodstuff as well.

Clark, M. 2005. *Mussolini*. London, UK. Pearson. p. 130.

The following year, 1926, saw the start of the Battle for Land – a further attempt to increase the amount of available farmland. Marshes and swamps were drained, most notably the Pontine Marshes near Rome. This allowed the establishment of many small farms. The farming itself, financed from public funds, created work for the unemployed.

On 18 August 1926, the Battle for the Lira began when the value of the Italian currency dropped. To restore its value abroad (and thus help stop internal price rises), and to increase Italian prestige, the lira was revalued. This allowed Italy to continue importing coal and iron for armaments and shipbuilding.

## 2.11 How successful were Mussolini's economic and social policies?

### Were the battles won or lost?

Most of Mussolini's economic 'battles' were far from successful, often because they were fought inconsistently. New villages had been promised in the Battle over the Southern Problem, but none were actually built. Although the Battle for Grain succeeded in almost doubling cereal production by 1939, making Italy self-sufficient in wheat, it also involved misallocation of resources. This resulted in Italy having to import olive oil, while exports of fruit and wine, and numbers of cattle and sheep, dropped. The Battle for Land only reclaimed one significant area (the Pontine Marshes).

The Battle for the Lira, which involved artificially raising the value of the lira, also resulted in declining exports – and thus increased unemployment – as Italian goods became more expensive. Car exports, in particular, were badly hit. It also began a recession in Italy, which was worsened by the Great Depression (see section 2.7, Controlling minds).

Thus, most of Mussolini's 'battles', which were intended to achieve autarchy, caused at least as many problems as they solved.

### Fascism and state intervention

Before the Depression, Mussolini had not interfered with private enterprise and had favoured large companies and heavy industry. However, once the Depression started to take effect, he began to consider some state intervention, at first by encouraging

**autarchy:** Sometimes spelled 'autarky', this means self-sufficiency. It usually applies to countries or regimes that try to exist without having to import particular foods, fuels, raw materials or industrial goods. It can also refer to the attempt to be totally self-sufficient in all important areas, as happened in Italy and Nazi Germany. Invariably, such attempts had limited success.

**Historical debate:**

One of the many areas in which debate continues amongst historians relates to the effects of Mussolini's economic policy in terms of it being a 'modernising dictatorship'. A. J. Gregor, among others, controversially claimed that Italian fascism was similar to Stalin's regime in the USSR, in that it attempted to carry out the rapid industrialisation of a backward economy. Others do not share this extreme view, but do consider that fascism played some part in 'modernising' Italy's economy. However, many historians believe that fascism failed to modernise because of its deference to 'traditional' economic interests. Carry out some further research on this topic. Which, if any, of these views do you share?

**QUESTION**

How did the IRI help large-scale private companies?

**League of Nations:** Set up by the peace treaties that ended the First World War, the League was intended to avoid future wars through 'collective security'. Member nations imposed economic sanctions on aggressive nations to force them to end conflict through negotiations.

job-sharing schemes. By 1933, unemployment had risen to over 2 million, while millions more (especially in the rural south) suffered from underemployment. More than 30 per cent of labouring jobs in agriculture were lost, and many women were forced to give up their jobs to unemployed men. The situation in the countryside was made worse by controls on migration to the cities. These were designed to keep the problem of unemployment hidden within less-populated rural areas. By 1930, Mussolini had to drop earlier claims that his regime had improved the living standards of working-class Italians. In 1931, Mussolini's government decided to use public money to help prevent the collapse of banks and industries hit by the Depression.

## The Institute per la Reconstruzione Industriale (IRI)

The Institute per la Reconstruzione Industriale, or Institute of Industrial Reconstruction (IRI), was set up in 1933. At first, it took over various unprofitable industries on behalf of the state. By 1939, the IRI had become a massive state company, controlling most of the iron and steel industries, merchant shipping, the electrical industry and even the telephone system. However, Mussolini never intended for these industries to be permanently nationalised. Parts were regularly sold off to larger industries still under private ownership, resulting in the formation of huge capitalist monopolies. Examples of this were the large firms Montecatini and SINA Viscosa, which ended up owning the entire Italian chemical industry.

## Autarchy in the 1930s

The effects of the Depression led Mussolini to adopt increasingly protectionist measures and to strengthen the push towards fascist autarchy. These policies became even more important to the fascists in 1935 when several countries belonging to the **League of Nations** imposed some economic sanctions on Italy after its invasion of Abyssinia (see section 2.7, Fascist propaganda).

As Mussolini involved Italy in more military actions, the push for autarchy increased – as did the problems associated with this struggle for self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, there were some moderate achievements: by 1940, for example, industrial production had increased by 9 per cent. As a result, industry overtook agriculture as the largest proportion of GNP for the first time in Italy's history. In addition, between 1928 and 1939, imports of raw materials and industrial goods dropped significantly. Overall, however, fascist economic policy did not result in a significant modernisation of the economy, or even increased levels of productivity. Italy experienced a much slower recovery from the Depression than most other European states. Once Italy became involved in the Second World War, its economic and industrial weaknesses grew increasingly apparent.

## The social impact of fascism

According to the 'third way' ideal, fascism was supposed to replace class conflict with class harmony. It should have brought equal benefits to employers and employees, working in partnership for the good of the nation, the state and the Italian people. In particular, it was claimed that workers would no longer be exploited, and would enjoy an improved status under the corporate state.

