

# Introduction

## Ambition!



**SOURCE 1** Mussolini in around 1905

**SOURCE 2** Mussolini speaking to his mother

*One day I shall astonish the world.*

## Glory!



**SOURCE 3** The Duce Mussolini addressing a crowd in Venice in the 1930s

**SOURCE 4** From an article written by Mussolini, published in the *Daily Express* in December 1935, and reprinted in July 1943

*The crowd will always love strong men: in that respect the mob is like a woman . . .  
I am immortal.*

## Humiliation!



**SOURCE 5** Mussolini's body, displayed in Milan 1945

**SOURCE 6** King Victor Emmanuel addressing Mussolini, July 1943

*Italy has gone to bits. You are the most hated man in Italy.*

In May 1936 the lion roared in front of an ecstatic crowd of adoring Italians. Benito Mussolini, the DUCE, was addressing his people. Italy had just conquered Abyssinia, and a new Italian EMPIRE was proclaimed. The country appeared to be united and powerful, and Mussolini was the most popular leader Italy had ever seen. His doctrine, Fascism, was declared to be **the idea** of the twentieth century. Yet within ten years those same Italians had killed their leader, desecrated his body, and Italian Fascism had, as Hitler bitterly remarked, 'melted like snow in the sun'.

This book will explore the path of Mussolini's extraordinary career from SOCIALIST revolutionary to Fascist DICTATOR, and consider whether he really was a skilled politician, or a mere loudmouth and buffoon. It will also examine the nature of the Fascist state he created, and the impact it made on Italy.

# What is Fascism?

Before we can look at the growth of Fascism, we need to understand what the term Fascism means.

You will come across many political IDEOLOGIES during your course, and some may be new to you. Fascism is the central ideology in our study of Italy, and an understanding of its broad ideas will help you identify the reasons why Mussolini, the Fascist leader, became Prime Minister of Italy in 1922.

A good place to start looking at a political belief is in its name. For example, LIBERALISM describes the belief in individual liberty. Modern Britain, France, and the USA would be termed 'liberal' states. By this we mean a state which has:

- an elected assembly (Parliament) that makes laws
- a CONSTITUTION laying down and restricting the powers of the government, with clear rules for governing the country
- a variety of political parties competing for support
- formal protection for key individual rights or liberties, such as free speech, freedom of the press, free practice of religion, and equality before the law.

Mussolini once described Fascism as 'action and mood, not doctrine'. It had no founding father who laid down its fundamental principles, as Karl Marx did for COMMUNISM. Fascism took different forms in different countries. It gained support both for what it offered, but also, significantly, for what it opposed. The word Fascism seems rather meaningless, and indeed the term does not originate from an idea about how to run society. Read the Fascio explanation on page 4, which tells us the origins of the word and gives us our first clues about the nature of Fascism.

Fascism favoured the following:

- NATIONALISM (see page 10)
- A powerful leader or dictator
- One-party government
- National unity
- PARAMILITARY organisations
- War

Initially though, it defined itself mainly by what it was opposed to:

- INTERNATIONALISM
- Liberal DEMOCRACY
- MARXIST Socialism/Communism
- Class conflict
- PACIFISM

## Activity

Using just the word itself, what can you deduce about the following ideologies? It may help you to look up the stem (or beginning) of the word in a dictionary.

**Liberalism** – favouring individual liberty

**Communism** –

**Capitalism** –

**Conservatism** –

**National Socialism** –

**Imperialism** –

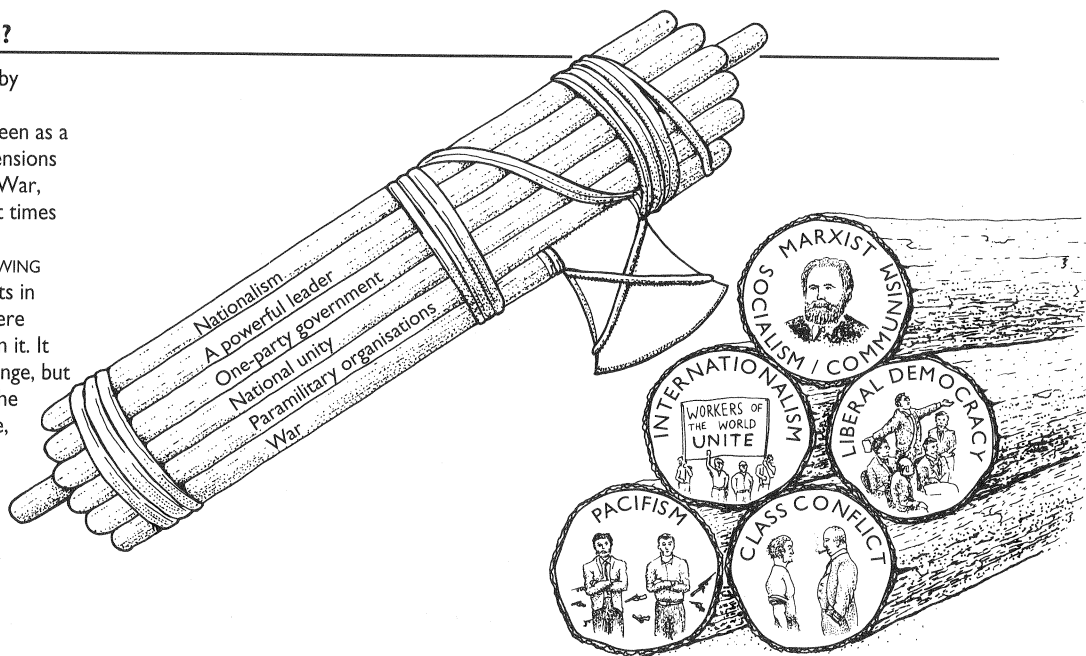
**Democracy** –

**Anarchism** –

## CHART A What is Fascism?

The first Fascist movement was founded by Mussolini in Italy, but similar movements developed elsewhere. Fascism has been seen as a response to the political and economic tensions in much of Europe after the First World War, but it has also arisen in other countries at times of strain.

