Chapter

13 Italy, 1918–45: the first appearance of fascism

SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The unification of Italy was only completed in 1870, and the new state suffered from economic and political weaknesses. The First World War was a great strain on her economy, and there was bitter disappointment at her treatment by the Versailles settlement. Between 1919 and 1922 there were five different governments, all of which were incapable of taking the decisive action that the situation demanded. In 1919, *Benito Mussolini founded the Italian fascist party*, which won 35 seats in the 1921 elections. At the same time there seemed to be a real danger of a left-wing revolution; in an atmosphere of strikes and riots, the fascists staged a 'march on Rome', which culminated in King Victor Emmanuel inviting Mussolini to form a government (October 1922); he remained in power until July 1943.

Gradually Mussolini took on the powers of a dictator and attempted to control the entire way of life of the Italian people. At first it seemed as though his authoritarian regime might bring lasting benefits to Italy, and he won popularity with his successful foreign policy (see Section 5.2). Later he made the fatal mistake of entering the Second World War on the side of Germany (June 1940), even though he knew Italy could not afford involvement in another war. After the Italians suffered defeats by the British, who captured Italy's African possessions and occupied Sicily, they turned against Mussolini. He was deposed and arrested (July 1943), but was rescued by the Germans (September) and set up as a puppet ruler in northern Italy, backed by German troops. In April 1945, as British and American troops advanced northwards through Italy towards Milan, Mussolini tried to escape to Switzerland but was captured and shot dead by his Italian enemies (known as 'partisans'). His body was taken to Milan and strung up by the feet in a public square – an ignominious end for the man who had ruled Italy for 20 years.

13.1 WHY WAS MUSSOLINI ABLE TO COME TO POWER?

(a) Disillusionment and frustration

In the summer of 1919 there was a general atmosphere of disillusionment and frustration in Italy, caused by a combination of factors:

1 Disappointment at Italy's gains from the Versailles settlement

When Italy entered the war the Allies had promised her Trentino, the south Tyrol, Istria, Trieste, part of Dalmatia, Adalia, some Aegean islands and a protectorate over Albania. Although she was given the first four areas, the rest were awarded to other states, mainly Yugoslavia; Albania was to be independent. The Italians felt cheated in view of their valiant efforts during the war and the loss of close on 700 000 men. Particularly irritating

was their failure to get Fiume (given to Yugoslavia), though in fact this was not one of the areas which had been promised to them. Gabriele d'Annunzio, a famous romantic poet, marched with a few hundred supporters and occupied Fiume before the Yugoslavs had time to take it. Some army units deserted and supported d'Annunzio, providing him with arms and ammunition, and he began to have hopes of overthrowing the government. However, in June 1920, after d'Annunzio had held out in Fiume for 15 months, the new prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, decided that the government's authority must be restored. He ordered the army to remove d'Annunzio from Fiume – a risky move, since he was viewed as a national hero. The army obeyed orders and d'Annunzio surrendered without a fight, but it left the government highly unpopular.

2 *The economic effects of the war*

The effects of the war on the economy and the standard of living were disastrous. The government had borrowed heavily, especially from the USA, and these debts now had to be repaid. As the lira declined in value (from 5 to the dollar in 1914 to 28 to the dollar in 1921) the cost of living increased accordingly by at least five times. There was massive unemployment as heavy industry cut back its wartime production levels, and 2.5 million ex-servicemen had difficulty finding jobs.

3 Growing contempt for the parliamentary system

Votes for all men and proportional representation were introduced for the 1919 elections. Although this gave a fairer representation than under the previous system, it meant that there was a large number of parties in parliament. After the election of May 1921, for example, there were at least nine parties represented, including liberals, nationalists, socialists, communists, the Catholic popular party and fascists. This made it difficult for any one party to gain an overall majority, and coalition governments were inevitable. No consistent policy was possible as five different cabinets with shaky majorities came and went. There was growing impatience with a system that seemed designed to prevent decisive government.

(b) There was a wave of strikes in 1919 and 1920

The industrialization of Italy in the years after unification led to the development of a strong socialist party and trade unions. Their way of protesting at the mess the country was in was to organize a wave of strikes in 1919 and 1920. These were accompanied by rioting, looting of shops and occupation of factories by workers. In Turin, factory councils reminiscent of the Russian soviets (see Section 16.2(c) point 2) were appearing. In the south, socialist leagues of farmworkers seized land from wealthy landowners and set up co-operatives. The government's prestige sank even lower because of its failure to protect property; many property-owners were convinced that a left-wing revolution was at hand, especially when the Italian Communist Party was formed in January 1921. But in fact the chances of revolution were receding by then: the strikes and factory occupations were fizzling out, because although workers tried to maintain production, claiming control of the factories, it proved impossible (suppliers refused them raw materials and they needed engineers and managers). In fact the formation of the Communist Party made a revolution less likely because it split the forces of the left; nevertheless the fear of a revolution remained strong.

