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The Fascist state, 1925–45

Mussolini hesitated before deciding to establish a Fascist dictatorship. He was determined that it would be a personal dictatorship and that he would be independent of the *ras*.

The establishment of the dictatorship, 1925–28

Increased violence

On 3 January 1925, Mussolini addressed the chamber of deputies. He denied setting up the Ceka and condemned the actions of Dumini's gang, but he went on to assume responsibility for Matteotti's murder, as prime minister and leader of the Fascist Party. However, he made it clear that he would not resign; he would continue to rule Italy, by force 'if necessary'. When Mussolini became seriously ill in February, Italy was ruled by Farinacci, the notorious *ras* of Cremona and newly appointed party secretary, who launched a new campaign of *squadristi* violence against the Socialist and Communist parties and the more radical sections of the PPI. As a result, several people were killed and many others decided to go into exile. Farinacci also supervised a purge of Fascist Party members, especially local leaders who were seen as insufficiently loyal to Mussolini.

The press

The first step in establishing a Fascist dictatorship was taken in July 1925 when Mussolini, now recovered, imposed a series of laws to control the press. Anti-Fascist newspapers were closed down and those remaining were only allowed to print articles approved by the government. From December 1925 all journalists had to be registered with the Fascist Party.

Central and local government

In August 1925 Mussolini took the next step in establishing his dictatorship. This time he focused on local and central government. Elected mayors and councils of towns and cities in the 93 provinces were replaced by appointed Fascist officials known as *podesta*. Although they were party members, they were mainly conservative and were drawn from the traditional landowning and military elites. In this way, Mussolini tried to ensure that the more militant Fascists were excluded from real power in the provinces. Fascist political control was further established on 3 August, when all meetings by opposition parties were banned.

Mussolini also moved to increase his personal power in central government. On 24 December 1925 Mussolini made himself head of government and in January 1926 he increased his powers to allow him to issue decrees without parliamentary approval and made himself responsible only to the king. The new law also stated that the king needed his agreement before anyone could be appointed as minister. Soon, Mussolini insisted on being called *Il Duce* (the leader). By 1929, he held eight ministerial posts himself, which excluded many other Fascist leaders from power. In practice, these state departments were run by the traditional conservative civil servants, which meant that little change was made to the status quo.

The parties

However, Mussolini's position was still not totally secure. The king and the chamber of deputies still existed, as did the increasingly harassed opposition parties. In October 1926, after yet another assassination attempt on Mussolini, all parties other than the Fascist Party were banned and their deputies were expelled from the chamber. At the same time, trade unions were outlawed and a new law court was set up to deal with political offences, some of which carried the death penalty. In 1927 Mussolini formed a secret police force, known as the OVRA, to suppress any political opponents. This was not, however, a specifically Fascist organisation, as it was essentially an adaptation of the interior ministry's secret police section. The OVRA was thus not the equivalent of the Nazi SS or Gestapo, as it was under state, not party, control.

In May 1928, when new elections were due, Mussolini took further measures to ensure that Italy would remain a one-party state. These included changes to the electoral system so that only men aged 21 or over who belonged to Fascist syndicates (see p. 118) could vote. The Fascist Grand Council then drew up a list of 400 candidates from lists approved by confederations of employers and employees; voters then had to vote 'for' or 'against' those on this list. Fear of Fascist violence meant that most Italians voted for, as Fascist officials in the polling stations were able to identify those who voted against as this required a white voting slip as opposed to the coloured one used by those voting for. Mussolini secured a clear electoral victory which made him the dictator of Italy. The king's power was drastically reduced.

The Fascist Party

However, this authoritarian regime was not a Fascist Party dictatorship, in that Mussolini deliberately restricted the influence of the party by retaining members of the traditional conservative elites in the police, the judicial system, the civil service and the army. Mussolini made no serious attempt to 'fascistise' the system of government by only appointing leading Fascists to positions of power. In 1927, only about 15 per cent of the civil service were said to be Fascists and both the interior minister, Luigi Federzoni, and the justice minister, Alfredo Rocco, were conservative ex-Nationalists. In the 1930s civil servants tended to join the Fascist Party merely to retain their jobs.

There was, however, a purge of the judiciary, in which many judges were sacked for lack of loyalty or for following too-independent a line. Mussolini frequently intervened in cases and imprisonment without trial became common, as Mussolini destroyed what impartiality the Italian legal system had had. The chief of police was another position that was filled by career politicians, not Fascists.

In January 1927 Mussolini issued instructions that all Italians – including Fascists – should be totally obedient to the prefects (the senior civil servants who ran the provinces and controlled the police). In the provinces, the prefects appointed the *podesta*. Once Farinacci had been dismissed in October 1926 (ostensibly for another outburst of *squadristi* violence, but really because he had begun to push for a 'second wave' of Fascist revolution), the prefects and the *podesta* set about stamping out *squadristi* violence.

The new party secretary, Augusto Turati, purged the party of more militant Fascists and allowed people to join who merely wanted to further their careers. Soon, there were very few 'Fascists of the first hour' left in important positions. This policy was expanded in the 1930s under Turati's successors, when the Fascist Party became a mass party with almost 5 million (mainly inactive) members by 1943. Most of its members were white-collar employees; the workers and peasants, who had once made up 30 per cent of the party's membership, had become a small minority. The Fascist Party was thus increasingly turned into a tame and loyal support base for Mussolini. At the same time, party posts were now to be filled by appointment from above, not through election by party members. The influence of the latter was further reduced in 1928, when the Fascist Grand Council was made part of the state machinery of government.

This gradual weakening of the Fascist Party, which resulted in it becoming the servant rather than the master of the state, was due in part to the divisions and disunity which had existed from its foundation. According to R. Thurlow, it had at least five different factions, including the militant *ras*, who sought a 'second wave' of Fascist revolution to replace state institutions with Fascist ones, and the 'left' Fascists, who wanted to establish a corporate or national syndicalist state – this latter group was led by Edmondo Rossoni, among others. Opposed to these two factions were the Fascist 'revisionists', led by Dino Grandi, Massimo Rocca and Giuseppe Bottai, who were prepared to co-operate and merge with the existing political system. Mussolini was able to play off these various factions against each other in order to enhance his own personal power. At the same time, he also played off different sectors of state personnel to ensure that no-one was able to challenge his power. One result of this, however, was to cause administrative confusion and weakness.

The corporate state

Those Fascists who believed that Fascism was a 'third way' between capitalism and communism favoured the creation of a corporate state. The corporate state would replace the traditional parliamentary democracy with a political system of corporations that represented the nation's various economic sectors. Along with

state appointees, these corporations, each with equal representation for employers and employees, would enable class conflict to be overcome (thus avoiding strikes and other labour disputes) and instead give prime consideration to the interests of the nation. Although this system would increase state influence, there was no thought of eradicating private ownership.

