

## Overview

- By 1922, Mussolini was prime minister, but he was still not head of a fascist government. He began to take steps to increase his power over both the state and his own party.
- Securing the support of the Catholic Church and industrialists, in 1923 Mussolini pushed through a reform of the electoral system.
- In the 1924 election, using a variety of methods, the PNF became the largest party.
- After surviving the 'Matteotti crisis' of 1924, the following year Mussolini began a series of measures designed to establish an authoritarian one-party state, including banning trade unions and all opposition parties, and taking control of local government.
- Steps taken towards the creation of a corporate state also consolidated his power – including over the Fascist Party itself.
- At the same time, repression, censorship, control of the media and various forms of propaganda all helped to create Mussolini's personal dictatorship by the late 1920s.
- However, Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940 led to increased opposition to Mussolini, and his downfall in 1943.
- Mussolini was eventually captured and shot by partisans in 1945.

### KEY QUESTIONS

- How did Mussolini consolidate his power in the period 1922–24?
- What measures were taken after 1924 to maintain Mussolini's power?
- What role was played by personality and propaganda in the consolidation of Mussolini's power?
- How far did foreign policy help Mussolini maintain power?
- What was the nature and extent of opposition, and how was it dealt with?

### TIMELINE

- 1922 Nov:** Mussolini given emergency powers  
**Dec:** Establishment of Fascist Grand Council
- 1923 Jan:** Formation of national fascist militia  
**Jun:** Corfu Incident  
**Jul:** Acerbo Law
- 1924 Mar:** Fascist violence against opposition  
**Apr:** Elections held in which fascists and their allies win a large majority  
**Jun:** Matteotti abducted and murdered  
**Aug:** Aventine Secession
- 1925 Jan:** end of 'Matteotti crisis'  
**Jul:** control of press exerted  
**Aug:** Fascist *podesta* control provinces
- 1926 Jan:** Mussolini takes power to rule by decree  
**Oct:** Trade unions and all opposition parties banned
- 1928 May:** New electoral law restricts franchise to males belonging to fascist syndicates; powers of king reduced
- 1930 Mar:** National Council of Corporations established
- 1935 Oct:** Invasion of Abyssinia
- 1936 Jul:** Italy intervenes with Nazi Germany in Spanish Civil War  
**Oct:** Rome-Berlin Axis
- 1939 Jan:** Chamber of Fasci and Corporations replaces Chamber of Deputies  
**Apr:** Invasion of Albania
- 1940 Jun:** Italy enters Second World War
- 1942** Allied bombing of Italy
- 1943 Jul:** Mussolini brought down by coup  
**Sep:** Italy surrenders; formation of Salò Republic (Italian Social Republic)
- 1945 Apr:** Mussolini captured trying to flee and shot

## 2.5 How did Mussolini consolidate his power in the period 1922–24?

Although Mussolini was now prime minister, Italy was not a fascist state – for that to happen, he needed to change the constitution. To achieve this he set out to win new political allies, doing everything in his power to widen the political appeal of fascism. Such a move was crucial as Mussolini's government was essentially a Nationalist–Popolari–Liberal coalition that could fall at any time if one of these parties withdrew. There were only four fascists in the cabinet. In addition, the king had the power to dismiss Mussolini as prime minister. Both the king and the other political leaders believed Mussolini could be tamed, transformed and used to their own advantage.

### Early consolidation moves

Mussolini had no intention of being tamed. Instead, he wished to establish a one-party fascist state, with himself as dictator.

#### SOURCE A

For all his willingness to compromise, at least temporarily, with the Italian establishment, Mussolini certainly had no wish or intention to relinquish the power he now held. Nor, however, can he be regarded as one of those fascist maximalists like Farinacci, Rossoni or Balbo who – in their different ways – from the start dreamed of a radical 'fascist revolution'. Probably, at this early stage, Mussolini envisaged, rather than a complete political revolution, a drastic revision of the existing system to ensure the repeated renewal of his authority. For a time at least this would have satisfied his new conservative supporters, for whom a fascist-led government may have been a blessing, and the prospect of greater authoritarianism attractive.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Routledge. pp. 30–31.

In his first speech to parliament on 16 November 1922, Mussolini made a veiled threat about the strength of the Fascist Party (he claimed 300,000 armed and obedient members). He also spoke of his desire to create a strong and united Italy, and asked for emergency powers to deal with Italy's economic and political problems.

#### QUESTION

Study Source B. What do you think might be the hidden message behind Mussolini's speech? Can you identify any specific aspects of his speech that make you come to this conclusion?

#### SOURCE B

And so that everyone may know ... I am here to defend and enforce in the highest degree the Blackshirts' revolution ... I could have abused my victory, but I refused to do so. I imposed limits on myself ... With 300,000 youths armed to the teeth, fully determined and almost mystically ready to act on any command of mine, I could have punished all those who defamed and tried to sully fascism ... I could have transformed this drab silent hall into a camp for my squads ... I could have barred the doors of Parliament and formed a government exclusively of Fascists. I could have done so; but I chose not to, at least not for the present.

From Mussolini's first speech as prime minister, 16 November 1922. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 73.

The deputies, including ex-prime ministers Giolitti, Salandra and Facta, gave Mussolini an enormous vote of confidence and emergency powers for a year.

## Controlling the Fascist Party

In order to increase his support amongst the conservative élites, Mussolini appointed the liberal Alberto de Stefani as finance minister. De Stefani's economic policies (reducing government controls on industry and trade, and cutting taxation) pleased the industrialists and shopkeepers. However, many on the left of the Fascist Party were angered, as they would have preferred to see significant social reforms. Partly as an attempt to increase his control over the Fascist Party, in December Mussolini established a **Fascist Grand Council**.

In January 1923, Mussolini succeeded in getting the Fascist Grand Council to agree that the regional fascist squads should be formed into a national militia, funded by the government. This militia, called the National Security Guards (MVSN), swore an oath of loyalty to Mussolini, not the king. This gave Mussolini a paramilitary organisation of over 30,000 men, which he could deploy against anti-fascists. At the same time, it considerably reduced the power of the provincial *ras*.

