

2

Mussolini and Italy

1 Unit

Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy

TIMELINE

- 1861** Formation of an independent Italy
- 1870** Papal states incorporated into Italian kingdom
- 1911 Sep:** Italy invades Libya
- 1914 Jun:** 'Red Week'
Nov: Mussolini founds *Il Popolo d'Italia*
- 1915 May:** Italy signs Treaty of London; 'Radiant Days of May'; participation in First World War leads to inflation
- 1919 Jan:** Start of *biennio rosso*; first Arditi Association set up in Rome
Mar: Formation of the Fascio di Combattimento in Milan
Jun: *Fascist Programme* published
Sep: D'Annunzio takes Fiume
Nov: First use of proportional representation in elections; no fascists elected
- 1920 Sep:** *Biennio rosso*: wave of factory occupations; electoral victories for socialists
- 1921 May:** Mussolini forms National Bloc electoral alliance with Giolitti; 35 fascists elected, including Mussolini
Aug: Pact of Pacification between fascists and socialists
Oct: Formation of National Fascist Party / PNF
Nov: Mussolini elected leader of PNF
- 1922 Jul-Aug:** General strike broken up by fascist violence
Oct: March on Rome; Mussolini appointed as prime minister
- 1925** *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals* published
- 1932** *The Doctrine of Fascism* published

Overview

- Although independence had been gained from Austria in 1861, Italy remained a divided nation in many ways. The incorporation of the papal states in 1870 resulted in Catholic hostility against the new Italian kingdom, which lasted into the early 20th century.
- In 1900, the right to vote was still very restricted. This and the liberal domination of politics via the system known as *trasformismo* ('transformism') undermined support for parliamentary democracy. There was also opposition from the growing socialist movement.
- In addition, there were significant economic and social divisions in Italy, especially between the more prosperous industrial north and the poorer agricultural south.
- Another cause of unrest was the claims made by Italian nationalists for various territories in Europe, and their demands for Italy to establish colonies in Africa and Asia.
- These problems were worsened by Italy's entry into the First World War. There were divisions between interventionists and those who wanted to remain neutral. The war led to high casualties and inflation. After the war, there was disappointment at Italy's limited territorial gains from the peace treaties, as well as higher unemployment.
- Between 1919 and 1922, many socialist-led strikes and factory occupations took place. Right-wing groups such as the Arditi and the Fasci di Combattimento used increasing violence against the left.
- In 1921, Mussolini established the National Fascist Party (PNF) and then made an electoral pact with the liberals. A new wave of fascist violence was often ignored by the élites and the authorities.
- Many of the (often contradictory) ideas that eventually formed fascist ideology in Italy had their origins in 19th-century thought.
- Mussolini's own political views covered the entire political spectrum, from revolutionary socialism before 1914, to nationalism and then to fascism by 1919.
- In the early days of fascism, Mussolini placed much more emphasis on action than on ideology. From 1919 to 1922, the more radical elements of fascist programmes and policies were increasingly moderated.
- In 1922, local fascist leaders began to take over various towns and regions, and in October their 'March on Rome' resulted in Mussolini being appointed prime minister.
- After he became prime minister in 1922, Mussolini continued to distance himself from early fascism.

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- From 1926 onwards, the more radical members of the PNF were purged, and the party came increasingly under Mussolini's personal control.
- Even the creation of the corporate state – although apparently a concession to party 'radicals' – was carried out in a way that emphasised the power of the Italian state and of employers over employees.
- During the 1930s, Mussolini made efforts to issue clearer statements of **fascist** ideology. However, by this point, Italy had become a personal rather than a party dictatorship.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How did the political and economic conditions in Italy before 1914 contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian regime?
- How did conditions between 1914–22 contribute to Mussolini's rise to power?
- What were the aims and ideology of the Fascist Party?
- What were the sources of support for Mussolini's Fascist Party?

fascist: A term deriving from the Italian word *fascio* (plural *fasci*), meaning 'group' or 'band'. In 1893, in Sicily, radical groups of mostly socialist workers formed *fasci* to organise demonstrations and strikes in protest at low wages and high rents. Mussolini adopted the term for his political movement in 1919. He later claimed that it referred to the *fascas*, bundles of rods carried by *lictors* (bodyguards) in ancient Rome.

QUESTION

What can you learn from this photograph about the nature of the Italian Fascist Party in 1922?



Figure 2.1 Fascist rally



Figure 2.2 Benito Mussolini (1883–1945)

Mussolini followed an inconsistent political path in his early years. Initially more influenced by his father (a blacksmith with revolutionary socialist views) than by his mother (a school teacher and a devout Catholic), Mussolini drifted into socialist politics and journalism. Between 1904 and 1910, he developed a reputation as a militant as a result of articles in which he expressed traditional socialist views. The First World War led him to make a dramatic switch to extreme nationalism – which resulted in his expulsion from the Socialist Party – and then to fascism. Mussolini became Italy's first dictator, ruling from 1922 until 1943.

Risorgimento: This Italian word means 'resurgence' or 'rebirth', and refers to the literary and cultural revival that took place in Italy after 1815. The movement also campaigned against divisions within Italy and foreign domination, and called for political unification.

2.1 How did the political and economic conditions in Italy before 1914 contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian regime?

Italy was the first state anywhere in the world in which a Fascist Party developed, and the first to have a fascist dictator, in **Benito Mussolini**.

The problems of liberal Italy before 1914

Many of the long-term factors behind the emergence of Mussolini as fascist dictator of Italy can be found in the weaknesses of Italy's liberal monarchy in the period before 1914. In 1861, after many decades of struggle against the Austrian Empire, the **Risorgimento** nationalist movement succeeded in creating a unified and independent Italy. However, the Catholic Church retained its own separate state in Rome and the surrounding area.

The people of the new kingdom of Italy were far from united, though, and several serious underlying problems left the *Risorgimento* process incomplete in many ways.

Italian politics and the impact of trasformismo

After unification, Italian politics were dominated by the liberals, who hoped to modernise Italy through social reforms such as state education (to break the conservative influence of the Catholic Church), and by stimulating economic development and progress. However, although the liberals were split into progressives and conservatives – or 'left-liberals' and 'conservative-liberals' – they were united in distrusting the masses, who had played little part in the struggle for unification. The liberals also particularly feared the influence of socialists, anarchists and republicans on the left and the Catholic Church on the right. All of these groups were opposed to the new Italian state. Consequently, the liberals were determined to keep politics firmly under their control until the old internal divisions and rivalries were overcome and the new state was secure. The electorate was thus restricted at first, with only about 2 per cent of the adult population allowed to vote.

The resentment many Italians felt at this restricted franchise (the right to vote) was increased by the corrupt politics it encouraged. With no mass parties, and no real party discipline amongst the liberals, leading politicians formed factions that made deals with one another to alternate political control. This process became known as **trasformismo**.

Even though the franchise was gradually extended, and all adult males were allowed to vote by 1912, the practice of *trasformismo* continued.

Political disunity in Italy was intensified by the hostility of the papacy towards the new Italian state. The papacy's opposition to the liberal regime was moderated during the 1890s out of fear that it might give way to socialism, and in 1904, the pope permitted Catholics to vote in constituencies where abstaining might result in a socialist victory. However, there was no real harmony between the liberal and Catholic powers.

Regional divisions

In addition to these political problems, the people of the new kingdom of Italy were not really united. Many Italians felt more loyalty towards their own town or region than towards the national government. The mountain ranges and islands that dominated Italy's geography made communication difficult, hindering the development of a truly national identity among the country's 38 million people. This was especially true in the south, where earlier rulers had deliberately neglected road and railway development in an attempt to stop the spread of liberal and revolutionary ideas from the north.

The problems of communication and transport also contributed to economic divisions in Italy. The south was very poor in comparison with northern and central areas. Land suitable for farming in the south was restricted by geography and climate, and most of the fertile lands were part of large estates known as *latifundia*, which were owned by a small minority of wealthy landowners. The vast majority of the population was extremely poor.