The Fascist syndicates

During their rise to power in the years 1920-22, the Fascists had closed down the traditional labour movement trade unions in the areas they controlled and replaced them with Fascist-controlled syndicates which, theoretically, were still supposed to represent workers' interests. By 1922 a Confederation of Fascist Syndicates, headed by Rossoni, had been set up. Its aim was to create corporations (see below) that would force industrialists to make some concessions to workers' demands. However, this Fascist aspiration, coming from the left of the party, was not popular with the *Confindustria*, the organisation representing the main industrialists. In December 1923, when Mussolini had been prime minister for 14 months, the Chigi Palace Pact, in which industrialists promised to co-operate with the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates, was concluded. The industrialists nevertheless insisted on maintaining their own independent organisations.

Despite this agreement, many employers were not prepared to make any significant concessions to workers. Their intransigence resulted in a series of strikes in 1925. This was resolved by the Vidoni Palace Pact, which confirmed that the *Confindustria* and the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates were the only organisations that could represent, respectively, employers and employees. It was also made clear that workers were not to challenge the authority of employers and managers; all workers' factory councils were then closed down and all non-Fascist trade unions were abolished. This was followed up in 1926 by Alfredo Rocco's law which made all strikes illegal and stated that all industrial disputes had to be settled in special labour courts. It also made it illegal for there to be more than one organisation of workers and employers in each branch of industry and identified seven main areas of economic activity.

The corporations

In July 1926 Mussolini established a ministry of corporations, with himself as minister. Each corporation consisted of representatives of employers and workers from the same economic or industrial sector (e.g. mining) and three representatives from the government, who acted as referees and final adjudicators. In practice, this new ministry was mainly run by Giuseppe Bottai, the under-secretary. In April 1927 he produced the Charter of Labour, which promised not only fair judgements in labour disputes, but also social reforms such as improved health and accident insurance schemes.

However, the existence of corporations tended to weaken the Fascist syndicates and in 1928 the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates was abolished and Rossoni was dismissed. In 1929 Bottai took over as minister of corporations

and in March 1930 he set up the National Council of Corporations (NCC) to represent the seven largest corporations. In 1932 Mussolini again resumed control of the ministry of corporations. The number of corporations grew slowly until, by 1934, there were 22 in total. These sent delegates to the General Assembly of Corporations (also headed by Mussolini), which was supposed to make important decisions about economic policy, including setting wage and price levels. In practice, Mussolini usually ignored the general assembly and made the important decisions himself. Most of the decisions that were made to deal with the effects of the Great Depression were not made by the corporations but by the government and employers, including the decision to cut wages. It should also be noted that most of the trade unionists experienced in industrial negotiations and disputes were socialists or communists and they were, therefore, dead, in prison or in exile. For this reason, employers had undue influence within the corporations, especially as the workers' representatives were usually selected by the Fascist Party or the ministry of corporations, rather than being chosen directly by the workers. Many of the representatives were, in fact, tame members of the Fascist syndicates or even middle-class careerists. In addition, the employers were nearly always supported by the three government representatives, who were Fascist Party members, even though they were supposed to be neutral.

In 1938, in a belated attempt to give more credibility to the corporate state, Mussolini decided to abolish the chamber of deputies and replace it with the chamber of *fasci* and corporations. The corporate state was supposed to be a new form of politics in which people were given a voice according to their economic function or occupation, rather than their geographical location. In reality, however, it had too little substance or power as it was dominated by Fascists appointed from above.

Economic policy

In many respects, Mussolini's main concern was not so much to create Fascism as a viable 'third way', as it was to make Italy a rich and great power. To do this, he believed it was necessary to make Italy economically self-sufficient in food and in raw materials for industry. This not only included overcoming problems of poverty and improving agriculture, but also conquering a large empire.

Mussolini's 'battles'

To achieve economic greatness – and in keeping with Fascist methods – Mussolini decided to launch a series of initiatives he called 'battles'. The first battle was announced in 1924 and was directed at trying to overcome the long-term poverty that existed in southern Italy. Called 'the battle over the southern problem', it promised to build thousands of new villages in Sicily and the south to wipe out the poverty suffered by so many.

In 1925 a much more serious campaign known as 'the battle for grain' was launched in response to a poor harvest and a consequent increase in grain

imports. The aim was to get Italian farmers to grow more cereals, especially wheat, in order to reduce foreign imports. Import controls were imposed, which helped the inefficient farmers in the south to continue farming without having to modernise, and more land for grain growing was made available. This was done by ploughing up pasture land, olive and citrus orchards, and vineyards. In addition, medals were awarded to farmers who grew the most and their stories were reported in the newspapers. In the more prosperous north, farmers shifted from maize to wheat and also became more mechanised. This greater use of tractors and fertilisers also benefited industrial firms such as Fiat, Pirelli (rubber) and Montecatini (chemicals).

In 1926 'the battle for land' was begun. Its aim was to further increase the amount of available farming land. Marshes and swamps were drained, in particular the Pontine Marshes near Rome. This created many small farms and work for the unemployed, which was financed from public funds. Attempts were also made to farm on cleared woodland sites and on hillsides.

When the value of the lira dropped, 'the battle for the lira' was announced on 18 August 1926. In order to restore its value abroad and help stop price rises and to increase and maintain Italian prestige, the lira was revalued (by the application of 'quota 90') at just over 92 lire to the pound – a much more realistic exchange rate would have been 150 lire. This allowed Italy to continue importing coal and iron for armaments and shipbuilding.

In 1927 Mussolini launched 'the battle for births' in order to increase the Italian population. His intention was to build up a large army which would enable Italy to conquer a large empire, seen as being essential for both raw materials and national pride. His aim was to increase Italy's population from 40 million to 60 million by 1950 – Mussolini claimed that the ideal family size was 12. It was believed that this would be achieved by encouraging early marriages, giving maternity benefits, encouraging women not to take paid employment, giving jobs to married fathers in preference over single men and giving prizes to the 93 women, one from each of Italy's 93 provinces, who gave birth to the most children. By 1934, the total number of children produced by these 93 women was 1,300! Taxation was also used: bachelors (especially those between the ages of 35 and 50) had to pay extra taxes, while couples with 6 or more children paid none. Newlyweds were given cheap railway tickets to help them to go on honeymoon. Homosexuality was outlawed in 1931, new laws against abortion and divorce were imposed and attempts were made to exclude women from paid employment.

Success and failure

Most of Mussolini's economic 'battles' were far from successful, however, often because they were inconsistent. None of the new villages promised by 'the battle over the southern problem' was built. The 'battle for grain' succeeded in almost doubling cereal production by 1939, thus making Italy self-sufficient in wheat. However, it also involved the misallocation of resources and resulted in Italy having to import olive oil. Fruit and wine exports dropped, as did the numbers

of cattle and sheep. The 'battle for land' resulted in only one area – the Pontine Marshes – being effectively reclaimed. (As it was near Rome, Mussolini saw this as a way of impressing visitors and tourists.)