### SOURCE C

What he did was to dissolve the squads and incorporate the *squadristi* into a new body, the Militia (Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale, MVSN), organised by De Bono at the Interior. The Militia would 'defend the fascist revolution', would protect the fascist regime from its enemies, would give the *squadristi* status, pay and some local power, and would also discipline them: the ordinary *ex-squadristi* would supposedly find themselves serving under the command of ex-army officers. It was, therefore, an ambiguous body, part reward, part constraint; it was also part Fascist, part state, and it had ambiguous functions, part military, part police. However, it soon became clear that neither the army nor any of the various police forces was willing to let the MVSN muscle into its territory.

Clark, M. 2005. *Mussolini*. London, UK. Pearson. p. 67.

However, the Fascist Grand Council also worked alongside the government's Council of Ministers – fascist ministers took important decisions, which were then passed on to the Council of Ministers for official approval. In addition to his role as prime minister, Mussolini also acted as interior and foreign minister.

By early 1923, the employers' organisation – the *Confindustria* – had pledged its support for Mussolini. This was largely due to his announcement that there would be no serious measures taken against tax evasion, which was widely practised by wealthy companies and individuals. In March 1923, the small Nationalist Party (a member of the coalition) merged with the Fascist Party.

This merger brought the fascists additional paramilitary forces (the Nationalists' Blueshirts), but it also confirmed Mussolini's increasing shift to the right, towards the conservative élites. Once again, this disturbed the more militant fascists.

## The Vatican

At the same time, from April to June 1923, Mussolini worked to gain greater support from the Catholic hierarchy in order to widen the fascists' political base and to weaken

**Fascist Grand Council:** This was declared to be the supreme decision-making body within the Fascist Party. It could discuss proposals for government action, but Mussolini insisted on sole power over appointments to his council. In effect, he was attempting to establish total control over fascist policy-making.

### QUESTION

How significant were the Fascist Grand Council and the MVSN in helping Mussolini to control his own party?

**Fact:** The Nationalist Party had close links to big business and the army. Ex-nationalists such as Enrico Corradini, Luigi Federzoni and Alfredo Rocco brought with them a desire for an authoritarian government and a much-enlarged Italian empire.

## Mussolini and Italy

the position of the Popolari, another key member of the coalition government. Mussolini announced measures that included renouncing atheism, making religious education compulsory, banning contraception and punishing swearing in public places. Pope Pius XI, already a fascist sympathiser, signalled his willingness to withdraw his support for the Popolari.

### SOURCE D

Mussolini alone has a proper understanding of what is necessary for his country in order to rid it of the anarchy to which it has been reduced by an impotent parliamentarianism and three years of war. You see that he has carried the nation with him. May he be able to regenerate Italy.

Comments made by Pope Pius XI to the French ambassador, shortly after Mussolini was appointed prime minister. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 75.

In April 1923, Mussolini sacked all Popolari ministers from his government, claiming that they refused to give him full support. In June, the pope forced the priest Don Luigi Sturzo, a Popolari leader, to resign. Support for the Popolari among the conservative Catholics declined and by the summer of 1923 the party had lost most of its political importance.

## Changing the constitution – the Acerbo Law

More secure in his position, Mussolini announced his intention to reform the electoral system in a way that he hoped would strengthen his status even further. On his instructions, the under-secretary of state, Giacomo Acerbo, outlined a new electoral law that gave the party or alliance that won the most votes two-thirds of the seats in parliament, as long as the percentage was no less than 25 per cent of the votes cast. According to Mussolini, this would give Italy the strong and stable government it needed. In fact, the law was clearly intended to give the fascists total, but legally acquired, control over Italian politics. Given the intimidation and violence that could be expected from the fascists and the fact that, as minister of the interior, Mussolini could order the police not to intervene, there was little likelihood of the fascists' opponents ever being able to vote them out of office.

To ensure the passage of this law, Mussolini overcame the opposition (who greatly outnumbered the thirty-five fascist deputies) by threatening to abolish parliament, and by placing armed fascist guards on the doors to intimidate the deputies. Liberal leaders such as Giolitti and Salandra advised their supporters to approve the law, and it was passed by a large majority in July 1923. Most Popolari deputies abstained. With the Acerbo Law in place, Mussolini now needed to ensure his party would win the most votes in the next election. He was helped by the events of August 1923 that became known as the Corfu Incident.

### The election of April 1924

It was not until April 1924 that Mussolini decided to hold new elections. In January he set up a secret gang of thugs and gangsters to terrorise anti-fascists both in Italy and

Fact: The Corfu Incident occurred when an Italian general was murdered on Greek soil while making maps of a disputed area. Mussolini took advantage of this to demand that Greece pay 50 million lire as compensation, and make a full apology. When Greece refused to pay (as they had not been responsible), Mussolini – ignoring criticism from the League of Nations – ordered Italian marines to invade the Greek island of Corfu. The Greek government paid the fine. Many Italians regarded Mussolini as a national hero after this incident.

abroad. Known as the Ceka, this group was led by **Amerigo Dumini**, who had his own office within the ministry of the interior.

The elections were announced in March, and Dumini's gang unleashed a wave of terror against anti-fascists in which over 100 people were killed. In addition to this, voting certificates were seized, fascists voted on behalf of dead people, and ballot boxes were stolen in areas where fascists feared electoral defeat. As a result, the fascists (and the right-wing liberals, including Salandra and Orlando, who had formed an electoral alliance with the fascists) won almost 65 per cent of the vote. The number of fascists in the 535-seat chamber rose from 35 to 374. Yet despite the intimidation and vote-rigging, over 2.5 million Italians still voted for opposition parties, mainly the socialists and the communists.

## The Matteotti crisis

When the new parliament met for the first time, on 30 May 1924, Giacomo Matteotti, an independent and much-respected socialist, strongly condemned the fascist violence and corruption that had occurred during the election. He even dared to produce evidence, and called the results a fraud.

On 10 June 1924, Matteotti was abducted in Rome. Although there was no hard evidence, it was widely assumed that he had been murdered by Dumini's fascist thugs, and many began to distance themselves from Mussolini's regime. For a time, it seemed as though revulsion at Matteotti's murder might actually cause Mussolini's downfall. He was sufficiently worried to suspend parliament in order to prevent a debate. To win back support, Mussolini ordered the arrest of Dumini and his gang on 15 June, and on 18 August Matteotti's body was found. Although Dumini was found guilty of the murder and imprisoned, newspapers began to print evidence of Mussolini's involvement.



