

## 2 Ideology and the nature of the state

### Timeline

**1914 Jun** 'Red Week'

**Aug** Fasci di Azione Rivoluzionaria set up

**Nov** founding of *Il Popolo d'Italia*

**1915 May** 'Radiant Days of May'

**1917 Nov** *Manifesto to the Nation* published

**1918 Jul** Mussolini formally renounces socialism

**1919 Mar** formation of Fascio di Combattimento in Milan

**Jun** *Fascist Programme* published

**Nov** first use of proportional representation in elections; no fascists elected

**1921 May** Giolitti forms electoral bloc with fascists; Mussolini and 34 other fascists elected

**Oct** formation of National Fascist Party

**1922 Sep** Mussolini's speech in Udine

**Oct** March on Rome; Mussolini becomes prime minister

**1923 Dec** Chigi Palace Pact

**1925** *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals* published; Vidoni Palace Pact

**1926 Jul** Ministry of Corporations established

**Oct** Turati replaces Farinacci as party secretary; Rocco's Law

**1927 Apr** Charter of Labour introduced

**1928 May** new electoral law introduced

**1930 Mar** National Council of Corporations established

**1933** *The Doctrine of Fascism* published

**1938** Chamber of Fasci and Corporations replaces Chamber of Deputies

### Key questions

- What role did ideology play in Mussolini's rise to power?
- To what extent was Mussolini a fascist?
- What was the nature of Italy's fascist state?

### Overview

- Many of the (often contradictory) ideas that eventually formed fascist ideology in Italy had their origins in 19th-century thought.
- Mussolini's own political views covered the entire political spectrum, from revolutionary socialism before 1914, to nationalism and then to fascism by 1919.
- In the early days of fascism, Mussolini placed much more emphasis on action than on ideology. From 1919 to 1922, the more radical elements of fascist programmes and policies were increasingly moderated.
- After he became prime minister in 1922, Mussolini continued to distance himself from early fascism.
- From 1926 onwards, the more radical members of the PNF were purged, and the party came increasingly under Mussolini's personal control.
- Even the creation of the corporate state – although apparently a concession to party 'radicals' – was carried out in a way that emphasised the power of the Italian state and of employers over employees.
- During the 1930s, Mussolini made efforts to issue clearer statements of fascist ideology. However, by this point, Italy had become a personal rather than a party dictatorship.

### What role did ideology play in Mussolini's rise to power?

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

## SOURCE A

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

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

## Was fascism an ideology?

Many historians argue that there is no coherent and unified ideological root for fascism, in the way that there is for Marxism, for example (see pages 10–11 of the coursebook). Mussolini did not make a concerted effort to define the basic beliefs of his movement until after he became prime minister. In fact, it was not until 1925 that Mussolini began to draw up a clear statement of fascist doctrine. Under the leadership of the philosopher **Giovanni Gentile**, over 200 intellectuals met in Bologna and put together the *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals*.

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

## SOURCE B

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

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

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

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

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

**Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944)**

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



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

### **Mussolini's early political views**

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

At this time, Mussolini opposed militarism and Italian imperialism, supporting international solidarity instead. In 1911, during violent demonstrations against the Italian war on Libya, he was imprisoned for his part in attempting to provoke an insurrection in protest against the war. On his release in 1912, he became editor of the Socialist Party's newspaper *Avanti!* in Milan. His articles advocated revolutionary violence against the liberal state. He also helped expel pro-royalists and reformists from the Socialist Party. However, Mussolini was not a Marxist, and his 'socialism' was largely anti-clerical republicanism. Syndicalism and anarchism (see page 10) were far less important aspects of his 'ideology'.

#### **SOURCE C**

*Comments by Angelica Balabanoff, a Marxist who had an affair with Mussolini, and who had some influence on his ideas in the early years.*

I soon saw that he [Mussolini] knew little of history, of economics or of Socialist theory ... Mussolini's radicalism and anti-clericalism were more a reflection of his early environment and his own rebellious egoism than the product of understanding and conviction.

*Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. Fascist Italy. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 39.*

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

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

Despite advocating intervention in the war, Mussolini did not volunteer for the army. He was conscripted in September 1915, and invalided out of the army in 1917, after an accident during a training exercise. He then resumed his role as editor of *Il Popolo*, blaming the liberal government for military incompetence and calling for a dictator to take charge of the war effort. His *Manifesto to the Nation*, published in November 1917 after the defeat at Caporetto (see page 7), called for a 'national union' to work for victory in the war.