The 'battle for the lira', which had involved artificially overvaluing the lira, resulted in Italian goods becoming more expensive and a consequent decline in exports and increase in unemployment – car exports, in particular, were badly hit. The revaluation also undermined the free trade and traditional financial policies Mussolini had adopted in the period 1922–25. It led to a recession in Italy, made worse by the Great Depression. The 'battle for births' was particularly disastrous. Despite all Mussolini's initiatives, the number of births actually declined throughout the 1930s and by 1940 the birth rate had dropped to 23.1 per 1,000 from 29.9 per 1,000 in 1925. In addition, nearly one-third of Italy's paid workforce continued to be female. This was partly due to the fact that Mussolini's military adventures led to the conscription of large numbers of men. Most of Mussolini's battles, which were intended to achieve autarky (self-sufficiency), tended to cause at least as many problems as they solved. This tendency was worsened by the effects of the depression.

State intervention

Before the depression, Mussolini had not interfered with private enterprise and had favoured the large companies and heavy industry. Once the depression began to take effect, Mussolini began to intervene. At first, this took the form of encouraging job-sharing schemes. By 1933, however, unemployment had risen to over 2 million, while millions more still suffered from underemployment, especially in the rural south. At its peak, over 30 per cent of labouring jobs in agriculture were lost and many women were forced to give up their jobs to unemployed men. The situation in the countryside was made worse by controls on migration from rural areas to the larger urban and industrial areas. This was designed to keep the problem of unemployment hidden in rural areas where the population was less concentrated.

In 1931, in an attempt to deal with these problems, Mussolini's government decided to use public money to help prevent the collapse of banks and industries hit by the depression. Then in April 1933 the *Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale* (Institute of Industrial Reconstruction or IRI) was set up. Initially, it took over various unprofitable industries on behalf of the state. By 1939, the IRI had become a massive state company, controlling many industries, including most of the iron and steel industries, merchant shipping, the electrical industry and even the telephone system. However, the intention was never that these industries should be permanently nationalised. Parts were regularly sold off to the relevant larger industries still under private ownership, thus helping the formation of huge capitalist monopolies. Examples of this are the two giant firms of Montecatini and SINA Viscosa, which ended up owning the chemical industry.

Autarky

The effects of the depression led Mussolini to adopt increasingly protectionist measures and to push for autarky. This increased after 1935 when many member countries of the League of Nations imposed some economic sanctions on Italy following its invasion of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) (see pp. 132–33). Once Mussolini began to involve Italy in further military adventures and wars, the push for autarky – and the problems it caused – increased accordingly. Nonetheless, there were some moderate achievements: by 1940, industrial production had increased by 9 per cent, resulting in industry overtaking agriculture as the largest proportion of GNP for the first time in Italy's history. In addition, between 1928 and 1939, imports of raw materials and industrial goods dropped significantly. Overall, however, the end result of Fascist economic policy was not a significant modernisation of the economy or even increased levels of productivity, and Italy recovered much more slowly from the depression than most other European states. Once Italy was involved in the Second World War, these economic and industrial weaknesses became increasingly apparent.

The social impact of Fascism

According to the 'third way' ideal, fascism was supposed to replace class conflict with class harmony. It was intended to bring equal benefits to employers and employees as they worked in partnership for the good of the nation, the state and the Italian people. It claimed that workers would no longer be exploited and that they would have a new, improved status under the corporate state.

The classes

In the first years of Mussolini's rule (between 1922 and 1925), male workers had experienced a drop in unemployment and an improvement in living standards. This was due partly to the orthodox and cautious economic policies followed by de Stefani, but was mainly the result of the general economic revival in Europe that took place in the early 1920s. (De Stefani, a Liberal, was appointed finance minister by Mussolini as part of his attempt to show the elites that Fascism was not a threat to them.) By 1939, however, it had become clear that only a small minority of people had gained any significant benefits from Fascist rule. Most Italians, especially the working classes, saw their standard of living and general quality of life decline under Fascism.

During 1925–26, workers lost their independent trade unions and their right to strike, and the promises made about the corporate state failed to materialise. Instead of ending class conflict, Mussolini's Fascist state merely suppressed the workers' ability to defend their interests, while employers were able to manage their companies without interference from the state or opposition from their workers. For example, as the economy began to experience problems in the second half of the 1920s, employers and the Fascist representatives on the corporations were able to extend the working week and cut wages at the same time (from 1925 to 1938, the level of real wages declined by over 10 per cent). As

unemployment began to rise during the Great Depression, even the various public work schemes had little effect. In addition the relatively high level of unemployment also tended to intimidate workers into moderating their efforts to improve their conditions. For many, foods such as meat, vegetables, fruit, wine, sugar and coffee became so expensive they were unable to afford them and this was exacerbated by the effects of the 'battle for grain'. Social welfare legislation, including old age pensions and unemployment and health insurance, and a significant increase in expenditure on education, did not make up the tremendous decline in real wages and working conditions.

Despite Mussolini's claim to love the countryside and his promises to return Italy to a mythical rural innocence, the situation there worsened, if anything, under the corporate state. In general the north–south divide continued. Mussolini's policies benefited the large landowners more than the small farmers and agricultural labourers. A law introduced in 1922 to break up the large estates and redistribute the land was never acted on and agricultural wages were reduced by well over 30 per cent during the 1930s. Not surprisingly, many rural workers ignored the various government decrees intended to stop migration to the towns. They usually ended up in the slums of Milan, Turin and Rome. Rural poverty was made even worse when the USA drastically reduced immigration quotas, as over 200,000 Italians had already emigrated in the period 1900–29 in an attempt to escape Italy's rural poverty. Not surprisingly, therefore, many ordinary Italians did not develop a strong attachment to Fascism.

The lower middle classes, who formed the backbone of the Fascist Party, were affected in different ways. Many of those who had small businesses were quite hard hit by the impact of the depression and by Mussolini's various economic policies. However, those who worked for the administrative bureaucracy of the state or the Fascist Party experienced relative prosperity. They benefited from good wages and considerable fringe benefits as well as the opportunity to increase income via corruption, which was rife in Fascist Italy.

The classes who did very well in Fascist Italy were the large industrialists and landowners. The Vidoni Palace Pact of 1925 and the Charter of Labour of 1927 destroyed the ability of workers to defend, let alone improve, their living standards and increased the power of employers. Decisions made by the corporate state also benefited employers and worsened the conditions of workers. Even during the depression, the large firms benefited in many ways, either from large government contracts or from the financial assistance given by the IRI. This also helped in the creation of huge monopolies which, with no competition acting as a spur, militated against any significant modernisation.

The large landowners were another group that benefited during the depression, especially by the government's 1930 legislation that restricted the migration of rural workers to cities. The landowners benefited further in 1935 when special workbooks (*libretto di lavoro*) were introduced which had to be stamped by a Fascist official before a worker could leave an area to find work elsewhere. This helped to keep unemployment high in rural areas, a situation that was exploited by landowners in order to cut wages. There was certainly no

attempt to redistribute land. By 1930, 0.5 per cent of the population owned 42 per cent of land, while 87 per cent of the rural population (mainly small landowners) owned only 13 per cent.