## How were the different classes affected?

### Industrial workers

In the early years of Mussolini's rule (1922–25), male workers experienced a drop in unemployment and an improvement in living standards. This was due in part to the cautious economic policies followed by **Alberto de Stefani**, but the general economic revival in Europe in the early 1920s also contributed to this improved situation in Italy.

In 1925–26, workers lost their independent trade unions and their right to strike. The promises that had been made about the corporate state (see section 2.15, The corporate state) failed to materialise. Instead of ending class conflict, Mussolini's fascist state merely prevented workers from defending their interests, while employers were able to manage their companies without either interference from the state or opposition from their employees. For example, as the economy began to decline in the second half of the 1920s, employers ended the eight-hour day and extended the working week. At the same time, wages were cut – from 1925 to 1938, the level of real wages dropped by over 10 per cent.

By 1939, it was clear that only a small minority had benefited significantly from fascist rule. The standard of living and the general quality of life for most Italians, especially the working classes, declined under fascism.

Unemployment increased after the Great Depression, and even the public work schemes had little effect. Workers were afraid of protesting about their working conditions in case they lost their jobs altogether.

Some social welfare legislation was passed in the fascist era, including the introduction of old-age pensions and unemployment and health insurance. There was also a significant increase in education expenditure. However, these improvements did not make up for the loss of wages and poor working conditions experienced by many.

### Peasants and agricultural workers

Despite Mussolini's claim to love the countryside and his promises to 'ruralise' Italy, the situation in rural areas actually worsened under the corporate state. Mussolini's policies clearly benefited large landowners rather than small farmers and agricultural labourers. In 1922, a law was introduced to split the large estates and redistribute the land, but this was never acted on. Agricultural wages dropped by more than 30 per cent during the 1930s.

In an attempt to escape rural poverty, many Italians emigrated. Over 200,000 Italians moved to the USA in the period 1920–29. The situation in rural Italy worsened when the US drastically reduced its immigration quotas from the mid-1920s, making it more difficult for Italians to find relief abroad. Not surprisingly, many rural workers ignored government decrees intended to stop migration to the towns. Those workers often ended up in the slums of Milan, Turin and Rome.

### The lower-middle classes

The lower-middle classes, who had formed the backbone of the Fascist Party, were affected in different ways. Many small business owners were hit hard by the Depression and by Mussolini's economic policies. However, those who entered the administrative bureaucracy of the state or the Fascist Party enjoyed relative prosperity, with good wages and considerable benefits, as well as the opportunity to increase their income through corrupt means.

**Fact:** In October 1935, Italy launched an invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), which was sandwiched between the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland. Mussolini sent 500,000 troops, who used tanks, bombers and poison gas against people often only armed with spears. Abyssinia appealed to the League of Nations. Britain and France were reluctant to impose sanctions as, at this time, Mussolini was regarded as a useful ally against the rise of Nazism in Germany. In 1934, Mussolini had joined British and French leaders in opposing Hitler's attempted takeover of Austria. Some sanctions were imposed, but these were limited. For example, the League did not ban Italy from exporting oil or from using the Suez Canal.

### Alberto de Stefani (1879–1969)

Originally a liberal, de Stefani later supported Mussolini, and was appointed minister of finance in 1922. He was in charge of Mussolini's economic programme from 1922 to 1925, favouring free trade, lower taxes (especially for private companies and the wealthier classes) and a reduction of government 'interference' in the economy. However, when wages started to drop and the economy began to show signs of crisis in 1925, de Stefani was replaced by Count Giuseppe Volpi.

**QUESTION**

Was there more change or more continuity as regards the living standards of most working-class Italian families under fascism?

**Fact:** There was no serious attempt to redistribute land. By 1930, 0.5 per cent of the population owned 42 per cent of land, while 87 per cent of the rural population (mainly small landowners) owned only 13 per cent.

**Industrialists and landowners**

Large industrialists and landowners benefited most in fascist Italy. The Vidoni Pact of 1925 and the Charter of Labour of 1927 increased the power and freedom of employers, while preventing workers from defending – let alone improving – their living standards. Even during the Depression, large firms benefited in many ways, either through government contracts or the IRI, which offered them financial assistance.

**SOURCE C**

While plainly damaging to some sectors of the economy, Fascist policies unquestionably benefited other, powerful interests whose ability to influence government long pre-dated fascism and on whose continued acquiescence the regime's chances of permanence partly depended: heavy industry, the *agrari* of the Po Valley, and the less enterprising big landowners of other regions.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Routledge. p. 45.

Wealthy landowners flourished under the fascist system. In 1935, as part of an ongoing attempt to restrict the migration of rural workers to cities, special workbooks (*libretti di lavoro*) were printed. These had to be signed by the local prefect before a worker could move to a new area. Such measures kept unemployment high in rural areas, a situation exploited by landowners in order to cut wages.

## 2.12 What were the main religious policies in Mussolini's fascist Italy?

### The Church

When it came to the Roman Catholic Church, Mussolini was a little more successful in widening the base of fascist support. Mussolini never really shed his anti-religious views, but as most Italians were Catholics he realised that he needed to reach an understanding with the Church. As early as 1921 (before he became prime minister), Mussolini began presenting the Fascist Party as an alternative to the traditionally anti-clerical liberals, and the atheistic communists and socialists. The Catholic hierarchy was particularly pleased by the fascists' defeat of the socialists and communists, and saw benefits in ending the conflict between Church and state.

