

How great a challenge did the First World War and Socialism pose to the Liberal state?

'Radiant May', 1915 – Italy goes to war!

SOURCE 2.1 King Victor Emmanuel III waves the Italian flag in celebration of Italy's entry into the war, May 1915



SOURCE 2.2 The nationalist poet d'Annunzio, May 1915 (see page 27)

Companions, here is the dawn. Our vigil is over. Our gaiety begins ... After so much wavering the incredible has happened. We shall now fight our war, and blood will flow from the veins of Italy. We are the last to enter the struggle but will be among the first to find glory. Here is the dawn. Let us kiss one another and take leave ...

You may find it amazing that anyone could greet Italy's declaration of war so enthusiastically. However, even if d'Annunzio had had our benefit of hindsight in seeing the mass slaughter the war caused it is unlikely he would have taken a different view. To d'Annunzio and others like him this was an exhilarating moment and an opportunity for Italy to assert itself and at last win glory.

When war broke out in Europe in July 1914 thousands of Italians shared d'Annunzio's excitement, but many others were bitterly opposed. The politically aware classes engaged in heated debate over what Italy should do. A large vocal minority favoured entering the war; most supported joining Britain and France, while a few favoured Italy's ally, Austria. Large crowds of noisy NATIONALISTS held meetings in the piazzas (squares), demanding that Italy join the conflict. Although the majority in Parliament favoured peace, the King and some ministers opened negotiations with both sides, to see who would offer the best terms. In April 1915 the government made the secret Treaty of London with Britain and France (see page 26), and the next month declared war on Austria.

Mussolini later claimed this was the founding moment of Fascism. In Mussolini's mind a group of heroic nationalist Italians, following his lead, had forced a dithering government to act to assert Italy's nationhood.

This chapter considers the extra strains caused by the First World War, both at the time and afterwards, and assesses how these weakened Liberal Italy. It then examines how the fears aroused by the growth of SOCIALISM encouraged the ELITE to support Fascism, and how Socialist weakness helped Mussolini and the Fascists gain power.

CHART 2A CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2 How great a challenge did the First World War and Socialism pose to the Liberal state?

- A** How was Italy affected by the First World War 1914–18? (pp. 23–25)
- B** Why were the post-war years so turbulent? (pp. 26–30)
- C** Could there have been a Socialist revolution in Italy 1919–20? (pp. 31–34)
- D** Review: How great a challenge did the First World War and Socialism pose to the Liberal state? (p. 35)

A How was Italy affected by the First World War 1914–18?

■ Talking point

What did Trotsky mean? Can you think of other examples to support his assertion?

‘War is the locomotive of history.’ Trotsky’s description was certainly true in Italy at this time. The all-pervading effects of the First World War were to open up new opportunities and experiences, and generate new ambitions and fears among sections of the community. The war was to divide Italy deeply, to lead Mussolini to break with his socialist past, and to create the conditions which allowed the Fascists to gain power.

The mass MOBILISATION of twentieth-century warfare ensured that nearly everyone in Italy was affected in one way or another by involvement in the war. At the front we can find groups who gloried in warfare and the new-found camaraderie of the trenches (trincerismo); others suffered demoralisation and mutilation. On the Home Front some people were to make financial gains from the war, while others were left feeling exploited.

Two key battles

When you think of the First World War, you think of the horror of the trenches on the Western Front, and perhaps the fighting on the Eastern Front in Russia. But there was also a Southern Front, where Italy faced Austria for three years. For most of that time, this was a stalemate, but there were two key battles that influenced Italy’s history.

In October 1917 Italy suffered a major defeat at Caporetto, partly attributed to low morale. The government responded by promising major reforms when the war was over. So expectations were raised.

In October 1918, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was on the verge of disintegration, Italy won a victory at Vittorio Veneto. It was a far smaller battle than Caporetto, but Italians remembered this victory rather than the defeat, and considered they deserved major rewards for their success. So, once again, expectations were raised.

■ Activity

- 1 Write out a list, from the choices below, of those developments which you think might have occurred during the war. Check your responses when you discover what actually happened (see pages 23–25).

Consider whether any of these developments would be affected by whether the war was going well or badly.

Political developments

- Increased power for the King and government
- Greater role for Parliament debating issues
- Upsurge in nationalism
- Increase in strikes and discontent
- Major social reforms
- Government promises of reforms once the war is over

Economic and social developments

- Growth of heavy industry
- Expansion of small, luxury trades
- Increased taxation
- Falling government debt
- Inflation
- Increased foreign trade
- Increased unemployment
- Increased demand for labour
- Women gaining more opportunities
- Closer ties between the state and big business
- Increased wages (in real terms)
- Growth in trade unionism

Now read pages 23–25 about Italy’s experience of war.

- 2 ‘Italy made a major contribution to the war.’

‘Italy’s performance in the war was embarrassing.’

As you work through this section, note down evidence that supports each of these statements.

SOURCE 2.3 FUTURISTS at war. Futurists like Marinetti (seen here standing on the left) welcomed the war: 'We glorify war as the sole hygiene of the world ... the world needs only heroism ... an aesthetic [theory of beauty] of violence and blood'



The soldiers

Most of the soldiers were southern peasant CONSCRIPTS who did not understand why the war was being fought. Most skilled industrial workers were required to stay in their factories to produce war equipment. Soldiers were bitter about the 'shirkers' left at home. Low rations (600 grams bread, 250 grams meat, and 150 grams of pasta a day), low pay ($\frac{1}{2}$ lira a day to each soldier, and the same to his family), and the lack of modern equipment undermined morale. Thousands were killed by cholera, typhus and frostbite.

