

3 Establishment and consolidation of Mussolini's rule

Timeline

- 1922 Nov** Mussolini given emergency powers
- Dec** establishment of Fascist Grand Council
- 1923 Jan** formation of national fascist militia
- Jul** Acerbo Law
- 1924 Mar** fascist violence against opposition
- Apr** elections held in which fascists and their allies win a large majority
- Jun** Matteotti abducted and murdered
- Aug** Aventine Secession
- 1925 Jan** end of 'Matteotti crisis'
- Feb** Farinacci becomes secretary of PNF
- Jul** control of press exerted
- Aug** fascist *podesta* control provinces
- 1926 Jan** Mussolini takes power to rule by decree
- Apr** Rocco's Law on labour relations passed
- Jul** formation of Ministry of Corporations
- Oct** trade unions and all opposition parties banned
- Nov** internal exile (*confino*) for political prisoners
- 1927 Apr** Charter of Labour revealed; formation of OVRA
- 1928 May** restriction of franchise to males belonging to fascist syndicates; powers of king reduced
- 1939 Jan** Chamber of Fasci and Corporations replaces Chamber of Deputies
- 1940 Jun** Italy enters Second World War
- 1942** Allied bombing of Italy
- 1943 Jul** Mussolini brought down by coup
- Sep** Italy surrenders; formation of Salò Republic (Italian Social Republic)
- 1945 Apr** Mussolini arrested and shot

Key questions

- How did Mussolini establish his power in the period 1922–24?
- What measures were taken after 1924 to further consolidate Mussolini's power?
- What other methods did Mussolini use to consolidate his power?

Overview

- By 1922, Mussolini was prime minister, but he was still not head of a fascist government. He began to take steps to increase his power over both the state and his own party.
- Securing the support of the Catholic Church and industrialists, in 1923 Mussolini pushed through a reform of the electoral system. In the 1924 election, using a variety of methods, the PNF became the largest party.
- After surviving the 'Matteotti crisis' of 1924, the following year Mussolini began a series of measures designed to establish a one-party state, including banning trade unions and all opposition parties, and taking control of local government.
- At the same time, repression, censorship, control of the media and various forms of propaganda all helped create Mussolini's personal dictatorship by the late 1920s.
- However, Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940 led to increased opposition to Mussolini, and his downfall in 1943.
- Mussolini was eventually captured and shot by partisans in 1945.

How did Mussolini establish his power in the period 1922–24?

Although Mussolini was now prime minister, Italy was not a fascist state – for that to happen, he needed to change the constitution. To achieve this he set out to win new political allies, doing everything in his power to widen the political appeal of fascism. Such a move was essential, as Mussolini's government was essentially a Nationalist–Popolari–Liberal coalition that could fall at any time if one of these parties withdrew. There were only four fascists in the cabinet. In addition, the king had the power to dismiss Mussolini as prime minister. Both the king and the other political leaders believed Mussolini could be tamed, transformed and used to their own advantage.

Early moves

Mussolini had no intention of being tamed. Instead, he wished to establish a one-party fascist state, with himself as dictator.

SOURCE A

For all his willingness to compromise, at least temporarily, with the Italian establishment, Mussolini certainly had no wish or intention to relinquish the power he now held. Nor, however, can he be regarded as one of those Fascist maximalists like Farinacci, Rossoni or Balbo who – in their different ways – from the start dreamed of a radical ‘Fascist revolution’. Probably, at this early stage, Mussolini envisaged, rather than a complete political revolution, a drastic revision of the existing system to ensure the repeated renewal of his authority. For a time at least this would have satisfied his new conservative supporters, for whom a Fascist-led government may have been a blessing, and the prospect of greater authoritarianism attractive.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. Mussolini and Fascist Italy. London, UK. Routledge. pp. 30–31.

In his first speech to parliament on 16 November 1922, Mussolini made a veiled threat about the strength of the Fascist Party (he claimed 300,000 armed and obedient members). He also spoke of his desire to create a strong and united Italy, and asked for emergency powers to deal with Italy's economic and political problems.

SOURCE B

And so that everyone may know ... I am here to defend and enforce in the highest degree the Blackshirts' revolution ... I could have abused my victory, but I refused to do so. I imposed limits on myself ... With 300,000 youths armed to the teeth, fully determined and almost mystically ready to act on any command of mine, I could have punished all those who defamed and tried to sully fascism ... I could have transformed this drab silent hall into a camp for my squads ... I could have barred the doors of Parliament and formed a government exclusively of Fascists. I could have done so; but I chose not to, at least not for the present.

From Mussolini's first speech as prime minister, 16 November 1922. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. Fascist Italy. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 73.

The deputies, including ex-prime ministers Giolitti, Salandra and Facta, gave Mussolini an enormous vote of confidence and emergency powers for a year.

Fascist Grand Council This was declared to be the supreme decision-making body within the Fascist Party. It could discuss proposals for government action, but Mussolini insisted on sole power over appointments to his council. In effect, he was attempting to establish total control over fascist policy-making.