Once installed as prime minister, Mussolini restored Catholic education in state primary schools, which encouraged the papacy to end its support for the Catholic Popolari. The real breakthrough, however, came in 1929, following a series of secret negotiations between the fascists and Cardinal Gasparri, a senior Vatican official.

These negotiations resulted in three Lateran Agreements, which finally ended the conflict and bitterness that had existed between the papacy and the Italian state since 1870. By the terms of the Lateran Treaty, the government accepted papal sovereignty over Vatican City, which became an independent state. In return, the pope formally

recognised the Italian state, and its possession of Rome and the former papal states. In a separate but related agreement, the state gave the pope 1,750 million lire (£30 million) in cash and government bonds as compensation for the loss of Rome. Finally, the treaty agreed that Roman Catholicism would be the official state religion of Italy, with compulsory Catholic religious education in all state schools, and that the state would pay the salaries of the clergy. In return, the papacy agreed that the state could veto the appointment of politically hostile bishops, and that the clergy should not join political parties. It was also agreed that no one could get divorced without the consent of the Church, and that civil marriages were no longer necessary.



**Figure 2.20** Mussolini and Catholic priests; as Mussolini's rule progressed he won over Church leaders, largely through the Lateran Agreements of 1929 (see section 2.12, The Church)

### Collaborators or rivals?

While the Lateran Agreements meant that Catholicism remained a potential rival ideology to fascism, thus preventing the establishment of a truly totalitarian dictatorship, Mussolini was satisfied. The pope and the Catholic Church gave its official backing to him as *Il Duce*.

The Lateran Agreements have led many people to regard the Catholic Church as a fascist collaborator. Indeed, priests would give the fascist salute and participated in Opera

### KEY CONCEPTS QUESTION

**Causation and Consequence:** From what you have studied so far, what caused the Catholic Church in Italy to support Mussolini in the 1920s? What were the main consequences of this support?



**Theory of knowledge**

History, ethics and duty:  
According to George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), 'When a stupid man is doing something he is ashamed of, he always declares it is his duty.' Study the role of the Catholic Church in fascist Italy under Mussolini. Then write a couple of paragraphs to explain whether or not, in your view, the Church had an overriding moral duty to promote Christian values and principles during this period.

Nazionale Balilla (ONB) activities (see section 2.14, Fascism and youth movements). However, relations were not always smooth. In 1928, rivalry between Catholic and fascist youth movements led to the banning of the Catholic Scout organisation, and this tension continued even after the Lateran Agreements. In 1931, the government attempted to suppress the Church's Catholic Action youth organisation, provoking further conflict. Eventually a compromise was reached, but only after the pope had publicly criticised the fascist oath of loyalty and interference in educational and family matters. From 1938, disagreements also emerged over the fascists' anti-Semitic policies. Thus it was clear that Mussolini never fully controlled the Church.

**SOURCE D**

To opponents of Fascism, the Church seemed ... inextricably implicated in Fascist policy ... Even the denunciations of particular Fascist policies were expressed in temperate tones ... Yet the Church ... did resist the persistent attacks on the remaining forms of Catholic Action and did formally denounce Mussolini's racial policy in late 1938. No opposition to a complete totalitarianism was more formidable.

Grew, R. 'Catholicism in a Changing Italy'. In Tannenbaum, E. (ed.). 1974. *Modern Italy: a Topical History Since 1861*. New York, USA. New York University Press. p. 268.

## 2.13 What were Mussolini's policies towards women, ethnic and other minorities?

### Women and families

One group that suffered more than most under fascism was women. Their status was deliberately and consistently downgraded, especially by the Battle for Births, which stressed the traditional role of women as housewives and mothers, and caused a downturn in employment opportunities for women.

**SOURCE E**

- Women must obey ... In our state, she does not count.
- Intellectual women are a monstrosity.
- Higher education for women should just cover what the female brain can cope with, i.e. household management.
- Child bearing is women's natural and fundamental mission in life. [Women's work] distracts from reproduction, if it does not directly impede it, and foments independence and the accompanying physical-moral styles contrary to giving birth.

Various statements made by Mussolini during the 1930s. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 165.

The Battle for Births was launched in 1927, in an attempt to increase the Italian population to create a large future army that would help to expand Italy's empire. Mussolini aimed to increase the population from 40 million in 1927 to 60 million by 1950. To achieve this, the fascists encouraged early marriage, offered generous maternity benefits, exhorted women not to work, and gave jobs to married fathers in preference over single men. They also gave prizes to those women in each of Italy's ninety-three provinces who had the most children during their lives.

**Fact:** Some jobs held by women were seen by fascists as especially 'unnatural'. These included teaching in schools, office work and the professions. From as early as the mid-1920s, women began to be excluded from certain teaching jobs.

**Theory of knowledge**

**History and emotion:** Strong emotions can affect perception and reason. Study Source E again. Your attitudes to the position of women in society are probably very different from those put forward by Mussolini in the 1930s. Do his views make you angry? If they do, does this mean it is impossible for you to make an objective assessment of fascist policy towards women?