SOURCE 2.4 Police with captured deserters. Around 290,000 soldiers were court-martialled, 4000 sentenced to death, and 750 shot



CHART 2B Italy at war 1915-18

Summary of the war effort

Military

- Five million conscripted
- Generally trench stalemate
- Eleven offensives in two and a half years
- Maximum advance twelve miles
- 600,000 Italians killed
- 1,000,000 wounded

Political

- Government powers increased
- Parliament was just a rubber stamp
- Close state-industry links
- Caporetto led to reorganisation and promise of major social reforms
- PSI advocated 'neither support nor sabotage'
- Pope criticised 'useless slaughter'

Economic

- State spent 41 billion lire
- National debt
 - 1914 16 billion lire
 - 1919 85 billion lire
- Price index 1914 = 100
- 1918 = 413

Major industries saw massive expansion, e.g. Fiat, Ansaldo (steel)

Social

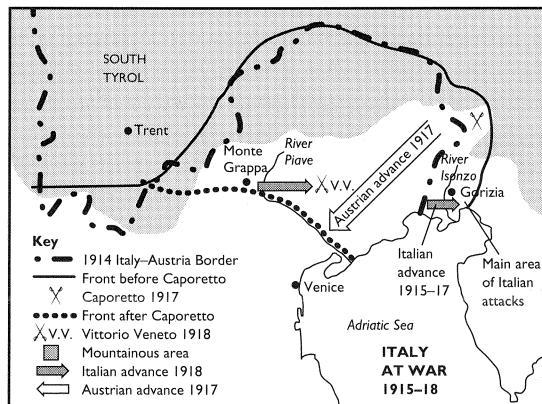
- Strict discipline in war industries
- Long hours: up to 75 hours a week
- Increased employment of women
- Real wages fell approximately 25%
- Rents frozen
- Some peasants paid off debts
- Bread riots, Summer 1917: 50 killed

SOURCE 2.5 Mussolini on trincerismo (the camaraderie of the trenches)

The war had taught us one lesson, the great community of the front. All class differences disappeared under its spell. There was only one people, no individuals. Common suffering and common peril had welded us together.

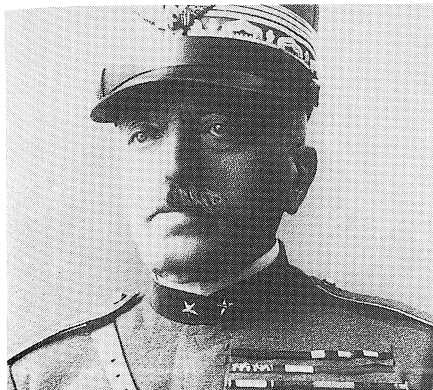
Timeline of the war

August	1914	Great Powers go to war. Italy remains neutral.
May	1915	Italy joins war on the side of the Allies.
October	1917	Italian army badly defeated at Caporetto
October	1918	Italians triumph over the exhausted Austrians at Vittorio Veneto.
November	1918	Armistice signed
September	1919	Peace terms with Austria finalised at the Treaty of St Germain



Comparative war costs

Country	Total mobilised forces (millions)	Deaths
Italy	5.6m	600,000
France	8.2m	1,500,000
British Empire	9.5m	1,000,000
Russia	13.0m	1,700,000
USA	3.8m	116,000
Germany	13.2m	1,950,000
Austria-Hungary	9.0m	1,050,000
Turkey	2.8m	325,000



General Cadorna

The General

General Cadorna was the autocratic, stubborn leader of the Italian army from 1915 to 1917. He implemented a series of massed infantry attacks against entrenched positions and ordered that not a yard gained should be given up. Cadorna was scornful of the soldiers' welfare. He sacked 217 generals; banned politicians from the war zone; and blamed failings on the weak government and its toleration of subversives (people plotting to overthrow the government). He was sacked after the defeat at Caporetto.

Historians assess the impact of the war

SOURCE 2.6 P. Morgan, *Italian Fascism 1919–45*, 1995, p. 7

Italy's involvement in the First World War was the first great collective and national experience for literally millions of Italians, especially the largely peasant conscript army. But, partly because of the imperfect nation forming since unification, and partly because of the way Italy entered the war in 1915 and the way the war was conducted, the Great War did not bring about national integration and unity. There was no . . . temporary national and political truce for the duration of the war. Italy's wartime experience was extremely divisive; it increased popular alienation from the LIBERAL parliamentary state while heightening expectations of transforming it. Italy's national war was 'waged in an atmosphere of civil war'.

SOURCE 2.7 Clark, p. 200

The Italians had been divided before, but by November 1919 they were more divided than ever: 'combatants' against 'shirkers', peasants against workers, patriots against defeatists. No conceivable form of government could suit them all.

The war left other major legacies. They included a thirst for justice ('land for the peasants') and a transformed industrial economy. The war also produced tens of thousands of new officers, drunk with patriotism and greedy to command. They had won the war, and did not intend to let anyone forget it.

SOURCE 2.8 D. Mack Smith, *Italy, A Modern History*, 1969, p. 313

The final figure for the cost of the whole war had been 148 billion lire, that is to say twice the sum of all government expenditure between 1861 and 1913.

This total is a symbol for an enormous consumption of energy and natural resources, in return for which Italy obtained little joy and much grief. A great deal of idealism had gone into the war on Italy's part, and much elevated patriotism, but one need not look many years beyond 1918 to see that it had been one of the great disasters of her history. [As a result] Italy suffered 25 years of revolution and tyranny.

SOURCE 2.9 M. Blinkhorn, *Mussolini and Fascist Italy*, 1984, p. 9

War also brought profound changes to Italy herself. Most significant was the rapid growth and increased concentration of those industries most closely linked with war production: metallurgy, engineering, shipbuilding and automobiles. Any suggestion of a lasting boom was nevertheless misleading, for Italy's war machine consumed industrial products of a kind and at a rate no peacetime economy was likely to match. A distorted economy potentially short of raw materials, export outlets and a healthy domestic market was a sure recipe for post-war difficulties. Returning soldiers likely then to be the sufferers would scarcely be mollified [feel calmed or compensated] by the sight of those who had got rich while they were at the front: not only financial and industrial profiteers but also ambitious peasants who had seized opportunities to buy more land. Meanwhile the political situation looked more and more discouraging . . . To many Italians, Liberal government was coming to seem ineffectual and irrelevant.

FOCUS ROUTE

- Using pages 23–25, write a summary of the main effects of the war on Italy 1914–18. Classify your notes under these headings: military, political, economic and social.
- This section opened with d'Annunzio's view of the 'new dawn'. Marinetti and Mussolini remained enthusiasts for war (see Sources 2.3 and 2.5). Other soldiers hated their experience of it. How can these differences be explained?

Learning trouble spot

Which peace treaty? What did Italy gain?

