

## Why was Mussolini, the Fascist leader, appointed Prime Minister of Italy in 1922?

In 1922 King Victor Emmanuel III asked Benito Mussolini, the wayward son of a blacksmith, to become Prime Minister of Italy. This seems a remarkable offer for a man who in 1902 had stolen food from two English ladies in Geneva; who was subsequently expelled from Switzerland for trade-union activity, and who in 1913 edited a revolutionary SOCIALIST newspaper called *Avanti!* He and his new Fascist movement had then failed abysmally in the elections of 1919. Ten years later he achieved his ambition of becoming Italy's leader.

How far was his rise the product of the skills of this extraordinary man and of the appeal of Fascism; and how far was it a product of the post-war circumstances, and the longer-term weaknesses in Liberal Italy that you have already studied?

### CHART 3A CHAPTER OVERVIEW

#### 3 Why was Mussolini, the Fascist leader, appointed Prime Minister of Italy in 1922?

- A Why did Mussolini become a Fascist? (pp. 36–43)
- B Fascism 1919–22: an overview (pp. 44–45)
- C How did Fascism develop 1919–21? (pp. 46–55)
- D How did Mussolini gain power in 1922? (pp. 56–61)
- E Review: Why was Mussolini, the Fascist leader, appointed Prime Minister of Italy in 1922? (p. 62)

### A Why did Mussolini become a Fascist?

Although Fascism was more than just the creation of one man, it is still true to say that Fascism was shaped by the extraordinary career of its creator. As you read about Mussolini's background, consider what features of his early life might have helped mould the movement he created.

Pages 36–43 chart Mussolini's career from his childhood to his role as a leading Socialist by 1914, to his quarrels with other Socialists over Italy's role in the First World War. This will help you to understand both Mussolini's qualities as a politician and his motives for gaining power. Was he motivated by principles, personal ambition, or both?

#### FOCUS ROUTE

As you study Mussolini's early life and the extracts from his autobiography (on pages 41–43), make notes on aspects of:

- a) Mussolini's background
- b) his most significant experiences
- c) his character
- d) his abilities
- e) his views

which might make him successful in politics. Also note any weaknesses he might have to overcome.

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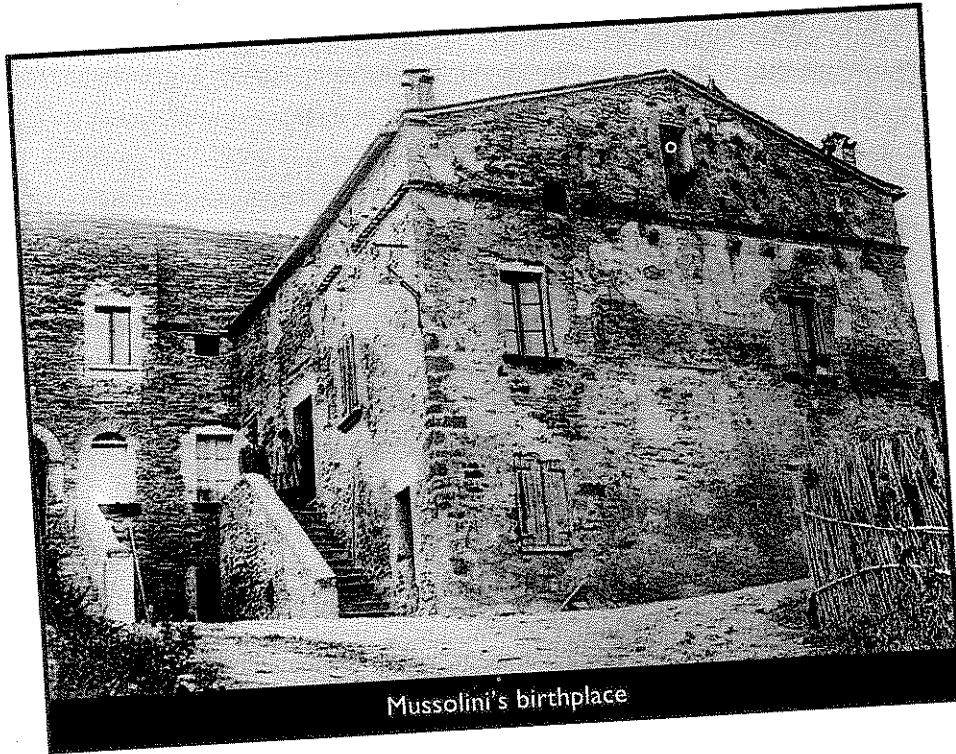
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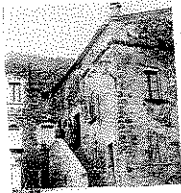
## Activity