**Figure 2.21** Mussolini with his wife and children, setting an example during the Battle for Births

Taxation policy was also used to encourage large families. Bachelors (especially those between the ages of thirty-five and fifty) had to pay extra taxes, while couples with six or more children paid none. Newly married couples were given cheap railway tickets for their honeymoon. Later, in 1931, same-sex relations were outlawed, and new laws against abortion and divorce were imposed.

A series of decrees was imposed to restrict female employment. In 1933, it was announced that only 10 per cent of state jobs could be held by women; in 1938, this was extended to many private firms. Although this policy was partly intended to solve the problem of male unemployment, it was also a reflection of fascist attitudes towards women.

Despite fascist statements and policies, however, many women were able to retain their pre-1922 positions in the economy. It is also important to note that the two key fascist policies relating to women (increasing the birth rate and reducing the number of women in the workforce) both failed to meet their targets. The number of births

**ACTIVITY**

Carry out research to find out how Italian fascist views about women compared to the views advocated by Hitler in Nazi Germany. To what extent do they differ from attitudes and policies relating to women in *either* Mao's China or Castro's Cuba?

## Mussolini and Italy

actually declined – dropping from 29.9 per 1,000 in 1925 to 23.1 in 1940. In addition, nearly one-third of Italy's paid workforce was still female by 1940. In part, this was because Mussolini's military adventures resulted in the conscription of large numbers of men.

### SOURCE F

The female experience of the Fascist period was marked by its sheer diversity ... When they [the fascists] tried to intervene explicitly to mould gender roles, in their bid to stem or even reverse trends towards female emancipation through highly misogynous [anti-female] rhetoric and policy, they were far from successful ... despite the enormous amount of attention paid to gender roles in Fascist rhetoric, it seems that particular patterns of industrialisation, commercialisation, and urbanisation had more power to shape female experiences in this period than the crude tools of Fascist ideology and policy.

Willson, P. 'Women in Fascist Italy'. Quoted in Bessel, R. (ed.). 1996. *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press. pp. 92–93.



**Figure 2.22 Margherita Sarfatti (1883–1961)**

Sarfatti was a member of the wealthy Grassini family from Venice. Extremely intelligent, she was initially a radical socialist and feminist, as well as a talented art critic. Sarfatti first met Mussolini in Milan in 1911, before he was expelled from the Socialist Party, while she was working as a journalist and art critic for *Avanti!* She supported him after 1915, and is believed to have influenced the moderation of his policies after 1922. However, as Mussolini became more anti-Semitic after 1938, Sarfatti went into exile until the end of the Second World War.

## Racism and anti-Semitism

While neither explicit racism nor anti-Semitism were characteristics of the early fascist movement, there was a general racist attitude underlying the fascists' nationalism and their plans for imperialist expansion. Racism was also a strong element in the *Romanità* movement (see section 2.7, Controlling minds). Mussolini believed that the Italian 'race' was superior to those African 'races' in Libya and Abyssinia. In September 1938, in the newspaper *Il Giornale d'Italia*, Mussolini claimed that 'prestige' was needed to maintain an empire. This, he said, required a clear 'racial consciousness' that established ideas of racial 'superiority'.

Until 1936, when Mussolini joined Nazi Germany in the alliance known as the Rome–Berlin Axis, anti-Semitism had not played a part in fascist politics. In fact, in an interview given as late as 1932, Mussolini said, 'Anti-Semitism does not exist in Italy. Italians of Jewish birth have shown themselves good citizens and they fought bravely in the war.' In the *Historical Dictionary of Fascist Italy*, Mussolini dismissed anti-Semitism as 'unscientific'.

Furthermore, some leading fascists were Jewish, and almost 30 per cent of Jewish Italians were members of the Fascist Party. Mussolini had previously appointed the Jewish Guido Jung as minister of finance. At one point, Mussolini himself had a Jewish mistress, **Margherita Sarfatti**.

Mussolini's move towards anti-Semitism was signalled in July 1938 by the issue of the ten-point Charter of Race, which was drawn up by Mussolini and ten fascist 'professors', and issued by Minculpop (see section 2.7, Fascist propaganda). This manifesto claimed to offer a 'scientific' explanation of fascist racial doctrine, based on the fact that Italians were 'Aryans'. Thus, Jewish people were not members of the Italian 'race'. The charter was followed by a series of racial laws and decrees, initiated between September and

November 1938. These anti-Semitic laws excluded Jewish children and teachers from all state schools, banned Jews from marrying non-Jews, and prevented Jews from owning large companies or landed estates. The laws also expelled foreign Jews, including those who had been granted citizenship after 1919.

### SOURCE G

Admittedly the definition of 'Jew' was not too rigorous: those with two Jewish parents, or with one but practising the Judaic religion. Hence the children of mixed marriages could become 'Aryan' by being baptised, and there were 4000–5000 conversions in autumn 1938 (many of them so that children might be admitted to Catholic schools, having been expelled from state ones). There were also plenty of 'exemptions' allowed for war service or exceptional merit, brought in to placate the king: more than 20 per cent of Jewish families were exempted in this way.

Clark, M. 2005. *Mussolini*. London, UK. Pearson. p. 221.

These laws were never fully implemented in the period 1938–43, mainly because at a local level they were largely ignored by many Italians. However, they were strongly and publicly opposed by the pope. As well as the Catholic leadership, several senior fascists were unhappy about the introduction of these racial laws.