(c) Mussolini attracted widespread support

Mussolini and the fascist party were attractive to many sections of society because as he himself said, he aimed to rescue Italy from feeble government and give the country a

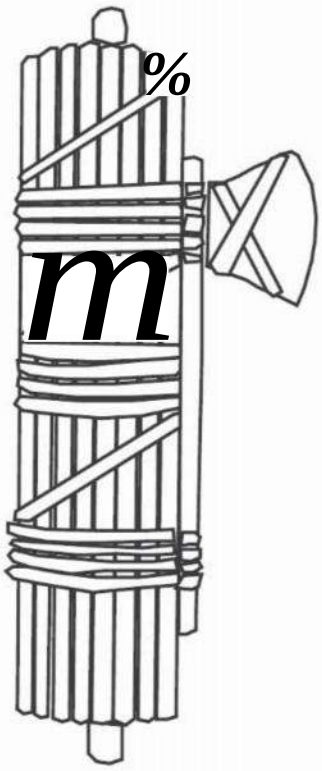

Figure **13.1** **The fascist symbol**

political system that would provide stable and strong government. Mussolini (born 1883), the son of a blacksmith in the Romagna, had a varied early career, working for a time as a stonemason's mate and then as a primary-school teacher. Politically he began as a socialist and made a name for himself as a journalist, becoming editor of the socialist newspaper *Avanti*. He fell out with the socialists because they were against Italian intervention in the war, and started his own paper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. In 1919 he founded the fascist party with a socialist and republican programme, and he showed sympathy with the factory occupations of 1919–20. The local party branches were known as *fasci di combattimento* (fighting groups) – the word *fasces* meant the bundle of rods with protruding axe which used to symbolize the authority and power of the ancient Roman consuls (see Fig. 13.1). At this stage the fascists were anti-monarchy, anti-Church and anti-big business.

The new party won no seats in the 1919 elections; this, plus the failure of the factory occupations, caused Mussolini to change course. He came out as the defender of private enterprise and property, thus attracting much needed financial support from wealthy business interests. Beginning in late 1920, black-shirted squads of fascists regularly attacked and burned down local socialist headquarters and newspaper offices and beat up socialist councillors. By the end of 1921, even though his political programme was vague in the extreme, he had gained the support of property-owners in general, because they saw him as a guarantee of law and order and as a protector of their property (especially after the formation of the Communist Party in January 1921). Having won over big business, Mussolini began to make conciliatory speeches about the Roman Catholic Church; Pope Pius XI swung the Church into line behind Mussolini, seeing him as a good anti-communist weapon. When Mussolini announced that he had dropped the republican part of his programme (September 1922), even the king began to look more favourably on the fascists. In the space of three years Mussolini had swung from the extreme left to the extreme right. Some of the working class supported the fascists, though probably a majority, especially among industrial workers, supported parties of the left.

(d) Lack of effective opposition

The anti-fascist groups failed to co-operate with each other and made no determined efforts to keep the fascists out. The communists refused to co-operate with the socialists, and Giovanni Giolitti (prime minister from June 1920 to July 1921) held the elections of May 1921 in the hope that the fascists, still unrepresented in parliament, would win some seats and then support his government. He was willing to overlook their violence, feeling that they would become more responsible once they were in parliament. However, they won only 35 seats whereas the socialists took 123. Clearly there should have been no question of a fascist takeover, though the number of fascist squads throughout the country was increasing rapidly. The socialists must take much of the blame for refusing to work with the government to curb fascist violence; a coalition of Giolitti's nationalist bloc and the socialists could have made a reasonably stable government, thus excluding the fascists. But the socialists would not co-operate, and this caused Giolitti to resign in exasperation and despair. The socialists tried to use the situation to their own advantage by calling a general strike in the summer of 1922.

(e) The attempted general strike, summer 1922

This played into the hands of the fascists, who were able to use it to their advantage: they announced that if the government failed to quell the strike, they would crush it themselves. When the strike failed through lack of support, Mussolini was able to pose as *the saviour of the nation from communism*, and by October 1922 the fascists felt confident enough to stage their 'march on Rome'. As about 50 000 blackshirts converged on the capital, while others occupied important towns in the north, the prime minister, Luigi Facta, was prepared to resist. But King Victor Emmanuel III refused to declare a state of emergency and instead, invited Mussolini, who had remained nervously in Milan, to come to Rome and form a new government, which he obligingly did, arriving by train. Afterwards the fascists fostered the myth that they had seized power in a heroic struggle, but it had been achieved legally by the mere threat of force, while the army and the police stood aside.