Women

Women suffered especially under Fascism as their status was deliberately and consistently reduced, particularly by the 'battle for births', which stressed the traditional role of women as housewives and mothers. This was reinforced by a series of decrees designed to restrict female employment; in 1938, for example, it was decreed that only 10 per cent of jobs should be held by women. Although this was intended to solve male unemployment, it also reflected Fascist attitudes towards women.

The Roman Catholic Church

Mussolini was a little more successful in widening the base of Fascist support in the Roman Catholic Church. Although he never really lost his early anti-religious views, Mussolini soon realised the need to reach an understanding with the Church. As early as 1921, even before he became prime minister, he was presenting the Fascist Party as an alternative to the traditionally anti-clerical Liberals and the atheism of the Communist and Socialist parties. The Church hierarchy was particularly pleased by the Fascists' destruction of the Socialists and Communists as a political force and recognised the benefits of ending the conflict between state and church, which had begun in 1870 with the reunification of Italy when the papacy lost most of its land. In fact, sporadic discussions with various Italian governments had been taking place since 1917.

Once installed as prime minister, Mussolini restored Catholic education in state primary schools. One result of this was that the papacy ended its support for the Catholic PPI. The real breakthrough came in 1929, following a series of secret negotiations with Cardinal Gasparri, a senior Vatican official. These resulted in the signing of the three Lateran Agreements in May, which finally ended the conflict and bitterness which had existed between the papacy and the Italian state since 1870. Mussolini accepted papal sovereignty over the Vatican City, which became an independent state, in return for which the pope formally recognised the Italian state and its possession of Rome and the former papal states in central Italy. In a separate but related agreement, the state paid the pope £30 million (1750 million lire) in cash and government bonds as compensation for the loss of Rome. Finally, they agreed that Roman Catholicism would be the official state religion of Italy, that there would be compulsory Catholic religious education in all state schools and that the state would therefore pay the salaries of the clergy. In return, the papacy agreed that the state could veto the appointment of politically hostile bishops and that the clergy would not join political parties. It was also agreed that there could be no divorce without the consent of the Church and that civil marriages were no longer necessary.

What this meant was that Catholicism was able to continue as a potential rival ideology to Fascism (thus blocking any chance of establishing a truly totalitarian dictatorship), but Mussolini was satisfied because the pope and the Catholic Church now officially backed him as *Il Duce*, which in turn pleased large numbers of Italian Catholics. However, relations between the state and church were not always smooth. In 1928 rivalry between Catholic and Fascist youth movements led to the banning of the Catholic scout organisation, which continued even after the Lateran Agreements. In 1931 government attempts to suppress the Church's Catholic Action youth organisation, which offered an alternative to the Fascist Party's youth and leisure organisations, provoked another brief conflict. Mussolini suspected that Catholic Action and the FUCI, the Catholic university students' organisation, were being used by ex-PPI activists to foment opposition to the Fascist regime. These suspicions were justified as both the FUCI and the Catholic *Movimento Laureati*, dedicated to creating a new political order, did offer some opposition to Fascist aims and, in the late 1930s, even began to form potential rival political centres around some leading members of the Church hierarchy. However, the dispute over Catholic Action was soon resolved by compromise: Catholic Action was allowed to continue, but was restricted to religious activities. It is significant that this compromise came after the pope publicly criticised the Fascist oath of loyalty and Fascist interference in educational and family matters as it shows that Mussolini lacked control over the Catholic Church. Despite this agreement, by 1939 Catholic Action had created several youth organisations which competed with Fascist paramilitary, social and cultural groups.

Although the Church was in agreement with several Fascist policies, such as the invasion of Abyssinia and involvement in the Spanish Civil War, which were seen as 'Christian crusades' against 'barbarism' and communism, as well as Mussolini's opposition to contraception and abortion, several other disagreements emerged. The creed of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (see p. 129), for instance, was opposed as it was seen as 'blasphemous'. Thus it is clear that the Church was never fully controlled by Mussolini.

Racism

While explicit racism was not part of the early Fascist movement, an underlying racist attitude was part of Mussolini's and the Fascist Party's imperialist expansionist plans. It was believed that the Italian 'race' was superior to those African 'races' in Libya and Abyssinia. The Abyssinian invasion raised race as a public issue and Mussolini had been angered by opposition to this invasion from, among others, some Jewish organisations. Racism was also a strong element in the Romanita movement (see p. 130).

However, anti-Semitism did not play a part in Fascist politics until the signing of the Rome–Berlin Axis in 1936. In fact, in the *Historical dictionary of Fascist Italy* Mussolini had dismissed anti-Semitism as unscientific. Furthermore, some leading Fascists were Jewish and almost 30 per cent of Italian Jews were members of the Fascist Party. Mussolini had previously appointed a Jewish minister of finance (Guido Jung) and at one point he had a Jewish mistress.

Mussolini's adoption of anti-Semitism, signalled by the issuing of the Charter of Race in July 1938, was in response to pressure from Hitler. It was drawn up by Mussolini and 10 'professors' and claimed to give a scientific explanation of Fascist racial doctrine. Their findings were based on the 'fact' that Italians were Aryans and that Jews, who were not, consequently did not belong to the Italian 'race'. This charter was followed up, between September and November, by a series of racial laws and decrees. These anti-Semitic laws excluded Jewish teachers and children from all state schools, banned Jewish people from marrying non-Jewish people and prevented them from owning large companies or landed estates.

Even though these laws were never fully implemented in the period 1938–43, in large part because Italians simply ignored them, they were strongly and publicly opposed by the pope. He criticised them for breaking the Concordat and for attempting to imitate Nazi Germany; in fact, these anti-Semitic laws contributed to the unravelling of the earlier alliance between Fascism and the Catholic Church. There were also several senior Fascists who were unhappy about the introduction of these racial laws, including Balboa, De Bono, Federzoni, Gentile and Marinetti.

Despite this opposition, extreme racial persecution began in 1943 in the Italian Social Republic (known as the Salò Republic), which was nominally ruled by Mussolini following his overthrow as prime minister (see pp. 137–38). The brutal persecution of the Jewish people living there was, in fact, carried out by the German Gestapo and SS operating in this northern part of Italy.

Ducismo: the cult of Il Duce and propaganda

Mussolini wanted Fascism to penetrate every aspect of Italian life and society, and to create a 'new Fascist man' who would be strong, aggressive and willing to do anything to protect the nation. He intended to achieve this by building up his own image as the epitome of this superman, and by publicising the achievements of Fascism.

Il Duce

As Mussolini began to establish his dictatorship, he quickly realised the importance of a good public image and good publicity. He established a press office to ensure that photographs and newspaper articles projected a positive image of him and his activities. He was portrayed as youthful, energetic and an expert in a wide range of specialist areas and pursuits. He also set up state radio in 1924 – by 1939, however, there were still only about 1 million radios in Italy, which meant that there was only 1 set for every 44 people (in Germany the ratio was 1:7 and in Britain 1:5). To deal with this, public address systems were set up in cafés, restaurants and public squares, so that more people could listen to his speeches, and free radios were given to schools.