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

## Fascist beliefs in 1919

Having already moved from his pre-war opposition to nationalism and imperialism to a pro-war expansionist position after 1915, Mussolini's political 'ideology' continued to shift. As seen in Unit 1, in March 1919 Mussolini set up a *Fascio di Combattimento* in Milan. The founder members of this group later became known as the **Fascists of the First Hour**. Soon, over 70 such *fasci* had been established in northern and central Italy. Their *Fascist Programme*, published in June, was an incoherent mixture of left-wing and right-wing policies. It was designed to hold these very different groups together, and to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

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

### SOURCE D

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Fact

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

### Questions

How do you account for the differences between the two statements of fascist programmes and policies in Source D (on page 21) and Source E opposite? What impact do you think Source E might have had on the conservative élites and classes?

### SOURCE E

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

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

Socialists ... we want to remove from the state all its economic attributes.

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

### SOURCE F

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

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

## Fascist 'ideology', 1921–22

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

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

## Squadristo

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

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

## To what extent was Mussolini a fascist?

Having looked at Mussolini's views and his movement's actions in the previous pages, it should now be possible to assess to what extent Mussolini himself can be described as a fascist. To draw any conclusions, it is necessary to examine how historians have attempted to define fascism, and to identify the movement's core beliefs. In particular, it is necessary to investigate what has been called 'generic fascism' – and how Mussolini's views relate to such academic definitions.

## Generic fascism

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

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

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

### Proto-fascism

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

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

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

### Activity

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

*Fascist Blackshirts from a Fascio di Combattimento (battle group)*



**SOURCE G**

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

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

**Question**

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

**SOURCE H**

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

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

**Activity**

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

**What was the nature of Italy's fascist state?**

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

**SOURCE I**

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

Extracts from the 1935 edition of *The Doctrine of Fascism*. pp. 14 and 41.

Source I on page 25 makes extravagant claims as to the nature of the state that Mussolini attempted to establish after 1922. However, such claims were often not an accurate reflection of reality. Nonetheless, by December 1924, the crisis following the murder of Giacomo Matteotti (see page 36) led some more militant fascists to present Mussolini with an ultimatum – establish a fascist dictatorship, or they would replace him with someone who would. After some hesitation, Mussolini agreed to declare himself dictator, but only on his own terms. He was determined to enforce a dictatorship that would be independent of the *ras*. The authoritarian regime that Mussolini presided over between 1925 and 1945 was thus a personal rather than a Fascist Party dictatorship.

*Mussolini and Catholic priests; as Mussolini's rule progressed he won over Church leaders, largely through the Lateran Agreements of 1929 (see page 58)*



## **The Fascist Party**

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

However, Mussolini did instigate a purge of the judiciary, and many judges were sacked for lack of loyalty or for following an overly independent line. Mussolini frequently intervened in legal cases, and imprisonment without trial was

common. The chief of police was another position filled by career politicians rather than fascists. In the provinces, it was the prefects (the senior civil servants who ran the administration, suppressed 'subversives' and controlled the police) who appointed the *podesta*. The prefects had to be loyal to the government, but also to the local élites. Between 1922 and 1929, only 29 of the 86 new *podesta* appointed were fascists. Most were career civil servants.

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

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

## The 'taming' of the PNF

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

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

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

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

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

### Fact

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

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

### Augusto Turati (1888–1955)

Turati was an ex-syndicalist, an irredentist, a supporter of Italy's entry into the First World War, and a journalist. He joined Mussolini's Fascio di Combattimento in 1920, and became the PNF boss of Brescia. He was National Party secretary from 1926 to 1930. His purge of party members affected both provincial and non-provincial branches. In 1927, for example, 7000 of Rome's 31,000 members were purged. In his first year as party secretary, Turati expelled 30,000 members, and by 1929, that number had risen to over 50,000. Later, he opposed Italy's entry into the Second World War, and did not support Mussolini's Salò Republic.

**Edmondo Rossoni (1884–1965)** Rossoni was initially a revolutionary syndicalist, who was imprisoned for his activities in 1908. He became a socialist and then a nationalist, joining Mussolini’s PNF in 1921. Rossoni was the most prominent of the fascist labour leaders and, as head of the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates, he wanted genuine workers’ representatives who would share power with employers. After his dismissal in 1928, he continued in fascist politics, serving as under-secretary to the president of the Fascist Grand Council from 1932 to 1935. Later, he supported Dino Grandi’s coup and voted against Mussolini in 1943.