The role of the king was important: he made the crucial decision not to use the army to stop the blackshirts, though many historians believe that the regular army would have had little difficulty in dispersing the disorderly and poorly armed squads, many of which arrived by train. The march was an enormous bluff which came off. The reasons why the king decided against armed resistance remain something of a mystery, since he was apparently reluctant to discuss them. Suggestions include:

- lack of confidence in Facta;
- doubts about whether the army, with its fascist sympathies, could be relied on to obey orders;
- fears of a long civil war if the army failed to crush the fascists quickly.

There is no doubt that the king had a certain amount of sympathy with the fascist aim of providing strong government, and he was also afraid that some of the generals might force him to abdicate in favour of his cousin, the duke of Aosta, who openly supported the fascists. Whatever the king's motives, the outcome was clear: Mussolini became the first ever fascist premier in history.

13.2 WHAT DID THE TERM 'FASCISM' STAND FOR?

It is important to try to define what the term 'fascist' stood for, because it was later applied to other regimes and rulers, such as Hitler, Franco (Spain), Salazar (Portugal) and Peron (Argentina), which were sometimes quite different from the Italian version of fascism. Nowadays there is a tendency among the left to label as 'fascist' anybody who holds right-wing views. The fact that fascism never produced a great theoretical writer who could explain its philosophies clearly in the way that Marx did for communism makes it difficult to pin down exactly what was involved. Mussolini's constantly changing aims before 1923 suggest that his main concern was simply to acquire power; after that he seems to have improvised his ideas as he went along. It eventually emerged that the type of fascism that Mussolini had in mind included certain basic features:

- *A stable and authoritarian government.* The Italian fascist movement was a reaction to the crisis situation outlined above that made stable democratic government impossible, just at the time when strong and decisive leadership was needed. An authoritarian government would arouse and mobilize the great mass of ordinary people, and would control as many aspects of people's lives as possible, with strong discipline. One aspect of this was *the 'corporate state'.* This was a way of promoting efficiency by setting up a separate organization of workers and employers for each branch of the economy. Each 'corporation' had a government official attached to it. In practice it was a good way of controlling the workforce.
- *Extreme nationalism.* An emphasis on the rebirth of the nation after a period of decline; building up the greatness and prestige of the state, with the implication that one's own nation is superior to all others.
- *A one-party state was essential.* There was no place for democratic debate, because that made decisive government impossible and held up progress. Only fascism could provide the necessary dynamic action to guarantee Italy a great future. It also involved the cult of the great charismatic leader who would guide and inspire the nation to great things. Mussolini did not see himself as a prime minister or president – instead he took the title *il Duce* ('the leader'), in the same way that Hitler called himself *Fiihrer.* Fascism was especially hostile to communism, which explains much of its popularity with big business and the wealthy.
- *Economic self-sufficiency (autarky).* This was vitally important in developing the greatness of the state; the government must therefore direct the economic life of the nation (though not in the Marxist sense of the state owning factories and land.
- *Great use was made of all the latest modern forms of propaganda* – uniforms, marches, songs and displays, all to demonstrate that fascists were a completely new and dynamic alternative to the boring, old-fashioned traditional parties, and to mobilize mass support behind the heroic leader.
- *Military strength and violence* were an integral part of the fascist way of life. In domestic affairs they were prepared to use extreme violence against opponents. Mussolini himself also gave the impression that they would pursue an aggressive foreign policy; he once remarked: 'Peace is absurd: fascism does not believe in it.' Hence the Italian fascists fostered the myth that they had seized power by force, when in fact Mussolini had been invited to form a government by the king.

13.3 MUSSOLINI TRIES TO INTRODUCE THE FASCIST STATE

There was no sudden change in the system of government and state institutions; at first Mussolini was merely the prime minister of a coalition cabinet in which only four out of

twelve ministers were fascists, and he had to move cautiously. However, the king had given him special powers to last until the end of 1923, to deal with the crisis. His black-shirt private army was legalized, becoming the National State Voluntary Militia (MVSN). The Accerbo Law (November 1923) changed the rules of general elections. From now on the party which got most votes in a general election would automatically be given two-thirds of the seats in parliament. As a result of the next election (April 1924) the fascists and their supporters came out with 404 seats while the opposition parties could manage only 107. The right-wing success can be explained partly by the general desire for a strong government which would put the country back on its feet again, after the weak minority governments of the preceding years. But there is no doubt that there was a good deal of violence and fraud during the election which prevented many people from voting freely.