Mussolini also made full use of film and the opportunities it presented. He insisted that the state-sponsored newsreel films, which had to be played in all

cinemas as part of the programme from 1926, showed him addressing large crowds of enthusiastic supporters and that he was always filmed from below, to hide his lack of height.

Propaganda

In 1933, Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, took over the press office (renamed the ministry for press and propaganda in 1935). Two years later, it was expanded to ensure that all films, plays, radio programmes and books glorified Mussolini as a hero and a new Caesar, and the Fascists as the saviours of Italy, and was renamed the ministry of popular culture (Minculpop). These and other attempts to regulate the arts were not very successful as traditional liberal culture proved too strong.

At the same time, Achille Starace, appointed party secretary in 1930, worked tirelessly to project an image of Mussolini as hero. Lights were left on in his office to imply that he worked 20 hours a day for Italy, while photographs and posters of Mussolini appeared in public buildings, streets and workplaces. Great prominence was also given to various catchphrases that were supposed to reflect Fascist ideals, such as *Crede, Obbedire, Combattere* ('Believe, Obey, Fight') and 'Mussolini is always right'. At press conferences, Mussolini was always accompanied by Blackshirt bodyguards, while all public appearances were attended by what soon became known as the 'applause squad', who whipped up sufficient enthusiasm for Mussolini's speeches, even at times resorting to prompt cards.

Much as this was based on current theories of crowd psychology. All public events, such as mass rallies and meetings, were consciously turned into political theatre, with full use being made of lighting and music. Mussolini also borrowed from the techniques used by D'Annunzio and the artistic events favoured by Marinetti and the Futurists. These methods not only added to the theatrical impact of Fascist propaganda methods, but also helped create a modern image for them. Even Goebbels was impressed by the Fascist propaganda machine. Despite all these efforts, Mussolini never established a complete monopoly: the independent Vatican Radio, for example, continued to broadcast.

Education and indoctrination

Central to the cult of personality was the way in which Mussolini presented himself and the Fascist Party as the only forces able to unite all Italians and make Italy great. As well as this and the use of force to coerce opponents, Mussolini also adopted various other methods to control the public, including indoctrination. The younger generations were of prime importance but, as we have seen, the Church's influence over the young remained significant and led to conflict.

In infant schools, the day started with a prayer that began: 'I believe in the genius of Mussolini', while in primary schools children were taught that Mussolini and the Fascists had 'saved' Italy from communist revolution. In 1929, it was made compulsory for all teachers in state schools to swear an oath of loyalty to both the king and to Mussolini's Fascist regime. In 1931, this oath was



Mussolini at a typical public meeting. The Fascist slogan says: 'Believe, Obey, Fight'.

extended to university lecturers and only 11 resigned rather than take it. Mussolini was less successful in relation to secondary education as there were too many loopholes through which children could escape indoctrination. All school textbooks were examined and many were banned and replaced with new books, issued by the government, which emphasised the role of Mussolini and the Fascists. In 1926, for example, 101 out of 317 history textbooks were banned and, by 1936, there was only one official history textbook.

Fascist attempts to indoctrinate secondary school children were not helped by Giovanni Gentile, who, as the first Fascist minister of education, continued to concentrate on traditional academic education. Not only were classical courses (which allowed entrance to university) emphasised, but technical and vocational education was separated and downgraded. He also introduced exams which

made it very difficult for most children to progress to secondary education itself; as a result, the numbers going to secondary school, and thus university, declined significantly. Protests from parents led to some modifications by his successor, Fedele, from 1925 onwards. Nonetheless, by the time Giuseppe Bottai became education minister and introduced the School Charter in 1939 (which promised to improve the status of practical subjects and vocational training), an important opportunity to help ordinary people and thus widen the Fascists' support base had been missed.

The Fascist Youth Movement

An important part of Mussolini's and the Fascists' indoctrination of the young was the setting-up of youth organisations. In 1926, all Fascist youth groups were made part of the *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB). When the Boy Scouts movement was abolished in 1927, the ONB became the main youth group in Italy, apart from the Catholic groups. Boys aged 18–21 could join the Fascist Levy (Young Fascists), after which they could apply to become members of the Fascist Party. In 1937, the ONB was merged with the Young Fascists to form the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* (GIL) and membership was made compulsory for all children aged 8–21. By then, the ONB's membership had risen to over 7 million.

All groups followed physical fitness programmes and attended summer camps, which included pre-military training, and older children also received political indoctrination. All members of the ONB and GUF (the Fascist University Groups) had to swear loyalty to Mussolini. However, the impact on school-children was not as great as was hoped – some 40 per cent of 4–18 year olds managed to avoid membership of these groups. Private and Catholic schools tended not to enforce ONB membership and many children, because of Gentile's entrance exams for secondary education, left school at the age of 11. In the universities, there was more contempt for Fascist ideals and even some resistance.

The indoctrination of adults

Mussolini also considered it important to influence the minds of adults and he attempted to achieve this by setting up organisations intended to control after-work activities. The *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND) was set up in May 1925 to organise concerts, dancing and summer holiday activities in most towns and villages. It also established a vast network of clubs, libraries and sports grounds. By the 1930s, the OND controlled all of Italy's football clubs, along with 1,350 brass bands and 8,000 libraries. Membership had risen from about 300,000 in 1926 to over 4 million by 1939. Overall, about 40 per cent of industrial workers and 25 per cent of peasants were members. Sport was given particular emphasis and Italy began to do well in international motor racing, cycling, athletics and football competitions. Despite the fact that OND's main function was to increase acceptance of Fascist ideology and that its activities did result in some popular support, local organisers tended to ignore this aspect of the organisation, preferring instead to concentrate on the various sporting and cultural activities.

Between 1931 and 1939, a concerted attempt was made to expand membership of the party and its associated organisations to increase further Fascist influence among the masses. This process of uniting and incorporating the people was known as *l'inquadramento*. From 1931 to 1937, during the worst of the depression, the Fascist Party established its own welfare agencies to provide extra relief and also began to establish women's *fasci* to help run these agencies. Although these new networks and agencies led to increased party contact, surveillance and control, party membership did not increase dramatically: according to some historians, only about 6 per cent of the Italian population belonged to the party by 1939.

The Romanita movement

Another propaganda ploy to build up the prestige and popularity of Mussolini and the Fascists was to link them to the greatness of Ancient Rome and its emperors. This became known as the Romanita movement. Fascist writers, artists and scholars began to portray Fascism as a revival of Roman civilisation. From 1926, Mussolini was increasingly referred to as *Il Duce* and was portrayed as a new Caesar. Mussolini also adopted the *fascies* – the bundle of rods and the axe used by the lictor (speaker of the Roman Senate) to symbolise authority, discipline and punishment – as the Fascist emblem and had it incorporated into the national flag. He claimed that even the word 'Fascist' was derived from *fascies* and not from *fascio* (see p. 98). The Fascists' stress on establishing a second empire was part of this attempt to establish links with Ancient Rome and was reflected in the infant school prayer in which children prayed for 'the resurrection of the Empire'. According to those in the Romanita movement, the Fascist 'new man' was a modern version of the idealised Roman centurion.