Two aspects of the peace treaty often confuse students. First there is the problem of names! The various treaties were named after the chateaux outside Paris where the negotiations took place. The peace treaty most affecting Italy was called the Treaty of St Germain and was signed with Austria on 10 September 1919. Consequently you would be wrong to refer to the Versailles 'Treaty', when discussing Italy's concerns. It would, however, be all right to refer to the Versailles 'Settlement' because this term covers all the treaties signed at the end of the war.

More significantly, students often think that Italy did not receive Italia Irredenta at the peace settlement because so much emphasis is placed on the 'mutilated' victory. A glance at the map (Source 2.10) shows that all of Italy's nationalist claims to Italia Irredenta were met, as it gained Trentino, South Tyrol and Istria. In fact, Italy got more than was strictly justified on nationalist grounds. Around 200,000 German-speaking Austrians now lived in land ruled by Italy. The principle of self-determination did not apply to them, partly, it seems, because they belonged to a defeated power, but also in order to give Italy the security of the natural frontier of the Brenner Pass. Italy also gained 250,000 Slavs in the mixed territory of Istria.

Despite these gains, most Italians felt bitter, as they had not gained what had been promised in the Treaty of London. This was partly because Dalmatia was now claimed by the new Yugoslav state, which was justified on the grounds of self-determination.

Most historians consider that in the circumstances Italy got fair rewards at the peace conference, but what matters is how people felt at the time. Millions of Italians considered Italy had been cheated.

B Why were the post-war years so turbulent?

The end of the war brought no respite for Liberal Italy. The regime was soon beset with difficulties from all sides. You can find tasks to guide you through this section in the Focus Route on page 30.

Was Italy's victory in the First World War 'mutilated'?

Italy was on the winning side in the First World War. However, one of the great claims of the Fascist movement was to be that the government mishandled the war and then 'lost' the peace. How true was this claim?

In 1915 Italy had been secretly promised major territorial gains, mainly at the expense of the then Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, this was during the era of secret diplomacy and Great Power land grabbing. By 1919 the world had changed. The United States had entered the war in 1917 and saw it as a struggle for DEMOCRACY. Europe was to be rebuilt using President Wilson's FOURTEEN POINTS, the most important of which was national self-determination.

Italy was thwarted in some of its territorial and colonial ambitions. During the peace negotiations the Prime Minister Orlando walked out in protest at the terms offered to Italy. It had no effect, and after the final peace settlement the Liberal government was saddled with the blame for the 'mutilated victory'. Many Italians now felt another grievance at their limited rewards for their 600,000 war dead, massive debts and a huge increase in the cost of living.

SOURCE 2.10 Italy's territorial gains

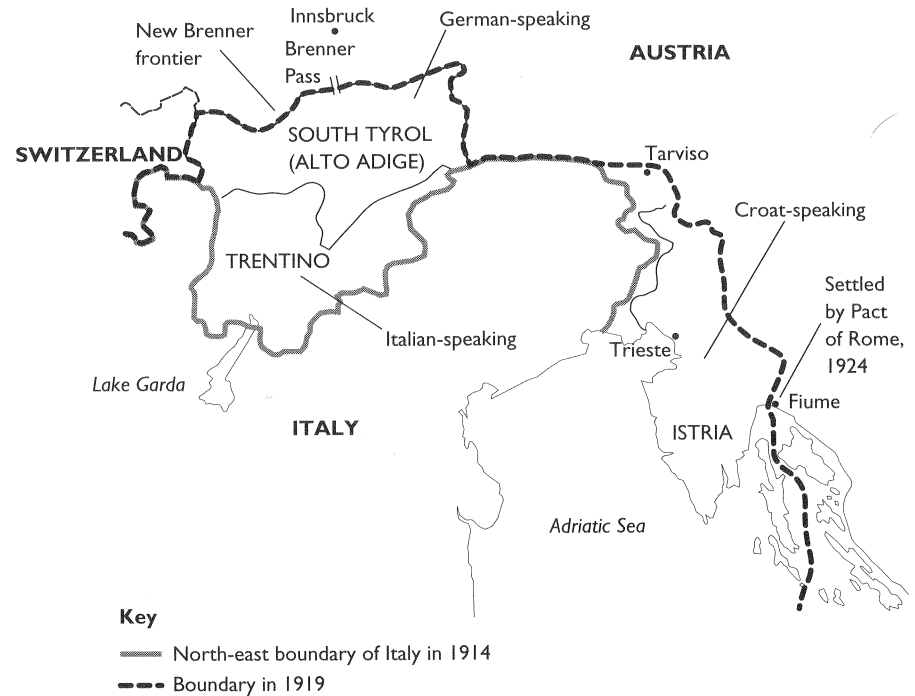
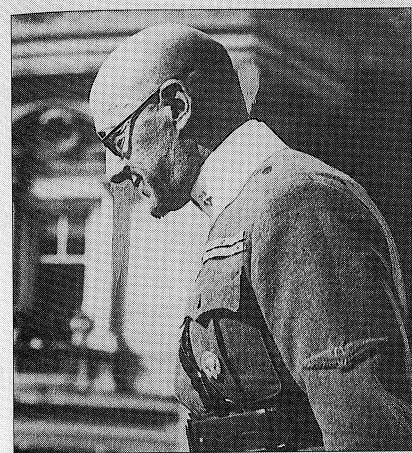


CHART 2C Italy and the peace settlement

What Italy claimed	Promised at Treaty of London, May 1915?	Did Italy receive it in the St Germain Treaty, 1919?
South Tyrol	yes	yes
Trentino	yes	yes
Istria	yes	yes
Fiume	no	no
Dalmatia	yes	no
Colonies	yes	no



Gabriele d'Annunzio

Gabriele d'Annunzio, 1865–1938

- As a student he wrote poems and novels
- 1897 he was elected as an extreme RIGHT-WING candidate
- 1900 he briefly joined the extreme LEFT WING of the PSI, then he became a nationalist
- 1914–15 powerful INTERVENTIONIST speaker
- Volunteered for army aged 52
- August 1918 he dropped leaflets from plane over Vienna
- 1922 Possible rival nationalist leader; after Mussolini's appointment, he concentrated on writing
- 1957 he was made President of Royal Academy of Arts

What did d'Annunzio and Fiume give to Fascism?