- Using pages 36–39, list the reasons why Mussolini became a leading Socialist.
- Do you think he was more interested in action and leadership than in the principles and politics of Socialism? What evidence supports your views?

## A born revolutionary?



Mussolini's birthplace



### Birth

- Born July 1883 in Predappio, Romagna (see the map on page 29), a region of marked class conflict and strong anarchist and REPUBLICAN political traditions.
- Son of a blacksmith and a schoolmistress. He absorbed revolutionary ideas from his father: 'Socialism is an open and violent rebellion against our inhuman state of things.'
- Alleged not to have spoken until he was three; then he never stopped.
- Mussolini always emphasised, 'I am a man of the people. I understand the people because I am one of them.'

### Mussolini's early life

### School experience

- As the local school found it hard to control him, at the age of nine he was sent to a boarding school run by Catholic priests. There he was involved in fights, threw an inkwell at a teacher, and stabbed an older boy with a penknife. He was suspended four times, and expelled. However, he still achieved the highest marks in History, Literature and Singing, and decided to become a teacher!



## Mussolini's early life

### Character

- Disobedient, self-willed, quarrelsome and moody. Easily lost his temper. Restless and ambitious. A dreamer. He once said to his mother: 'One day I shall astonish the world.'



### Jobs

- Elementary school teacher for six months. Like Hitler, he experienced the humiliating struggle of the lower middle class OF PETTY BOURGEOISIE.
- 1902-4 he fled to Switzerland to escape his debts. Held a series of brief jobs. Experienced foreign contempt for Italians and helped organise Italian migrant workers.
- 1904-6 conscripted into the army. Responded well to military discipline.
- 1906-10 journalist and strike organiser in Italy and amongst Italians in Austrian Trentino. Gained support through his lively oratory and writing. 1909 he was expelled from Trentino.

### Marriage

- 1910 began living with Rachele Guidi, a local peasant girl.
- In 1915 they married in a civil ceremony.



### Politics

- 1910 became Secretary to the Socialist Party in Forli (see map on page 29). He was on the extremist wing of the party and put all his energies into provoking a Socialist revolution. Soon nicknamed 'E'matt' (madman).
- 1911 organised protest against the Libyan War. Led an attack on Forli railway station which blocked the movement of troops to Libya for three days. Jailed for five months. He frequently referred to the need for violence.
- 1912 led demands for the expulsion from the Socialist Party of moderates who had cooperated with Giolitti. Became Editor of Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti!* (in two years its circulation rose from 28,000 to 100,000).

### Personal qualities

- A forceful and authoritative speaker, with a powerful voice, vigorous gestures and dramatic phrases. Developed an ability to arouse emotion by building up a series of apparently disconnected sentences. Realised the importance of cultivating a mood in an audience. Boasted of his virility (manliness). Had several violent relationships with women.

### Influences

- Read quite widely, especially
  - Marx (Socialism)
  - Sorel (need for an ELITE; role of violence)
  - Nietzsche (role of a superman who can impose his own laws)
  - Le Bon (how a brave leader could channel power of the crowd)
  - Prezzolini (need to create a modern assertive Italy).

For a man who always put 'mood and action' before anything else, the following comments by contemporaries are revealing.