Beginning in the summer of 1924, using a mixture of violence and intimidation, and helped by divisions among his opponents, Mussolini gradually developed Italian government and society along fascist lines. At the same time he consolidated his own hold over the country, which was largely complete, at least politically, by 1930. However, he still seems to have had no 'revolutionary' ideas about how to change Italy for the better; in fact it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his main interest was simply to increase his own personal power by whatever methods were appropriate at the time.

(a) Only the fascist party was allowed

Persistent opponents of the regime were either exiled or murdered, the most notorious case being the murder of Giacomo Matteotti, the socialist leader in the Italian parliament, who was stabbed to death. Soon after the 1924 election Matteotti made a speech in parliament complaining about the fraud and violence, and demanding that the election be declared invalid. Mussolini was furious, and there can be little doubt that he was responsible for having Matteotti killed. Later, another opposition leader, the liberal-conservative Giovanni Amendola, was beaten to death by fascist thugs. The fascists' popularity levels slumped dramatically in the aftermath of these outrages; the party seemed likely to split, as many moderates felt that their tactics had gone too far. Even Mussolini thought his regime was likely to be overthrown. However, nobody seemed to have the nerve to take the lead and try to unite the opposition against the fascists. Mussolini survived, partly because he was still seen as a guarantee against a communist and socialist takeover. After 1926, when Mussolini felt more secure, violence was much reduced and the Italian system was never as brutal as the Nazi regime in Germany.

Further changes in the constitution meant that:

- the prime minister (Mussolini) was responsible only to the king, not to parliament (1925);
- the prime minister could rule by decree, which meant that new laws did not need to be discussed by parliament (1926);
- the electorate was reduced from about 10 million to 3 million (the wealthiest).

Although parliament still met, all important decisions were taken by the Fascist Grand Council, which always did as Mussolini told it. In effect Mussolini, who now adopted the title *il Duce*, was a dictator.

(b) Changes in local government

Elected town councils and mayors were abolished and towns were run by officials appointed from Rome. In practice the local fascist party bosses (known as *ras*) often had as much power as the government officials.

(c) Education supervised

Education in schools and universities was closely supervised. Teachers had to wear uniforms and take an oath of loyalty to the regime; new textbooks were written to glorify the fascist system. Children were encouraged to criticize any teachers who lacked enthusiasm for the party. Children and young people were encouraged to join government youth organizations such as the *Gioventu Italiana del Littorio (GIL)*; this had branches for both boys and girls aged 6 to 21 and organized sports and military parades. Then there was a special organization for young boys aged 6 to 8 known as 'Sons of the Wolf' which also tried to indoctrinate them with the brilliance of the *Duee* and the glories of war. From 1937 membership of one of these organizations was compulsory. The other main message emphasized was total obedience to authority; this was deemed necessary because everything was seen in terms of struggle – 'Believe, Obey, Fight!'

(d) Employment policies

The 'Corporate State' was one of the key elements of the Fascist system. The government claimed that it was designed to promote co-operation between employers and workers and to end class warfare. Fascist-controlled unions had the sole right to negotiate for the workers, and both unions and employers' associations were organized into corporations, and were expected to work together to settle disputes over pay and working conditions. Strikes and lockouts were not allowed. By 1934 there were 22 corporations each dealing with a separate industry; each one included a government official among its members, and there was a minister of corporations in charge of the whole system. Mussolini himself acted as the first minister of corporations from 1926 until 1929. In this way Mussolini hoped to control workers and direct production and the economy. To compensate for their loss of freedom, workers were assured of such benefits as free Sundays, annual holidays with pay, social security, sports and theatre facilities and cheap tours and holidays.

(e) An understanding was reached with the pope

The Papacy had been hostile to the Italian government since 1870 when all the territory belonging to the Papacy (Papal States) had been incorporated in the new kingdom of Italy. Though he had been sympathetic towards Mussolini in 1922, Pope Pius XI disapproved of the increasing totalitarianism of fascist government (the fascist youth organizations, for example, clashed with the Catholic scouts). Mussolini, who was probably an atheist himself, was nevertheless well aware of the power of the Roman Catholic Church, and he put himself out to win over Pius, who, as the Duce well knew, was obsessed with the fear of communism. The result was *the Lateran Treaty of 1929*, by which Italy recognized the Vatican City as a sovereign state, paid the pope a large sum of money as compensation for all his losses, accepted the Catholic faith as the official state religion, made religious instruction compulsory in all schools and left the Church free to continue its spiritual mission without interference from the government. In return the Papacy recognized the

kingdom of Italy, and promised not to interfere in politics. *Some historians see the ending of the long breach between Church and State as Mussolini's most lasting and worthwhile achievement.*

(f) Propaganda and censorship

Great importance was attached to propaganda in the attempt to brainwash the Italian people into accepting fascist values and culture. The government tried, with some success, to keep a close control over the press, radio, theatre and the cinema. Strict press censorship was enforced: anti-fascist newspapers and magazines were banned or their editors were replaced by fascist supporters. A Ministry of Popular Culture was set up in 1937 to mastermind the campaign to spread the fascist message, suggesting perhaps that for the last 15 years the campaign had been less successful than had been hoped. The main points for emphasis were the cult of Mussolini, the hero and the man of action, always in uniform; and the celebration of military greatness. People were bombarded with slogans such as 'Mussolini is always right.' The military glories of ancient Rome were constantly extolled, with the implication that fascism would bring more military glory.