The élites or the party?

In order to increase his support amongst the conservative élites, Mussolini appointed the liberal Alberto de Stefani as finance minister. De Stefani's economic policies (reducing government controls on industry and trade, and cutting taxation) pleased the industrialists and shopkeepers. However, many on the left of the Fascist Party were angered, as they would have preferred to see significant social reforms. Partly as an attempt to increase his control over the Fascist Party, in December Mussolini established a **Fascist Grand Council**.

The following month, in January 1923, Mussolini succeeded in getting the Fascist Grand Council to agree that the regional fascist squads should be formed into a national militia, funded by the government. This militia, called the National Security Guards (MVSN), swore an oath of loyalty to Mussolini, not the king. This gave Mussolini a paramilitary organisation of over 30,000 men, which he could deploy against anti-fascists. At the same time, it considerably reduced the power of the provincial *ras*.

SOURCE C

What he did was to dissolve the squads and incorporate the *squadristi* into a new body, the Militia (Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale, MVSN), organised by De Bono at the Interior. The Militia would 'defend the Fascist revolution', would protect the Fascist regime from its enemies, would give the *squadristi* status, pay and some local power, and would also discipline them: the ordinary *ex-squadristi* would supposedly find themselves serving under the command of ex-army officers. It was, therefore, an ambiguous body, part reward, part constraint; it was also part Fascist, part state, and it had ambiguous functions, part military, part police. However, it soon became clear that neither the army nor any of the various police forces was willing to let the MVSN muscle into its territory.

Clark, M. 2005. *Mussolini*. London, UK. Pearson. p. 67.

Question

How did the creation of the Fascist Grand Council and the MVSN help Mussolini to control his own party?

Fact

The Nationalist Party had close links to big business and the army. Ex-nationalists such as Enrico Corradini, Luigi Federzoni and Alfredo Rocco brought with them a desire for an authoritarian government and a much-enlarged Italian empire.

However, the Fascist Grand Council also worked alongside the government's Council of Ministers – fascist ministers took important decisions, which were then passed on to the Council of Ministers for official approval. In addition to his role as prime minister, Mussolini also acted as interior and foreign minister.

By early 1923, the employers' organisation – the Confindustria – had pledged its support for Mussolini. This was largely due to his announcement that there would be no serious measures taken against tax evasion, which was widely practised by wealthy companies and individuals. In March 1923, the small Nationalist Party (a member of the coalition) merged with the Fascist Party.

This merger brought the fascists additional paramilitary forces (the Nationalists' Blueshirts), but it also confirmed Mussolini's increasing shift to the right, towards the conservative élites. Once again, this disturbed the more militant fascists.

The Vatican

At the same time, from April to June 1923, Mussolini worked to gain greater support from the Catholic hierarchy, in order to widen the fascists' political base and to weaken the position of the Popolari, another key member of the coalition government. Mussolini announced measures that included renouncing atheism, making religious education compulsory, banning contraception and punishing swearing in public places. Pope Pius XI, already a fascist sympathiser, signalled his willingness to withdraw his support for the Popolari.

SOURCE D

Mussolini alone has a proper understanding of what is necessary for his country in order to rid it of the anarchy to which it has been reduced by an impotent parliamentarianism and three years of war. You see that he has carried the nation with him. May he be able to regenerate Italy.

Comments made by Pope Pius XI to the French ambassador, shortly after Mussolini was appointed prime minister. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. Fascist Italy. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 75.

In April 1923, Mussolini sacked all Popolari ministers from his government, claiming that they refused to give him full support. In June, the pope forced the priest Don Luigi Sturzo, a Popolari leader, to resign. Support for the Popolari among the conservative Catholics declined and, by the summer of 1923, the party had lost most of its political importance.

Changing the constitution – the Acerbo Law

More secure in his position, Mussolini announced his intention to reform the electoral system in a way that he hoped would strengthen his status even further. On his instructions, the under-secretary of state, Giacomo Acerbo, outlined a new electoral law that gave the party or alliance that won the most votes two-thirds of the seats in parliament, as long as the percentage was no less than 25% of the votes cast. According to Mussolini, this would give Italy the strong and stable government it needed. In fact, the law was clearly intended to give the fascists total, but legally acquired, control over Italian politics. Given the intimidation and violence that could be expected from the fascists and the fact that, as minister of the interior, Mussolini could order the police not to intervene, there was little likelihood of the fascists' opponents ever being able to vote them out of office.

To ensure the passage of this law, Mussolini overcame the opposition (who greatly outnumbered the 35 fascist deputies) by threatening to abolish parliament, and by placing armed fascist guards on the doors to intimidate the deputies. Liberal leaders such as Giolitti and Salandra advised their supporters to approve the law, and it was passed by a large majority in July 1923. Most Popolari deputies abstained. With the Acerbo Law in place, Mussolini now needed to ensure his party would win the most votes in the next election. He was helped by the events of August 1923 that became known as the Corfu Incident.