Figure 2.13 The body of Giacomo Matteotti is carried out of the woods outside Rome

### Amerigo Dumini (1894–1967)

Dumini was born in the USA after his parents emigrated there from Italy. He travelled to Florence at the end of the First World War and became involved in the local Fascio di Combattimento. He was soon known as 'Il Duce's hit man'. In 1924, Dumini headed the group that kidnapped and then murdered Giacomo Matteotti, leader of the Socialist Party. In 1943, after Mussolini's overthrow, Dumini gave his support to the establishment of the Salò Republic.



Figure 2.14 Giacomo Matteotti (1885–1924)

Born into a wealthy family, Matteotti studied law at the University of Bologna. He soon became active in socialist politics, and he opposed Italy's entry into the First World War, in line with the official position of the Italian Socialist Party. He was first elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1919 and eventually became leader of the United Socialist Party. He was an outspoken critic of fascist violence.

# 2

## Mussolini and Italy

**Aventine Secession:** This was named after similar events in ancient Rome, when a group of politicians set up a rival assembly on the Aventine Hills above Rome. The opposition deputies of 1924 walked out of the Chamber and set up an alternative parliamentary assembly, claiming they were now the true and democratic representatives of the Italian people.

**Historical debate:** There has been some debate amongst historians about Mussolini's involvement in Matteotti's assassination. De Felice and Emilio Gentile argued that Mussolini had not ordered the death of Matteotti. De Felice even claimed that Mussolini was the victim of a political plot to threaten his power and frustrate his plans to create a more broad-based government. Other historians, including Denis Mack Smith, thought Mussolini was probably aware of the assassination plot but that it was ordered and organised by someone else. However, some studies have suggested that Mussolini did order the murder to stop Matteotti publishing documents containing details of corruption involving the selling of oil rights to a US company.

This evidence led most of the opposition deputies – mainly socialists, communists and radical Popolari – to boycott parliament in protest, under the leadership of the liberal Giovanni Amendola. This became known as the **Aventine Secession**, and was intended to force the king to dismiss Mussolini. At first, the king refused to consider such an action and instead blamed the opposition (most of whom were republicans, and thus disliked by the king) for unconstitutional behaviour.

### SOURCE E

The Aventine [Secession] was undermined by its own contradictions. For the members of the opposition, genuine democrats who had not understood that Fascism represented a radically new element in political life, there was no choice but to await the constitutional monarch's pleasure ... Therefore, and as much in order to avoid frightening the king as out of fear of revolution, they rejected the call for a general strike and the proclamation of the Aventine as the sole legal Parliament of the country ... They hoped to bring about a Cabinet crisis and the dismissal of Mussolini. It was now December, seven months after the murder of Matteotti, and the Aventine moderates had not yet learned that on the parliamentary battleground Mussolini was bound to win because the king was determined to uphold him.

Gallo, M. 1974. *Mussolini's Italy*. London, UK. Macmillan. pp. 189–91.

The pope also supported Mussolini and condemned the Popolari deputies who had participated in the Aventine Secession. He was joined by Giolitti and Salandra and other leading liberals and conservatives, all of whom saw this as a way of reasserting influence over a now-weakened Mussolini. They also feared that Mussolini's fall might be followed by a revival of the revolutionary left-wing parties. Perhaps most significantly, leading industrialists were opposed to any change of government, especially as Mussolini had begun to reduce state involvement in the economy.

### SOURCE F

Mussolini clearly feared his days were numbered. Yet the king declined to act ... He had quickly come to value Mussolini ...

Mussolini was under considerable pressure, but he was far from resigning. He countered by making changes in the government to reassure moderates ... Damage limitation was helped by the Vatican ... Many leading members of the clergy were grateful to Fascism for breaking the Left ... Industrialists too stayed largely faithful, reflecting their basic satisfaction with government policy.

Eatwell, R. 1995. *Fascism: a History*. London, UK. Chatto & Windus. p. 52.

In July 1924, industrialists, liberals and conservatives supported Mussolini's moves towards press censorship, and then his ban on meetings by opposition parties in August 1924. When further evidence of fascist violence emerged, Mussolini felt it necessary

to promise to get rid of the thugs in the Fascist Party, and he sacked three fascist ministers from the government. However, in November, some leading liberals joined the opposition in criticising the continued press censorship.

These actions provoked a revolt by leading *ras* and some 50 senior officers of the MVSN in December 1924. At a meeting on 31 December, they presented Mussolini with a clear choice: either he had to stop any further investigations of fascist violence and become dictator of Italy, or they would overthrow him and replace him with a more hard-line fascist leader.

### KEY CONCEPTS QUESTION

**Causation:** What reasons can you give for the failure of the Aventine Secession?

Remember – ‘reasons’ is a term commonly used in History questions: as it requires you to focus on explaining causes, it is thus a causation question, even though the word ‘causes’ is not used.

## 2.6 What measures were taken after 1924 to maintain Mussolini's power?

### The establishment of the dictatorship, 1925–28

On 3 January 1925, Mussolini addressed the Chamber of Deputies. He denied having set up the Ceka, and condemned the actions of Dumini's gang. However, as prime minister and leader of the PNF, he assumed ultimate responsibility for Matteotti's murder. Nonetheless, he made it clear that, rather than resigning, he would continue to rule Italy – by force ‘if necessary’.

#### SOURCE G

I declare before all Italy that I assume full responsibility for what has happened ... If Fascism has turned out to be only castor oil and rubber truncheons instead of being a superb passion inspiring the best youth of Italy, I am responsible ... Italians want peace and quiet, and to get on with its [*sic*] work. I shall give it all these, if possible in love, but if necessary by force.

Extract from a speech given by Mussolini, 3 January 1925. Quoted in Robson, M. 1992. *Italy: Liberalism and Fascism 1870–1945*. London, UK. Hodder & Stoughton. p. 66.

#### SOURCE H

For even as Farinacci continued to press for a Fascist takeover, his enthusiastic centralization of the party – intended to prepare it for its revolutionary destiny – actually had the effect of undermining the power and autonomy of provincial bosses like himself and neutralizing the *squadristo* of which he had previously been chief spokesman. By the time he was manoeuvred into resigning in April 1926 he had fulfilled what Mussolini had expected of him and the PNF was well on the way to being domesticated.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Routledge. pp. 36–37.

In February 1925, Mussolini became seriously ill. During his illness and recovery, power was exercised by Roberto Farinacci, the notorious *ras* of Cremona who had recently been appointed as party secretary by Mussolini. In fact, Mussolini disliked Farinacci, who was in favour of a total fascist takeover, but his appointment proved to be a shrewd move on Mussolini's part.