(g) Racial policy

For much of his time in power Mussolini showed little interest in any so-called problems to do with race. He had certainly not shown any signs of anti-Jewishness. At one time he had even encouraged Zionism because he thought it might be useful for embarrassing the British. Many leading members of the fascist party were Jews, and he had several times insisted that there was no such thing as a Jewish problem in Italy. He was very critical of the Nazis' anti-Semitism. On the other hand he had also claimed that certain races were superior to others. He suggested that the Italians belonged to an Aryan race that was superior to such nationalities as Spaniards and Greeks, as well as to the Africans in the Italian territories of Abyssinia and Libya. He seemed to be more worried about what he called the 'Levantines', by which he meant the slaves brought in during the time of the Roman Empire. He was afraid that as their descendants intermarried with the pure Aryans over many generations, a wrong impression of the Italian national character would be given to the rest of the world. As late as September 1937 he said that the Jews in Italy were no problem; after all, there were at most only about 70 000 of them. In the summer of 1939, however, Mussolini announced the introduction of anti-Jewish laws on the same lines as the Nazi laws. In view of his earlier pronouncements most people were shocked by this sudden change. The reasons for the change were simple. Following the hostile reception from France and Britain of the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and their imposition of economic sanctions on Italy, Mussolini found himself being pushed towards an alliance with Hitler. In 1936 he reached an understanding with Hitler, known as the Rome–Berlin Axis, and in 1937 he joined the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan (see Section 5.2(b)), which was directed against Communism. After a four-day visit to Germany in 1937 Mussolini realized the political expediency of aligning Italy with Germany as closely as possible. As he moved towards the full alliance with Germany – the Pact of Steel – signed in May 1939, Mussolini moved quickly to emulate Hitler, in what was simply a cynical, tactical move. There was another motive for the policy change, or so Mussolini claimed: the possession of territory in Africa (Abyssinia and Libya) meant that it was important for Italians to emphasize their domination over Africans and Arabs, and make sure that they showed the respect due to people of a superior race. In July 1938 the Charter of Race was published which claimed that Arabs, Africans *and Jews* were all inferior

races. He began by urging people not to employ Jews and to sack those already in jobs. Then the press were told to report that Jews had managed to get themselves into important and influential positions and must be ousted before they sent Italy into decline. This policy was not popular with the general public, but when the pope protested strongly, the press was ordered to print articles justifying the persecution of Jews and to ignore the pope. As the Second World War got under way Mussolini appointed Giovanni Prezioso, a well-known journalist and virulent anti-Semite, to supervise the racial policy. They agreed that all Jews must be expelled from Europe. Although they knew that the Nazis were systematically murdering Jews, including women and children, they still ordered thousands of Italian Jews to be deported to Germany. Again this policy was extremely unpopular and some officials either sabotaged orders or simply refused to carry them out.

How totalitarian was Mussolini's system?

It seems clear that in spite of his efforts *Mussolini did not succeed in creating a completely totalitarian system* in the Fascist sense of there being 'no individuals or groups not controlled by the state'; nor was it as all-pervasive as the Nazi state in Germany. He never completely eliminated the influence of the king or the pope. In spite of the cult of Mussolini as il Duce, the king remained head of state, and was able to dismiss Mussolini in 1943. The Roman Catholic Church remained an extremely powerful institution and it provided the Italian people with an alternative focus of loyalty; there was no way that Mussolini could sideline it, and there were several clashes between the two even after the signing of the Lateran Treaty. The pope became highly critical of Mussolini when he began to persecute Jews in the later 1930s. The historian and philosopher Benedetto Croce and other university professors were constant critics of fascism and yet they survived, apparently because Mussolini was afraid of hostile foreign reaction if he had them arrested. They would certainly not have been tolerated in Nazi Germany. A more accurate description of Mussolini's system would be authoritarian rather than totalitarian. Even fascist sympathizers admitted that the corporative system was not a success either in controlling production or in eliminating class warfare. According to historian Elizabeth Wiskemann, 'on the whole the big industrialists only made gestures of submission and in fact bought their freedom from the fascist state by generous subscriptions to Fascist party funds'. Most of the important decisions on the economy were taken by the government in consultation with business leaders, and the workers themselves had very little say. It was the workers who had to make all the concessions – agree not to strike and give up their own trade unions – while the big employers enjoyed considerable freedom of action. In fact the corporate state was little more than a propaganda exercise and a way of controlling the workers. As far as the mass of the population was concerned, it seems that they were prepared to tolerate fascism while it appeared to bring benefits, but soon grew tired of it when its inadequacies were revealed by its failures during the Second World War.