## The corporate state

Those fascists who believed that their movement was a ‘third way’ between capitalism and communism favoured the creation of a corporate state. Sometimes known as the corporative state, the aim of corporativism was to replace the politics of traditional parliamentary democracy with that of corporations representing the nation’s various economic sectors. These corporations, each with equal representation for employers and employees, were supposed to overcome class conflict. By thus avoiding strikes and other labour disputes, the corporate state would instead give prime consideration to the interests of the nation. Although there would be elements of increased state control, there was no thought of eradicating private ownership.

### SOURCE J

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

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

## The fascist syndicates

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

However, this ‘leftist’ fascist aspiration – unlike their attacks on the traditional trade unions – was opposed by the Confindustria, the organisation that represented the main industrialists in Italy. In December 1923, when Mussolini had been prime minister for 14 months, the Chigi Palace Pact was made. In this agreement, the industrialists promised to co-operate with the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates, but they insisted on maintaining their own independent organisations.

Despite this, many employers were not prepared to make any significant concessions to workers, and this provoked a series of strikes in 1925. The resulting Vidoni Palace Pact confirmed that the Confindustria and the Confederation of

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

## The corporations

Following these developments, in July 1926 Mussolini established a Ministry of Corporations, with himself as the minister. Each corporation was made up of representatives of employers and workers of the same economic or industrial sector (e.g. mining), with the state's representatives acting as referees and final adjudicators. In practice, this new ministry was run by the under-secretary, **Giuseppe Bottai**, who produced the Charter of Labour (written mainly by Rocco) in April 1927. This document guaranteed fair judgement of labour disputes and promised to carry out social reforms such as improved health care and accident insurance schemes (although none of these measures had the force of law).

In May 1927, Mussolini delivered a speech in which he claimed that a corporate state had been established. He even promised that the corporations would elect half the members of the next Chamber of Deputies. In May the following year, a new electoral law was passed – a compromise between party and syndicalist views. It allowed for 1000 names to be recommended to the Fascist Grand Council, which would select 400 as candidates for the March 1929 election.

As Mussolini feared, the corporations weakened the fascist syndicates. In 1928, Rossoni was dismissed and the Confederation of Fascist Syndicates was abolished. In 1929, Bottai took over as minister of corporations and, in March 1930, he set up the National Council of Corporations (NCC), which represented the seven largest corporations. In 1932, Mussolini resumed control of the Ministry of Corporations, and the number of corporations slowly grew, reaching 22 by 1934.

Despite all the reorganisation, Mussolini usually made the important decisions himself. In particular, most of the decisions on policies to deal with the effects of the Great Depression (see page 40) had nothing to do with the corporations – including the decision to cut wages. Furthermore, as most trade unionists experienced in industrial negotiations and disputes were socialists or communists (and were therefore either dead, in prison or in exile), the employers had a greater influence in the corporations. Many were 'tame' members of the fascist syndicates, or even middle-class careerists. In addition, the employers were nearly always supported by the three government-appointed Fascist Party members, who were supposed to remain neutral.

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

### Giuseppe Bottai (1895–1959)

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

### Fact

In the March 1929 election, electors could only vote 'yes' or 'no' to the Grand Council's list. Of the original 1000 names recommended by syndicates, employers' associations, ex-servicemen and a few other groups, the employers got 125 of their nominees 'elected', while the workers' syndicates only managed 89. Mussolini employed his usual methods of 'persuasion', resulting in a 90% turnout, with 98.3% voting in favour of the list presented to them. One of the few politicians to speak out against the new electoral law was Giolitti.

### Historical debate

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

### Was Mussolini an all-powerful dictator?

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

#### SOURCE K

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

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

#### SOURCE L

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

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



### Theory of knowledge

#### History and propaganda

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

#### SOURCE M

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

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

## End of unit activities

- 1 Carry out further research on the thinkers and ideas that contributed to the development of fascism. Then produce a poster to summarise this information.
- 2 Draw up a chart to show the extent to which Mussolini's fascist ideology seemed to offer:
  - a new form of society
  - a new economic and social structure
  - new values.
- 3 After 1924, Mussolini made increasing efforts to reduce the influence of the more radical sections of his party. List the ways in which he did this, and the possible reasons for his actions.
- 4 Find out more about the various steps in the creation of the corporate state in Italy from 1926 to 1932. Then write a few paragraphs to explain why the more radical sections of the PNF, such as Edmondo Rossoni, were disappointed by these developments.

### Discussion point

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