### A new wave of violence

Farinacci launched a new campaign of squadristi violence against members of the Socialist and Communist Parties, as well as the more radical sections of the Popolari. Several people were killed, including Amendola, and many others decided to go into exile. Farinacci also supervised a purge of PNF members and local leaders (the latter in particular) who were considered to be insufficiently loyal to Mussolini.

### Controlling the press

The first step in establishing a fascist dictatorship was taken in July 1925, when Mussolini, now recovered from his illness, imposed a series of laws designed to control the press. Anti-fascist newspapers were shut down, while other newspapers were only allowed to print articles approved by the government. From December 1925, all journalists were required to be on a register drawn up by the Fascist Party.

### Local and central government

In August 1925, Mussolini began the next step in establishing his dictatorship, this time focused on local and central government. In the ninety-three provinces of Italy, elected mayors and councils of towns and cities were replaced by appointed fascist officials known as *podesta* (see section 2.15, Declining importance of the Fascist Party). Although the *podesta* were Fascist Party members, they were mainly conservatives, drawn from the traditional landowning and military élites. In this way, Mussolini excluded the more militant fascists from real power in the provinces. Fascist political control was further established on 3 August, when all meetings by opposition parties were banned.

Mussolini also moved to increase his personal power in central government. On 24 December 1925, he made himself 'head of government', a new official title. He also assumed formal powers over his ministers, who became responsible to him rather than to the Chamber of Deputies. In January 1926, Mussolini assumed the power to issue decrees without parliamentary approval, making him responsible only to the king. The new law also stated that the king must secure Mussolini's personal approval before appointing new ministers. Soon, Mussolini insisted on being called *Il Duce* ('The Leader').

By 1929, Mussolini held eight ministerial posts himself, thus excluding many other fascist leaders. However, in practice, it was the traditional conservative civil servants who ran these state departments rather than Mussolini or the Fascist Party.

### Further steps, 1926

Despite increased control, Mussolini's position was still not totally secure. The king and the Chamber of Deputies still had influence, as did the increasingly harassed opposition parties. So in October 1926, after yet another failed assassination attempt on Mussolini, all parties other than the PNF were banned, and their deputies expelled from the Chamber. At the same time, trade unions were outlawed and a new law court (the Special Tribunal) was established to deal with political offences, some of which carried



the death penalty. In 1927, Mussolini formed the *Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo* (Organisation for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism, or OVRA), a secret police force charged with suppressing political opponents.

In May 1928, when new elections were due, Mussolini took further measures to ensure that the Fascist Party won and that Italy remained a one-party, authoritarian state. These included changes to the electoral system so that only men aged twenty-one or over who belonged to fascist syndicates (see section 2.15, 'The corporate state') could vote. The Fascist Grand Council drew up a list of 400 candidates from lists approved by confederations of employers and employees, and voters only had the choice of voting either for or against this list. Fear of fascist violence meant most Italians voted 'yes', as fascist officials in the polling stations were able to identify those who voted 'no' (the voting slips were different colours). Having secured a clear electoral victory, Mussolini was established as dictator of Italy. The Chamber contained only fascist deputies, and the king's power was drastically reduced.

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## 2.7 What role was played by personality and propaganda in the consolidation of Mussolini's power?

As well as these political measures, Mussolini took other steps to secure his power. These included methods of indoctrination and propaganda, as well as increased measures against opposition.

### Controlling minds

Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND)

The fascists believed that it was important to influence the minds of the adult population of Italy. To this end, they established organisations to control leisure activities. The Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), a national recreational club, was set up in 1925. *Dopolavoro* is Italian for 'after work'. The OND soon had a vast network of clubs, libraries and sports grounds, and organised concerts, dancing and summer holiday activities in most towns and villages. Overall, about 40 per cent of industrial workers and 25 per cent of peasants were members of the OND. Sport was given particular emphasis, and Italy began to do well internationally in motor racing, cycling, athletics and football.

The main function of the OND was to increase acceptance of fascist ideology. However, although its activities did lead to some popular support – many Italians enjoyed the subsidised sports, outings and holidays – most local organisers ignored the indoctrination aspects.

*L'inquadramento*

To build on the activities of the OND, and to increase fascist influence amongst the masses, there was a concerted attempt to expand membership of the party and its associated organisations. This process of uniting and incorporating the people was known as *l'inquadramento*. From 1931 to 1937, during the worst of the Great Depression,

**Fact:** The OVRA was not a specifically fascist organisation, being essentially an adaptation of the Interior Ministry's existing secret police section. So OVRA was not the equivalent of the Nazi SS or Gestapo, as it was under state, not party, control.

### ACTIVITY

Carry out some further research on the methods and activities of the OVRA. To what extent was it similar to the Gestapo in Nazi Germany?

**Great Depression:** Following the 1929 Wall Street Crash, the entire world entered a prolonged economic downturn that resulted in a contraction of economic activity and mass unemployment. This became known as the Great Depression. All major countries – with the exception of the USSR – were badly affected during the 1930s.

## ACTIVITY

Working in pairs, develop arguments for a class presentation on the effectiveness of the fascist policy of *l'inquadramento*. Concentrate on two aspects:

- the various policies connected to *l'inquadramento*
- the degree of success/failure of each one.

the Fascist Party established its own welfare agencies to provide extra relief, and also began setting up women's *fasci* to help run these agencies. Although these new agencies and networks led to increased party contact, surveillance and control, party membership did not increase dramatically. According to some, by 1939, only about 6 per cent of the population belonged to the party.

## The Romanità movement

Another propaganda ploy to build up the prestige and popularity of Mussolini and the fascists was to link them to the earlier greatness of ancient Rome and its emperors. This became known as the Romanità ('Romanness') movement. Fascist writers, artists and scholars portrayed fascism as a revival of, and a return to, ancient Roman civilisation. From 1926, Mussolini was increasingly spoken of as a new Caesar.

In 1937, the Mostra Augustea della Romanità exhibition was held to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the emperor Augustus. Over the entrance to the exhibition was a quote from Mussolini: 'Italians, you must ensure that the glories of the past are surpassed by the glories of the future.'