In 1943, an extreme form of racial persecution began under the Italian Social Republic (Salò Republic), which was nominally ruled by Mussolini following his overthrow as prime minister (see section 2.8, The Second World War). In fact, it was mainly the German Gestapo and the SS who carried out this much more brutal persecution of the Jewish people living in northern Italy.

Many historians regard the adoption of anti-Semitism as either a momentary aberration or simply the consequence of Mussolini's desire to imitate and impress his new ally, Hitler. Other historians argue that anti-Semitism stemmed from certain deep-rooted aspects of fascism.

### SOURCE H

His decision to formulate a policy which would weld together racism and anti-Semitism was purely voluntary and flowed naturally from the confluence of Italy's imperial policies, the ideological tenets of Fascism, and Italian national interests as enunciated by Il Duce ...

The emergence of official anti-Semitism ... must be viewed not as a momentary aberration on the part of Mussolini or the Grand Council ... It was rather cut from the same cloth as the rest of Fascism's final costume.

Bernardini, P. 'The Origins and Development of Racial Anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy'. In Marrus, M. (ed.). 1988. *The Nazi Holocaust: the Final Solution Outside Germany*. Toronto, Canada. University of Toronto Press. pp. 230 and 238.

**Fact:** There were few Italian-born Jews. Only about 37,000 Italians had two Jewish parents, while around 10,800 had one parent who was Jewish. Jews were well integrated in Italian society, and were not seen as a threat to established interests. Later, however, leaders of several anti-fascist opposition groups – such as the Giustizia e Liberta – were Jewish.

### QUESTION

Why were the anti-Semitic laws of 1938 not rigorously enforced in fascist Italy before 1943?

## 2.14 What were the main fascist policies on education and young people, and what impact did they have?

### 'Fascistisation' – education and indoctrination

Central to Mussolini's 'Cult of Personality' was his portrayal of the fascists as the only force that could unite all Italians and make their country great. Mussolini also adopted various other methods to manipulate and control the public, including indoctrination. He gave prime importance to the younger generation, which – he believed – needed to be 'fascistised'.

In infant schools, children started the day with a prayer that began, 'I believe in the genius of Mussolini'. In primary schools, children were taught that Mussolini and the fascists had 'saved' Italy from communist revolution. In 1929, it became compulsory for all teachers in state schools to swear an oath of loyalty to both the king and to Mussolini's fascist regime. Two years later, this oath was extended to university lecturers. Only eleven chose to resign rather than take the oath.

Mussolini's attempts at indoctrination were less successful in secondary education. However, all school textbooks were carefully reviewed, and many were banned and replaced with new government books that emphasised the role of Mussolini and the fascists.

In 1923, fascist attempts to indoctrinate secondary-school children were not helped by the first fascist minister of education, Giovanni Gentile, who decided to continue focusing on traditional academic education. Gentile also introduced exams that made it very difficult for most children to progress to secondary education at all. As a result, the number of children reaching secondary school, and thus university, declined significantly.

### Fascism and youth movements

Mussolini and the fascists also tried to indoctrinate young people by setting up youth organisations. In 1926, all fascist youth groups were made part of the **Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB)**. Within the organisation were different sections for boys and girls, according to age. For boys, there were the Sons of the She-Wolf (4–8), the Balilla (8–14) and the Avanguardisti (14–18). For girls, there were the Piccole Italiane and the Giovani Italiane. There was also the Young Fascists for boys aged 18–21, after which they could apply to become members of the Fascist Party.

In 1937, the ONB merged with the Young Fascists to form the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (GIL), and membership was made compulsory for all young people aged eight to twenty-one. By this time, the ONB's membership had risen to over 7 million. While all groups followed physical fitness programmes and attended summer camps that included pre-military training, older children also received political indoctrination.

**Fact:** In 1926, 101 out of 317 history textbooks were banned. By 1936, under the then minister of education, Giuseppe Bottai, there was only one official history textbook.

**Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB):** The main youth group in Italy from 1926, apart from those run by the Catholic Church. 'Balilla' was the name given to Giovan Battista Perasso, the Genoese schoolboy who – according to legend – began the revolt against Habsburg rule by throwing stones at Austrian troops in 1746.

All members of the ONB – and of the GUF (the Fascist University Groups) – had to swear loyalty to Mussolini.

However, the impact on schoolchildren was not as great as Mussolini had intended. Some 40 per cent of 4–18-year-olds managed to avoid membership. In particular, private and Catholic schools tended not to enforce ONB membership. Also, because of the entrance exams required for secondary education, many children left school at the age of eleven. Contempt for – and even resistance to – fascist ideals was not uncommon in the universities.



Figure 2.23 Members of the Ballila (fascist youth) greet Mussolini in 1939

#### SOURCE I

The regime is and intends to remain a regime of the young ... The regime intends to prepare spiritually all the youth of Italy, from whom successive selections there must issue tomorrow the ranks of the governing classes of Italy, and for this purpose it has created, alongside the civil Militia of the party, the organisation of the Balilla, the Avanguardisti and the University groups. The totalitarian principle of the education of youth, systematically demanded by Fascism, responds to this supreme necessity of Fascist Revolution which intends to last.

Extracts from the 'Order of the Day', issued by the PNF secretary in 1930. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 157.