- Heroic speeches to mass audiences from his balcony
- Rhythmic war cries, which were often incomprehensible, e.g. Eja, Eja, Alala
- His followers wore blackshirts, adopted the skull and cross-bones, and used castor oil to humiliate opponents (see page 51)
- The Roman straight-arm salute
- The song 'Giovinezza' ('Youth')
- Plans for a new organisation of all producers in a corporative state (see page 135)
- Spoke of 'our Mediterranean', and 'Italy or Death'
- Discussed a march on Rome
- Overall, d'Annunzio put on a great display, and made great claims for his mini-state; much of this was make-believe

How significant was d'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume?

The failure of the Italian government to gain Italy's expected rewards was highlighted by dramatic events that occurred at the Adriatic port of Fiume. Italy claimed the city, but was not granted it. The nationalist poet d'Annunzio seized Fiume and ruled it for a year. D'Annunzio's seizure of Fiume is a potentially confusing incident which is often given a lot of stress, but it can also be seen as an eccentric side-show. Was it really significant?

The events

Fiume was a major Adriatic port. Until 1919 it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The majority of its inhabitants were Italian, but the suburbs and hinterland were mainly Croat. It had not been mentioned in the Treaty of London. After the war was won, Italian nationalists clamoured for the port to be part of Italy, but in 1918 it was occupied by Allied troops. The Italian government failed to gain Fiume at the Versailles Settlement. It became an illustration of what d'Annunzio described as the 'mutilated victory'.

In September 1919 d'Annunzio, at the head of 300 ex-soldiers, seized control of the city. The Allied troops left, although some Italian troops who supported d'Annunzio remained. The Italian government did nothing, reinforcing the image of both its weakness, and its willingness to submit to violence. D'Annunzio theatrically kissed the Italian flag and proclaimed: 'In this mad, vile world, Fiume is the symbol of liberty.' His new state has been described by the historian Mitchell as a 'mixture of MANIFESTOS, harangues, fireworks, pageants, military concerts and overstretched nerves'. It was a true 'theatre of revolution', but one probably not appreciated by the locals!

For a time it had seemed as if d'Annunzio might exploit his position to seize power in Rome. However, in December 1920 Giolitti's new government decided to reassert its authority, and sent in troops. D'Annunzio and his veterans fled (fearing either shells or an influenza epidemic that was raging) and the Italian army quickly took command. It had previously agreed with Yugoslavia that Fiume should be an international free city. Fiume remained under international supervision until Mussolini took it over in 1923.

The Fiume incident showed that force could be used to try and achieve political aims in post-war Italy. The government's inadequacy was shown as it took over a year to respond to d'Annunzio's COUP. In addition, Italians could contrast d'Annunzio's vigorous action to defend Italy's interests with the government's apparently inadequate performance at the peace conference. In the end, perhaps d'Annunzio's chief significance was as an inspirer of many of the features, both of IDEOLOGY and symbols, of Fascist Italy.

D'Annunzio: a potential rival to Mussolini?

Until 1922 d'Annunzio was a far more famous leader than Mussolini, and the latter considered him a rival. He was a nationalist poet, who glorified Italy's past, and condemned its existing political system as 'a heap of filth which cannot even serve to manure the nation's cabbages'. During the war, despite being over 50, he had led heroic air raids, and lost an eye. His fame peaked as Commander of Fiume, and for a time he considered marching on Rome to overthrow the decadent (decaying and corrupt) parliamentary system.

With his retreat from Fiume his prestige fell, but he remained a dangerous rival. He had criticised Mussolini for his lukewarm support over Fiume, and told his followers not to join 'thug Fascism'. Many, however, still did. In the Autumn of 1922 various politicians contacted him asking that he join a national government. Mussolini was worried about him as a possible rival. In October 1922 d'Annunzio conveniently 'fell' from a balcony, so he was out of action for some time. Mussolini gained power first. From then on, there was room for only one nationalist DEMAGOGUE and d'Annunzio became Italy's 'lost leader'.

SOURCE 2.11 D'Annunzio, speaking in 1919

Whatever happens, one thing is certain after the war. The future will bring something quite new to us, such as we have never seen before. Something stronger, more beautiful, will be born from this blood and sacrifice. All forms of art and politics will be overthrown; the new ones will be healthier. I believe we are entering a new era.

Why was there an economic and political crisis in post-war Italy?

D'Annunzio's comment (Source 2.11) reflected a widespread desire in post-war Italy for a new beginning, but which way would such a divided society turn? The Italians had been divided before the war. The debate over whether to join, and then the experience of war 1915–18 had created further divisions. Government promises to help rally the nation after the humiliation of Caporetto had aroused great expectations of a better life, which it would be difficult to fulfil. The hopes of nationalists for major territorial gains were also dashed, leaving considerable bitterness. The war also produced tens of thousands of new officers, who were determined to assert themselves. They believed *they* had won the war, and did not intend to let anyone forget it. Some soldiers found it hard to settle down after the war. They felt the task of making Italy great was unfinished and were scornful of many of their compatriots who had not played a positive role in the war. They missed the comradeship of the trenches and some formed themselves into squads to fulfil their desire for action. Many were to be drawn into Fascism.

The Liberal regime was under attack from the Left as well as the Right. The Soviet Revolution in Russia inspired many Socialists. Workers, determined to improve their position, launched a series of strikes, whilst returning peasant soldiers seized unoccupied land. Socialists made major gains in local and national elections. The government made concessions, but this upset those on the Right, without stemming the unrest.

There were also severe economic problems. Heavy industry was hit by the end of major war orders, and the demobilisation of over two million soldiers put added strains on the economy. Continuing inflation undermined many people's living standards.

Whereas unions were able to force increased wages, and many industrialists benefited from higher prices, the PETTY BOURGEOISIE were particularly badly affected. The self-employed had no muscle to press for higher income. Those who had lent money to the government during the war found the value of their savings hit by inflation, and became especially bitter.