**SOURCE 3.1** From Mussolini's last report from Faenza school, when he was twelve

*Has a lively intelligence, and unusual memory but a character quite out of the ordinary... passionate and unruly he cannot adapt himself to the life of the school... He placed himself in opposition to every rule of the school... One personal motivation guides him and this is the principal streak in his character... He cannot tolerate an injury; he wants revenge... he rebels against every punishment to a point which obliges the Headmaster reluctantly to ask his parents to withdraw him.*

**SOURCE 3.2** Angelica Balabanoff, a MARXIST Socialist who had a strong influence on Mussolini, gained this insight into his character

*I soon saw that he knew little of history, of economics, or of Socialist theory and that his mind was completely undisciplined... Mussolini's RADICALISM and ANTI-CLERICALISM were more the reflection of his early environment and his own rebellious egoism than the product of understanding and conviction; his hatred of oppression was not that impersonal hatred of a system shared by all revolutionaries; it sprang rather from his own sense of indignity and frustration, from a passion to assert his own ego and from a determination for personal revenge.*

### ■ Talking point

Is it important to study the childhood of political leaders such as Mussolini, or should we simply study their policies once in power?

**SOURCE 3.3** A police report by Inspector Gasti of the Milan branch of the security police in 1919 concluded

*He is emotional and impulsive... He is a bold organiser and personally brave, makes quick decisions, but is less firm in his beliefs and aims.*

*He is most ambitious... He wants to lead and dominate... Mussolini's political ideas are changeable... and it cannot be ruled out that in certain conditions, whether for fear of being outbid by others, or as a result of fresh events, or for other subjective or objective reasons, he may take a new line and co-operate in undermining institutions and principles that he previously believed in and supported.*

**SOURCE 3.4** A reporter in 1912

*I don't know what to make of this queer fellow Mussolini. But I know one thing - he's going to get somewhere.*

As the First World War approached, Benito Mussolini was firmly established on the revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party. His journalism was aggressive; he supported violence and he promoted a revolutionary socialist takeover. However, he was also an unpredictable individual who loved action, and it was far from clear what his likely response to the outbreak of war would be.

## The First World War: Mussolini's dilemma

At the outbreak of the First World War the Socialist Party's view was that the war was an IMPERIALIST struggle fought at the expense of the working classes of Europe. Unlike most other Socialist parties, the Italian Socialist Party stuck to its principles and opposed Italy's entry into the war.

However, Mussolini, the man of action, soon developed an impatience with being sidelined from an event which might destroy existing political structures, provide exciting revolutionary options and give opportunities for personal glory. He once said to his mistress Margherita Sarfatti, 'I need glory and wealth, I am always looking for the tumultuous and new...' and 'I want to be... greater than Napoleon.' He was a natural rebel who did not find it easy to stick to the party line.

### ■ Activity

- 1 How did Mussolini's political views change during 1914 (see Sources 3.6-8)?
- 2 What part did each of these factors play in changing Mussolini's views?
  - a) patriotism
  - b) war experiences
  - c) his ambitions and personality
  - d) political principles

**SOURCE 3.5** Mussolini as Editor of *Avanti!*



**SOURCE 3.6** From Mussolini's writings

a) 1911

*The national flag is for us a rag to plant on a dunghill.  
Let us show that the fatherland does not exist just as God does not exist.*

b) 1913

*Let us have no more talk of battleships, barracks, cannon, at a time when thousands of villages have no schools, roads, electricity or doctors, but still live tragically beyond the pale of civilised life.*

c) Commenting on the outbreak of war, *Avanti!*, 26 July 1914

*Down with War! Down with arms and up with humanity.*

d) *Avanti!*, 10 October 1914

*To offer the same kind of opposition to all wars... is stupidity bordering on the imbecile. Do you want to be a spectator of this great drama or do you want to be its fighters?*

**SOURCE 3.7** Mussolini writing in *Il Popolo d'Italia*

a) November 1914

*Who has iron has bread.  
Revolution is an idea which has found bayonets.*

b) 24 May 1915

*From today we are all Italians,  
nothing but Italians.*

**SOURCE 3.8** Mussolini's office



Mussolini was expelled from the Socialist Party for promoting intervention in the war. He set up his own newspaper in November 1914, partly financed by the French government and Italian industrialists. The paper was known as *Il Popolo d'Italia* and claimed still to be the supporter of socialist ideas, but advocated Italy's entry into the war.

Mussolini himself was CONSCRIPTED into the Italian army in August 1915. He acquitted himself well even though he was not involved in any serious fighting. He was invalided out of the army in February 1917 when a mortar training accident left him with 40 pieces of shrapnel in his body.