13.4 WHAT BENEFITS DID FASCISM BRING FOR THE ITALIAN PEOPLE?

What really mattered to ordinary people was whether the regime's policies were effective or not. Did Mussolini rescue Italy from weak government as he had promised, or was he, as some of his critics alleged at the time, just a windbag whose government was as corrupt and inefficient as previous ones?

(a) A promising beginning

Much of fascist policy was concerned with the economy, though Mussolini knew very little about economics. The big drive was for self-sufficiency *(autarky)*, which was thought to be essential for a 'warrior-nation'. A great nation must not be dependent on any other nations for vital commodities like raw materials and food supplies. He liked to see things in terms of struggle – hence the various 'Battles', for the lira, for wheat and for births. The early years seemed to be successful, or so the government propaganda told people.

1 *Industry was encouraged* with government subsidies where necessary, so that iron and steel production doubled by 1930 and artificial silk production increased tenfold. By 1937, production of hydro-electric power had doubled.
2 *The 'Battle for the Lira'.* Mussolini believed that Italy must have a strong currency if it wanted to be a strong state. He revalued the lira at 90 to the pound sterling instead of 150 (1926). This had mixed results: it helped some industries, notably steel and chemicals, by making imported raw materials cheaper. But unfortunately it made Italian exports more expensive on the world market and led to reduced orders, especially in the cotton industry. Many factories were on a three-day week and workers suffered wage reductions of between 10 and 20 per cent – *before* the world economic crisis that started in 1929.
3 *The 'Battlefor Wheat'* encouraged farmers to concentrate on wheat production and raised tariffs (import duties) on imported wheat as part of the drive for self-sufficiency. Again this had mixed results: by 1935, wheat imports had been cut by 75 per cent, and Italy was close to achieving self-sufficiency in wheat production. This policy was popular with the wealthy cereal-growing farmers of the north; but time showed that there were some unexpected side effects (see below).
4 *The 'Battlefor Births',* launched in 1927, was a campaign to increase the birth rate. Mussolini believed that a population of 40 million was too small for a country aiming to be a great power; they simply wouldn't have enough soldiers! The target was to double the birth rate and raise the population to 60 million by 1950; this was to be achieved by taxing unmarried men heavily, giving tax relief and promotion at work for men with large families and paying generous family allowances. There were severe penalties for abortions. He specified 12 children as the ideal number for a family. This was one of Mussolini's complete failures. Apparently young married couples did not find this package attractive enough, and the birth rate actually fell.
5 *A programme of land reclamation was launched* in 1928, involving draining marshes, irrigation, and planting forests in mountainous areas, again as part of the drive to improve and increase agricultural yield. The great showpiece were the reclaimed Pontine Marshes near Rome.
6 *An impressive public works programme* was designed, among other things to reduce unemployment. It included the building of motorways, bridges, blocks of flats, railway stations, sports stadiums, schools and new towns on reclaimed land; a start was made on electrifying main railway lines, and the great fascist boast was that Mussolini had made the trains run on time. Even sportsmen did well under fascism – the Italian soccer team won the World Cup twice – in 1934 and 1938!
7 *The 'after-work'* (Dopolavoro) *organization* provided the Italian people with things to do in their leisure time. There were cheap holidays, tours and cruises, and *Dopolavoro* controlled theatres, dramatic societies, libraries, orchestras, brass bands and sporting organizations. Mobile cinemas were provided which were useful for putting out propaganda. Very poor families could get welfare support from *Dopolavoro.* All this was partly to appease the workers for the loss of their trade unions and the right to strike, and it was genuinely popular. However, most

historians seem to agree that, as a propaganda exercise, it failed to arouse genuine enthusiasm for the fascist system.

8 To promote the image of Italy as a great power, Mussolini pursued a virile foreign policy (see Section 5.2), although in the later 1920s and early 1930s he was much more cautious.

However, the promise of the early years of Mussolini's rule was in many ways never fulfilled.

(b) Unsolved problems

Even before Italy became involved in the Second World War, it was clear that fascism had not solved many of her problems.

1 *Little had been done to remedy Italy's basic shortage of raw materials* – coal and oil – and much more effort could have been made to develop hydro-electric power. In spite of the modest increase in iron and steel production, Italy could not even match a small state like Belgium (see Table 13.1). By 1940 it was clear that Italy had failed to become self-sufficient in coal, oil and steel, which was essential if Mussolini was serious about waging war. This failure meant that Italy became increasingly dependent economically on Nazi Germany.