In northern and central Italy agriculture was more developed, and more modern farming methods and machinery were used. Even here, however, productivity was much lower than in the countries of northern Europe. There were also significant social divisions in even the more advanced agricultural areas. Most of the land was owned by wealthy landowners known as the *agrari*, who rented out land to poorer farmers and peasant sharecroppers. At the bottom of the social scale was a large class of rural labourers. As in the south, poverty and discontent in rural areas often led to conflict between the classes. The biggest economic difference between north and south, however, was in industry.

The Fiat car company was established in 1899, and by 1913 it was exporting over 4,000 cars a year. Towns and cities in the north grew rapidly. This led to the creation of a large industrial working class, a sizeable lower-middle class, and a powerful class of rich industrialists and bankers. While industry expanded in the north, however, there was no real investment in the south.

As with agriculture, the social and economic inequalities in the industrial towns led to frequent clashes between employers and employees. Many workers joined the socialists or the anarchists, and in 1904 a general strike took place. The dissatisfaction felt by many Italians led them to emigrate – the majority going to the USA.

The problems of terra irredenta and the desire for empire

After 1870, many Italians came to realise that the *Risorgimento* was not complete. Firstly, there were the lands in Europe known as *terra irredenta*, which many Italians wanted Italy to reclaim.

In addition, many Italians hoped that unification would enable Italy to join the top rank of European powers by establishing its own empire. They looked to the example set by Germany – newly created in 1871 – which had started to obtain colonies in Africa and Asia. The first step in Italian empire-building was taken in 1885, with the acquisition of the port of Massawa on the Red Sea. By 1890, this had become the centre of the Italian colony of Eritrea. At the same time, Italy began the conquest of what became Italian Somaliland. However, tensions grew between Italy and the independent African state of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), which bordered both of these regions.

In 1911, Italy invaded the Turkish colony of Libya in an attempt to increase the size of the Italian empire and to block growing French influence in North Africa. In 1912,

trasformismo: This political development began soon after Italy had obtained the papal states in 1870, and was first applied by Agostino Depretis who was prime minister for most of the period 1876–87. He wanted to unite all moderate Liberals, and was prepared to form coalition governments with politicians of conflicting views – provided they were not extremists of the right or left. He saw this as a way to 'transform' Italy's political life and bring about widespread national support for Italy's recent unification. In effect, however, it tended to result in different sections of the Liberals forming governments.

terra irredenta: This term means 'unredeemed land'. It originally referred to the areas inhabited by many Italian speakers but ruled by Austria-Hungary during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The most important of these were Trentino and Trieste, in the northern Adriatic. Later, this term would also designate other surrounding foreign territories to which Italy believed that it had a rightful claim. Those who advocated this policy of territory reclamation were called 'irredentists'.

QUESTION

How did the practice of *trasformismo* undermine support for parliamentary democracy in Italy before 1922?

Fact: 'The papacy' refers to the office of the pope, while 'the Vatican' refers to the central administration of the Catholic Church. *Risorgimento* was not supported by the papacy, which had previously ruled a large part of central Italy. The creation of the new kingdom deprived the papacy of all its territory except that surrounding Rome itself – also seized by Italian troops in 1870 to complete Italy's unification. In 1873, the government confirmed the confiscation and in 1874, the pope retaliated by banning Catholics from all involvement in politics – even voting.

Fact: Industrial development in the newly unified Italy was limited. The north had some iron and steel concerns, but development was hindered by the lack of coal and iron ore. The south's traditional silk industry was soon wiped out by more efficient manufacturers in the north. In the 1880s, hydroelectric power in the north provided the basis for rapid industrialisation.

Turkey formally accepted its loss. Many Italian nationalists, still angry at their defeat by Abyssinia in 1896, continued to press for a more aggressive imperial policy.

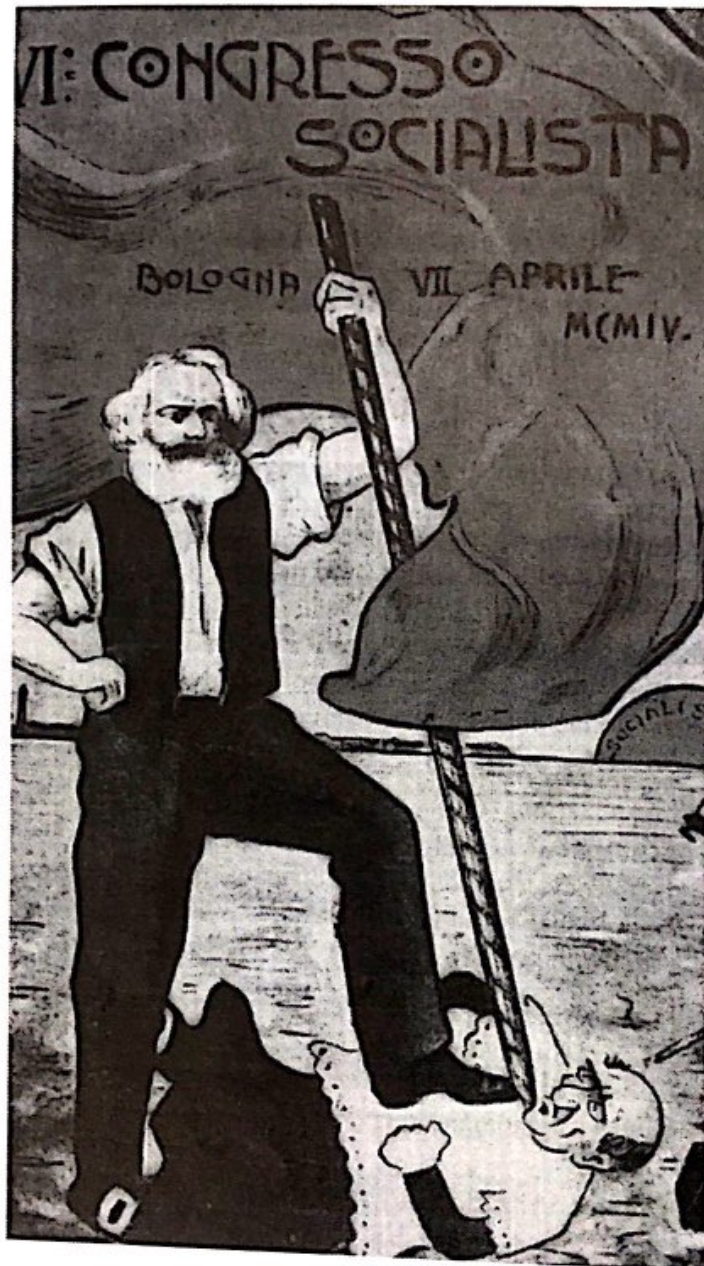


Figure 2.3 A postcard advertising a meeting of socialists in Bologna, 1904

2.2 How did conditions during 1914–22 contribute to Mussolini's rise to power?

Triple Alliance: The military alliance formed in 1882 between Germany, Austria and Italy. Opposed to this was the Triple Entente, consisting of Britain, France and Russia.

Although Italy was a member of the **Triple Alliance**, it did not join in when the First World War began in 1914. Instead, it decided to stay neutral.

The impact of the First World War and the peace treaties, 1914–19

Italian participation

While most Italians (especially the socialists) were in favour of neutrality, nationalists felt that intervention in the war would offer Italy an opportunity to gain more land and expand its empire. In view of its ambition to reclaim the country's *terra irredenta*, the liberal government decided to see which side would offer the best terms in exchange for Italy's support. Negotiations with the other two Triple Alliance nations in the period 1914–15 revealed that Austria would never concede Trentino or Trieste. However, the Entente nations promised that in the event of their victory, these territories would be granted to Italy, along with similarly contested Austrian territory in the South Tyrol, and Istria and northern Dalmatia on the Adriatic coast.

The Treaty of London

While the Italian parliament debated the issues, interventionists organised street demonstrations demanding Italian involvement in the war. Many were members of the *fasci*, a mixture of anarcho-syndicalists (see Mussolini and the Fascio di Combattimento below) and national socialists who believed war would hasten revolution. They were joined by the right-wing nationalists of the **Associazione Nazionalista Italiana (ANI)** – the Italian Nationalist Association – which had previously pushed for the conquest of Libya. However, the leading liberal politicians had already decided on Italy's participation in the war. Consequently, in May 1915, Italy signed the Treaty of London and promised to join the war on the side of the Triple Entente.