After four months in hospital he returned to the editorship of *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Writing soon after the disastrous defeat at Caporetto, he claimed Italy needed a strong leader to take command of the war effort. He significantly changed his paper: from calling itself a socialist daily, it became the 'paper of combatants and producers'. No longer would the emphasis be on class. Mussolini would welcome anyone prepared to fight and work to save the nation.

Alienated from the Socialist Party by the split over the First World War, and concerning himself with the creation of national wealth and not its distribution, the logic of Mussolini's position was that his socialist ideas would soon fade. Could he find an alternative way to gain power?

### Mussolini's autobiography

Of all the sources available to a historian, an autobiography is one of the most exciting. It may tell us a great deal about the author – and not only what he intended us to know. On pages 42–43 you can read Mussolini's own description of his life before he gained power.

**SOURCE 3.9** Extracts from *My Autobiography* by Benito Mussolini. It was first published in English in 1928 and never translated into Italian. Reprinted 1936, 1937 (twice)

#### Activity

Read Sources 3.9 a) and b).

- 1 Why did the writers of these extracts want Mussolini's autobiography to be published?
- 2 Mussolini's autobiography was written after he came to power. How might this affect his account of events?
- 3 How would you expect Mussolini to portray
  - a) his own character and qualities
  - b) the politics of the war and post-war years?

#### a) Publisher's preface

*It is a book that is historically valuable, giving us, as it does, intimate pictures of Fascism in theory and in practice . . . There has been a tendency to belittle the magnificent achievements of a man who, whatever may be said about his IDEOLOGY, is undoubtedly great, and whom history will record as the saviour of post-war Italy.*

#### b) The foreword is by Richard Child, former US Ambassador in Italy. He describes how he persuaded Mussolini, 'the busiest single individual in the world', to dictate this autobiography to him

*Of course, there are many things which a man writing an autobiography cannot say about himself, or will not say about himself. He is unlikely to speak of his own size on the screen of history . . .*

*In our time it may be shrewdly forecast that no man will exhibit dimensions of permanent greatness equal to those of Mussolini.*

#### c) Extracts from Chapter 1, 'Youth'; and Chapter 2, 'War and its Effect upon a Man'

#### Mussolini's character

*I was then a restless being; I am still. Then I could not understand why it is necessary to take time in order to act. Rest for restfulness meant nothing more to me then than now.*

*I believe that in those youthful years, just as now, my day began and ended with an act of will – by will put into action.*

*The difficulties of life have hardened my spirit. They have taught me how to live . . . Any comfortable cranny would have sapped my energies. These energies which I enjoy were trained by obstacles and even by bitterness of soul. They were made by struggle; not by the joys of the pathway. ➡*



### Activity

- 1 Using each section in turn ('Mussolini's character', etc.), consider what Mussolini wants the reader to believe about himself and his actions.
- 2 What can you learn about Mussolini from these extracts?

*Whenever I took an extreme decision I have obeyed only the firm commandment of will and conscience which came from within. I do not believe in the supposed influence of books ...*

*For myself, I have used only one big book.*

*For myself, I have had only one great teacher.*

*The book is life experience.*

*The teacher is day-by-day experience.*

*The reality of experience is far more eloquent than all the theories and philosophies in all the tongues and on all the shelves ...*

### His career as a journalist and soldier

#### As a journalist

*The itch of journalism was in me. My opportunity was before me in the editorship of a local Socialist newspaper. I understood now that the Gordian knot [complicated problem] of Italian political life could only be undone by an act of violence.*

*Therefore I became the public crier of this basic partisan warlike conception. The time had come to shake the souls of men and fire their minds to thinking and acting. It was not long before I was proclaimed the mouthpiece of the intransigent [not willing to compromise] revolutionary Socialist faction.*

*I worked hard to build up the circulation, the influence and the prestige of Avanti! ... I did not yield an inch to DEMAGOGUERY. I have never flattered the crowd nor wheedled anyone; I spoke always of the costs of victories – sacrifices and sweat and blood.*

*(Sixty days after war broke out, Mussolini gave up the editorship of Avanti!)*

*I felt lighter, fresher. I was free! I was better prepared to fight my battles than when I was bound by the dogmas of any political organisations. But I understood that I could not use with sufficient strength my convictions if I was without that modern weapon, capable of all possibilities, ready to arm and to help, good for offence and defence, the newspaper.*