CHART 2D Summary of the post-war turmoil

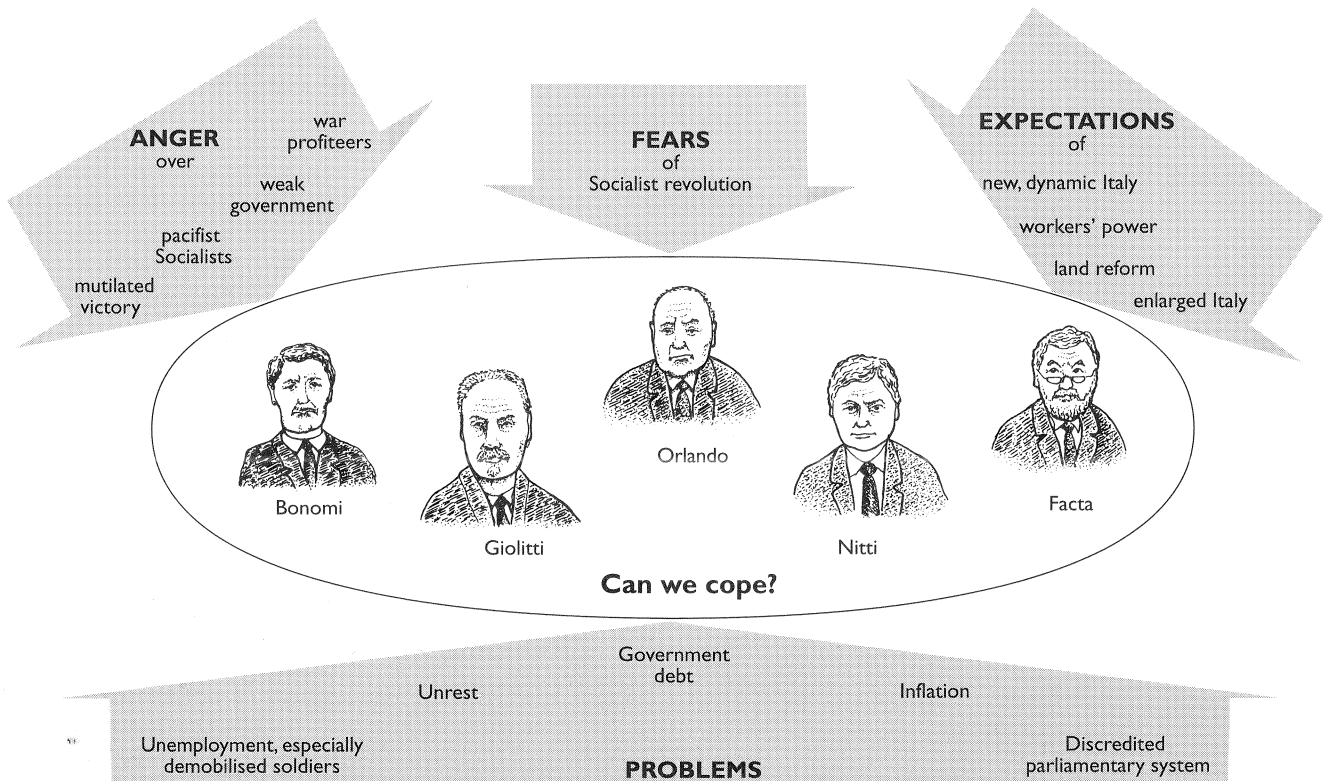


CHART 2E Post-war Italy: problems
THE ADVANCE OF SOCIALISM

- ① Growth of unions 1919–20 wave of strikes in industry, agriculture
- ② Factory occupations
 - Aug–Sept 1920 over 300 factories occupied
- ③ Land occupations
 - 1919–20 returning ex-soldiers occupied uncultivated land, and some landlords' land. Government legalised these occupations. 1918–21 over 1m hectares transferred to peasants
- ④ Socialist power in the agricultural economy
 - In Emilia-Romagna, powerful Socialist agricultural union (Federterra), labour exchanges and Chambers of Labour developed (see page 32)
 - 1920 wave of strikes forced employers to improve workers' terms
- ⑤ PSI success in local elections
 - November 1920 PSI won control of 2162 of 8059 communes, and 25 of 69 provinces, mainly in North and Centre
- ⑥ Successful Russian Revolution
 - 1917 Soviet Revolution helped inspire many socialists
 - 1919 strikes in solidarity with Soviet Russia

THE FASCIST REACTION

- ⑦ Growth of Fascism
 - Founded in Milan, March 1919
 - Cities taken over by Fascists, October 1922
 - March on Rome, October 1922
- ⑧ Civil War: Socialists v Fascists
 - 1919–22 violent clashes between Fascists and Socialists; over 2000 killed

TERRITORIAL PROBLEMS

- ⑨ 'Mutilated' victory
 - Italy failed to gain Dalmatia and Fiume
 - No colonies in Africa, Middle East, Dalmatia
- ⑩ Fiume (see page 27)
 - Nationalist d'Annunzio seized control 1919

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

- Rising unemployment from 1920 as 2.5m soldiers demobilised, and industry hit by post-war recession 1920–21
- National debt in 1918 was 85 billion lire (1914 was 16 billion)
- Wartime inflation continued:

1913 price index	100
1918	413
1920	591

GENERAL SITUATION

- Great hopes and fears
- Disillusionment, and hostility towards war profiteers
- Flu epidemic, killed nearly as many as the war

GOVERNMENT

- Weak Liberal governments continued in Rome. Failure of PSI and PPI to co-operate meant return to trasformismo-style politics
- Prime Ministers 1918–22

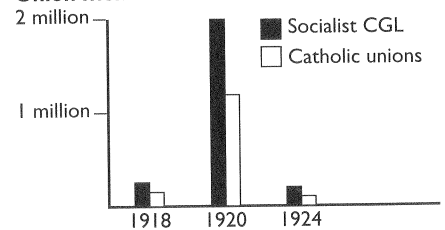
Orlando	Oct 1917–June 1919
Nitti	June 1919–June 1920
Giolitti	June 1920–July 1921
Bonomi	July 1921–Feb 1922
Facta	Feb–Oct 1922

GOVERNMENT REACTION TO PROBLEMS

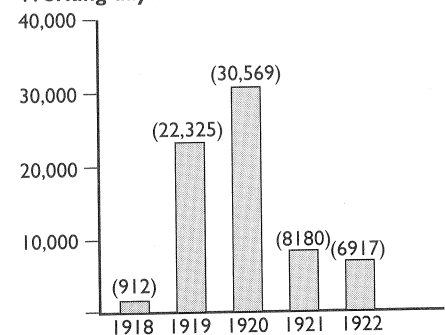
Problem	Government reaction
Modest gains at Versailles	Walked out
D'Annunzio seizure of Fiume	Did nothing
Food riots	Set up commission and authorised price cuts
Land occupations	Legalised them
Factory occupations	Promised reforms
Powerful labour exchanges	Officially recognised and given state subsidies



Union members



Working days lost as a result of strikes



Talking point

Women over 30 gained the vote in Britain in 1918 and in Germany in 1919. Why do you think the situation was different in Italy?