Italy's performance in the First World War

Despite the interventionists' hopes, the war did not go well for Italy. Over 5 million Italians were conscripted, and though most fought bravely they were ill-equipped and ill-supplied. In particular, military leadership was often poor and the Italian army found itself fighting a costly war of attrition.

In November 1917, the Italians suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Austrians at the Battle of Caporetto. Over 40,000 Italian soldiers were killed and about 300,000 were taken prisoner. The nationalists blamed the government for its inefficiency and for failing to supply the troops with enough equipment. Although the Italians won a costly victory at Vittorio Veneto in October 1918, this was overshadowed by previous defeats and the high casualties suffered. In addition, with the socialists maintaining strong opposition throughout, the war had clearly failed to unite Italians.

The economic impact of the First World War

The First World War had a significant impact on the relatively weak Italian economy. In order to finance its involvement, the liberal government had borrowed heavily from Britain and the US, and the national debt had risen from 16 billion lire to 85 billion. Even this proved inadequate, so the government printed more banknotes, causing rapid inflation – prices increased by over 400 per cent between 1915 and 1918. This inflation destroyed much of the middle-class savings, reduced rental incomes for many landowners, and caused a drop of more than 25 per cent in the real wages of many workers. At the end of the war the situation was worsened by high

Fact: In 1889, Abyssinia signed a Treaty of Friendship with Italy, recognising Italy's acquisition of Massawa and agreeing to use the city as its main port. However, the Italian conquest of Eritrea led the Abyssinians to oppose any Italian interference in their country's affairs. In 1895, Italy occupied the province of Tigre in Abyssinia, but after several military clashes the Italians were heavily defeated at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. This was seen by many Italians as a terrible national humiliation.

Associazione Nazionalista Italiana (ANI): Italy's first nationalist party, formed in 1910. It supported war against Austria as a way of gaining the *terra irredenta*. The ANI grew close to Mussolini's Fascist Party, and merged with it in 1923.

attrition: The process of wearing down the enemy by sustained attacks. Italian officers often sacrificed thousands of lives needlessly – in all, over 600,000 Italians were killed, about 450,000 were permanently disabled, and a further 500,000 were seriously wounded.

Bolsheviks: The more revolutionary element of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (a Marxist party). Led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin – later joined by Leon Trotsky – they took power in Russia in November 1917. The Bolsheviks later changed their name to the Russian Communist Party, and worked hard to aid and encourage socialist revolutions in other regions, especially in more advanced capitalist countries such as Germany.

Fact: Companies such as Pirelli (tyres) and Montecatini (chemicals) made huge profits during the war. Fiat continued to expand and, by 1918, it was the largest motor manufacturer in Europe. However, the end of the war meant the loss of lucrative state contracts as the government cut expenditure in order to cope with mounting debts.

QUESTION

What do you understand by the term 'mutilated victory'? What areas were claimed by Italian nationalists after 1919?

unemployment as war industries closed down and more than 2.5 million soldiers were demobilised.

The war also deepened the economic divisions between north and south Italy. Those industries linked to war production (especially steel, chemicals, motor vehicles, and the rubber and woollen industries) did extremely well before 1918, as they were guaranteed large state contracts. When inflation began to rise, industrialists simply passed on the price increases to the government.

The south, still predominantly agricultural, did not share in this prosperity. Farming was badly affected by the conscription of large numbers of peasants and farm labourers. However, during the last years of the war – in an attempt to limit the attraction of socialism and the ideology of the Russian **Bolsheviks** – the government promised a programme of land reform after the war.

The terms of the peace treaties

When the war ended in November 1918, many Italians thought that their sacrifices should be repaid by substantial territorial rewards. **Vittorio Orlando**, the Italian prime minister, went to the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919 expecting to receive all that had been promised by the Treaty of London. Under pressure from the nationalists, he also demanded the port of Fiume on the border of Istria as it contained a large Italian-speaking population. Finally, Orlando wanted Italy to gain a share of the former German colonies in Africa.

Nationalists and the 'mutilated victory'

Although most of Italy's post-war demands were eventually met, there were some important exceptions. The country gained no African territory, and Britain and the US refused to grant Italy Fiume and northern Dalmatia, arguing that these were vital for the development of the new state of Yugoslavia.

Italy's long-term opponent, Austria-Hungary, had been defeated and its empire dismantled, leaving Italy the dominant power in the Adriatic. Yet Italian nationalists were disgusted once the likely terms of the peace agreements became clear, and accused the liberal government of allowing Italy to be both humiliated and cheated. The popular nationalist **Gabriele D'Annunzio** spoke for many Italians – especially war veterans – when he called it a 'mutilated victory'.

By 1919, it was clear that the liberal regime would face many problems in post-war Italy. In addition to the growing dissatisfaction of the nationalists, the liberals faced increased political opposition from other quarters. In January 1919, the papacy finally lifted its ban on the formation of a Catholic political party, leading to the foundation of the **Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI)**, or Italian Popular Party.

The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) – the socialist 'threat'

A more serious threat to the liberal regime was posed by the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). The economic problems resulting from the First World War caused great discontent among industrial and rural workers. The Socialist Party had moved increasingly to a revolutionary position. In 1917, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, it called for the overthrow of the liberal state and the establishment of a socialist republic. Industrial workers resented the imposition of wartime discipline in the factories, which increased working hours and banned strikes – to the benefit of the employers. With

only about 50,000 members in 1914, Socialist Party membership had increased to over 200,000 by 1919. At its congress in that year, delegates talked of the need to use force in order to achieve 'the conquest of power over the bourgeoisie'. In practice, however, many socialist leaders were stronger on rhetoric than on action.



Figure 2.4 The land promised by the Treaty of London in 1915 and land actually gained by Italy in the 1919 peace treaties

The *biennio rosso*, 1919-20

Unemployment rose to over 2 million in 1919, and industrial workers began a wave of militant action that lasted from early 1919 to 1920. These years became known as the *biennio rosso* – the 'two red years'. Throughout 1919, strikes, factory occupations

Vittorio Orlando (1860-1952)

Orlando was appointed prime minister a few days after the Italian defeat at Caporetto in October 1917. At the Paris Peace Conferences, Italy had expected to be granted control of the Adriatic coastline. Orlando's failure to win this territory prompted his resignation in June 1919. His inability to secure all of Italy's territorial expectations at Versailles was used by Mussolini and the fascists in their campaign to demonstrate the weakness of the Italian government. Orlando initially backed Mussolini in 1922, but he withdrew his support in 1924.

Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI): Often known simply as the Popolari, this party was a coalition of conservative and liberal Catholics who wanted to defend Catholic interests and improve life for the peasants. It was led by the priest Luigi Sturzo, and was backed by Pope Benedict XV in order to oppose the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). In 1919, the Popolari won 20 per cent of the vote, and from 1919 to 1921 it was the second-largest party in Italy after the PSI. The Popolari was generally suspicious of liberalism because of the latter's history of anti-clericalism. Some members became ministers in Mussolini's fascist government.

Mussolini and Italy

Giovanni Giolitti (1842–1928)

Giolitti was prime minister of Italy five times between 1892 and 1921. Bowing to nationalist pressure, he agreed to the Italo-Turkish war of 1911–12. In 1915, Giolitti opposed Italy's involvement in the First World War, believing the country was unprepared. His last period as prime minister was 1920–21. He was supported by the fascist *squadristi*, and did not oppose their violent takeover of towns and regions. Giolitti backed Mussolini at first, but he withdrew his support in 1924.

and land occupations, organised by trade unions and peasant leagues and involving over 1 million workers, swept across Italy. By the end of 1919, socialist trade unions had more than 2 million members, compared to about 250,000 at the beginning of the year.

In many areas, especially in the north, socialists seized control of local government. To many industrialists and landowners, and to the middle classes in general, it seemed that a communist revolution was about to begin. Yet the government, headed by **Giovanni Giolitti**, did little. Believing that the workers were less dangerous inside the factories than on the streets, and that militancy would soon decline, the government urged employers and landowners to make some concessions. In response to riots over the high price of food, the government set up food committees to control distribution and prices. This lack of forceful action led many of the middle and upper classes to view the government as dangerously incompetent.