*I needed a daily paper. I hungered for one ... I was mad to tell Italy and Italians the truth – their opportunity!*

*On November 15th, 1914, the first number of the Popolo d'Italia appeared. Even now I call this newspaper my most cherished child: it is only through it, small as was its beginning, that I am able to win all the battles of my political life. I am still its director ...*

*My first article in the Popolo d'Italia turned a large part of public opinion toward the intervention of Italy in the war, side by side with England and France.*



#### As a soldier

*I liked the life of a soldier. The sense of willing subordination suited my temperament. I was preceded by a reputation of being restless, a fire-eater, a radical, a revolutionist ... It was my opportunity to show serenity [calmness] of spirit and strength of character.*

**SOURCE 3.10** Mussolini as a corporal in the Italian army



*The war moulded me . . . I wanted to be a soldier, obedient, faithful to discipline, stretching myself with all my might to the fulfilment of my duty. In this I felt I succeeded . . . I still hold on to, as my life's dedication . . . that once a man sets up to be the expounder of an ideal or of a new school of thought he must constantly and intensively live daily life and fight battles for the doctrines that he teaches – at any cost until victory – to the end!*

*Within a few months I was promoted corporal by merit of war action with a citation from my superiors in these words, 'Benito Mussolini, ever the first in operations of courage and audacity'.*

*One of our grenades burst in our trenches . . . I was rushed to hospital . . . My wounds were serious . . . I faced atrocious pain; my suffering was indescribable . . . I had 27 operations in one month, all except two were without anaesthetics.*

(After Caporetto)

*Helped by the mutilated, the wounded, and the pro-war veterans I began an active campaign of 'Stand to a Finish'. . . This campaign developed by degrees in the newspaper, in public meetings, in gatherings at the Front. It brought results far beyond my highest hopes. The government seemed to be tugged after us by our efforts, towards resistance and victory.*

### **His view of Italy**

*Those years before the World War were filled by political twists and turns. Italian life was not easy. Difficulties were many for the people. The conquest of Tripolitania [Libya] had exacted its toll of lives and money in a measure far beyond our expectation. Our lack of political understanding brought at least one riot a week.*

*During one ministry of Giolitti I remember thirty-three. They had their harvest of killed and wounded and of corroding bitterness of heart. Riots and upheavals among day labourers, among the peasants in the Valley of the Po, riots in the South. Even separatist movements in our islands. And in the meantime, above all this atrophy [wasting away] of normal life, there went on the tournament and joust of political parties struggling for power.*

*I thought then, as I think now, that only the common denominator of a great sacrifice of blood could have restored to all the Italian nation an equalisation of rights and duties. The attempt at revolution – 'the red week' – was not revolution as much as it was chaos. No leaders. No means to go on! The middle class and the BOURGEOISIE gave us another picture of their insipid spirit.*

*I do not choose to make posthumous recriminations. The weakness of internal politics in 1917, the feeble parliamentary situation, the hateful Socialistic propaganda, were certainly preparing the ground for events that could prove ruinous. And the blow came in October 1917; it took the name of Caporetto.*

*Never in my life as an Italian and as a politician have I experienced a sorrow equal to that which I suffered after news of the defeat of Caporetto . . .*

*The final victory was not only a victory of a war . . . It was a victory for the whole Italian race. After a thousand years we were again giving tangible proof of our moral and spiritual valour . . . Our love of country had bloomed again.*

### **His aims and political evolution**

*For my supreme aim I have had the public interest. If I spoke of life I did not speak of a concept of my own life, my family life or that of my friends. I spoke and thought and conceived of the whole Italian life taken as a synthesis [joining together] – as an expression of a whole people.*

*Above all there was my own country. I saw that INTERNATIONALISM was crumbling. The unit of loyalty was too large.*

*My political evolution has been the product of constant expansion, of a flow of springs always nearer to the realities of living life and always further away from the rigid structures of sociological theories . . .*

*The organisation of Fascismo was marked and stamped with Youth. It has youth's spirit and it gathered youth, which like a young orchard has many years of productiveness for the future.*