## SOURCE 1

Rome is our point of departure and our point of reference. It is our symbol and, if you like, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, an Italy that is wise and strong, disciplined and impersonal. Much of the spirit of Ancient Rome is being born again in Fascism: the Lictorian *fascies* are Roman, our war machine is Roman, our pride and our courage are Roman too. *Civis Romanus sum* ['I am a Roman citizen'].

Extract from a speech delivered by Mussolini in 1935. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 106.

As part of this cult, Mussolini adopted the *fascies* as the fascist emblem, and had it incorporated into the national flag. In addition, much emphasis was placed on the need to establish a second empire – 'the resurrection of the empire'. According to Romanità, the fascist 'New Man' was a modern version of the idealised Roman centurion.

**Ducismo: the personality cult of Il Duce**

To create this 'New Man', Mussolini wanted fascism to penetrate every aspect of Italian life and society. To achieve this, he concentrated on building up and projecting his own image, and widely publicised the 'achievements' of fascism.

Almost as soon as Mussolini's dictatorship was established, he began to understand the importance of good publicity. Consequently, a press office was set up to ensure that photographs and newspaper articles projected a positive image of Mussolini and his activities. He was portrayed as youthful, energetic and an expert in a wide range of specialist areas and pursuits. He even gave instructions to the press on how he should be reported. Although initially sceptical of the value of radio, Mussolini eventually established a state radio network in 1924; this expanded rapidly. However, by 1939,

## QUESTION

How was the Romanità movement meant to create the fascist 'New Man'?

**Fact:** Unlike the efficient propaganda machine developed by Hermann Goebbels in Nazi Germany, propaganda in fascist Italy was marked by bureaucratic inefficiency. Mussolini's creation of a fascist propaganda machine was a gradual process. Significantly – and again unlike Nazi Germany – a number of non-fascist newspapers and radio broadcasts were allowed to continue, including those produced by the Vatican.

there were still only around 1 million radios in Italy – about one for every forty-four people. To deal with this, public-address systems were set up in cafés, restaurants and public squares, so that more people could listen to *Il Duce's* speeches. Free radios were also given to schools.



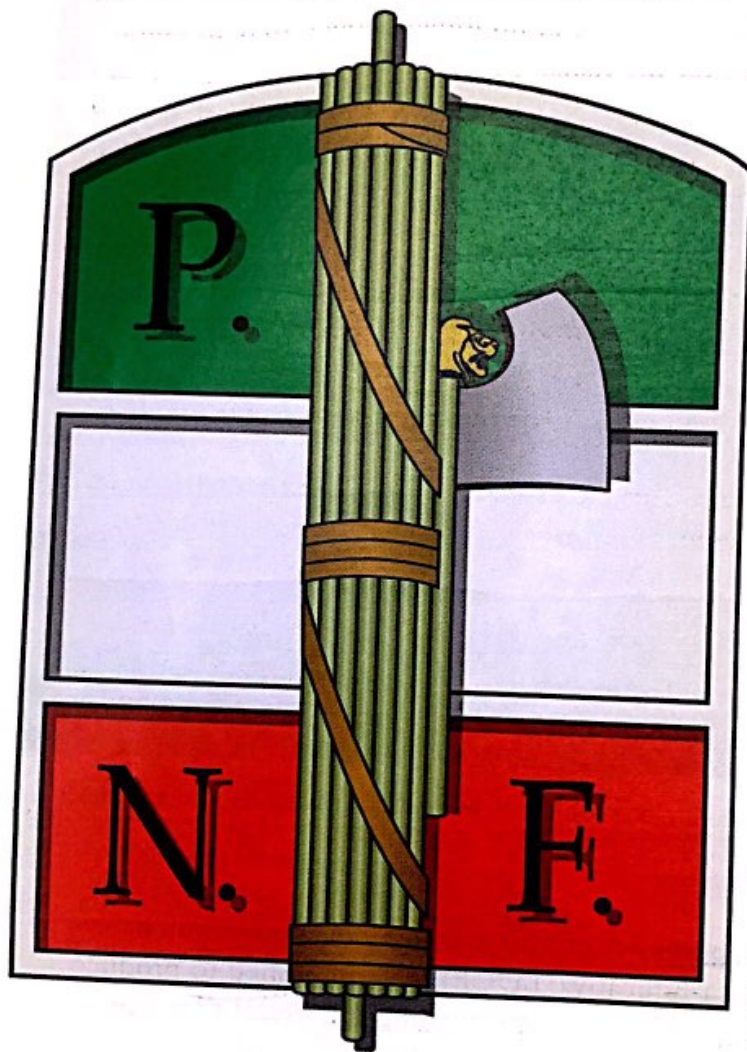
**Figure 2.15** Mussolini reviving the ancient glories of Rome; he is viewing a statue of Julius Caesar installed in the recently excavated forum

Mussolini was slow to realise the potential of film, but in 1924, a government agency (*L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa*, LUCE) was established to produce documentaries and newsreels. Soon, Mussolini was making full use of film. He insisted that the state-sponsored newsreel films (from 1926, these had to be played in all cinemas as part of the programme) showed him addressing large crowds of enthusiastic supporters, and that he was filmed from below, in order to disguise his lack of height.

## Fascist propaganda

Throughout the 1930s, the press office extended its role to cover not just radio and film, but all aspects of culture. In 1933, Mussolini's son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, took over the running of the office. In 1935, it was renamed the Ministry for Press and Propaganda – in part an imitation of developments in Nazi Germany.

Two years later, in 1937, the office was renamed again, this time as the Ministry of Popular Culture (nicknamed Minculpop). This was an attempt to broaden its influence and ensure that all films, plays, radio programmes and books glorified Mussolini as a hero and the fascists as Italy's saviours. However, Minculpop's attempts to regulate the arts were not very successful. Traditional liberal culture proved too strong, and this led to compromises and thus only partial control by the fascists. While Minculpop managed to rally support for the Abyssinian War (1935-36), it failed to gain much popular support for Mussolini's alliance with Nazi Germany or for the anti-Semitic policies he began to disseminate in 1938 (see section 2.13, Racism and anti-Semitism).



**Figure 2.16** The fasces emblem was taken from ancient Rome; it consists of a bundle of rods and an axe were used by the *lictor* (Roman bodyguards) and symbolised authority, discipline and punishment

### KEY CONCEPTS QUESTION

**Significance:** Using the material in this section and the previous section, and any other resources available to you, make a list of the main methods used by Mussolini between 1925 and 1928 to consolidate his power. Place them in order of importance and then write a paragraph to explain your first choice.