A regime that lasted twenty-one years could not fail to have some impact on the Italian youth. However, the speed with which support for fascism declined after Mussolini's downfall indicates that, for all the propaganda, the targeting of young people for fascist converts was ultimately yet another policy failure.

## 2.15 To what extent was authoritarian control established in fascist Italy?

### The main characteristics of Mussolini's fascist state

When he became prime minister in October 1922, Mussolini almost immediately took steps towards the construction of his fascist state. By 1924, Italy was on the way to becoming a fascist dictatorship.

#### SOURCE J

The Fascist conception of the State is all-embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State – a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values – interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people ... The Fascist State lays claim to rule in the economic field no less than in others; it makes its action felt throughout the length and breadth of the country by means of its corporate, social, and educational institutions, and all the political, economic, and spiritual forces of the nation, organised in their respective associations, circulate within the State.

Extracts from the 1935 edition of *The Doctrine of Fascism*. Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini. pp. 14 and 41.

**Fact:** In 1927, only about 15 per cent of the civil service were said to be fascists: both the interior minister (Luigi Federzoni) and the minister of justice (Alfredo Rocco) were conservative ex-nationalists. In the 1930s, civil servants often proclaimed loyalty to the Fascist Party merely to retain their jobs.

**podesta:** The *podesta* were the local mayors. After elected local councils were abolished in 1926, the prefects – whose powers were greatly increased – appointed all the mayors in their province. They usually chose 'respectable' landowners or ex-army officers, rather than local fascists. *Podesta* received no payment, so they needed to be financially independent.

**Source J** makes extravagant claims as to the nature of the state that Mussolini attempted to establish after 1922. However, such claims were often not an accurate reflection of reality. Nonetheless, by December 1924, the crisis following the murder of Giacomo Matteotti (see section 2.5, Changing the constitution – the Acerbo Law) had led some more militant fascists to present Mussolini with an ultimatum – establish a fascist dictatorship, or they would replace him with someone who would. After some hesitation, Mussolini had agreed to declare himself dictator, but only on his own terms. He was determined to enforce a dictatorship that would be independent of the *ras*. The authoritarian regime that Mussolini presided over between 1925 and 1945 was thus a personal rather than a Fascist Party dictatorship.

### Declining importance of the Fascist Party

Mussolini deliberately restricted the influence of the PNF by using members of the traditional conservative élites to maintain law and order. This included the police, the judicial system, the civil service and the army. Mussolini made no serious attempt to 'fascistise' the system of government by restricting appointments to leading fascists, as some of his followers wanted.

However, Mussolini did instigate a purge of the judiciary, and many judges were sacked for lack of loyalty or for following an overly independent line. Mussolini frequently intervened in legal cases, and imprisonment without trial was common. The chief of police was another position filled by career politicians rather than fascists. In the provinces, it was the prefects (the senior civil servants who ran the administration, suppressed 'subversives' and controlled the police) who appointed the *podesta*. The prefects had to be

loyal to the government, but also to the local élites. Between 1922 and 1929, only twenty-nine of the eighty-six new *podesta* appointed were fascists. Most were career civil servants.

At first, the *ras* resisted these developments, especially in central Italy. As late as 1927, local fascist leaders were able to insist on some power sharing. By 1930, however, Mussolini claimed this conflict had been resolved in favour of the prefects. Disputes between prefects and local party leaders still broke out occasionally though.

After Farinacci's forced resignation in October 1926 (ostensibly for another outburst of *squadristi* violence, but really because he had begun to push for a 'second wave' of fascist revolution), the prefects and the *podesta* set about stamping out *squadrisimo*. In January 1927, Mussolini issued instructions that all Italians, including fascists, should offer the prefects total obedience.

### The 'taming' of the PNF

In 1926, the new party secretary, **Augusto Turati**, began a purge of more militant fascists. At the same time, he opened membership to people who merely wanted to further their career. In just one year, party membership rose from about 640,000 to just under 940,000. For the first time, fascist branches were established in southern Italy.

Most of these new members came from the same local élites that had previously belonged to or supported the liberals. Soon there were very few Fascists of the First Hour left in important positions. At the same time, over 100,000 party members left – many of them disgusted by what was happening to their party.

These developments continued in the 1930s under Turati's successors, Giovanni Giuriati and Achille Starace. The PNF became a mass party, with almost 5 million (mainly inactive) members by 1943. However, most were white-collar employees, while the workers and peasants (who had once made up 30 per cent of the party's membership) dropped to a small minority. The Fascist Party thus increasingly became a tame and loyal base of support for Mussolini. At the same time, party posts were filled by appointment from above rather than through election by party members.

This gradual weakening of the PNF was due in part to internal divisions and disunity, which had existed from its foundation. According to the historian Richard Thurlow, there were at least five different factions within the party. These included the militant *ras*, who (like sections of the *Sturmabteilung* in Nazi Germany) wanted a 'second wave' of fascist revolution to replace state institutions with fascist ones, and the 'left' fascists, who wanted to establish a corporatist, or national syndicalist, state.

Opposed to these two factions were the fascist 'revisionists', led by Dino Grandi, Massimo Rocca and Giuseppe Bottai, who were prepared to cooperate and merge with the existing political system. Mussolini was able to play off these factions against each other to enhance his own power. At the same time, he manipulated different sectors of state personnel to ensure that no one could challenge his authority.

