

2

Mussolini and Italy

1 Unit

Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy

TIMELINE

- 1861** Formation of an independent Italy
- 1870** Papal states incorporated into Italian kingdom
- 1911 Sep:** Italy invades Libya
- 1914 Jun:** ‘Red Week’  
**Nov:** Mussolini founds *Il Popolo d’Italia*
- 1915 May:** Italy signs Treaty of London; ‘Radiant Days of May’; participation in First World War leads to inflation
- 1919 Jan:** Start of *biennio rosso*; first Arditi Association set up in Rome  
**Mar:** Formation of the Fascio di Combattimento in Milan  
**Jun:** *Fascist Programme* published  
**Sep:** D’Annunzio takes Fiume  
**Nov:** First use of proportional representation in elections; no fascists elected
- 1920 Sep:** *Biennio rosso*: wave of factory occupations; electoral victories for socialists
- 1921 May:** Mussolini forms National Bloc electoral alliance with Giolitti; 35 fascists elected, including Mussolini  
**Aug:** Pact of Pacification between fascists and socialists  
**Oct:** Formation of National Fascist Party / PNF  
**Nov:** Mussolini elected leader of PNF
- 1922 Jul–Aug:** General strike broken up by fascist violence  
**Oct:** March on Rome; Mussolini appointed as prime minister
- 1925** *Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals* published
- 1932** *The Doctrine of Fascism* published

Overview

- Although independence had been gained from Austria in 1861, Italy remained a divided nation in many ways. The incorporation of the papal states in 1870 resulted in Catholic hostility against the new Italian kingdom, which lasted into the early 20th century.
- In 1900, the right to vote was still very restricted. This and the liberal domination of politics via the system known as *trasformismo* (‘transformism’) undermined support for parliamentary democracy. There was also opposition from the growing socialist movement.
- In addition, there were significant economic and social divisions in Italy, especially between the more prosperous industrial north and the poorer agricultural south.
- Another cause of unrest was the claims made by Italian nationalists for various territories in Europe, and their demands for Italy to establish colonies in Africa and Asia.
- These problems were worsened by Italy’s entry into the First World War. There were divisions between interventionists and those who wanted to remain neutral. The war led to high casualties and inflation. After the war, there was disappointment at Italy’s limited territorial gains from the peace treaties, as well as higher unemployment.
- Between 1919 and 1922, many socialist-led strikes and factory occupations took place. Right-wing groups such as the Arditi and the Fasci di Combattimento used increasing violence against the left.
- In 1921, Mussolini established the National Fascist Party (PNF) and then made an electoral pact with the liberals. A new wave of fascist violence was often ignored by the élites and the authorities.
- Many of the (often contradictory) ideas that eventually formed fascist ideology in Italy had their origins in 19th-century thought.
- Mussolini’s own political views covered the entire political spectrum, from revolutionary socialism before 1914, to nationalism and then to fascism by 1919.
- In the early days of fascism, Mussolini placed much more emphasis on action than on ideology. From 1919 to 1922, the more radical elements of fascist programmes and policies were increasingly moderated.
- In 1922, local fascist leaders began to take over various towns and regions, and in October their ‘March on Rome’ resulted in Mussolini being appointed prime minister.
- After he became prime minister in 1922, Mussolini continued to distance himself from early fascism.

Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy

- From 1926 onwards, the more radical members of the PNF were purged, and the party came increasingly under Mussolini’s personal control.
- Even the creation of the corporate state – although apparently a concession to party ‘radicals’ – was carried out in a way that emphasised the power of the Italian state and of employers over employees.
- During the 1930s, Mussolini made efforts to issue clearer statements of **fascist** ideology. However, by this point, Italy had become a personal rather than a party dictatorship.

**fascist:** A term deriving from the Italian word *fascio* (plural *fasci*), meaning ‘group’ or ‘band’. In 1893, in Sicily, radical groups of mostly socialist workers formed *fasci* to organise demonstrations and strikes in protest at low wages and high rents. Mussolini adopted the term for his political movement in 1919. He later claimed that it referred to the *fascies*, bundles of rods carried by *lictors* (bodyguards) in ancient Rome.

KEY QUESTIONS

- How did the political and economic conditions in Italy before 1914 contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian regime?
- How did conditions between 1914–22 contribute to Mussolini’s rise to power?
- What were the aims and ideology of the Fascist Party?
- What were the sources of support for Mussolini’s Fascist Party?



Figure 2.1 Fascists in Rome, November 1922, after their triumphant ‘March’ on the city

QUESTION

What can you learn from this photograph about the nature of the Italian Fascist Party in 1922?

# 2



**Figure 2.2 Benito Mussolini (1883–1945)**

Mussolini followed an inconsistent political path in his early years. Initially more influenced by his father (a blacksmith with revolutionary socialist views) than by his mother (a school teacher and a devout Catholic), Mussolini drifted into socialist politics and journalism. Between 1904 and 1910, he developed a reputation as a militant as a result of articles in which he expressed traditional socialist views. The First World War led him to make a dramatic switch to extreme nationalism – which resulted in his expulsion from the Socialist Party – and then to fascism. Mussolini became Italy's first dictator, ruling from 1922 until 1943.

**Risorgimento:** This Italian word means 'resurgence' or 'rebirth', and refers to the literary and cultural revival that took place in Italy after 1815. The movement also campaigned against divisions within Italy and foreign domination, and called for political unification.

## Mussolini and Italy

### 2.1 How did the political and economic conditions in Italy before 1914 contribute to the emergence of an authoritarian regime?