Fact

The Corfu Incident occurred when an Italian general was murdered on Greek soil while making maps of a disputed area. Mussolini took advantage of this to demand that Greece pay 50 million lire as compensation, and make a full apology. When Greece refused to pay (as they had not been responsible), Mussolini – ignoring criticism from the League of Nations – ordered Italian marines to invade the Greek island of Corfu. The Greek government paid the fine. Many Italians regarded Mussolini as a national hero after this incident.

Amerigo Dumini (1894–1967)

Dumini was born in the USA, after his parents emigrated there from Italy. He travelled to Florence at the end of the First World War, and became involved in the local Fascio di Combattimento. He was soon known as ‘*Il Duce’s* hit man’. In 1924, Dumini headed the group that kidnapped and then murdered Giacomo Matteotti, leader of the Socialist Party. In 1943, after Mussolini’s overthrow, Dumini gave his support to the establishment of the Salò Republic.

Giacomo Matteotti (1885–1924)

Born into a wealthy family, Matteotti studied law at the University of Bologna. He soon became active in socialist politics, and opposed Italy’s entry into the First World War, in line with the official position of the Italian Socialist Party. He was first elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1919, and eventually became leader of the United Socialist Party. He was an outspoken critic of fascist violence.



The election of April 1924

It was not until April 1924 that Mussolini decided to hold new elections. In January he set up a secret gang of thugs and gangsters to terrorise anti-fascists both in Italy and abroad. Known as the Ceka, this group was led by **Amerigo Dumini**, who had his own office within the ministry of the interior.

The elections were announced in March, and Dumini’s gang unleashed a wave of terror against anti-fascists, in which over 100 people were killed. In addition to this, voting certificates were seized, fascists voted on behalf of dead people, and ballot boxes were stolen in areas where fascists feared electoral defeat. As a result, the fascists (and the right-wing liberals, including Salandra and Orlando, who had formed an electoral alliance with the fascists) won almost 65% of the vote. The number of fascists in the 535-seat chamber rose from 35 to 374. Yet despite the intimidation and vote-rigging, over 2.5 million Italians still voted for opposition parties, mainly the socialists and the communists.

The Matteotti crisis

When the new parliament met for the first time, on 30 May 1924, **Giacomo Matteotti**, an independent and much-respected socialist, strongly condemned the fascist violence and corruption that had occurred during the election. He even dared to produce evidence, and called the results a fraud.

On 10 June 1924, Matteotti was abducted in Rome. Although there was no hard evidence, it was widely assumed that he had been murdered by Dumini’s fascist thugs, and many began to distance themselves from Mussolini’s regime. For a time, it seemed as though revulsion at Matteotti’s murder might actually cause Mussolini’s downfall. He was sufficiently worried to suspend parliament in order to prevent a debate. To win back support, Mussolini ordered the arrest of Dumini and his gang on 15 June and, on 18 August, Matteotti’s body was found. Although Dumini was found guilty of the murder and imprisoned, newspapers began to print evidence of Mussolini’s involvement.

The body of Giacomo Matteotti is carried out of the woods outside Rome



This evidence led most of the opposition deputies – mainly socialists, communists and radical Popolari – to boycott parliament in protest, under the leadership of the liberal Giovanni Amendola. This became known as the **Aventine Secession**, and was intended to force the king to dismiss Mussolini. At first, the king refused to consider such an action and instead blamed the opposition (most of whom were republicans, and thus disliked by the king) for unconstitutional behaviour.

SOURCE E

The Aventine [Secession] was undermined by its own contradictions. For the members of the opposition, genuine democrats who had not understood that Fascism represented a radically new element in political life, there was no choice but to await the constitutional monarch's pleasure ... Therefore, and as much in order to avoid frightening the king as out of fear of revolution, they rejected the call for a general strike and the proclamation of the Aventine as the sole legal Parliament of the country ... They hoped to bring about a Cabinet crisis and the dismissal of Mussolini. It was now December, seven months after the murder of Matteotti, and the Aventine moderates had not yet learned that on the parliamentary battleground Mussolini was bound to win because the king was determined to uphold him.

Gallo, M. 1974. *Mussolini's Italy*. London, UK. Macmillan. pp. 189–91.

The pope also supported Mussolini, and condemned the Popolari deputies who had participated in the Aventine Secession. He was joined by Giolitti and Salandra and other leading liberals and conservatives, all of whom saw this as a way of reasserting influence over a now-weakened Mussolini. They also feared that Mussolini's fall might be followed by a revival of the revolutionary left-wing parties. Perhaps most significantly, leading industrialists were opposed to any change of government, especially as Mussolini had begun to reduce state involvement in the economy.

SOURCE F

Mussolini clearly feared his days were numbered. Yet the king declined to act ... He had quickly come to value Mussolini ...

Mussolini was under considerable pressure, but he was far from resigning. He countered by making changes in the government to reassure moderates ... Damage limitation was helped by the Vatican ... Many leading members of the clergy were grateful to Fascism for breaking the Left ... Industrialists too stayed largely faithful, reflecting their basic satisfaction with government policy.