Activity

Prepare two brief news broadcasts in 1919:

- Giving the election results
 - Explaining who has formed the new government and why.
- Repeat this for 1921.

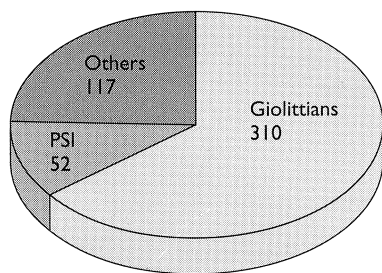
Were the 1919 elections a lost opportunity?

Some political developments seemed to offer hope for the future. A real opportunity existed in 1918 to strengthen the Liberal system by making it more democratic and susceptible to public opinion. There were key changes in the electoral system and the development of new political parties. In 1918 full universal male SUFFRAGE and a new system of PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION was introduced. A new party, the Popolari, approved by the Pope but independent of Church control, was set up representing Catholic views. The effect of these changes was that for the first time the Italian Parliament might reflect the views of the whole of (male) Italy.

The two mass parties, the Socialists (PSI) and Catholic Popolari (PPI), did well in the 1919 elections (see Chart 2F). It is extraordinary to those used to democratic systems that the election results you see displayed in the pie chart led to neither the PSI nor the PPI playing a role in government. Had they co-operated they could have had a majority in Parliament. However, they did not. Before the war Giolitti failed to gain the co-operation of both moderate Catholic and Socialist opinion, and this did not change. The Popolari were split between reformers and conservatives, and the Socialists between reformers and revolutionaries. The extreme wings could not co-operate.

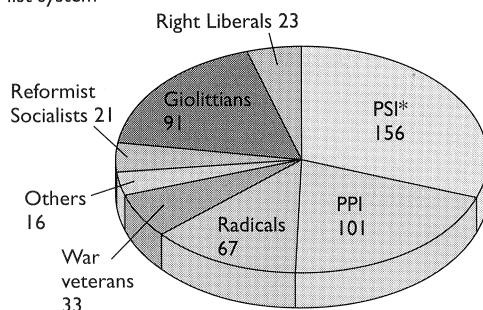
CHART 2F Election results, 1913, 1919 and 1921

1913



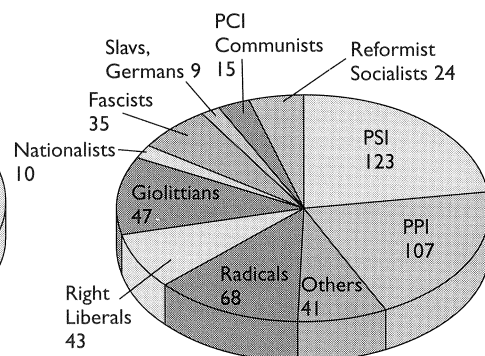
1919

New proportional representation system of 54 huge constituencies, with 508 deputies elected on a party list system



1921

535 deputies



FOCUS ROUTE

Using pages 26–30, answer the following questions:

- How justified was the view that Italy only gained a 'mutilated victory'? (Consider what it was promised; what it contributed; what it suffered; what it gained; the context of 1919, i.e. the new world order.)
- Make notes on the significance of Fiume. What does it show about:
 - the post-war atmosphere in Italy
 - the strength of the Liberal government
 - the tactics and symbols Mussolini was to develop from d'Annunzio's example at Fiume?
- Chart 2D suggests that Italy in 1919 experienced
 - anger
 - expectation
 - fear
 - problems.
 Choose three pieces of information from Chart 2E to justify each of these claims.
- Explain why the 1919 elections can be seen as a lost opportunity.

In the absence of agreement between the two mass parties, the old Liberal politicians remained in power, cobbling together enough support in Parliament to form five brief governments between 1918 and 1922. It was TRASFORMISMO again, not democracy. Such governments were largely unrepresentative of opinion in Parliament and in the country. Only if they achieved some outstanding successes would they gain credibility and consolidate the Liberal regime. The government did pass various measures to try to help the masses, such as bread subsidies and the eight-hour day, and began to make the tax system fairer. But once again these reforms did not satisfy RADICALS, and worried some of the elite. Generally, the succession of weak Liberal governments failed to solve Italy's social, economic and political problems (see Chart 2E).

Italy's post-war turmoil and the ineffectiveness of the governments in dealing with its problems gave an opportunity to radical forces on the Right and Left. Would any of these groups be able to take the opportunity?

CHART 2G Divided Italy

Pre-war divisions

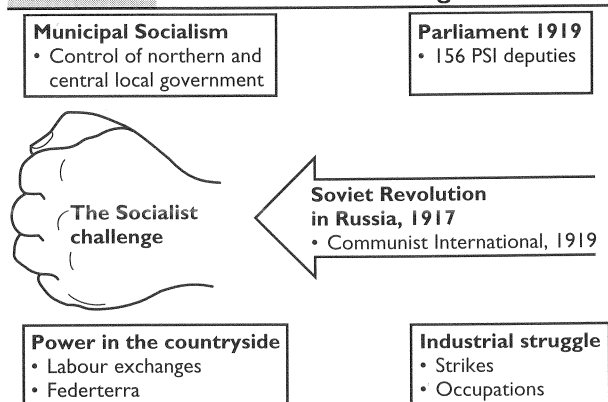
Class
Regional
Political



Post-war divisions

Class
Regional
Political
INTERVENTIONISTS v NEUTRALISTS
Financial gainers v losers

CHART 2H The Socialist challenge



‘Is this Italy or Russia?’ remarked one landowner in post-war Italy. One can understand his concern as he walked around Cremona. He would have seen red flags flying over town halls, postage stamps showing the hammer and sickle, and Socialists making blood-curdling speeches about revolution.