The threat from the right

After the war, the various militant and disaffected right-wing groups were joined by another force that was also in search of change. This comprised demobilised and unemployed officers and troops, who found it difficult to accept many aspects of post-war Italian society. One notable group was the **Arditi**.

In early 1919, the Arditi formed themselves into organised groups. The first **Arditi Association** was set up in Rome in January, while **Filippo Tommaso Marinetti** established another in Milan. Throughout February, many other Arditi groups were formed across Italy. They increasingly used weapons to attack socialists and trade unionists, whom they regarded as the enemies of the Italian nation.

Mussolini and the Fascio di Combattimento

In March 1919, Mussolini – himself a member of the Arditi – tried to bring these disparate groups together. On 23 March, 118 people, representing various political groupings, met in Milan and formed a **Fascio di Combattimento** ('combat' or 'fighting group'). These founding members later became known as the Fascists of the First Hour (see section 2.3, Fascist beliefs in 1919). They intended to bring together nationalists and socialists, and a militant-sounding *Fascist Programme* was published on 6 June 1919, which combined various left- and right-wing demands. However, what really united these nationalists, syndicalists, artists and ex-servicemen was a hatred of the liberal state.

Arditi: The term translates as 'the daring ones'. These were the black-shirted commando (or 'storm') troops of the Italian army, whose officers hated the liberal political system which they felt had betrayed their wartime sacrifices by failing to obtain the land promised to Italy. These troops were demobilised in 1920, but their name – and uniform – was used by D'Annunzio's supporters who took over Fiume in 1919.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944)

Writer and artist Marinetti proclaimed the unity of art and life. The artistic movement he founded, futurism, incorporated elements of both anarchism and fascism. Marinetti was an early supporter of Mussolini. He later distanced himself from what he saw as the more conservative aspects of fascism, but he remained an important influence on fascist ideology.

SOURCE A

Comments on the backgrounds of the fascist squadristi by Angelo Tasca, a member of the Italian Communist Party in the early 1920s.

In the Po valley, the towns were on the whole less red than the country, being full of landowners, garrison officers, university students, rentiers, professional men, and trades people. These were the classes from which Fascism drew its recruits and which offered the first armed squads.

Tasca, A. *The Rise of Italian Fascism 1918–22*. Quoted in Macdonald, H. 1999. *Mussolini and Italian Fascism*. Cheltenham, UK. Nelson Thornes. p. 17.



Figure 2.5 Benito Mussolini and Gabriele D'Annunzio in 1925

D'Annunzio and Fiume

Although Fasci di Combattimento were established in about 70 other towns, Mussolini's tiny network of militant agitators was soon overshadowed by the actions of Gabriele D'Annunzio, who led 2,000 armed men to the city of Fiume — one of the areas Italy had sought but not won in the peace treaties. D'Annunzio's force quickly took control, and in open defiance of the liberal Italian government and the Allies, they ruled the city for the next 15 months. This bold action made D'Annunzio a hero to Italian nationalists, and proved an inspiration to Mussolini. In particular, Mussolini decided to adopt the theatrical trappings used by D'Annunzio, especially the black shirts of the Arditi, the ancient Roman salute they used, and the many parades and balcony speeches they performed.

The relative weakness of Mussolini's Fasci di Combattimento was underlined by the results of the November 1919 elections. These were for appointments to the Chamber of Deputies — the lower house of the Italian parliament (the upper house was the Senate). For the first time, the elections were held using a system of proportional representation.

syndicalists: These were originally people who believed that the workers, not the state, should control the economy through trade unions. This form of syndicalism was most often associated with left-wing anarcho-syndicalism (such as existed in Spain in 1936–39), but some syndicalists were politically involved with early fascism.

Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938)

D'Annunzio was a poet and writer. As an ultra-nationalist, he supported Italy's entry into the First World War on the side of the Triple Entente. He joined up as a pilot and became something of a war hero after dropping propaganda leaflets over Vienna. He was an irredentist (see section 2.1, The problems of *terra irredenta* and the desire for empire), and was angered when Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia) was handed over to the new state of Yugoslavia after the First World War.

proportional representation:

A method of voting whereby each party gains representation in parliament to a greater or lesser extent, according to the proportion of the total votes it receives in an election. Some proportional representation systems are more closely proportional than others.

ACTIVITY

Using what you have read, carry out some further research on D'Annunzio and the Arditi. Then write a couple of paragraphs to show the most significant ways in which they influenced Mussolini as he began to build his fascist movement.



Figure 2.6 Italo Balbo (1896–1940)

A right-wing republican, Balbo joined the PNF in 1921. He became secretary of the fascist organisation in Ferrara, and soon the *ras* there. His fascist gangs – known as the Celbano – broke strikes for landowners and industrialists, and attacked socialists and communists. Balbo was one of the four main planners, known as the Quadrumirs, of Mussolini's 'March on Rome' (see The March on Rome, October 1922 below). In 1923, he became a member of the Fascist Grand Council.

Each local *fascio* was allowed to decide its own election manifesto but, despite this, not a single fascist candidate was elected. Mussolini himself won only 5,000 votes out of 270,000 in Milan. So great was his disappointment at this result that he considered emigrating to the US. In all, there were probably only about 4,000 committed fascist supporters throughout the entire country in 1919.

Fascist violence, the *ras* and Mussolini

By the end of 1920, the factory and land occupations had begun to decline. However, *squadristi* violence had not. Mussolini had not initially ordered the attacks, which had been organised by powerful *ras* leaders such as **Italo Balbo** in Ferrara and Dino Grandi in Bologna.

However, Mussolini soon realised the political – and financial – opportunities offered by a more organised use of *squadristi*. Support for Mussolini's Fasci di Combattimento increased when government military action against D'Annunzio forced the latter to surrender control of Fiume in January 1921. This removed a potentially powerful rival force for Mussolini. Slowly, with much resistance at first, he began to assert central control, arguing that without his leadership and newspaper (*Il Popolo*), the various groups would fall apart. In particular, Mussolini stressed the need to depict violence as necessary to prevent the success of a Bolshevik-style revolution in Italy. In April 1921, Mussolini made a speech in which he declared fascist violence to be part of an anti-socialist crusade to 'break up the Bolshevist State' (see Source B).

While attacking the state in public, Mussolini privately reassured Giolitti and other liberal politicians that talk of fascist revolution was not to be taken seriously. As a result, Giolitti offered the fascists an electoral alliance – an anti-socialist National Bloc – for the national elections due to be held in May 1921. During the election campaign, fascist squads continued their violence, and about 100 socialists were killed.

SOURCE B

Extracts from a speech about fascist violence by Mussolini to the fascists of Bologna, April 1921.

And, however much violence may be deplored, it is evident that we, in order to make our ideas understood, must beat refractory skulls with resounding blows ... We are violent because it is necessary to be so ...

Our punitive expeditions, all those acts of violence which figure in the papers, must always have the character of the just retort and legitimate reprisal; because we are the first to recognise that it is sad, after having fought the external enemy, to have to fight the enemy within ... and for this reason that which we are causing today is a revolution to break up the Bolshevist State, while waiting to settle our account with the Liberal State which remains.

Robson, M. 1992. *Italy: Liberalism and Fascism 1870–1945*. London, UK. Hodder & Stoughton. p. 51.