Eatwell, R. 1995. *Fascism: a History*. London, UK. Chatto & Windus. p. 52.

Aventine Secession This was named after similar events in ancient Rome, when a group of politicians set up a rival assembly on the Aventine Hills above Rome. The opposition deputies of 1924 walked out of the Chamber and set up an alternative parliamentary assembly, claiming they were now the true and democratic representatives of the Italian people.

Historical debate

There has been some debate amongst historians about Mussolini's involvement in Matteotti's assassination. De Felice and Emilio Gentile argued that Mussolini had not ordered the death of Matteotti. De Felice even claimed that Mussolini was the victim of a political plot to threaten his power and frustrate his plans to create a more broad-based government. Other historians, including Denis Mack Smith, thought Mussolini was probably aware of the assassination plot but that it was ordered and organised by someone else. However, some studies have suggested that Mussolini did order the murder, to stop Matteotti publishing documents containing details of corruption involving the selling of oil rights to a US company.

Question

What reasons can you give for the failure of the Aventine Secession?

In July 1924, industrialists, liberals and conservatives supported Mussolini's moves towards press censorship, and then his ban on meetings by opposition parties in August 1924. When further evidence of fascist violence emerged, Mussolini felt it necessary to promise to get rid of the thugs in the Fascist Party, and he sacked three fascist ministers from the government. However, in November, some leading liberals joined the opposition in criticising the continued press censorship.

These actions provoked a revolt by leading *ras* and some 50 senior officers of the MVSN in December 1924. At a meeting on 31 December, they presented Mussolini with a clear choice: either he stop any further investigations of fascist violence and become dictator of Italy, or they would overthrow him and replace him with a more hard-line fascist leader.

What measures were taken after 1924 to further consolidate Mussolini's power?

The establishment of the dictatorship, 1925–28

On 3 January 1925, Mussolini addressed the Chamber of Deputies. He denied having set up the Ceka, and condemned the actions of Dumini's gang. However, as prime minister and leader of the PNF, he assumed ultimate responsibility for Matteotti's murder. Nonetheless, he made it clear that, rather than resigning, he would continue to rule Italy – by force 'if necessary'.

SOURCE G

I declare before all Italy that I assume full responsibility for what has happened ... If Fascism has turned out to be only castor oil and rubber truncheons instead of being a superb passion inspiring the best youth of Italy, I am responsible ... Italians want peace and quiet, and to get on with its [sic] work. I shall give it all these, if possible in love, but if necessary by force.

Extract from a speech given by Mussolini, 3 January 1925. Quoted in Robson, M. 1992. Italy: Liberalism and Fascism 1870–1945. London, UK. Hodder & Stoughton. p. 66.

SOURCE H

For even as Farinacci continued to press for a Fascist takeover, his enthusiastic centralization of the party – intended to prepare it for its revolutionary destiny – actually had the effect of undermining the power and autonomy of provincial bosses like himself and neutralizing the *squadristo* of which he had previously been chief spokesman. By the time he was manoeuvred into resigning in April 1926 he had fulfilled what Mussolini had expected of him and the PNF was well on the way to being domesticated.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. Mussolini and Fascist Italy. London, UK. Routledge. pp. 36–37.

In February 1925, Mussolini became seriously ill. During his illness and recovery, power was exercised by Roberto Farinacci, the notorious *ras* of Cremona who had recently been appointed as party secretary by Mussolini. In fact, Mussolini disliked Farinacci, who was in favour of a total fascist takeover, but his appointment proved to be a shrewd move on Mussolini's part.

A new wave of violence

Farinacci launched a new campaign of *squadristi* violence against members of the Socialist and Communist Parties, as well as the more radical sections of the Popolari. Several people were killed, including Amendola, and many others decided to go into exile. Farinacci also supervised a purge of PNF members and local leaders (the latter in particular) who were considered to be insufficiently loyal to Mussolini.

Controlling the press

The first step in establishing a fascist dictatorship was taken in July 1925, when Mussolini, now recovered from his illness, imposed a series of laws designed to control the press. Anti-fascist newspapers were shut down, while other newspapers were only allowed to print articles approved by the government. From December 1925, all journalists were required to be on a register drawn up by the Fascist Party.

Local and central government

In August 1925, Mussolini began the next step in establishing his dictatorship, this time focused on local and central government. In the 93 provinces of Italy, elected mayors and councils of towns and cities were replaced by appointed fascist officials known as *podesta* (see page 27). Although the *podesta* were Fascist Party members, they were mainly conservatives, drawn from the traditional landowning and military élites. In this way, Mussolini excluded the more militant fascists from real power in the provinces. Fascist political control was further established on 3 August, when all meetings by opposition parties were banned.

Mussolini also moved to increase his personal power in central government. On 24 December 1925, he made himself 'head of government', a new official title. He also assumed formal powers over his ministers, who became responsible to him rather than to the Chamber of Deputies. In January 1926, Mussolini assumed the power to issue decrees without parliamentary approval, making him responsible only to the king. The new law also stated that the king must secure Mussolini's personal approval before appointing new ministers. Soon, Mussolini insisted on being called *Il Duce* ('The Leader').