Fascism and foreign policy

Although historians generally agree that Mussolini always wanted to make Italy a great Mediterranean power, with a large African empire, there are important disagreements about his actual conduct of foreign policy. While some see him as essentially opportunistic and inconsistent, others believe his policy unfolded and altered according to a systematic policy, not according to circumstances.

The pursuit of diplomacy, 1922–35

Initially, Mussolini was not in a strong enough military or political position to achieve his aims by force. The new state of Yugoslavia seemed to be a potential bloc to Italian ambitions along the Adriatic while, more importantly, Britain and France controlled strategically important areas in the Mediterranean (Cyprus, Malta, Gibraltar and Corsica) and in Africa and the Middle East (the Suez Canal, Egypt, Palestine, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia). Although Mussolini's use of force in the Corfu Incident in 1923 (see p. 111) increased his support in Italy, it also showed him the relative weakness of Italy in the face of concerted Franco-British opposition.

For the next 11 years, Mussolini pursued a relatively passive foreign policy. He was often greatly influenced by the advice of traditional career diplomats. By April 1924, for example, he used a combination of diplomacy and unilateral action to force Yugoslavia to sign the Pact of Rome, which accepted Italian occupation of Fiume (a nationalist aim since 1919). At the time France, Yugoslavia's main ally, was too distracted by its occupation of the Ruhr to become involved. Mussolini continued to play the role of peaceful diplomat in 1925 by agreeing to the Locarno Pact in May and pursuing Italian interests in Albania by initially following a peaceful policy of economic penetration. In the following year, talks with Britain and France led to parts of Kenya and Egypt being handed over to the Italian colonies of Somaliland and Libya respectively.

Nevertheless, Mussolini was also using non-diplomatic methods to increase Italy's influence. He gave financial backing to an Albanian chieftain who seized power in 1929 and proclaimed himself King Zog; a treaty of friendship with Italy soon followed. He also increased his secret support of extreme nationalists in Germany, Bulgaria, Austria and Yugoslavia. Despite such activities, he signed the Kellogg–Briand Pact in 1928, which outlawed war. He signed the pact despite his growing dislike of French diplomatic moves in the Balkans (especially its alliance with Yugoslavia) which seemed, along with France's position in North Africa, to pose a threat to future Italian expansion. In particular, Mussolini objected to the Little Entente, which had been formed in 1927 by France, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania, as he wanted land that had been made part of Yugoslavia after the First World War but knew that France would make this difficult to achieve. By 1929 Mussolini had joined the calls for the 1919–20 peace treaties to be revised and was also plotting with Hungary to overthrow the king of Yugoslavia. At the 1930 international peace conference in London, his insistence that the Italian navy should be allowed to be as large as those possessed by Britain and France was not heeded.

In many ways, the period 1931–34 was a turning point. In 1931 Mussolini took particular note of the League of Nations' ineffectiveness in the face of Japanese aggression in Manchuria. Then in 1933 details of Italian arms deliveries to the right-wing *Heimwehr* in Austria and to the *Ustase* (a Croat terrorist group, based in Hungary, that wanted independence from Yugoslavia) came to light. These revelations disturbed Britain and France and caused the powers of the Little Entente to strengthen their ties with each other.

When Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933 Mussolini initially intended to play off Britain and France against Germany, despite Hitler being a fellow fascist. He tried to undermine the League of Nations by proposing a four-power pact between Italy, Germany, Britain and France. He put forward this proposal partly because he did not trust Hitler and his plans for expansion. He was particularly concerned over the Alto Adige area in north Italy because it contained many German-speakers; he also believed that Austria should be an Italian, not German, sphere of influence.

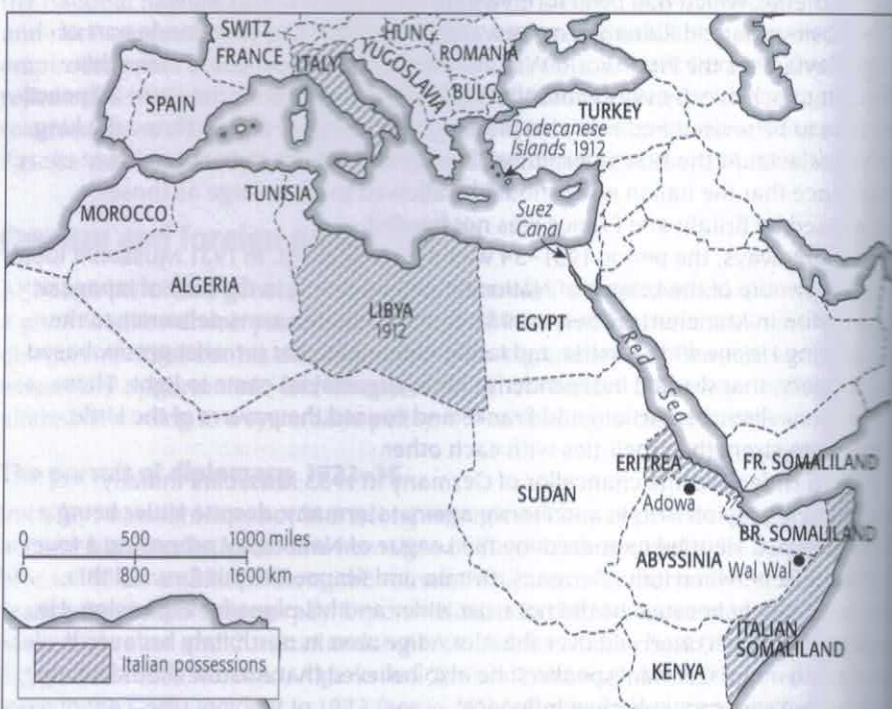
In September 1933 Mussolini signed a non-aggression pact with the USSR and in 1934 he attempted to establish closer relations with Austria and Hungary.

When Hitler attempted to take over Austria in July 1934 Mussolini acted swiftly to prevent this by placing Italian troops on the Austro-Italian border. In January 1935 he signed an accord with France and in April, alarmed by Hitler's attack on the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and his introduction of conscription in March, he formed the Stresa Front with Britain and France in order to block the threat of German expansion.

Mussolini also calculated that siding with Britain and France against Germany might persuade them to take a more favourable attitude to his planned invasion of Abyssinia. Despite supporting Abyssinian membership of the League of Nations in 1923 and signing a treaty of friendship with that country in 1928, Mussolini had been making plans for this invasion since 1923. In fact, the Italians had made attempts to expand into disputed border areas on the fringes of Eritrea and Somaliland as early as 1929.

Aggression and Fascist 'crusades', 1935-39

Mussolini's first imperial war began on 2 October 1935 when 500,000 Italian troops invaded Abyssinia. Mussolini was determined to add Abyssinia (one of only two African states still retaining their independence) to Italy's two existing colonies in East Africa: Eritrea and Somaliland, both of which bordered Abyssinia. The invading forces met very little serious resistance as the



Italy's empire in 1914. Note the position of Abyssinia in relation to the two Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa.