### The corporate state

Those fascists who believed that their movement was a 'third way' between capitalism and communism favoured the creation of a corporate state. Sometimes known as the corporative state, the aim of corporatism was to replace the politics of traditional parliamentary democracy with that of corporations representing the nation's various economic sectors. These corporations, each with equal representation for employers



**Figure 2.24** Augusto Turati (1888–1955)

Turati was an ex-syndicalist, an irredentist, a supporter of Italy's entry into the First World War, and a journalist. He joined Mussolini's Fascio di Combattimento in 1920, and became the PNF boss of Brescia. He was National Party secretary from 1926 to 1930. His purge of party members affected both provincial and non-provincial branches. In 1927, for example, 7,000 of Rome's 31,000 members were purged. In his first year as party secretary, Turati expelled 30,000 members, and by 1929 that number had risen to over 50,000. Later, he opposed Italy's entry into the Second World War and did not support Mussolini's Salò Republic.



## Mussolini and Italy

and employees, were supposed to overcome class conflict. By thus avoiding strikes and other labour disputes, the corporate state would instead give prime consideration to the interests of the nation. Although there would be elements of increased state control, there was no thought of eradicating private ownership.

### Edmondo Rossoni (1884–1965)

Rossoni was initially a revolutionary syndicalist, who was imprisoned for his activities in 1908. He became a socialist and then a nationalist, joining Mussolini's PNF in 1921. Rossoni was the most prominent of the fascist labour leaders and, as head of the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates, he wanted genuine workers' representatives who would share power with employers. After his dismissal in 1928, he continued in fascist politics, serving as under-secretary to the president of the Fascist Grand Council from 1932 to 1935. Later, he supported Dino Grandi's coup and voted against Mussolini in 1943.

### Giuseppe Bottai (1895–1959)

Bottai met Mussolini in 1919 and helped set up a *fascio* in Rome, where he acted as editor of Mussolini's paper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. In the March on Rome his unit was responsible for the deaths of several anti-fascists. From 1926 to 1929, Bottai was deputy secretary of corporations. From 1936 to 1943, he served as minister for education and mayor of Rome. He was responsible for implementing several anti-democratic and anti-Semitic measures. In 1943, Bottai sided with Grandi in the coup against Mussolini.

### SOURCE K

Fascism is therefore opposed to Socialism to which unity within the State (which amalgamates classes into a single economic and ethical reality) is unknown, and which sees in history nothing but the class struggle. Fascism is likewise opposed to trade unionism as a class weapon. But when brought within the orbit of the State, Fascism recognises the real needs which gave rise to socialism and trade-unionism, giving them due weight in the guild or corporative system in which divergent interests are coordinated and harmonised in the unity of the State.

Extract from *The Doctrine of Fascism*. 1932. Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini. p. 15.

### The fascist syndicates

During their rise to power in the years 1920–22, the fascists closed down the traditional labour movement trade unions in the areas they controlled. They replaced these unions with fascist-controlled syndicates, which were still supposed to represent workers' interests. By 1922, a Confederation of Fascist Syndicates had been set up, headed by **Edmondo Rossoni**, who wanted to create corporations that would force industrialists to make some concessions to workers' demands. These corporations would be established for each industry, and made up of government representatives, employers' organisations and representatives from the fascist syndicates.

However, this 'leftist' fascist aspiration – unlike their attacks on the traditional trade unions – was opposed by the Confindustria, the organisation that represented the main industrialists in Italy. In December 1923, when Mussolini had been prime minister for fourteen months, the Chigi Palace Pact was made. In this agreement, the industrialists promised to cooperate with the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates, but they insisted on maintaining their own independent organisations.

Despite this, many employers were not prepared to make any significant concessions to workers, and this provoked a series of strikes in 1925. The resulting Vidoni Palace Pact confirmed that the Confindustria and the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates were the only organisations allowed to represent employers and employees respectively. It was also made clear that workers were not to challenge the authority of employers and managers. All workers' factory councils were closed down and non-fascist trade unions were abolished. In 1926, Alfredo Rocco's law made all strikes illegal – even those by fascist syndicates – and declared that industrial disputes must be settled in special labour courts. The law also stated that there could only be one organisation (a fascist syndicate) of workers and employers in each branch of industry, and identified seven main areas of economic activity.

### The corporations

Following these developments, in July 1926 Mussolini established a Ministry of Corporations with himself as the minister. Each corporation was made up of representatives of employers and workers of the same economic or industrial sector (e.g. mining), with the state's representatives acting as referees and final adjudicators. In practice, this new ministry was run by the under-secretary, **Giuseppe Bottai**, who produced the Charter of Labour (written

mainly by Rocco) in April 1927. This document guaranteed fair judgement of labour disputes and promised to carry out social reforms such as improved health care and accident insurance schemes (although none of these measures had the force of law).

In May 1927, Mussolini delivered a speech in which he claimed that a corporate state had been established. He even promised that the corporations would elect half of the members of the next Chamber of Deputies. In May the following year, a new electoral law was passed – a compromise between party and syndicalist views. It allowed for 1,000 names to be recommended to the Fascist Grand Council, which would select 400 as candidates for the March 1929 election.

As Mussolini feared, the corporations weakened the fascist syndicates. In 1928, Rossoni was dismissed and the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates was abolished. In 1929, Bottai took over as minister of corporations, and in March 1930 he set up the National Council of Corporations (NCC), which represented the seven largest corporations. In 1932, Mussolini resumed control of the Ministry of Corporations, and the number of corporations slowly grew, reaching twenty-two by 1934.