Nonetheless, the socialists remained the largest party with 123 seats; the Popolari won 407 seats. Giolitti was disappointed by the results. Mussolini, however, was pleased with the outcome of the election – his group had won 7 per cent of the vote and had taken 35 seats. Mussolini himself was now a deputy and, significantly, all 35 fascist deputies

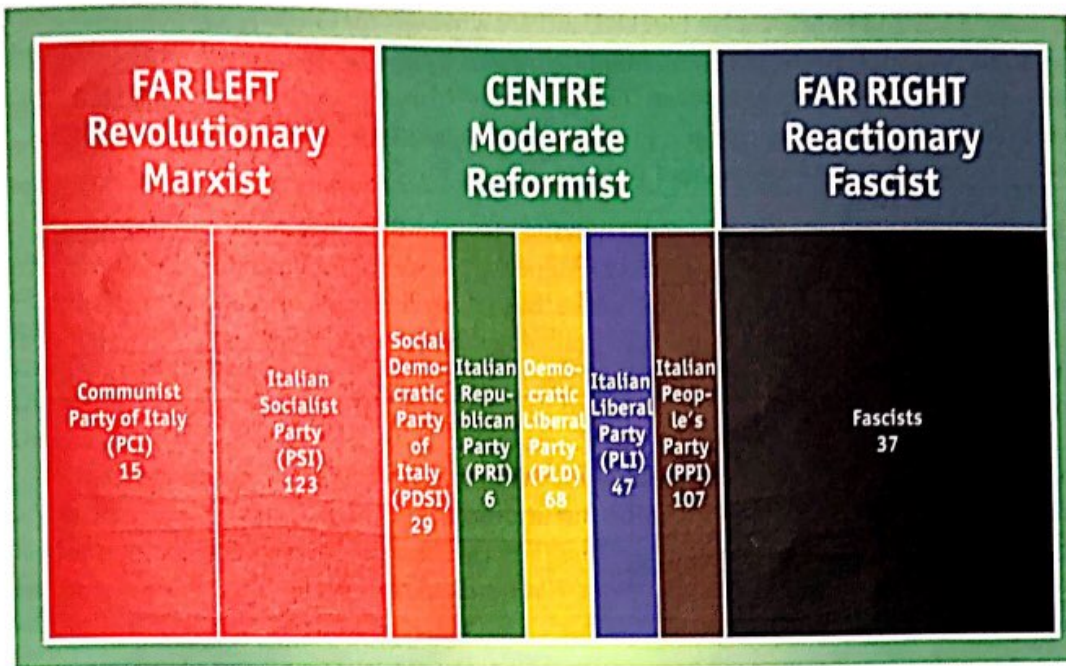


Figure 2.7 There were 535 seats in the Italian parliament in 1921. For these May elections, Mussolini entered the National Bloc, which was an anti-left alliance: led by Giolitti and the PLI, it also included the PPI. The remaining 105 seats were shared between several other less-important parties or political groupings

Fact: The action squads used knives, bayonets, firearms and even grenades in their attacks. They also beat up opponents with cudgels (known as *manganelli*). Often they would tie up their victims in town squares, and then – to humiliate them in public – force them to drink large quantities of castor oil, a powerful laxative that could cause severe diarrhoea, dehydration and in some cases even death.

were from the right of the movement. More importantly, holding positions in parliament gave the fascists an image of respectability as well as a foothold in national politics. With this success achieved, Mussolini announced that the fascists would not support Giolitti's coalition government after all.

The March on Rome, October 1922

Having obtained considerable control of northern and central Italy, the *ras* wanted to move from local to national power. Many of them had urged a coup after the collapse of the general strike, and Mussolini had struggled to restrain them. In early October 1922, the *ras* renewed their pressure. Balbo is said to have told Mussolini that the *ras* intended to march on Rome and seize power – with him or without him. To appease his more militant supporters, and to intimidate the liberal government into making concessions, Mussolini agreed to organise the March on Rome.

Local squads were organised into a national militia, under Balbo and Grandi, and a plan was drawn up by which four *ras* – Balbo, Bianchi, Cesare De Vecchi and General De Bono – would seize control of major towns and cities in northern and central Italy. Once this had been achieved, some 40,000 fascists would converge on Rome from three different cities.

On the night of 27 October, fascist squads took over town halls, railway stations and telephone exchanges across northern Italy. The following day, Prime Minister **Luigi Facta** persuaded the king, as commander-in-chief of the army, to declare a state of emergency. This meant that the government could use the military as well as the police to stop the fascist columns assembling in Rome.



Figure 2.8 Luigi Facta (1861–1930)

A liberal, Facta held various ministerial posts before and immediately after the First World War. He initially favoured neutrality, but later supported the war effort. Facta became prime minister in February 1922. Dismissed in July, he was soon reappointed, as no one else could form a government. He was the last prime minister of Italy before Mussolini began his rule.

Mussolini and Italy

Initially, roads and railways were blocked, and army troops met little resistance as they began to take back control of some buildings seized by the fascists. Fascist commanders, including De Vecchi, began to waver. The prefect of Milan was instructed to arrest Mussolini, who was in the city as a precautionary measure (Mussolini would be able to escape from Milan into Switzerland if things went wrong).

However, Mussolini was not arrested. The king changed his mind and refused to sign the papers authorising martial law. Facta resigned in protest. The king then asked the conservative Salandra to form a government, but Mussolini rejected the offer of four cabinet posts for fascists. He wanted the post of prime minister for himself. Salandra advised the king to appoint Mussolini and the king conceded. Mussolini accepted on 29 October 1922.

In fact, the March on Rome was more myth than reality. Mussolini himself did not march at the head of the fascist columns, but arrived in Rome by train, having already accepted the position of prime minister. The fascist militia did not reach the city until the following day, 30 October, when about 70,000 Blackshirts celebrated their victory in the streets of Rome.

2.3 What were the aims and ideology of the Fascist Party?

The question of fascist ideology, and the role it played in Mussolini's rise to power, is somewhat confused. This is firstly because there is no clear or consistent ideology connected to Mussolini's fascist movement, and secondly because Mussolini started on the left of the political spectrum and eventually moved to the extreme right. In fact, Mussolini once described fascism as 'action and mood, not doctrine'. As late as 1932, he wrote that when he formed the Fasci di Combattimento in 1919, fascism was 'not a doctrine'.

SOURCE C

Yet if anyone cares to read over the now crumbling minutes giving an account of the meetings at which the Italian Fasci di Combattimento were founded, he will find not a doctrine but a series of pointers.

Extract from *The Doctrine of Fascism*. 1932. Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini. p. 23.

Fascism and ideology

Many historians argue that there is no coherent and unified ideological root for fascism, in the way that there is for Marxism, for example (see the Introduction). Mussolini did not make a concerted effort to define the basic beliefs of his movement until after he became prime minister. In fact, it was not until 1925 that Mussolini began to draw up a clear statement of fascist doctrine. Under the leadership of the philosopher

Giovanni Gentile, over 200 intellectuals met in Bologna and put together the *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals*.

However, this attempt to bring together the diverse and often contradictory ideas of fascism was not particularly effective. A more determined effort came in 1932, ten years after Mussolini became prime minister of Italy, when Gentile (with some help from Mussolini) wrote a lengthy entry on fascism for the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, of which he was editor. The first part of this was published separately as *The Doctrine of Fascism*, under Mussolini's name. However, this was as much a statement of what fascism was *against* (essentially liberalism, socialism, democracy and pacifism) as about what it stood *for* (action, the nation, authority and the state). In the section called 'Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism', Gentile explained that fascism was anti-communist, anti-socialist, and strongly opposed to the 'economic conception of history' and the centrality of 'class war' – both of which are fundamental to Marxist and communist ideology. He went on to explain that fascism was also opposed to democracy. The text stressed the authoritarian aspect of fascism: 'The foundation of fascism is the conception of the State. Fascism conceives of the State as an absolute.'



Figure 2.9 Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944)

Known as the 'philosopher of fascism', Gentile's philosophy of 'actual idealism' corresponded to the fascist liking for action. Gentile became minister of public education under Mussolini in 1923. He was also an important member of the Fascist Grand Council, and remained a loyal supporter of Mussolini after the foundation of the Salò Republic in 1943. He was killed the following year by anti-fascist partisans.

SOURCE D

Fascism [is] the precise negation of that doctrine which formed the basis of the so-called Scientific or Marxian Socialism.

After Socialism, Fascism attacks the whole complex of democratic ideologies ...

Fascism denies that the majority, through the mere fact of being a majority, can rule human societies; it denies that this majority can govern by means of a periodical consultation ...

Fascism is definitely and absolutely opposed to the doctrines of liberalism, both in the political and economic sphere.

Extracts from *The Doctrine of Fascism*. 1932. Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini. pp. 30–32.

Yet Mussolini's fascism served as the model for many other fascist parties that emerged elsewhere in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. In his early days, Adolf Hitler was an admirer of Mussolini. In 1934, Mussolini even set up Fascist International, which funded emerging fascist parties. While the main factors in Mussolini's rise were undoubtedly the instability in Italy, the violence of the fascist action squads and the supporting role of the élites, fascist aims and pronouncements also played a part.