Fascism is normally viewed as a RIGHT-WING movement, but it initially had some aspects in common with LEFT-WING ideologies, as there were some anti-CAPITALIST elements within it. It began as a protest movement seeking change, but where Fascists gained power, as in Italy, the regime was in some respects conservative, protecting the social STATUS QUO.



**Fascio**

When Mussolini founded his first Fascist squads in March 1919, they were called *fascio di combattimento*. Their badge was the rods and axe, symbols of authority in ancient Rome. The term *fascio* had no precise meaning in 1919. It had been used by radicals in the late nineteenth century, and by various political groups in World War I. The literal meaning is 'bunch' or 'group', and once in power Mussolini linked it to the bound sticks or *fascis* which the Roman lictor (a magistrate) had used as a symbol of office. It is thought Mussolini wanted his fighting groups bound by ties as close as those that secured the sticks of the Roman lictors.

**Activity**

Divide into pairs.

- 1 In your own words describe to your partner what Fascism favoured, and to what it was opposed.
- 2 In what circumstances do you think people might support a Fascist movement?

**Talking point**

Why do you think Britain has never had a strong Fascist movement?

**CHART B Key features of Italian Fascism**

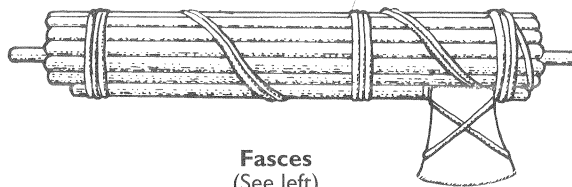
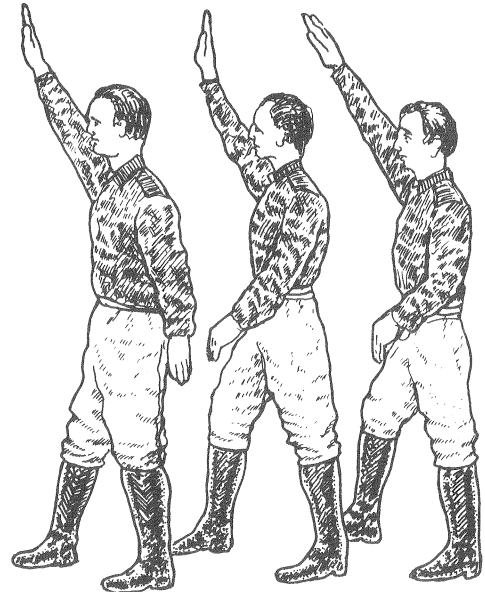


**Blackshirts**

- The uniform of the Fascist movement, worn by the Fascist squads who attacked opponents
- Copied from the uniform of the Arditi, the Italian shock troops in the First World War
- Used by d'Annunzio in Fiume (see page 27)

**Fascist salute**

- Copied from the straight-arm salute used by the ancient Romans
- Used by d'Annunzio



**Fascis**  
(See left)

## Why study Mussolini and Fascist Italy?

If you are one of the lucky ones for whom history is simply the most interesting subject you have studied (and if it is, you probably can't explain why – it just is!) you don't need any justification for studying Mussolini and Fascist Italy. For the rest of you – whose basic justification may be that it's on the syllabus – this page may persuade you that studying this topic is about even more than the very important business of getting a good grade.

The greatest justification for studying the past is that it helps us to understand and live in the present. Here are three ways in which your responses to today's issues may be sharpened by your increased knowledge of and understanding of this particular topic.

### **A** Are historical parallels with today's events accurate?

The interwar period saw the rise of several dictators and political decisions today may be affected by ideas about what happened in the 1930s. Politicians may feel they must 'stand up to' contemporary dictators because appeasement did not stop war in 1939. But is that an accurate representation of the events of the 1930s? If it isn't, are today's decisions affected by an oversimplification of past events? Once you know more about this period you will be likely to make fewer glib comparisons with the past and hence be better positioned to appraise politicians' use of the past to justify current policies.

### **B** Are they all the same?

Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Franco – dictators all, but were they all the same? Studies of this period should stop us generalising about people and events. The more sophisticated our understanding of the similarities and differences amongst the dictators of the 1930s, the better equipped we are to avoid sweeping generalisations about political leaders who seem similar today. The fewer generalisations we make, the better our judgements are today.

### **C** It couldn't happen here?

It is easy to look back at TOTALITARIAN regimes and feel secure within our political system. Only other people fall victims to extremist governments – or so we may think. Detailed study of the rise of a dictator like Mussolini makes us more aware of how easy it is for such a development to take place. His power was not the sole product of a dominating personality and cunning propaganda but was at least as much the result of other people's failure to stop him when they had the opportunity. This period shows how tempting it is to avoid involvement, to wait, to go along with the mood of the majority – or with what the mood of the majority appears to be. It couldn't happen here – only so long as people take action to stop such a development.