Despite all of the reorganisation, Mussolini usually made the important decisions himself. In particular, most of the decisions on policies to deal with the effects of the Great Depression (see section 2.7, Controlling minds) had nothing to do with the corporations – including the decision to cut wages. Furthermore, as most trade unionists experienced in industrial negotiations and disputes were socialists or communists (and were therefore either dead, in prison or in exile), the employers had a greater influence in the corporations. Many were 'tame' members of the fascist syndicates, or even middle-class careerists. In addition, the employers were nearly always supported by the three government-appointed Fascist Party members, who were supposed to remain neutral.

In 1938, in a belated attempt to give more credibility to the corporate state, Mussolini decided to abolish the Chamber of Deputies and to put in its place the Chamber of Fasci and Corporations. Mussolini hoped to establish a new form of politics, in which people were given a voice according to their economic function or occupation, rather than their territorial location. In reality, however, this had little substance or power, being dominated by fascists appointed from above.

## Was Mussolini an all-powerful dictator?

Despite Mussolini's claims, and despite having established control over the PNF, the reality was that he had to share power with the traditional groups that had wielded power in Italy long before 1922. These included the monarchy, the Catholic Church, the civil service and the courts, and the industrial and financial élites and their organisations. For example, after other fascist leaders began moving against Mussolini, it was the king who eventually ordered his arrest on 25 July 1943. Thus Mussolini's aim to create a completely authoritarian state was largely unsuccessful.

### SOURCE 1

The existence of autonomous, conservative interests – monarchy, industry, agrari, armed forces and Church – was thus integral to Mussolini's regime as it entered the 1930s. Their continued influence made the regime, in its essential character, less profoundly 'fascist' and less totalitarian in scope than it claimed to be and than outward appearances suggested.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Routledge. p. 52.

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**Fact:** In the March 1929 election, electors could only vote 'yes' or 'no' to the Grand Council's list. Of the original 1,000 names recommended by syndicates, employers' associations, ex-servicemen and a few other groups, the employers got 125 of their nominees 'elected', while the workers' syndicates only managed eighty-nine. Mussolini employed his usual methods of 'persuasion', resulting in a 90 per cent turnout, with 98.3 per cent voting in favour of the list presented to them. One of the few politicians to speak out against the new electoral law was Giolitti.

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### Historical debate:

Historians are divided over the nature of Italian fascism and its ideology. One broad interpretation has tended to examine fascist ideology and its corporate state in a serious way, and largely on its own terms. Another has been much more sceptical, considering its ideology to be incoherent and its declared 'achievements' mainly unfounded propaganda claims. Since the works of historians Renzo De Felice and Emilio Gentile, a third 'revisionist' strand has returned to the idea of fascist ideology and its stated purposes as relatively coherent and worthy of serious study.

**Theory of knowledge**

History and propaganda: Is it possible to examine Italian fascist ideology and the nature of Mussolini's state with any degree of certainty? Or does the propaganda that surrounded Mussolini's statements and policies put such a 'spin' on these issues that it is almost impossible for historians and students of history to arrive at any accurate and objective judgements?

**ACTIVITY**

In pairs, develop two sets of arguments about the role and the attitudes of the Catholic Church in fascist Italy – one to show they were mainly collaborators, and one to argue that they were rivals. Then present these arguments in a class debate. Make sure that each of the two views is critically examined in relation to the evidence presented.

**SOURCE M**

Mussolini gave the impression of being all-powerful, but he could not rule alone, and the Fascist Party as such was little help to him in running the country. The civil service, the courts, the armed forces and the police remained in the hands of career officials whose commitment to Fascism was usually nominal.

Tannenbaum, E. 1973. *Fascism in Italy*. London, UK. Allen Lane. p. 93.

**SOURCE N**

The new system was a personal dictatorship under Mussolini, yet still legally a monarchy ... The government ruled by decree ... Local elections were eliminated; all mayors were now appointed by decree. Yet the basic legal and administrative apparatus of the Italian government remained intact. There was no 'Fascist revolution', save at the top.

Payne, S. 1995. *A History of Fascism, 1914–45*. London, UK. UCL Press. pp. 116–17.

**End of unit activities**

- 1 Draw up a table to show the main economic problems facing Italy between 1922 and 1943, and the degree of success Mussolini had in dealing with them. Use the table below as an example.

	Problem	Policy	Success?	Failure?
1922–24				
1925–43				

- 2 Divide into five groups, with each group researching the impact of Mussolini's economic policies on *one* of the various social groups:
  - a large landowners
  - b industrialists and bankers
  - c industrial workers
  - d agricultural workers
  - e peasants / small farmers.
 Each group should present their findings to the class.
- 3 Carry out some additional research to find out how Italian women were affected by the fascist regime.
- 4 Find out more about the reasons for the cooperation and conflicts between the fascist state and the Catholic Church.
- 5 Work in pairs to produce a PowerPoint presentation on how Mussolini's regime tried to indoctrinate young people.
- 6 Find out more about the various steps in the creation of the corporate state in Italy from 1926 to 1932. Then write a few paragraphs to explain why the more radical sections of the PNF, such as Edmondo Rossoni, were disappointed by these developments.