Abyssinians were often only armed with spears, while the Italians had tanks and bombers, and used poison gas and mass executions to end resistance.

Mussolini's calculations about likely British and French reactions seemed confirmed when they drew up the Hoare–Laval Pact, which offered Italy two-thirds of Abyssinia. However, this deal collapsed as a result of hostile public opinion; instead, the League of Nations decided to impose sanctions on Italy. Up until then, Hitler had been supporting Abyssinia, but he changed his policy when Britain and France began to oppose Italy's invasion. He also took advantage of this crisis to reoccupy the Rhineland. This move put Austria under greater pressure, but Italy was now less able to prevent a German takeover as a rift had opened between it and its former allies, Britain and France.

The League's half-hearted protests against the invasion had little effect, especially as the limited sanctions specifically excluded vital war supplies such as oil, coal, iron and steel. In addition, Britain did not close the Suez Canal to Italian ships, while Germany totally ignored all sanctions and became a major supplier of essential raw materials. Consequently, Italian forces were able to capture the capital, Addis Ababa, by May 1936. Abyssinia was then merged with the other Italian colonies to form Italian East Africa. Thus, Mussolini's first steps in carving out a new Roman Empire were successful. Yet, despite boosting his popularity at home, the conquest brought little benefit to Italy. Abyssinia had poor agricultural land and not much in the way of raw materials. Mussolini's other priorities and lack of investment meant that he failed to develop the oil that existed in Libya. Furthermore, he had alienated Britain and France and made Italy increasingly dependent on a Nazi Germany that he still did not really trust.

By January 1936 Mussolini had informed Hitler that he would not object to a German *Anschluss* with Austria and had hinted that he would not support any League of Nations actions should Hitler reoccupy the Rhineland. Then on 6 March he followed Hitler's lead and took Italy out of the League of Nations. This shift to a pro-German policy was confirmed in June 1936 when, almost immediately after the end of the Abyssinian war and before Italy had recovered from its losses, he agreed to join Hitler in intervening in the Spanish Civil War. The signing of the Rome–Berlin Axis in October 1936 confirmed their joint opposition to communism and they agreed to divide Europe into spheres of influence, with Italy to have the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

Soon Mussolini had sent over 70,000 Italian troops to Spain to help the right-wing military, headed by General Franco, overthrow the democratically elected Popular Front government. As Franco was supported by the pope, Mussolini found it relatively easy to persuade Italians of the necessity for intervention. In fact, Mussolini made much more of a commitment to Spain than either Hitler or Stalin. The overall cost of Italy's intervention was over 10 billion lire: Mussolini provided over 600 planes and nearly 1,000 tanks as well as over 90 warships; some 6,000 Italian soldiers were killed in the war. Yet, as with Abyssinia, this military adventure brought very few tangible results, apart from the islands of Mallorca and Menorca. Mussolini was also angered and embarrassed by the fact that Italian exiles, fighting as volunteers for the Popular Front government,

played a big part in the defeat of Italian troops at the battle of Guadalajara in March 1937. This victory encouraged anti-Fascists in Italy, which led to renewed efforts on the part of Mussolini's secret police to assassinate exiles abroad.

Mussolini noted the great reluctance of Britain and France to risk war over their intervention in Spain – to the extent that they refused to respond to the destruction of British and French merchant ships by Italian bombers and submarines. This led to a further widening of the breach between himself and his former Stresa Front allies. In contrast, Hitler was offering an alliance with Nazi Germany. The Rome-Berlin Axis between these two fascist regimes, signed in October 1936, marked a significant turning point in Italy's foreign and diplomatic relations. The two fascist dictators moved even closer together in November 1937 when Mussolini joined Germany and Japan in their Anti-Comintern Pact (formed originally in November 1936), which was intended to oppose communism and the Soviet Union.

The following year, this new fascist alliance enabled Hitler finally to carry out *Anschluss* with Austria in March, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. This time Mussolini just stood aside, despite the fact that Hitler had not given Mussolini the advance notice he had promised for any such invasion. It was perhaps for this reason that Mussolini signed a pact of friendship with Britain in April 1938 and resisted strong pressure from Hitler to sign a firm military alliance with Nazi Germany throughout this year. Although he tried to act as peacemaker between Germany, Britain and France at the Munich conference in September 1938, he also ordered the Italian navy to prepare for war against Britain in the Mediterranean. This was partly because he had finally been convinced at this conference that Britain and France would never take any firm action to curb German expansion. This belief was confirmed by their lack of response to Hitler's takeover of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, following his occupation of the Sudetenland in 1938. Consequently Mussolini decided it was time to act: in April 1939 he annexed Albania and turned it into an Italian protectorate. Ominously, Italian troops had difficulty in conquering even this small state.

Any wavering on Mussolini's part was ended in May 1939, when Mussolini and Hitler finally signed a formal military alliance known as the Pact of Steel. This committed Italy to fight on Germany's side, should war break out. Mussolini warned Hitler that Italy needed at least three years of peace in order to recover sufficiently from the effects of the Abyssinian and Spanish wars before becoming involved in another conflict. Mussolini was thus again taken by surprise when Hitler invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, so beginning the Second World War.

The impact of the Second World War, 1940-45

Despite Mussolini's boasts that Fascist Italy had enough planes to blot out the sun and 8 million reservists as well as 150 army divisions well supplied with modern weapons, the reality of Italian military strength was very different. By September 1939, Italy only had 10 divisions (about 700,000 men) ready to fight. Although the army eventually numbered about 3 million men, only about half of

them had rifles and many of these were old fashioned, as was their artillery. The army had about 1,500 armoured cars and light tanks, but fewer than 100 heavy tanks. Most of the airforce's 1,000 planes had unreliable radios and were generally inferior. In addition, Italy had no long-range bombers. Although the navy, which was supposed to control the Mediterranean, had new battleships, it had no aircraft carriers. Italy did have more submarines than Britain, but most of them were inferior and about 30 per cent were destroyed in the first three weeks of the war.

All of this was despite the fact that, between 1935 and 1939, the government had doubled its expenditure from 30 billion lire to 60 billion lire (increasing the national debt from 2 billion to 28 billion lire) and that about 30 per cent of this had been spent on the armed forces and the war industries. Italy's various wars from 1935 to 1939, including the recent invasion of Albania, had accounted for most of this spending. Overall, Italy had been spending about 11.8 per cent of its national income on the armed forces, compared to Germany's 12.9 per cent, France's 6.9 per cent and Britain's 5.5 per cent. There was also considerable lack of co-ordination between the armed forces, despite Mussolini being minister of all three of the branches and first marshal of the empire. Mussolini had allowed his generals to resist modernisation in order to retain their support for his regime.