By 1929, Mussolini held eight ministerial posts himself, thus excluding many other fascist leaders. However, in practice, it was the traditional conservative civil servants who ran these state departments rather than Mussolini or the Fascist Party.

Creation of a one-party state, 1926

Despite increased control, Mussolini's position was still not totally secure. The king and the Chamber of Deputies still had influence, as did the increasingly harassed opposition parties. So in October 1926, after yet another failed assassination attempt on Mussolini, all parties other than the PNF were banned, and their deputies expelled from the Chamber. At the same time, trade unions were outlawed and a new law court (the Special Tribunal) was established to deal with political offences, some of which carried the death penalty. In 1927, Mussolini formed the Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo (Organisation for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism, or OVRA), a secret police force charged with suppressing political opponents.

Fact

The OVRA was not a specifically fascist organisation, being essentially an adaptation of the Interior Ministry's existing secret police section. So OVRA was not the equivalent of the Nazi SS or Gestapo, as it was under state, not party, control.

Activity

Carry out some further research on the methods and activities of the OVRA. To what extent was it similar to the Gestapo in Nazi Germany?

In May 1928, when new elections were due, Mussolini took further measures to ensure that the Fascist Party won and that Italy remained a one-party state. These included changes to the electoral system so that only men aged 21 or over who belonged to fascist syndicates (see page 28) could vote. The Fascist Grand Council drew up a list of 400 candidates from lists approved by confederations of employers and employees, and voters only had the choice of voting either for or against this list. Fear of fascist violence meant most Italians voted 'yes', as fascist officials in the polling stations were able to identify those who voted 'no' (the voting slips were different colours). Having secured a clear electoral victory, Mussolini was established as dictator of Italy. The Chamber contained only fascist deputies, and the king's power was drastically reduced.

What other methods did Mussolini use to consolidate his power?

As well as these political measures, Mussolini took other steps to secure his power. These included methods of indoctrination and propaganda, as well as increased measures against opposition.

Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND)

The fascists believed that it was important to influence the minds of the adult population of Italy. To this end, they established organisations to control leisure activities. The Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND), a national recreational club, was set up in 1925. *Dopolavoro* is Italian for 'after work'. The OND soon had a vast network of clubs, libraries and sports grounds, and organised concerts, dancing and summer holiday activities in most towns and villages. Overall, about 40% of industrial workers and 25% of peasants were members of the OND. Sport was given particular emphasis, and Italy began to do well internationally in motor racing, cycling, athletics and football.

The main function of the OND was to increase acceptance of fascist ideology. However, although its activities did lead to some popular support – many Italians enjoyed the subsidised sports, outings and holidays – most local organisers ignored the indoctrination aspects.

L'inquadramento

To build on the activities of the OND, and to increase fascist influence amongst the masses, there was a concerted attempt to expand membership of the party and its associated organisations. This process of uniting and incorporating the people was known as *l'inquadramento*. From 1931 to 1937, during the worst of the **Great Depression**, the Fascist Party established its own welfare agencies to provide extra relief, and also began setting up women's *fasci* to help run these agencies. Although these new agencies and networks led to increased party contact, surveillance and control, party membership did not increase dramatically. According to some, by 1939, only about 6% of the population belonged to the party.

The Romanità movement

Another propaganda ploy to build up the prestige and popularity of Mussolini and the fascists was to link them to the earlier greatness of ancient Rome and its emperors. This became known as the *Romanità* ('Romanness') movement. Fascist writers, artists and scholars portrayed fascism as a revival of, and a return to, ancient Roman civilisation. From 1926, Mussolini was increasingly spoken of as a new Caesar.

Great Depression Following the 1929 Wall Street Crash, the entire world entered a prolonged economic downturn that resulted in a contraction of economic activity and mass unemployment. This became known as the Great Depression. All major countries – with the exception of the USSR – were badly affected during the 1930s.

In 1937, the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* exhibition was held to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the emperor Augustus. Over the entrance to the exhibition was a quote from Mussolini: 'Italians, you must ensure that the glories of the past are surpassed by the glories of the future.'

SOURCE I

Rome is our point of departure and our point of reference. It is our symbol and, if you like, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, an Italy that is wise and strong, disciplined and impersonal. Much of the spirit of Ancient Rome is being born again in Fascism: the Lictorian *fasces* are Roman, our war machine is Roman, our pride and our courage are Roman too. *Civis Romanus sum* ['I am a Roman citizen'].