2 *Although the 'Battle of Wheat' was a victory, it was achieved only at the expense of dairy and arable farming*, whose output fell; the climate in the south is suited much better to grazing and orchards than to growing wheat, and these would have been much more lucrative for the farmers. As a result, agriculture remained inefficient and farm labourers the poorest class in the country. Their wages fell by between 20 and 40 per cent during the 1930s. Italy still had what is known as a 'dualist economy' – the north was industrial and comparatively prosperous, while the south was largely agricultural, backward and poverty-stricken. In 1940 the wealthiest one per cent of the population still owned 40 per cent of all the land. The attempt at self-sufficiency had been a dismal failure. More than that, it had caused an unpopular shortage of consumer goods and had greatly increased Italy's national debt.

3 *The Great Depression, which began in 1929 with the Wall Street Crash in the USA (see Section 22.6), made matters worse*. Exports fell further and unemployment rose to 1.1 million, yet the Duce refused to devalue the lira until 1936. Instead, wages and salaries were cut, and although the cost of living was falling because of the Depression, wages fell more than prices, so that workers suffered a fall of over 10

Table 13.1 **Italian iron and steel output (in million tons)**

	Iron			*Steel*		
	1918	1930	1940	1918	1930	1940
Italy	0.3	0.5	1.0	0.3	0.5	1.0
Belgium	–	3.4	1.8	–	3.4	1.9
Germany	11.9	9.7	13.9	15.0	11.5	19.0
USA	39.7	32.3	43.0	45.2	41.4	60.8

per cent in real wages. Particularly frustrating for industrial workers was that they had no way of protesting, since strikes were illegal and the unions weak. The economy was also hampered by the sanctions placed on Italy by the League of Nations after the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Some banks were in difficulties because struggling manufactures were unable to repay their loans.

4 *Another failing of the government was in social services*, where there was nothing approaching a 'welfare state'. There was no official government health insurance until 1943, and only an inadequate unemployment insurance scheme, which was not improved even during the Depression.

5 *The regime was inefficient and corrupt*, so that many of its policies were not carried out. For example, in spite of all the publicity about the land reclamation, only about one-tenth of the programme had been carried out by 1939 and work was at a standstill even before the war began. Immense sums of money disappeared into the pockets of corrupt officials. Part of the problem was that Mussolini tried increasingly to do everything himself; he refused to delegate because he wanted total control. But it was impossible for one man to do so much, and it placed an intolerable burden on him. According to his biographer Dennis Mack Smith, 'by trying to control everything, he ended by controlling very little … although he gave out a constant stream of orders, he had no way of checking that they were carried out. As officials knew this, they often only pretended to obey, and took no action at all.'

13.5 OPPOSITION AND DOWNFALL

The conclusion has to be that after the first flush of enthusiasm for Mussolini and his new system, the average Italian can have felt little lasting benefit from the regime, and disenchantment had probably set in long before the Second World War started. And yet there was not a great deal of overt opposition to him. This was partly because it was difficult to conduct an organized opposition in parliament, and there were heavy punishments for opponents and critics; fear of the political police tended to drive serious opposition underground, though they were much less repressive and brutal than Hitler's Gestapo. Also the Italians had a tradition of accepting whatever happened politically with a minimum of fuss and lots of resignation. In spite of all the problems, Mussolini could usually rely on the support of the traditional elites – the king and aristocracy, and wealthy landlords and industrialists, because he was their best insurance against the communists. The government continued to control the media, which kept on telling people that Mussolini was a hero.

(a) Why was Mussolini eventually overthrown?

- *Entry into the Second World War on Germany's side was a disastrous mistake.* The majority of Italians were against it; they already disapproved when Mussolini began to sack Jews from important jobs (1938), and they felt that Italy was becoming a German satellite. The Italian takeover of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) was popular with the public, though they had made heavy weather of that (see Section 5.2(b)). But the Second World War was a different matter altogether. Mussolini had failed to modernize the economy sufficiently to support a prolonged war; in fact, Italy was incapable of waging a major war; the army was equipped with obsolete rifles and artillery; there were only a thousand planes and no heavy tanks. The declaration of war on the USA (December 1941) horrified many of Mussolini's right-wing supporters (such as industrialists and bankers), who resented the closer economic

controls which wartime brought. As for the general public, Mussolini had failed to convert them to his aims of European war and conquest. All the propaganda about reviving the glories of ancient Rome had failed to arouse any fighting spirit or military enthusiasm.