At the same time, Achille Starace, appointed as party secretary in 1930, was also active in projecting an image of Mussolini as a hero. Lights were left on in the dictator's office to suggest that he worked twenty hours a day for Italy, while photographs and posters of Il Duce appeared in public buildings, streets and workplaces. Great prominence was also given to various catchphrases reflecting fascist ideals, such as *Credero, Obbedere, Combattere* ('Believe, Obey, Fight') and 'Mussolini is always right'.

At press conferences, Mussolini was always accompanied by Blackshirt bodyguards, while all public appearances were attended by what soon became known as the 'applause squad', who whipped up 'enthusiasm' for Mussolini's speeches, sometimes even resorting

to prompt cards. Public events such as mass rallies and meetings were deliberately turned into political theatre, and full use was made of lighting and music to enhance the drama.

## 2.8 How far did foreign policy help Mussolini maintain power?

As was shown in the previous section, Mussolini deliberately tried to link his fascist state with the empire of Ancient Rome. The Romanità movement was part of this, and was closely connected to his foreign policy. The aims of his foreign policy were to gain what was called *spazio vitale* ('living space') for the Italian people, and to make Italy a great power in the Mediterranean, northern Africa and the Balkans. Although he hoped that his foreign policy would strengthen his regime, it actually ended up becoming what is generally regarded as the main factor in his downfall.

### Peaceful diplomacy 1922–35

Mussolini's use of force in the Corfu Incident in August 1923 (see section 2.5, Changing the constitution – the Acerbo Law) is an example of how foreign policy did help him to establish and maintain power. Although, the Conference of Ambassadors eventually forced the Italians to withdraw, Greece made no official apology and Mussolini did obtain compensation from the Greeks. This increased his support within Italy, and having pushed the Acerbo Law through the previous month, it was an important factor in winning a big majority in the April 1924 elections.

Although the Corfu Incident had shown up the weakness of the League of Nations, Britain and France controlled important areas in the Mediterranean and in Africa. In addition, Yugoslavia was a potential obstacle to Italian ambitions along the Adriatic Sea. As Mussolini was not yet in a position to achieve his aim of a great new empire by force, he followed a largely peaceful foreign policy for the next eleven years. Some aspects of this also helped to increase support for his fascist regime. For instance, in 1924, as a result of the Pact of Rome with Yugoslavia, he gained Fiume. This was a valuable port city that Italy had originally hoped to gain by the peace treaties of 1919–20 – and which had long been an aim of Italian nationalists (see section 2.5, The terms of the peace treaties). Then, in 1926, talks with Britain and France resulted in parts of Kenya and Egypt being given to the Italian colonies of Somaliland and Libya, respectively.

However, after 1929 and the Great Depression, Mussolini's foreign policy began to change. He called for the 1919–20 peace treaties to be revised, and plotted (unsuccessfully) with Hungary to overthrow the king of Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, he was initially suspicious of Hitler, who came to power in Germany in 1933. As a result, he blocked Hitler's attempted takeover of Austria in July 1934 and then, in April 1935, formed the Stresa Front with Britain and France.

### Mussolini's fascist 'crusades' 1935–39

Mussolini's preparedness to work with Britain and France ended when, later in 1935, he decided to launch fascist Italy's first imperialist war against Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia).

## Mussolini and Italy

### Theory of knowledge

History, empathy and emotion:

The historian James Joll (1918–94) wrote: 'The aim of the historian, like that of the artist, is to ... give us a new way of looking at things.' But is it possible for historians to empathise with violent and racist regimes such as Mussolini's Fascist Italy without making moral or value judgements? If historians' personal views affect what they write, does this make history less valid as an academic discipline than, for example, the natural sciences?

This led to a breach with Britain and France and, more importantly for his regime, it saw him move increasingly closer to Hitler, his fellow fascist. In the end this would have disastrous consequences for Italy – and for his fascist regime.

### The invasion of Abyssinia, 1935–36

Abyssinia lay between Italy's two existing colonies in East Africa – Eritrea and Somaliland – and Mussolini had been making plans to invade the country since 1932. The Italian invasion began on 2 October 1935, when 500,000 Italian troops invaded. The invading forces met little serious resistance: the Abyssinians were often only armed with spears, while the Italians had tanks, bombers and poison gas. By May 1936, Abyssinia had been conquered and it became part of Italian East Africa. Although it ended the Stresa Front and Italy's close relationship with Britain and France, this first successful attempt to create a new Roman Empire boosted the popularity of Mussolini's regime in Italy. It pleased Italian nationalists, many of whom had long wanted a chance for revenge after a defeat suffered at the hands of Abyssinian forces at Adowa in 1896. It also gained the support of the Catholic Church, which saw the invasion as a 'Christian crusade' against 'barbarism'.

However, one of the main outcomes of the invasion was that it made Italy increasingly dependent on Nazi Germany, which had supported it when the League had made half-hearted attempts to oppose Italy's aggression.

### SOURCE J

Ethiopia proved a troublesome colony ... Most of the western zones had not been conquered and guerrilla war continued there for years. In July Mussolini authorised ... a terror policy of reprisals against rebels ... But the cost was huge. Ethiopia provided no loot, indeed swallowed up Italian resources. By 1937–8 about 12.5 per cent of the total state budget was being spent in East Africa alone ... Ethiopia bled Italy dry ... The other consequences were diplomatic ... and even more serious. When the Hoare-Laval scheme collapsed in December 1935, the 'Stresa front' against Germany collapsed with it.

Clark, M. 2005. *Mussolini*. Harlow, UK. Pearson. pp. 198–200.

**Fact:** Mussolini's involvement in Spain actually encouraged anti-fascist opposition in Italy. This was boosted by the news that Italian political exiles, fighting as volunteers in the International Brigades formed to fight Franco's forces, had played a big part in the defeat of Italian troops at the battle of Guadalajara in March 1937. Mussolini's response was to order his secret police to make greater efforts to assassinate Italian exiles abroad.