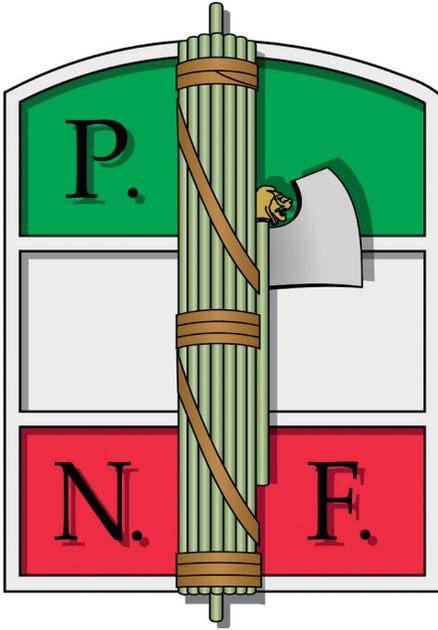
Extract from a speech delivered by Mussolini in 1935. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. *Fascist Italy*. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 106.

Mussolini reviving the ancient glories of Rome; he is viewing a statue of Julius Caesar installed in the recently excavated forum



As part of this cult, Mussolini adopted the *fasces* as the fascist emblem, and had it incorporated into the national flag. In addition, much emphasis was placed on the need to establish a second empire – 'the resurrection of the empire'. According to *Romanità*, the fascist 'New Man' was a modern version of the idealised Roman centurion.

The fasces emblem was taken from ancient Rome; a bundle of rods and an axe were used by the lictor (Roman bodyguards) and symbolised authority, discipline and punishment



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Question

How was the *Romanità* movement meant to create the fascist ‘New Man’?

Fact

Unlike the efficient propaganda machine developed by Hermann Goebbels in Nazi Germany, propaganda in fascist Italy was marked by bureaucratic inefficiency. Mussolini’s creation of a fascist propaganda machine was a gradual process. Significantly – and again unlike Nazi Germany – a number of non-fascist newspapers and radio broadcasts were allowed to continue, including those produced by the Vatican.

Ducismo: the cult of *Il Duce*

To create this ‘New Man’, Mussolini wanted fascism to penetrate every aspect of Italian life and society. To achieve this, he concentrated on building up and projecting his own image, and widely publicised the ‘achievements’ of fascism.

Almost as soon as Mussolini’s dictatorship was established, he began to understand the importance of good publicity. Consequently, a press office was set up to ensure that photographs and newspaper articles projected a positive image of Mussolini and his activities. He was portrayed as youthful, energetic and an expert in a wide range of specialist areas and pursuits. He even gave instructions to the press on how he should be reported. Although initially sceptical of the value of radio, Mussolini eventually established a state radio network in 1924; this rapidly expanded. However, by 1939, there were still only around 1 million radios in Italy – about one for every 44 people. To deal with this, public-address systems were set up in cafés, restaurants and public squares, so that more people could listen to *Il Duce*’s speeches. Free radios were also given to schools.

Mussolini was slow to realise the potential of film, but in 1924, a government agency (L’Unione Cinematografica Educativa, LUCE) was established to produce documentaries and newsreels. Soon, Mussolini was making full use of film. He insisted that the state-sponsored newsreel films (from 1926, these had to be played in all cinemas as part of the programme) showed him addressing large crowds of enthusiastic supporters, and that he was filmed from below, in order to disguise his lack of height.

SOURCE J

The most powerful force, over the last three years, which has hastened the development of this attitude [to think and act out of regard for the nation] has been our film production. The new national film production is acquiring an international reputation and meaning because it expresses our time in history, which is truly Italian and Fascist.

Comments made by Luigi Freddi, director of the General Directorate of Cinematography, in 1937. Quoted in Hite, J. and Hinton, C. 1998. Fascist Italy. London, UK. Hodder Education. p. 110.

Fascist propaganda

Throughout the 1930s, the press office extended its role to cover not just radio and film, but all aspects of culture. In 1933, Mussolini’s son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, took over the running of the office. In 1935, it was renamed the Ministry for Press and Propaganda – in part an imitation of developments in Nazi Germany.

Two years later, in 1937, the office was renamed again, this time as the Ministry of Popular Culture (nicknamed Minculpop). This was an attempt to broaden its influence and ensure that all films, plays, radio programmes and books glorified Mussolini as a hero and the fascists as Italy’s saviours. However, Minculpop’s attempts to regulate the arts were not very successful. Traditional liberal culture proved too strong, and this led to compromises and thus only partial control by

the fascists. While Minculpop managed to rally support for the Abyssinian War (1935–36), it failed to gain much popular support for Mussolini's alliance with Nazi Germany, or for the anti-Semitic policies he began to disseminate in 1938 (see pages 56–57).

At the same time, Achille Starace, appointed as party secretary in 1930, was also active in projecting an image of Mussolini as a hero. Lights were left on in the dictator's office to suggest that he worked 20 hours a day for Italy, while photographs and posters of *Il Duce* appeared in public buildings, streets and workplaces. Great prominence was also given to various catchphrases reflecting fascist ideals, such as *Credero, Obbedere, Combattere* ('Believe, Obey, Fight') and 'Mussolini is always right'.

At press conferences, Mussolini was always accompanied by Blackshirt bodyguards, while all public appearances were attended by what soon became known as the 'applause squad', who whipped up 'enthusiasm' for Mussolini's speeches, sometimes even resorting to prompt cards. Public events such as mass rallies and meetings were deliberately turned into political theatre, and full use was made of lighting and music to enhance the drama.