Mussolini's early political views

It was during the wave of socialist militancy from 1919 to 1922 that the man who was to become the fascist prime minister of Italy founded his political movement. Yet, at first, Mussolini was involved with the Socialist Party. He frequently attacked the Roman Catholic Church and repeatedly called for a deepening of the class struggle and violent revolution.

At this time, Mussolini opposed militarism and Italian imperialism, supporting international solidarity instead. In 1911, during violent demonstrations against the Italian

Mussolini and Italy

war on Libya, he was imprisoned for his part in attempting to provoke an insurrection in protest against the war. On his release in 1912, he became editor of the Socialist Party's newspaper *Avanti!* in Milan. His articles advocated revolutionary violence against the liberal state. He also helped expel pro-royalists and reformists from the Socialist Party. However, Mussolini was not a Marxist, and his 'socialism' was largely anti-clerical republicanism. Syndicalism and anarchism (see section 2.2, Mussolini and the Fascio di Combattimento) were far less important aspects of his 'ideology'.

The outbreak of the First World War soon led Mussolini to make a dramatic political U-turn – the first of many. The Socialist Party (like the Russian Bolsheviks) stuck to the principles of revolutionary internationalism and therefore condemned the war as an inter-imperialist conflict, urging the working class and the Italian government to remain neutral. Yet, in August, many of Mussolini's friends in republican and syndicalist groups supported Italy's entry on the Franco-British side. They set up the Fascio Rivoluzionario di Azione Internazionalista (Revolutionary Group of International Action). Mussolini soon dropped the idea of class struggle and rapidly moved towards an extreme nationalist position, advocating Italian involvement in the war.

In November 1914, Mussolini was sacked as editor of *Avanti!* and set up his own newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia* ('The People of Italy') to campaign in favour of war. The paper was financed by wealthy Italian companies such as Fiat (which expected to gain lucrative war contracts), as well as by the French government. Later, the paper was partly financed by Britain and Tsarist Russia. Shortly after the establishment of *Il Popolo*, Mussolini was expelled from the Socialist Party.

Despite advocating intervention in the war, Mussolini did not volunteer for the army. He was conscripted in September 1915, and invalided out of the army in 1917 after an accident during a training exercise. He then resumed his role as editor of *Il Popolo*, blaming the liberal government for military incompetence and calling for a dictator to take charge of the war effort. His *Manifesto to the Nation*, published in November 1917 after the defeat at Caporetto (see section 2.2, The impact of the First World War and the peace treaties, 1914–19), called for a 'national union' to work for victory in the war.

ACTIVITY

Write a couple of paragraphs to show the extent to which Mussolini's political beliefs between 1911 and 1918 both changed and remained the same.

The following month, some senators and deputies set up a Fascio Parlamentare di Difesa Nazionale (Parliamentary Group of National Defence). This coalition of nationalists, right-wing liberals and republican 'interventionists' set up various local *fasci* to take tough action against the 'enemy within' – for example neutralists and socialist revolutionaries. Although Mussolini still advocated social reform, he was rapidly moving away from a socialist position and closer to the emerging nationalist movement. In July 1918, he formally renounced socialism.

Fascist beliefs in 1919

Having already moved from his pre-war opposition to nationalism and imperialism to a pro-war expansionist position after 1915, Mussolini's political 'ideology' continued to shift. As seen above, in March 1919 Mussolini set up a Fascio di Combattimento in Milan. The founder members of this group later became known as the **Fascists of the First Hour**. Soon, over 70 such *fasci* had been established in northern and central Italy. Their *Fascist Programme*, published in June, was an incoherent mixture of left-wing and right-wing policies. It was designed to hold these very different groups together, and to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

Fascists of the First Hour: As the meeting took place in a hall on Piazza San Sepolcro, these early fascists were also known as the *sansepolcrista*. Historians disagree about the actual numbers who attended his foundation meeting. In 1923, Mussolini stated there were only 52.

SOURCE E

- 1 A new national Assembly [will be set up] ...
- 2 Proclamation of the Italian Republic ...
- 4 Abolition of all titles of nobility ...
- 6 Suppression of ... joint stock companies ... Suppression of all speculation by banks and stock exchanges.
- 7 Control and taxation of private wealth. Confiscation of unproductive income ...
- 22 Reorganisation of production on a co-operative basis and direct participation of the workers in the profits.

Extracts from the 1919 Fascist Programme. Quoted in Robson, M. 1992. *Italy: Liberalism and Fascism 1870–1945*. London, UK. Hodder & Stoughton. p. 48.

Fact: In the 1919 elections, the results for the fascist candidates – and for Mussolini himself (his fascist list in Milan got only 1.7 per cent of the vote) – were so poor that the socialists in Milan organised a fake funeral for Mussolini and his fascist movement.

According to historian Alexander De Grand, Mussolini's fascism was a mixture of five, often contradictory, ideas and beliefs:

- 1 **National syndicalism.** At first republican, vaguely socialist and anti-clerical.
- 2 **Technocratic fascism.** Accepting and wholeheartedly embracing the industrial revolution and modernism (these included the futurists).
- 3 **Rural fascism.** Anti-urban, anti-modern and anti-industrial.
- 4 **Conservative fascism.** Essentially non-ideological and pragmatic, favouring tradition, monarchy and the Catholic Church.
- 5 **Nationalist fascism.** The most coherent element, favouring an authoritarian political system and an aggressive foreign policy in order to achieve territorial expansion.

As Mussolini's political ambitions grew after 1919, the more radical aspects of the *Fascist Programme* began to be dropped in favour of right-wing elements. This process began in earnest after the fascists' poor performance in the 1919 elections.

By 1921, Mussolini had cut the number of fascist 'enemies' down to the socialists and the alleged 'threat' of imminent communist revolution. Previously, the list of fascism's enemies had included capitalism and big business, the monarchy and the Catholic Church. In fact, one way in which ideology played a significant part in Mussolini's rise was the way he cleverly both exaggerated and exploited the people's fear of those who supported Marxist and communist ideologies.

SOURCE F

Our programme is simple: we wish to govern Italy. They ask us for programmes, but there are already too many. It is not programmes that are wanting for the salvation of Italy, but men and will-power ...

Our [Italy's] political class is deficient. The crisis of the Liberal State has proved it ... We must have a state which will simply say: 'The State does not represent a party, it represents the nation as a whole, it includes all, is over all, protects all.' This is the State which must arise from the Italy of Vittorio Veneto ... a state which does not fall under the power of the Socialists ... we want to remove from the state all its economic attributes.

Extracts from a speech made by Mussolini in Udine in September 1922. Quoted in Robson, M. 1992. *Italy: Liberalism and Fascism 1870–1945*. London, UK. Hodder & Stoughton. pp. 53–54.

QUESTION

How do you account for the differences between the two statements of fascist programmes and policies in **Source F** and **Source G**? What impact do you think **Source G** might have had on the conservative élites and classes?

Theory of knowledge

History, its study and language:

According to G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), '*The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.*' Do you think that, since 1945, people have learned any 'lessons of history' from the study of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany? Do any fascist movements exist in the 21st century? Is it useful to apply labels to such political movements? Also, is it sensible in this case to stereotype such movements?

SOURCE G

The threat of Bolshevism was exploited cunningly by Mussolini and it is difficult to overestimate its importance in bringing Fascism to power. Yet in truth, the threat in Italy was almost entirely illusory. No master plan of revolution existed; peasants and workers acted without premeditation and on a local basis only ... By the last quarter of 1921, the worst of the post-war depression was past; so was the worst of proletarian unrest. By the time, a year later, that Mussolini arrived in office to save Italy from Bolshevism, the threat, if it ever existed, was over.

Cassels, A. 1969. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Routledge & Keegan Paul. pp. 24–25.

Fascist 'ideology', 1921–22

After the May 1921 elections, in which Mussolini and 34 other fascist deputies from the right wing of the movement were elected, he became increasingly concerned with appeasing the conservative classes and controlling the *ras*.