### The Spanish Civil War, 1936–39

The growing links between fascist Italy and Nazi Germany were shown in 1936 when Mussolini informed Hitler that he would no longer object to a German *Anschluss* (union) with Austria, and did not oppose the German reoccupation of the Rhineland. Then, on 6 March, Mussolini followed Hitler's lead and withdrew Italy from the League. This shift to a pro-German policy was confirmed in July 1936, when Mussolini agreed to join Hitler in intervening in the Spanish Civil War to help General Francisco Franco overthrow the democratically-elected Popular Front government. Although Italy gained the islands of Mallorca and Menorca, and Mussolini was supported once again by the pope and the Catholic Church in Italy which saw his intervention in the Spanish Civil War as another 'Christian crusade' – this time against communism – it brought Italy very few tangible benefits. In fact, it had negative effects on Italy, and thus on his regime.

Mussolini made a huge commitment in Spain: over 70,000 Italian troops were sent, along with 1,000 tanks and 600 planes. In all, this intervention cost over 10 billion lire, and more than 6,000 Italian soldiers were killed in the war. Given the impact of the Depression and

the general economic situation in Italy, these were resources Italy could ill afford, and this was one of the reasons why Mussolini did not join in the Second World War in 1939.

### The Rome–Berlin Axis

During the Spanish Civil War, Mussolini and Hitler confirmed their joint opposition to communism and agreed to divide Europe into spheres of influence. The Mediterranean and the Balkans fell within Italy's sphere. In October 1936, Mussolini moved closer to Nazi Germany when he signed the Rome–Berlin Axis. This marked a significant turning point in Italy's foreign policy, establishing cooperation and support between Italy and Germany. The two fascist dictators moved even closer in December 1937, when Mussolini joined Germany and Japan in their Anti-Comintern Pact. These steps would soon prove a disaster for Mussolini and his regime.

## The Second World War

In March 1938, Mussolini had kept his promise not to oppose *Anschluss* with Austria: when Hitler ordered in German troops, Italy took no action to prevent the takeover. Mussolini's belief that Britain and France would never take any firm action against German expansion seemed to be confirmed when those nations made no response to Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 – despite the promises Hitler had made at the Munich Conference in September 1938 that he had no other territorial ambitions.

As a result, in April 1939, Mussolini attempted to annex Albania and turn it into an Italian protectorate. Ominously, Italian troops had difficulty in conquering even this small state – once again, this setback stimulated opposition to his regime in Italy. Despite these difficulties, in May 1939, Mussolini signed the Pact of Steel with Nazi Germany. This was a formal military alliance that committed Italy to fight on Germany's side in the event of war. However, Mussolini warned that he needed three years to prepare for war. He was shocked, therefore, when Hitler invaded Poland on 1 September 1939.

Because of Italy's serious weaknesses – and despite the Pact of Steel – Mussolini did not join Hitler in his attack on Poland. When Germany failed to supply Italy with the strategic resources it needed, Mussolini stated that Italy could not participate in the war, although he said he would send agricultural and industrial labourers to Germany. This, too, was unpopular in Italy.

Italy finally entered the war on 10 June 1940 – yet Italian forces had not recovered fully from the effects of the Abyssinian and Spanish wars. In addition, agricultural production declined in the period 1940–43. Wheat production, for instance, declined by about 1.5 million tonnes as so many peasants were conscripted into the armed forces. This led to food shortages and a growing dissatisfaction with the fascist regime. In particular, it led to the re-emergence of the first serious signs of opposition since the late 1920s. This is explored in more detail in the section which deals with opposition.

The resulting poor performances of the Italian army in France, Greece, Yugoslavia and North Africa played a large part in Mussolini's eventual overthrow on 24 July 1943. Although imprisoned, he was rescued by German paratroopers and, at Hitler's urging, Mussolini later set up a new fascist state in north-eastern Italy. However, this Italian Social Republic was little more than a German puppet state, and was bitterly opposed by many Italians who formed partisan groups to fight against his remaining forces. When the Germans withdrew from Italy in April 1945, Mussolini tried to flee with them, but he was arrested on 27 April by a group of Italian partisans. The following day, he was

executed alongside fifteen other fascist leaders. Thus, in the end, Mussolini's foreign policy had not served to maintain his power – quite the reverse, it had eroded support and given those who opposed him a chance to bring about the end of his fascist regime.



**Figure 2.17** Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

Born in Sardinia, in 1911 Gramsci went to the University of Turin to study literature and linguistics. In 1913, he joined the Italian Socialist Party, and in 1916 became co-editor of the Piedmont edition of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* He supported the Socialist Party's decision to join the Communist Third International in 1919, and the establishment of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci was a highly original Marxist theoretical thinker and wrote various important books, some while he was in prison. One of his most important theories was that of cultural hegemony, the idea that the ruling capitalist classes construct and manipulate cultural norms to maintain a state that protects private property and their own interests.



**Figure 2.18** A photograph taken on 29 April 1945, showing the bodies of Mussolini (nearest to the camera) and other fascists, after their execution, hanging from the roof of a petrol station in Milan's Piazzale Loreto. The square was where fifteen anti-fascist partisans had recently been executed. The men on the roof are partisans – many in the crowd threw rotten fruit and stones at Mussolini's body

## 2.9 What was the nature and extent of opposition, and how was it dealt with?

### Opposition to fascist rule, 1925–40

Although trade unions and all opposition parties had been banned in 1926, there was still limited opposition and resistance. One organised group that remained was the Communist Party of Italy, which had been set up in 1921. In 1924, with many leading Communist Party members already arrested by Mussolini's regime, Antonio Gramsci became its leader, and was even elected to the Chamber of Deputies.



Gramsci set up a Communist Party newspaper called *L'Unità* ('Unity') and called for a united front to defeat fascism. However, in November 1926 he was arrested and imprisoned under the new emergency laws (see section 2.6, The establishment of the dictatorship, 1925–28), and he eventually died in prison in 1937.

During the late 1920s and the 1930s, opposition to Mussolini in Italy, though often courageous, was weak. Such opposition mainly involved isolated individuals, small clandestine groups and remnants of the trade unions. After 1926, political opponents who were caught were often sent into internal exile (known as *confino*) to remote parts of Italy. While fascist treatment of active opposition was brutal, it was not as excessively repressive as in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia, although it became more extreme after Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940.

Several anti-fascist groups went into self-imposed exile so that they could organise opposition from abroad, especially in France. They smuggled anti-fascist literature into Italy and, during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), over 3,000 Italian anti-fascist volunteers fought as part of the International Brigades on the side of the Republican government against Franco's forces, which included troops sent by Mussolini. Their Garibaldi Legion defeated Mussolini's troops at the Battle of Guadalajara in March 1937 – this greatly angered and embarrassed Mussolini.