Opposition to fascist rule after 1925

Although trade unions and all opposition parties had been banned in 1926, there was still limited opposition and resistance. One organised group that remained was the Communist Party of Italy, which had been set up in 1921. In 1924, with many leading Communist Party members already arrested by Mussolini's regime, **Antonio Gramsci** became its leader, and was even elected to the Chamber of Deputies.

Gramsci set up a Communist Party newspaper called *L'Unità* ('Unity') and called for a united front to defeat fascism. However, in November 1926, he was arrested and imprisoned under the new emergency laws (see page 29), and eventually died in prison in 1937.

During the late 1920s and the 1930s, opposition to Mussolini in Italy, though often courageous, was weak. Such opposition was mainly carried out by isolated individuals, small clandestine groups and remnants of the trade unions. After 1926, political opponents who were caught were often sent into internal exile (known as *confino*) to remote parts of Italy. While fascist treatment of active opposition was brutal, it was not as excessively repressive as in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia, although it became more extreme after Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940.

Several anti-fascist groups went into self-imposed exile so they could organise opposition from abroad, especially in France. They smuggled anti-fascist literature into Italy and, during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), over 3000 Italian anti-fascist volunteers fought as part of the International Brigades on the side of the Republican government against Franco's forces, which included troops sent by Mussolini. Their Garibaldi Legion defeated Mussolini's troops at the Battle of Guadalajara in March 1937.

Mussolini's Ceka often disrupted the activities of these *fuorusciti* (exiles or 'escapees'), sometimes by assassinating leaders in exile. For example, the Rosselli brothers, Carlo and Nello, established the *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Liberty) group in 1929. They were murdered in France in 1937, probably on Mussolini's orders, by members of *La Cagoule* (The Cow), a French fascist group.

Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)

Born in Sardinia, in 1911 Gramsci went to the University of Turin to study literature and linguistics. In 1913, he joined the Italian Socialist Party, and in 1916 became co-editor of the Piedmont edition of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* He supported the Socialist Party's decision to join the Communist Third International in 1919, and the establishment of the Italian Communist Party. Gramsci was a highly original Marxist theoretical thinker, and wrote various important books, some while he was in prison. One of his most important theories was that of cultural hegemony, the idea that the ruling capitalist classes construct and manipulate cultural norms to maintain a state that protects private property and their own interests.



Fact

Mussolini was persuaded by Hitler to declare war on Britain and France in June 1940, and then on the US in December 1941. However, Italy's forces performed badly in Greece and Yugoslavia, and suffered several setbacks in North Africa in 1942–43, eventually losing control of Libya. Allied bombing of Italy began in 1942, and after the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943, more and more Italians turned against the fascist regime. To help stop the Allied invasion, Nazi Germany sent troops into Italy in the early summer of 1943.

nepotism The promotion of relatives because of their family connections rather than their ability to do a job. Many Italians resented the nepotism Mussolini demonstrated towards relatives of his mistress, Clara Petacci.

Italian Social Republic This was soon contemptuously known as the Salò Republic, after the town where Mussolini had his headquarters. It was little more than a German puppet state, despite Mussolini's claims to be returning to the social idealism of his original fascism.

The re-emergence of opposition at home, 1940–43

Italy's entry into the Second World War in 1940 initiated the first signs of real renewed internal opposition, characterised by the outbreak of strikes.

By 1942, Germany was taking more from Italy than it was offering in military aid. In addition to coal and iron, about 50% of the 350,000 workers sent to Germany by Mussolini were skilled workers. The food he ordered to be sent to Germany caused serious shortages in Italy, and rationing was introduced in 1941. The inefficiency and inadequacy of the rationing system led to the rise of the black market (the ration of 150 grams of bread per person was the lowest in Europe, with the exception of the USSR). Towards the end of 1942, Allied bombing of Italy increased. Poor anti-aircraft defences resulted in widespread destruction which in turn led to increased working hours and greater factory discipline. Inevitably, a great wave of strikes occurred in March 1943.

Italy's military situation deteriorated during 1943. Axis troops in Africa were forced to surrender in May, resulting in the loss of Libya. Then, in July, the Allies invaded Sicily and began bombing Rome. The invading Allies met only token resistance as many Italians blamed Mussolini for their army's defeats and the dire situation on the home front. They had also grown to dislike the German armies that had begun moving onto Italian soil. Most Italians, including the industrialists and lower middle classes who had been the backbone of fascism, were disillusioned by the regime's inefficiency and corruption. The **nepotism** that Mussolini frequently used was particularly unpopular.

Between February and April 1943, Mussolini took a hard line in dealing with this disaffection – sacking or demoting several ministers and high-ranking members of the Fascist Party, including Grandi, Ciano and Bottai. However, this only led to plots against him. Many were critical of Mussolini's strategy, feared his close relationship with Nazi Germany, and wanted him removed from power altogether. However, another group of fascists, which included Farinacci and the new PNF secretary Carlo Scorza, wanted to forge closer ties with Germany.