In fact, Mussolini had been distancing himself from the more radical policies of early fascism since 1920. In October 1921, he successfully pushed for the establishment of a more disciplined political party – the National Fascist Party (PNF). This new party had a clear right-wing programme. It appealed to Mussolini's capitalist backers but it angered the *ras*, who wanted to destroy the existing political system, not participate in it. They became increasingly violent – a 'creeping insurrection', according to historian Philip Morgan. The socialists' general strike at the end of July 1922, which was intended to force the liberal government to take action against fascist attacks, merely served to frighten the conservatives and 'justify' further violence from the fascists.

Squadristo

During 1921, Mussolini's 'ideology' was focused much more on the cult of fascist violence – which came to be known as *squadristo* – than on political policies and programmes. After the bloc with the liberals and the May elections of 1921, Mussolini began to play on the conservatives' exaggerated fear of the socialists. In November, in another shift away from the radicalism of early fascism, Mussolini made a direct attempt to appease Catholics. The earlier left-wing and anti-clerical aspects of the 1919 programme were dropped: now the PNF opposed divorce and supported the Popolari's demands for better treatment of peasants.

From 1921 onwards, Mussolini's speeches and articles concentrated on what fascism was *against* – socialism and liberalism – rather than what it was *for*. However, Mussolini did stress fascism's commitment to strong government, patriotism and imperial expansion. Fascist violence increased during 1921–22.

Mussolini and fascism

Having looked at Mussolini's views and his movement's actions in the previous pages, it should now be possible to assess to what extent Mussolini himself can be described as a fascist. To draw any conclusions, it is necessary to examine how historians have attempted

to define fascism, and to identify the movement's core beliefs. In particular, it is necessary to investigate what has been called 'generic fascism' – and how Mussolini's views relate to such academic definitions.

Generic fascism

In general terms, when considering 'generic fascism', many historians – such as Roger Griffin and Stanley Payne – have isolated a core set of aspects of fascist ideology, which identifies what fascists stood for. At the heart of fascism lie at least four key elements:

- 1 a populist – even revolutionary – form of ultra-nationalism
- 2 a desire to destroy the existing political system
- 3 a belief in a strong leader (the *Führerprinzip*, or 'leadership principle')
- 4 a belief in the positive values of vitalism (action) and violence.

However, Roger Eatwell and others have often found it easier to identify fascist ideology by isolating what they were *against*, thus focusing on the negative and reactionary aspects of the movement. These include a rejection of the liberal ideas of the 18th-century Enlightenment and 19th-century positivism, both of which had stressed rationalism, reason and progress.

Proto-fascism

Some historians have described the period before the First World War as the 'incubatory period of fascism'. Initially, the **proto-fascism** that developed from the late 19th century was opposed to the growth of liberal (i.e. unrestricted or 'free market') capitalism, which tended to negatively affect smaller businesses and artisans. Parliamentary democracy, which often came in the wake of industrial capitalism, was seen as a way for the wealthy – and for the organised labour movement – to influence politics in a way that harmed the 'small man' and 'the nation'. Certainly, it was from these quarters that Mussolini, and later Hitler, drew the majority of their active support and formed their mass movements.

Many nationalists and 'small men' were moving towards a form of reactionary ultra-nationalism. The nationalist and imperialist Italian Nationalist Association was particularly important in this shift. Dissatisfied nationalists and frightened conservatives longed to return to a more glorious Italian past (recalling the empire of ancient Rome), and feared the growth of socialism and the threat of communist revolution. Such views were widespread amongst the upper and middle classes in Italy – not just among the industrial, financial and landowning élites, but also shopkeepers, small farmers and clerical workers. Many despised the weak liberal coalitions and wanted a stronger, more authoritarian government to defend their interests.

SOURCE H

We allow ourselves the luxury of being aristocrats and democrats; conservatives and progressives; reactionaries and revolutionaries; legalitarians and illegalitarians, according to the circumstances of the time.

Mussolini, commenting on the content of fascist ideology in 1919. Quoted in Pearce, R. 1997. *Fascism and Nazism*. London, UK. Hodder & Stoughton. p. 7.

proto-fascism: This early, incomplete form of fascism, which began to emerge before 1919, included elements of syndicalism found in the writings of philosopher Georges Sorel (1847–1922). However, fascists soon replaced Sorel's idea of a general strike fought by revolutionary unions (known as *syndicats*) with the 'big idea' of a powerful, united nation. There was also the idea of 'vitalism', which stated that emotion and action were superior to reason. It was the latter aspect in particular that led Mussolini and his followers to emphasise the need for action and violent combat.

ACTIVITY

Carry out further research on the historical debates surrounding proto-fascism and generic fascism.

QUESTION

What does Source H reveal about the importance of ideology in the Italian Fascist Party?

ACTIVITY

Assess the value and limitations of **Source 1** as evidence of the role played by fascist movements, and the reasons for fascist violence, in Italy during the 1920s.

SOURCE 1

Born in the womb of bourgeois democracy, fascism in the eyes of the capitalists is a means of saving capitalism from collapse. It is only for the purpose of deceiving and disarming the workers that social democracy denies the fascistisation of bourgeois democratic countries and the countries of the fascist dictatorship.

Extract from the plenum on fascism of the Communist International, December 1933. Quoted in Griffin, R. (ed.). 1995. *Fascism: a Reader*. Oxford, UK. Oxford Paperbacks. p. 263.



Figure 2.10 Fascist Blackshirts from a Fascio di Combattimento (battle group)

2.4 What were the sources of support for Mussolini's Fascist Party?

After the May 1921 elections, and Mussolini's decision not to support Giolitti, Mussolini concentrated on gaining support from various quarters.

The economic élites and emerging fascism, 1921–22

The unrest of the *biennio rosso* 1919–20 had given a boost to Mussolini's organisation. In an attempt to end the factory and land occupations, he had offered to send in *squadre*

d'azione (action squads) to help factory owners in the north and landowners in the Po Valley and Tuscany. These industrialists and landowners, frustrated and angered by the liberal government's stance of concessions and inaction, had been only too pleased to give money to Mussolini's groups in return for the *squadristi's* violent actions against the left's strikes and occupations.

These action squads were controlled by local fascist leaders, known as *ras*. As well as attacking strikers, the *squadristi* burnt down the offices and newspaper printing works belonging to the socialists and trade unions in many parts of northern and central Italy. They also tried to destroy the influence of the peasant leagues, which were encouraged by the more liberal elements of the Roman Catholic Popolari (see section 2.2, Nationalists and the 'mutilated victory').

This growing alliance with industrialists, bankers and landowners began to finance the building of a mass base for Mussolini's Fasci di Combattimento among the middle and lower-middle classes, who feared socialist revolution. However, the more radical elements (such as Marinetti and the syndicalists) were increasingly alienated from this base. Instead, as time went by, the fascist squads were mainly composed of disaffected and demobilised army officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and middle-class students. These supporters were united by their hatred of socialists and their belief in violent action, rather than by any coherent political ideology.

The practical appeal of the fascist *squadres* grew after September 1920, when a wave of factory occupations involving over 400,000 workers hit the industrial areas of the north. At the same time, agrarian strikes and land occupations continued to spread in central Italy. Then, in the local elections, the socialists won control of twenty-six out of Italy's sixty-nine provinces, mostly in northern and central parts of the country. All of this greatly increased the fears of the upper and middle classes. As the fascist action squads proved effective in suppressing leftist action, *squadristi* numbers were swelled by recruits from the ranks of small farmers, estate managers and sharecroppers.

From May 1921, Mussolini had hopes of achieving real power and he was determined to make full use of the opportunities to do so. He realised that he needed to convince the industrialists, landowners and the middle classes of three things: that the liberals were finished as an effective political force; that there was a real threat of socialist revolution; and that only the fascists were strong and determined enough to take the necessary action, and restore order and dignity to Italy.

Denied the support of the fascist deputies, Giolitti at first managed to form a coalition with the support of the Popolari, but this collapsed within a month. Between May 1921 and October 1922, there were three weak coalition governments, none of which managed to take effective action against industrial struggles and political violence.

The attitude of the political élites

The attitude of the élites now became increasingly crucial to the fascists' prospects of success. During the *biennio rosso*, the police and army leaders often turned a blind eye to fascist violence against socialists and industrial and agrarian militants. In fact, commanders in some areas even provided transport to take fascist squads to socialist demonstrations or congresses. In the first half of 1921, over 200 people were killed and more than 800 wounded by these action squads, and Emilia and Tuscany became fascist strongholds.

ras: An Abyssinian word meaning 'chieftain'. These were the regional fascist leaders who commanded their own action squads, and who often had a large degree of independence. They included Italo Balbo (Ferrara), Dino Grandi (Bologna), Roberto Farinacci (Cremona) and Filippo Turati (Brescia).