Economic weaknesses

In addition to this lack of military preparedness, Italy lacked sufficient stocks of raw materials to sustain a major war. Mussolini's plans for autarky in coal, steel and oil had not been achieved. Because of Italy's weak economy – in 1939, Italy was only producing 2.4 million tonnes of steel, compared to Britain's 13.4 million tonnes and Germany's 22.5 million tonnes – Mussolini was dependent on Germany and the Axis-occupied territories for the coal, iron and steel needed to sustain the large armaments industry required for a major war. As the war began to go badly for Italy, Germany was increasingly reluctant to send these vital supplies to such an ineffective ally.

Economic planning was also weak: Italy's steel production actually declined by about 20 per cent in the period 1940–43, making it difficult to replace destroyed planes and tanks. Italy was unique in the fact that there was a general decrease of about 35 per cent in industrial production during the war. A similar problem existed with agriculture, which experienced a general decline in output of about 25 per cent. Wheat production declined by about 1.5 million tonnes as so many peasants were conscripted. This led to food shortages and a growing dissatisfaction with the Fascist regime. This failure, which meant that such items still needed to be imported, increased the pressure for conquests and empire, in order to gain *spazio vitale* (living space).

Early campaigns

Despite the various agreements signed between 1936 and 1939, Mussolini did not join Hitler in his attack on Poland. The commission on war production warned

that Italy would not be ready to wage war until 1949. The king, who recognised the weakness of the Italian armed forces, argued forcefully that Italy should delay its entry into the war. As a result of these warnings, Mussolini demanded from Germany huge supplies of strategic resources and when these were not forthcoming he declared that Italy could not participate in the war. Instead, Mussolini sent agricultural and industrial labourers to Germany to help Hitler's war machine. In the event, Italy stayed out of the war until 10 June 1940, at which point, believing that France was about to surrender to Germany's armies, Mussolini sent troops to seize land along the French Riviera. Again, the Italian army did not do well in this Alpine War, despite France being near total defeat. Italian troops were forced to withdraw without obtaining any land. To make matters worse, Hitler (who had expected Mussolini to attack the British in Malta) refused to let Italy have France's North African colonies, allowing Vichy France to retain them instead.

A frustrated Mussolini then looked for another easy victim: with Britain seemingly near defeat, Italian forces grabbed British Somaliland in August 1940 and attacked Egypt in September. Then in October (in part to block German influence in the Balkans, following Hitler's occupation of Romania), he ordered an invasion of Greece. Determined Greek resistance meant that this campaign also went badly. In Africa, meanwhile, over 100,000 Italians were captured by British forces in Egypt. In November 1940 the Italian navy was beaten by the British at the battle of Taranto; a further defeat, at Matapan in March 1941, left Britain in control of the Mediterranean.

The following year was even more disastrous for Italy: in Africa, Italian forces were defeated by Britain at Tobruk, followed by an invasion of Italian East Africa. By May over 250,000 Italian soldiers had been captured and Haile Selassie was restored as ruler of Abyssinia. German troops (which had already invaded Greece and Yugoslavia in April 1941 in order to assist the Italians) had to be diverted to help Italy retain control of Libya, its last remaining colony. Mussolini, embarrassed by these failures and suspicious that Hitler might now ignore previous agreements about spheres of influence, decided to send Italian troops to help in the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941. Initially, some 60,000 troops were provided, but the total soon rose to over 250,000. He also sent military equipment, which Italy could ill afford.

The emergence of opposition at home, 1941–43

One result of these setbacks was the first signs of internal opposition, marked by the outbreak of some strikes in 1941. By this time Germany was taking more from Italy than it was giving. About 50 per cent of the 350,000 workers sent to Germany by Mussolini were skilled and Italy was still supplying Germany with coal and iron. Food supplied to Germany had led to real food shortages in Italy. As a result, rationing was introduced in 1941 – the ration of 150 grams of bread per person was the lowest in Europe after the USSR and led to the growth of the black market. Despite all this, Mussolini was persuaded by Hitler to declare war on the USA in December 1941.

In 1942 Axis troops in Africa led by Rommel had some initial successes. After the battle of El Alamein in October 1942 and the Allied Operation Torch, however, Rommel was forced to retreat in the face of a combined force of British and US troops. Towards the end of 1942, Allied bombing of Italy was increased. Poor Italian anti-aircraft defences resulted in much destruction; as production was stepped up to compensate for these losses, hours of work and factory discipline were increased. This resulted in a great wave of strikes in March 1943.

The military situation also deteriorated during 1943. In Africa, Axis troops were forced to surrender in May (resulting in the loss of Libya), while in July the Allies invaded Sicily and began bombing Rome. The invading Allies met only token resistance as, by then, many Italians blamed Mussolini for the defeats and had also come to dislike the German armies that had begun moving into Italy. Many Italians, including the industrialists and the lower middle classes who had been the backbone of Fascism, had by now become disillusioned by the government's inefficiency and corruption and by nepotism involving the family of Mussolini's current mistress, Clara Petacci. Mussolini tried to deal with this disaffection between February and April 1943 by sacking or demoting several ministers and high-ranking members of the Fascist Party, including Grandi, Ciano and Bottai. However, this only led to plots against him, as many were critical of his strategy and especially of his closeness to Nazi Germany. These Fascists now wanted him removed from power. Another faction, which included Farinacci and Scorza, the new party secretary, wanted to forge closer links with Germany.

Mussolini's fall, July 1943

The setbacks of the summer of 1943 finally led to a coup against Mussolini on 24 July 1943, when the Fascist Grand Council voted 19 to 7 to remove him from power. On 25 July the king formally ordered Mussolini to resign. He was then arrested and imprisoned. The ease with which this happened underlines the fact that Mussolini had never been able to impose a totalitarian regime on Italy. Mussolini was replaced by Marshal Badoglio, who announced Italy's surrender to the Allies on 8 September 1943.

The Italian Social Republic

In September 1943, Mussolini was rescued by German paratroopers, who took him to Germany, where Hitler persuaded him to set up a new Fascist state in the north-east of Italy, which was not yet under Allied occupation. This Italian Social Republic (soon contemptuously known as the Salò Republic after the town in which Mussolini had his headquarters) was little more than a German puppet state, despite Mussolini's claims to be returning to the social idealism of his original fascism. He issued a Socialisation Law in February 1944, in which a form of nationalisation of firms (known as socialisation) replaced corporatism. In practice, as the German army and the SS controlled the area, the important decisions were taken by Rahn, the German ambassador, and by SS General Wolff. This area experienced much SS and Gestapo brutality – especially against

Jewish people – and thousands of Italian men were sent to Germany as forced labour. At the same time, Fascist extremists made a determined effort to round up the plotters of July 1943. Several were eventually captured and executed in the Salò Republic, including Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law.

The end

During 1944 the Allies continued to push up into Italy and in April 1945, when they captured Bologna, the Germans decided to pull out of Italy. Mussolini tried to flee with them, but was recognised by a group of Italian partisans and was arrested on 27 April. The following day he was taken by another group of communist-led partisans and he and his mistress were shot. Fifteen other Fascist leaders and ministers, including Farinacci and Starace, were also executed. Their bodies were hung, upside down, outside a garage in Milan, where a group of partisans had been executed by the Germans for resistance activities.