Mussolini's fall, July 1943

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

The Italian Social Republic

In September 1943, Mussolini was 'rescued' from his enforced isolation in a mountainous region of eastern Italy by German paratroopers. They took him to Germany, where Hitler persuaded him to set up the **Italian Social Republic**. This was a new fascist state in the German-controlled north-eastern part of Italy, which was not yet under Allied occupation.

Although Mussolini was nominally leader of the new republic, in practice the important decisions were taken by Rudolf Rahn, the German ambassador, and by SS general Karl Wolff. There was much SS and Gestapo brutality, especially against Jewish people, while thousands of Italian men were sent to Germany

as forced labour. At the same time, fascist extremists made a determined effort to round up those who had planned and carried out Mussolini's overthrow. Several were captured, taken to the Salò Republic and then executed, including Mussolini's own son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano.

Mussolini's death

During 1944, the Allies continued to push up through Italy from the south. In April 1945, they captured the northern city of Bologna, and the Germans decided to pull out of Italy. Mussolini tried to flee with the Germans, but was recognised by a group of Italian partisans and arrested on 27 April. The following day, he was taken by another, communist-led, group of partisans and he and his mistress were shot. Also executed were 15 other fascist leaders and ministers, including Farinacci and Starace. The bodies were hung upside down outside a garage in Piazzale Loreto in Milan, where a group of partisans had previously been executed by the Germans for resistance activities.

End of unit activities

- 1 Create a diagram to show the various stages and steps in Mussolini's construction of a fascist dictatorship in the years 1922–29.
- 2 Carry out some additional research about the roles of both the king and the Catholic Church in the consolidation of Mussolini's control. Why do you think they acted in the ways they did?
- 3 Find out more about the Rosselli brothers. How far was what happened to them typical of Mussolini's regime and his treatment of opposition?

Historical debate

Immediately after the end of the Second World War, most histories of the Italian fascist movement focused on the periods of active opposition to Mussolini (1919–25 and 1943–45). However, some revisionist historians focused on the period 1926–43 when, they argued, the fascists achieved a degree of both success and at least passive support. In fact, Martin Clark has even compared Mussolini – in his defeat of the left and trade union power, and his attempts to increase patriotism – to Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister from 1979 to 1990. How convincing do you find this argument?



Theory of knowledge

History and bias

There are various historical interpretations about Mussolini and his fascist state. Some recent reinterpretations have given a more positive view of his actions, considering Mussolini as one of Italy's most successful 20th-century politicians. To what extent is it possible for historians and students of history not to be influenced by their own political views, or by the contemporary historical context in which they are writing?

Discussion point

Working in pairs, develop arguments for a class presentation on the effectiveness of the fascist policy of *l'inquadramento*. Concentrate on two aspects:

- the various policies connected to *l'inquadramento*
- the degree of success/failure of each one.

Paper 1 exam practice

Question

According to Source A below, what were the roles of the PNF in Mussolini's Italy?

[2 marks]

Skill

Comprehension of a source

SOURCE A

Fascist Italy may thus have been a one-party state, but it was not a 'party state' along the lines of Soviet Russia or even, eventually, Nazi Germany ... Quite apart from its mundane yet important role of providing job opportunities for the Italian middle class, the Party [PNF] came to perform numerous vital administrative and politically educative tasks ...

Through the elaborate bureaucracy of the Dopolavoro ('After-work') organization it supervised and even enlivened the leisure and social activities of the working population, seeking to compensate workers for their falling wages with a variety of fringe benefits and in the process to 'cure' them of socialism.

Blinkhorn, M. 2006. Mussolini and Fascist Italy. London, UK. Routledge. p. 38.

Examiner's tips

Comprehension questions are the most straightforward questions you will face in Paper 1. They simply require you to understand a source *and* extract two or three relevant points that relate to the question.

As only 2 marks are available for this question, make sure you do not waste valuable exam time that should be spent on the higher-scoring questions by writing a long answer here. Just a couple of brief sentences are needed, giving the necessary information to show that you have understood the message of the source. Try to give one piece of information for each of the marks available for the question.

Common mistakes

When asked to show your comprehension/understanding of a particular source, make sure you don't comment on the *wrong* source! Mistakes like this are made every year. Remember – every mark is important for your final grade.

Simplified markscheme

For **each item of relevant/correct information** identified, award 1 mark – up to a **maximum of 2 marks**.

Student answer



According to Source A, the main role of the Fascist Party (PNF) was to provide jobs for the middle classes.

Examiner's comments

The candidate has selected **one** relevant and explicit piece of information from the source that clearly identifies one important role of the PNF. This is enough to gain 1 mark. However, as no other point/role has been identified, this candidate fails to get the other mark available.

Activity

Look again at the source and the student answer above. Now try to identify one other piece of information from the source, and try to make an overall comment about the source's message. This will allow you to obtain the other mark available for this question.