Mussolini's Ceka often disrupted the activities of these *fuoriusciti* (exiles or 'escapees'), sometimes by assassinating leaders in exile. For example, the Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, established the Giustizia e Libertà (Justice and Liberty) group in 1929. They were murdered in France in 1937, probably on Mussolini's orders, by members of La Cagoule (The Cowl), a French fascist group.

## The re-emergence of opposition at home, 1940–43

Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940 initiated the first signs of real renewed internal opposition, characterised by the outbreak of strikes.

By 1942, Germany was taking more from Italy than it was offering in military aid. In addition to coal and iron, about 50 per cent of the 350,000 workers sent to Germany by Mussolini were skilled workers. The food he ordered to be sent to Germany caused serious shortages in Italy, and rationing was introduced in 1941. The inefficiency and inadequacy of the rationing system led to the rise of the black market (the ration of 150 grams of bread per person was the smallest in Europe with the exception of the USSR). Towards the end of 1942, Allied bombing of Italy increased. Poor anti-aircraft defences resulted in widespread destruction which in turn led to increased working hours and greater factory discipline. Inevitably, a great wave of strikes occurred in March 1943.

Italy's military situation deteriorated during 1943. Axis troops in Africa were forced to surrender in May, resulting in the loss of Libya. Then, in July, the Allies invaded Sicily and began bombing Rome. The invading Allies met only token resistance as many Italians blamed Mussolini for their army's defeats and the dire situation on the home front. They had also grown to dislike the German armies that had begun moving onto Italian soil. Most Italians, including the industrialists and lower-middle classes who had been the backbone of fascism, were disillusioned by the regime's inefficiency and corruption. The nepotism that Mussolini frequently used was particularly unpopular.

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**Fact:** Mussolini was persuaded by Hitler to declare war on Britain and France in June 1940, and then on the US in December 1941. However, Italy's forces performed badly in Greece and Yugoslavia and suffered several setbacks in North Africa in 1942–43, eventually losing control of Libya. Allied bombing of Italy began in 1942, and after the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943, more and more Italians turned against the fascist regime. To help stop the Allied invasion, Nazi Germany sent troops into Italy in the early summer of 1943.

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**nepotism:** The promotion of relatives because of their family connections rather than their ability to do a job. Many Italians resented the nepotism Mussolini demonstrated towards relatives of his mistress, Clara Petacci.

## Mussolini and Italy

Between February and April 1943, Mussolini took a hard line in dealing with this disaffection – sacking or demoting several ministers and high-ranking members of the Fascist Party, including Grandi, Ciano and Bottai. However, this only led to plots against him. Many were critical of Mussolini's strategy, feared his close relationship with Nazi Germany, and wanted him removed from power altogether. However, another group of fascists, which included Farinacci and the new PNF secretary Carlo Scorza, wanted to forge closer ties with Germany.

## The end of Mussolini's fascist state 1943–45

The military setbacks of May and July 1943 finally triggered a coup against Mussolini on 24 July 1943, when the Fascist Grand Council voted nineteen to seven to remove him from power. On 25 July, the king formally ordered Mussolini to resign. He was arrested and imprisoned. The ease with which his overthrow was achieved emphasised the fact that Mussolini had never been able to impose a totalitarian regime. He was replaced by Marshal Pietro Badoglio who, on 8 September 1943, announced Italy's surrender to the Allies.

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**Italian Social Republic:** This was soon contemptuously known as the Salò Republic, after the town where Mussolini had his headquarters. It was little more than a German puppet state, despite Mussolini's claims to be returning to the social idealism of his original fascism.

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### The Italian Social Republic

In September 1943, Mussolini was 'rescued' from his enforced isolation in a mountainous region of eastern Italy by German paratroopers. They took him to Germany where Hitler persuaded him to set up the **Italian Social Republic**. This was a new fascist state in the German-controlled north-eastern part of Italy, which was not yet under Allied occupation.

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**Historical debate:** Immediately after the end of the Second World War, most histories of the Italian fascist movement focused on the periods of active opposition to Mussolini (1919–25 and 1943–45). However, some revisionist historians focused on the period 1926–43 when, they argued, the fascists achieved a degree of both success and at least passive support. In fact, Martin Clark has even compared Mussolini – in his defeat of the left and trade union power, and his attempts to increase patriotism – to Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister from 1979 to 1990. How convincing do you find this argument?

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Although Mussolini was nominally leader of the new republic, in practice the important decisions were taken by Rudolf Rahn, the German ambassador, and by SS general Karl Wolff. There was much SS and Gestapo brutality, especially against Jewish people, while thousands of Italian men were sent to Germany as forced labour. At the same time, fascist extremists made a determined effort to round up those who had planned and carried out Mussolini's overthrow. Several were captured, taken to the Salò Republic and then executed, including Mussolini's own son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano.

### Mussolini's death

During 1944, the Allies continued to push up through Italy from the south. In April 1945, they captured the northern city of Bologna, and the Germans decided to pull out of Italy. Mussolini tried to flee with the Germans, but was recognised by a group of Italian partisans and arrested on 27 April. The following day, he was taken by another, communist-led, group of partisans and he and his mistress were shot. Also executed were fifteen other fascist leaders and ministers, including Farinacci and Starace. The bodies were hung upside down outside a garage in Piazzale Loreto in Milan, where a group of partisans had previously been executed by the Germans for resistance activities.

## End of unit activities

- 1 Create a diagram to show the various stages and steps in Mussolini's construction of a fascist dictatorship in the years 1922–29.
- 2 Carry out some additional research about the significance of the roles of both the king and the Catholic Church in the consolidation of Mussolini's control. Why do you think they acted in the ways they did?
- 3 Find out more about the Rosselli brothers. How far was what happened to them typical of Mussolini's regime and his treatment of opposition?
- 4 Construct a table showing Mussolini's foreign policies from 1922 to 1943. Draw up two main columns, listing which policies helped to increase support for his fascist regime and which eroded support. Make sure you include relevant details such as dates, actions and outcomes.

### Theory of knowledge

#### History and bias:

There are various historical interpretations about Mussolini and his fascist state. Some recent reinterpretations have given a more positive view of his actions, considering Mussolini as one of Italy's most successful 20th century politicians. To what extent is it possible for historians and students of history not to be influenced by their own political views, or by the contemporary historical context in which they are writing?