In 1920 the PSI, the Italian Socialist Party, won elections to many town councils and so controlled local taxes and services. It claimed over 200,000 members, and its paper *Avanti!* was read by over 300,000. Italy was swept by a wave of strikes. Was the country close to a Socialist revolution? Many politicians and members of the elite thought so during the Biennio Rosso (‘Two Red Years’) of 1919–20 – but how dangerous was the threat from the Left?

Even if you decide that the danger was not great, that does not mean that the Biennio Rosso was not important. It can be argued that Italian Socialists played a major role in the success of their bitter enemies, the Fascists. The threat of Socialist revolution drove many of the elite to support Fascism, and the Socialists’ weakness helped the Fascists come to power.

Let us now examine Italian Socialism; you will learn about a moment in history when what people *thought* was true was more important than the reality. Use the chart below to help organise your ideas about whether a Socialist revolution was likely.

Talking point

Can you think of another historical example of what people *thought* was happening being more significant than what was actually happening?

FOCUS ROUTE

Complete an assessment chart on Italian Socialism like the one below. In each box:

- a) note the key features
- b) put a tick if this made revolution likely or a cross if it made it unlikely.

Programme	Leaders
Support	Divisions/Rivals
Attitude of elite	Effect of war on Socialism
Actions/Strategy	Other points

CONCLUSION: Could there have been a Socialist revolution in Italy?

Italian Socialism

- 1 **Maximalists: revolutionaries controlling the party versus**
- 2 **Minimalists: moderate MPs for parliamentary reform**
- 3 **Communists: formed own party in 1921**

■ Talking point

What do you think Marx meant when he described religion as the opium of the masses? Can anything now be seen as serving this function?

How well organised were the Socialists?

The Socialists' difficulties began with their programme, which was uncompromising. They pronounced themselves a **MARXIST** party, aiming for a Socialist **REPUBLIC**. Thus they spoke of the eventual withering away of the state, after a period of **DICTATORSHIP** of the **PROLETARIAT**. There would be workers' control of industry, and the **NATIONALISATION** of all land. Religion, described by Marx as the opium of the masses in **CAPITALIST** societies, would no longer be needed and would wither away in their new socialist society.

However, although the party officially stood united behind this programme, it was deeply split between Maximalists and Minimalists. Maximalists, who controlled the party organisation, urged revolution to enact their full programme. Minimalists, who dominated the parliamentary party, were more prepared to use Parliament to enact reforms on the way to full Socialism. In January 1921 the PSI split into three. An even more radical group, prepared to join the Communist International on Lenin's terms, broke away from the Maximalists to form the Communist Party, PCI.

Matters were further complicated by the fact that alongside the divided Socialist party, there was also an industrial wing, with unions combined in the General Confederation of Labour (CGL). These also organised Chambers of Labour, and Socialist Leagues to protect workers' interests. Socialist support was challenged by rival Catholic unions, organised in the CIL (Italian Confederation of Workers).

The PSI controlled many local councils (see Chart 2E), but these failed to co-operate. The three main wings of the Socialist movement (the national PSI, Socialist unions, and Socialist councils) were all internally divided, and failed to work together effectively. Perhaps a powerful leader could have overcome these problems, but one of their potentially most effective leaders, Mussolini, had been expelled in 1914. They had a series of worthy leaders, such as Turati and Bissolati, but no one who could unite a majority.

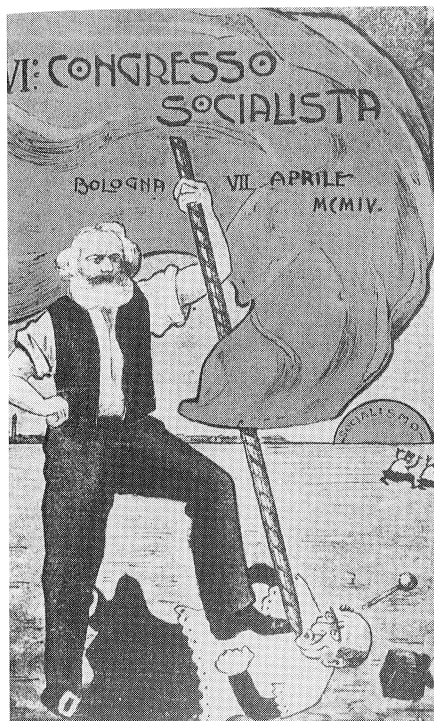
The PSI looked set to pose the greatest threat to the Liberal state after the 1919 elections (see Chart 2F), either through a legal challenge or through revolution. Their prospects for power looked good, but they failed to agree a coherent strategy. The Socialists benefited from the pressure for change after the war, but also frightened many Italians. Farmers, manufacturers, landlords, professional men, shopkeepers and tradesmen felt under attack from the **MUNICIPAL 'Dictatorships of the Proletariat'**.

Many patriots already harboured a grudge against the Socialists because of their neutral 'neither support nor sabotage' position during the war. When the war was over, many returning soldiers (peasants and workers) felt bitter about the PSI. They resented how many Socialists had stayed working for higher wages in factories, whilst they had risked their lives at the front. The war thus split groups, most of whom might otherwise have been Socialist supporters.

What strategies did the Socialists adopt?

In the important rural areas there were significant developments too. The South was where the PSI was weak, but land occupations were taking place, organised by Catholic land leagues. In the more commercialised Po Valley, the Socialist agricultural unions of the Federterra were not only making the traditional economic demands on wages and hours, but were also looking to control the supply of labour and employment: in effect, challenging the owners' property rights and right to manage. The Federterra aimed to gain **MONOPOLY** control over the labour supply, to force employers to employ their workers, even during winter months. The Socialist unions were prepared to use violence against any employer using **BLACKLEG** labour. They also intimidated peasants and labourers who would not co-operate with their pressure tactics on employers. Some of these victims of Socialist strong-arm methods later supported Fascism.

The increased power and membership of unions encouraged a series of strikes in 1919–20. However, some workers went beyond using this traditional form of struggle. In September 1920 half a million workers in Turin and Milan responded to a **LOCKOUT** threat by occupying over 300 factories, and running



SOURCE 2.13 Postcard advertising a Socialist meeting, 1904

Activity

- 1 What did the landowner mean when he asked (page 31) 'Is this Italy or Russia?'
- 2 How does Source 2.13 explain the Church's hostility to Socialism?
- 3 Would all Socialists have agreed with the writer of Source 2.14?
- 4 Malatesta (Source 2.15) was:
 - a) correctly analysing Socialist weaknesses
 - b) trying to provoke the Socialists into action
 - c) correctly predicting the future.
 Which of these statements is correct?
- 5 Why, according to Source 2.16, was there no revolution?
- 6 Hold a debate in summer 1922 between a frightened industrialist who sees Socialism as a major threat, and a radical journalist who argues that the Socialists are too weak to have any chance of gaining power.