KEY CONCEPTS
QUESTION

Causation and Consequence: How did the attitudes of Italy's political élite help to cause the rise of Mussolini's Fascist Party?



Figure 2.11 Roberto Farinacci (1892–1945)

Farinacci was originally a radical nationalist, but he soon became involved in the emerging fascist movement. He was the *ras* in Cremona, publishing his own newspaper (*Cremona Nuova*), and his action squads were among the most brutal in 1919. In 1922, Farinacci declared himself mayor of Cremona. Mussolini made him PNF secretary in 1925. Farinacci was anti-clerical and anti-Semitic, and after 1938, he strongly enforced anti-Jewish legislation.

SOURCE J

There were sectors who assisted Fascism indirectly: although they could not bring themselves to support Fascism openly they were at least prepared to tolerate it in a way which would have been out of the question with, for example, socialism. One of these groups was the political establishment ... Another was the aristocratic class, who were appeased by Mussolini's willingness to end his attacks on the monarchy. In fact, the Queen Mother, Margherita, and the king's cousin, the Duke of Aosta, were admirers of Fascism. A third sector was the Catholic Church, taking its cue from Pope Pius XI who, from the time of his election in 1922, remained on good terms with Mussolini. The Church undoubtedly considered a Communist revolution to be the main threat.

Lee, S. 1987. *The European Dictatorships, 1918–1945*. London, UK. Routledge. p. 95.

As *squadristi* violence continued to disrupt law and order into the summer of 1921, Mussolini began to worry that it might alienate the conservative élites and unify anti-fascists. His concerns grew on 31 July, when twelve *carabinieri* (police officers) managed to disperse over 500 fascists at Saranza, in north-west Italy. This was hardly the sign of a party able to impose law and order.

The formation and growth of the PNF

On 2 August, Mussolini surprised the opposition – and angered the *ras* – by signing a peace deal, known as the Pact of Pacification, with moderate socialists and the main trade union organisation, the General Confederation of Workers (Confederazione Generale del Lavoro, or CGL). He then resigned from the Fascist Central Committee in an attempt to outmanoeuvre the *ras*. This was successful, and in October 1921 Mussolini persuaded members of the Fasci di Combattimento to re-form the organisation into a political party, the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF).

Mussolini followed up this victory in November 1921 by persuading the Fascist National Congress to elect him as leader. In return, he agreed to end the truce with the socialists, and ordered all branches to organise action squads. Although the local *ras* still had considerable influence and some autonomy, Mussolini could now present himself as the clear and undisputed leader of an organised and united political party.

Mussolini and 'moderation'

Mussolini's growing control of this new party allowed him to drop what remained of the more left-wing elements of the 1919 *Fascist Programme*, especially those that had been hostile to the Roman Catholic Church. In doing so, Mussolini hoped to increase fascist support among conservatives. This was especially important as the new pope, Pius XI, did not support the leader of the Popolari and had previously – as archbishop of Milan – blessed the fascists' banners.

Mussolini kept fascist policy statements deliberately vague, declaring his party to be against socialism and liberalism and for a strong and ordered Italy. By the end of 1921, the Fascist Party claimed a membership of over 200,000 – many of whom were shopkeepers and clerical workers who had previously supported the liberals.

The fascists' 'creeping insurrection'

Despite Mussolini's growing control over the Fascist Party and its increasing appeal to conservatives, many of the local *ras* – including **Roberto Farinacci** and **Italo Balbo** – continued to endorse the violence of the action squads.

Determined to avoid a split in his party, Mussolini followed a dual policy throughout 1922. He encouraged the *ras* to continue their violent activities, but he made it known to the conservatives that he had no intention of pushing for a violent seizure of power. In the spring of 1922, there was a concerted campaign of *squadristi* violence in northern and central Italy. By July, street fighting was common in most northern towns, and soon Cremona, Rimini and Ravenna were under fascist control. Once again, the police either stood by or intervened on the side of the fascists. In some areas, the police even offered the fascists weapons if it looked as though the socialists might win.

The socialists and their trade unions decided to call a general strike for 31 July, in an attempt to force the government to take action against the fascists' violence and their 'creeping insurrection', which was giving the movement control of an increasing number of towns and other areas of Italy. Mussolini used this as an opportunity to prove that the socialists were still a threat and, more importantly, a threat that only the fascists could stop. Fascists immediately began to break the strike, taking over public transport and the postal service, and attacking strikers. The socialists called off the strike on 3 August.

The fascist success impressed the conservative middle classes, and led to renewed contact between Mussolini and former liberal prime ministers – such as Antonio Salandra, Vittorio Orlando, Francesco Nitti and Giovanni Giolitti – to discuss the possibility of the fascists entering a coalition government. To increase fascist respectability, in September Mussolini declared he was no longer opposed to the monarchy.

Victor Emmanuel III and fascism

Mussolini owed his success in October 1922 more to the role of the king, **Victor Emmanuel III**, than to the strength of his fascist militia. The king himself claimed that he refused to sign the declaration of martial law because he could not depend on the army's loyalty to him. However, he had been assured that his soldiers were faithful, and that they could easily disperse the fascist marchers.

Historians are still undecided as to why the king acted as he did. Some argue that he was uncertain of the reaction of the military, that he had little faith in the liberal politicians, that he genuinely feared the outbreak of civil war, and that he was worried about being replaced by his cousin, the duke of Aosta, a known fascist supporter. Other historians

Historical debate:

According to historians such as Renzo De Felice, Mussolini's rise to power in 1922 – and his ability to retain control until 1943 – had much to do with support from the élites (referred to as 'the Establishment men, the conservative trimmers and office-holders' by Martin Clark). Do you think this is a fair statement about the significance of the élites compared to popular support for fascism in Italy in explaining Mussolini's success?



Figure 2.12 Victor Emmanuel III (1869–1947)

Victor Emmanuel was the last king of Italy, largely due to his role during the rise and rule of fascism. After 1922, the king made little comment on fascist violence, anti-Semitic laws or the destruction of democracy. In 1944, he handed most of his powers to his son, Umberto, and abdicated in his favour in May 1946. In June, 54 per cent of Italians voted for a republic, and Victor Emmanuel went into exile in Egypt.

2

Theory of knowledge

History and the role of individuals:

Does an examination of Mussolini in the period 1919–22 provide adequate proof of the 'great person' theory of history? Or does a study of his rise during this period show instead the greater importance of economic factors – or even chance?

ACTIVITY

Was there any coherent ideology behind Italian fascism and Mussolini's fascist state? Divide the class into two groups. One group should prepare a presentation that argues that there was a coherent fascist ideology. The other group should argue that there was no clear or consistent ideological framework. After the presentation, take a vote on which argument was the most convincing.

Mussolini and Italy

have pointed out how leading industrialists, landowners and senior churchmen favoured compromise with the fascists (the queen mother, Margherita, was a fervent fascist) and how the king himself regarded the fascists as a bulwark against the threat of communist revolution.

Whatever the king's motives, by October 1922 Mussolini had become prime minister by legal, constitutional means – assisted by the fascist violence on the streets.

End of unit activities

- 1 Create a spider diagram to illustrate the economic, political and social conditions in Italy during the period 1900–19.
- 2 Divide into two groups. One group should present the case that Mussolini's rise to power in 1922 was inevitable, given the context of Italian history and politics in the period 1919–22. The other group should present arguments to show it was not inevitable – for example, could opponents of fascism have acted differently? Each group should present its findings in preparation for a class debate.
- 3 Use the internet and any other resources you have to find copies of Mussolini's speeches and interviews during the period 1919–22. Then carry out an analysis to show both consistencies and inconsistencies.
- 4 Carry out further research on the thinkers and ideas that contributed to the development of fascism. Then produce a poster to summarise this information.
- 5 Draw up a chart to show the extent to which Mussolini's fascist ideology seemed to offer:
 - a a new form of society
 - b a new economic and social structure
 - c new values.