- *The general public suffered hardships.* Taxes were increased to pay for the war, there was food rationing, massive inflation and a 30 per cent fall in real wages. After November 1942 there were British bombing raids on major cities. By March 1943, unrest showed itself in strikes in Milan and Turin, the first since 1922.
- After a few early successes, *the Italians suffered a string of defeats* culminating in the surrender of all Italian troops in North Africa (May 1943) (see Section 6.4, 5 and 6).
- *Mussolini seemed to have lost his touch.* He was suffering from a stomach ulcer and nervous strain. All he could think of was to sack some of the ministers who had criticized him. Breaking point came with the Allied capture of Sicily (July 1943). Many of the fascist leaders themselves realized the lunacy of trying to continue the war, but Mussolini refused to make peace because that would have meant deserting Hitler. The Fascist Grand Council turned against Mussolini, and the king dismissed him. Nobody lifted a finger to save him, and fascism disappeared.

(b) Verdict on Italian fascism

This is still a very controversial topic in Italy, where memories of personal experiences are strong. Broadly speaking *there are two interpretations of the fascist era.*

1 It was a temporary aberration (a departure from normal development) in Italian history, the work solely of Mussolini; historian A. Cassels calls it 'a gigantic confidence trick perpetrated on the Italian nation by Benito Mussolini – an artificial creation of Mussolini'.
2 Fascism grew naturally from Italian history; the environment and the circumstances shaped the rise and success of fascism, not the reverse.

Most historians now accept the second theory, that the roots of fascism lay in traditional Italian society and that the movement grew to fruition in the circumstances after the First World War. The Italian historian Renzo de Felice argued that fascism was primarily a movement of 'an emerging middle class', which was keen to challenge the traditional, liberal, ruling class for power. He claimed that the movement achieved a great deal – especially the modernizing of Italy's economy, which was very backward in 1918. On the other hand, British historian Martin Blinkhorn does not accept this claim about the economy and argues that de Felice has not paid enough attention to 'the negative and brutal side of Fascism'.

The most recent revisionist trend among Italian historians is to portray Mussolini once more as an inspirational leader who could do nothing wrong until he made the fatal mistake of entering the Second World War. There is a tendency to gloss over all the outrages of Italian fascism, with an element of nostalgia. A new biography by British writer Nicholas Farrell, published in 2003, takes the same line, arguing that Mussolini deserves to be remembered as a great man. He claims that not only did Mussolini save Italy from anarchy and communist subversion, but his domestic policies brought great benefits to the Italian people and improved their living standards. Other genuine successes were the ending of the historic quarrel between the Roman Catholic Church and the state and the popular *Dopolavoro,* which continued after the war under another name. Farrell also suggests that if Britain and France had handled Mussolini with more care in the years

1935 to 1940, he might well have been persuaded to join the allied side during the Second World War. After all, in 1934 when Hitler made his first attempt to take over Austria, Mussolini was the only European leader to stand up to Hitler. There is no knowing how much bloodshed might have been avoided if this had happened. Farrell even suggests that if Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, had not shown such anti-Italian prejudice, the Second World War might have been avoided.

This interpretation provoked mixed reviews. Some welcomed it as a long overdue revision of the dictator's career, though the majority were critical, finding Farrell's arguments unconvincing. Most were more likely to go along with the verdict of the great Italian historian Benedetto Croce, who dismissed fascism as 'a short-term moral infection'.

FURTHER READING

Blinkhorn, M., *Mussolini and Fascist Italy* (Routledge, 3rd edition, 2006).
Bosworth, R. J. B., *Mussolini* (Bloomsbury, 2011).
De Felice, R., *Interpretations of Fascism* (Harvard University Press, 1977).
Farrell, N., *Mussolini: A New Life* (Phoenix, 2005).
Mack Smith, D., *Mussolini* (Phoenix, 2002).

QUESTIONS

1 'It was the fear of communism that was mainly responsible for Mussolini coming to power in Italy in 1922, and for staying there so long.' Explain whether you agree or disagree with this view.
2 In what ways and with what success did Mussolini try to introduce a totalitarian form of government in Italy?
3 How successful were Mussolini's domestic policies up to 1940?
4 Explain why Mussolini launched the 'Battle for Wheat' in 1925.
5 Explain why you agree or disagree with the view that between 1925 and 1939 Mussolini's economic policies were very successful.
6 How important was the appeal of fascist ideology to so many Italians in explaining why Mussolini was made prime minister in October 1922?
7 Explain why racism became a more important part of Italian fascism in the 1930s.
8 How successful was Mussolini's regime in crushing cultural diversity in Italy in the years 1923 to 1940?
9 Explain why Mussolini launched the 'Battle for Births' in 1927.
10 'Fascist social policies gained widespread support for Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s'. Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

There is a document question about the differing interpretations of fascism on the website.