SOURCE 2.12 Socialist Red Guards during the occupation of the factories, September 1920

them for a month without the involvement of the bourgeoisie. Red flags flew, and armed workers protected 'their' factories. Some saw this as the first step to revolution; others saw it as a means to gain concessions.

Much to the annoyance of the employers, Prime Minister Giolitti took a conciliatory approach. After three weeks, supplies of raw materials and money were low. Eventually both sides accepted government mediation. After promises of reform, the workers withdrew. This turned out to be the peak of Socialist unrest because the onset of mass unemployment weakened the Socialist movement. After 1920 the number of strikes fell. An attempted general strike in August 1922, in protest against Fascist violence, fizzled out after 24 hours, partly put down by the Fascists themselves.

The PSI had talked revolution but had had no strategy for achieving it. The party proved to be incapable of carrying out either reform or revolution. Workers became disillusioned after the Biennio Rosso. However, the whole period had created a traumatic fear of 'BOLSHEVISM' among groups who had most to fear from it. This situation was to be skilfully exploited by Mussolini and the Fascists, who attacked the Socialists. The 'revolution of words' was about to be drowned in a 'revolution of blood'. The Fascists later claimed that they had saved Italy from Bolshevism, but with hindsight historians can see that the main danger of Socialist revolution was over before the Fascists grew strong.

SOURCE 2.14 Bologna PSI Congress, 1921

The proletariat must have recourse to violence for the conquest of power over the bourgeoisie . . . The existing institutions of local and national government cannot in any way be transformed into organs which will help to liberate the people. Instead we must use new and proletarian organisations such as workers' soviets.

SOURCE 2.15 The anarchist Malatesta

If we let the right moment slip we will pay with tears of blood for the fright we have given the bourgeoisie.

SOURCE 2.16 Major northern newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, September 1920

Italy has been in peril of collapse. There has been no revolution, not because there was anyone to bar its way, but because the General Confederation of Labour has not wished it.

Activity

- 1 Read Source 2.17.
 - a) Summarise in a sentence the author's views of the Socialist threat.
 - b) What evidence does he use to support his views?
- 2 Repeat question 1 for Source 2.18.
- 3 How did the Socialists make it easier for Mussolini to take power?

Historians and the Socialist revolution

SOURCE 2.17 A. Cassels, *Fascist Italy*, 1969, pp. 24–25

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. Even during the occupation of the factories, when a pattern of action seemed to emerge, there was no real co-operation between the strikers in one town and those in the next. The Socialist Party signally failed to provide a national organisation to take advantage of the working-class distress. Whenever the PSI called for a general strike, which it did more than once between 1919 and 1922, the response was half-hearted and far from revolutionary. The Socialist leaders spent too much energy quarrelling among themselves, which led Lenin to dub the whole Italian proletarian movement as too immature for revolution, so no direction was forthcoming from Moscow. Furthermore, lower-class disorders and revolutionary sentiment waxed [grew] and waned [declined] in accord with fluctuations of the Italian economy. Hence, the danger years were 1919 and 1920. 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 gone.

SOURCE 2.18 Mack Smith 1969, pp. 327–28

Italy's misfortune was that Socialism lacked responsible leadership, and from the benches of the Left hardly a single constructive step was proposed which went beyond the vaguest generalisation. The only constant factor among the Socialists was their association of violent language with a timid uncertainty in deed. They refused to collaborate against Fascism with the governments, and in so doing they made a right-wing victory almost inevitable. Yet they had little idea of effecting a Communist revolution on their own. They simply sat back under the cosy illusion that time was on their side and that universal suffrage inevitably signified the approaching end of Liberalism and the dictatorship of the proletariat ...

Despite their great number, despite the sporadic general strikes and local peasant revolts, the Italian Socialists were just waiting for the bourgeois state to fall into their lap instead of trying to coerce [force] events ... With the expulsion of the SYNDICALISTS and Mussolini they had lost much of their revolutionary zeal ...

One must conclude that Socialism did not believe wholeheartedly in either revolution or collaboration, and hence it was merely going to provoke Fascism and antagonise all straightforward patriots, without taking the only sort of action which could defend Italy against the inevitable counterattack from the Right.

D Review: How great a challenge did the First World War and Socialism pose to the Liberal state?

FOCUS ROUTE

Look back at your work in Chapter 2 and explain the impact of each of the following on the Liberal state.

- The 'mutilated victory'
- Fiume
- Economic developments, during and after the war
- The 1919 elections
- Socialism

Activity

In the context of Italy in 1920, a wide variety of people might find aspects of Fascism attractive. Explain how each of the following might be attracted to Fascism, either through fear of the alternative or through positive attraction.

- A demobilised officer
- An industrialist
- A small landholder
- A large rural landowner
- A Catholic bishop
- A Futurist

You have now studied how the First World War increased divisions and discontent in Liberal Italy, and led to a period of great social unrest and political instability. The Liberal regime faced a major threat from a potentially powerful but essentially disorganised socialist movement. This was too weak to gain power, but sufficiently strong to arouse great fears.

Key points from Chapter 2

- Italy was divided over whether to enter the war.
- Some Italians profited and others suffered from the war.
- During the war great expectations were raised of social reform and territorial gains.
- There was great anger over the so-called 'mutilated victory'.
- D'Annunzio in Fiume anticipated many aspects of Fascism.
- The war left severe economic problems.
- In 1919 the mass parties (PPI and PSI) gained a majority in the elections but did not form a government.
- A series of Liberal governments struggled to cope with mounting problems 1919–22.
- There was a wave of post-war Socialist-inspired unrest.
- The Socialists raised great hopes but failed to take their opportunities, and just frightened the elite.

A look ahead

It was within this context of continued Liberal weakness, post-war discontent and the growth of socialism that Fascism was to develop.

Remind yourself of the main features of Fascism (Chart 2I). These should suggest why it was able to gain support.

CHART 2I What is Fascism?