Italy was the first state anywhere in the world in which a Fascist Party developed, and the first to have a fascist dictator, in **Benito Mussolini**.

#### The problems of liberal Italy before 1914

Many of the long-term factors behind the emergence of Mussolini as fascist dictator of Italy can be found in the weaknesses of Italy's liberal monarchy in the period before 1914. In 1861, after many decades of struggle against the Austrian Empire, the **Risorgimento** nationalist movement succeeded in creating a unified and independent Italy. However, the Catholic Church retained its own separate state in Rome and the surrounding area.

The people of the new kingdom of Italy were far from united, though, and several serious underlying problems left the *Risorgimento* process incomplete in many ways.

#### Italian politics and the impact of *trasformismo*

After unification, Italian politics were dominated by the liberals, who hoped to modernise Italy through social reforms such as state education (to break the conservative influence of the Catholic Church), and by stimulating economic development and progress. However, although the liberals were split into progressives and conservatives – or 'left-liberals' and 'conservative-liberals' – they were united in distrusting the masses, who had played little part in the struggle for unification. The liberals also particularly feared the influence of socialists, anarchists and republicans on the left and the Catholic Church on the right. All of these groups were opposed to the new Italian state. Consequently, the liberals were determined to keep politics firmly under their control until the old internal divisions and rivalries were overcome and the new state was secure. The electorate was thus restricted at first, with only about 2 per cent of the adult population allowed to vote.

The resentment many Italians felt at this restricted franchise (the right to vote) was increased by the corrupt politics it encouraged. With no mass parties, and no real party discipline amongst the liberals, leading politicians formed factions that made deals with one another to alternate political control. This process became known as **trasformismo**.

Even though the franchise was gradually extended, and all adult males were allowed to vote by 1912, the practice of *trasformismo* continued.

Political disunity in Italy was intensified by the hostility of the papacy towards the new Italian state. The papacy's opposition to the liberal regime was moderated during the 1890s out of fear that it might give way to socialism, and in 1904, the pope permitted Catholics to vote in constituencies where abstaining might result in a socialist victory. However, there was no real harmony between the liberal and Catholic powers.



## Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy

### Regional divisions

In addition to these political problems, the people of the new kingdom of Italy were not really united. Many Italians felt more loyalty towards their own town or region than towards the national government. The mountain ranges and islands that dominated Italy's geography made communication difficult, hindering the development of a truly national identity among the country's 38 million people. This was especially true in the south, where earlier rulers had deliberately neglected road and railway development in an attempt to stop the spread of liberal and revolutionary ideas from the north.

The problems of communication and transport also contributed to economic divisions in Italy. The south was very poor in comparison with northern and central areas. Land suitable for farming in the south was restricted by geography and climate, and most of the fertile lands were part of large estates known as *latifundia*, which were owned by a small minority of wealthy landowners. The vast majority of the population was extremely poor.

In northern and central Italy agriculture was more developed, and more modern farming methods and machinery were used. Even here, however, productivity was much lower than in the countries of northern Europe. There were also significant social divisions in even the more advanced agricultural areas. Most of the land was owned by wealthy landowners known as the *agrari*, who rented out land to poorer farmers and peasant sharecroppers. At the bottom of the social scale was a large class of rural labourers. As in the south, poverty and discontent in rural areas often led to conflict between the classes. The biggest economic difference between north and south, however, was in industry.

The Fiat car company was established in 1899, and by 1913 it was exporting over 4,000 cars a year. Towns and cities in the north grew rapidly. This led to the creation of a large industrial working class, a sizeable lower-middle class, and a powerful class of rich industrialists and bankers. While industry expanded in the north, however, there was no real investment in the south.

As with agriculture, the social and economic inequalities in the industrial towns led to frequent clashes between employers and employees. Many workers joined the socialists or the anarchists, and in 1904 a general strike took place. The dissatisfaction felt by many Italians led them to emigrate – the majority going to the USA.

### The problems of *terra irredenta* and the desire for empire

After 1870, many Italians came to realise that the *Risorgimento* was not complete. Firstly, there were the lands in Europe known as *terra irredenta*, which many Italians wanted Italy to reclaim.

In addition, many Italians hoped that unification would enable Italy to join the top rank of European powers by establishing its own empire. They looked to the example set by Germany – newly created in 1871 – which had started to obtain colonies in Africa and Asia. The first step in Italian empire-building was taken in 1885, with the acquisition of the port of Massawa on the Red Sea. By 1890, this had become the centre of the Italian colony of Eritrea. At the same time, Italy began the conquest of what became Italian Somaliland. However, tensions grew between Italy and the independent African state of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), which bordered both of these regions.

In 1911, Italy invaded the Turkish colony of Libya in an attempt to increase the size of the Italian empire and to block growing French influence in North Africa. In 1912,

**trasformismo:** This political development began soon after Italy had obtained the papal states in 1870, and was first applied by Agostino Depretis who was prime minister for most of the period 1876–87. He wanted to unite all moderate Liberals, and was prepared to form coalition governments with politicians of conflicting views – provided they were not extremists of the right or left. He saw this as a way to 'transform' Italy's political life and bring about widespread national support for Italy's recent unification. In effect, however, it tended to result in different sections of the Liberals forming governments.

**terra irredenta:** This term means 'unredeemed land'. It originally referred to the areas inhabited by many Italian speakers but ruled by Austria-Hungary during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The most important of these were Trentino and Trieste, in the northern Adriatic. Later, this term would also designate other surrounding foreign territories to which Italy believed that it had a rightful claim. Those who advocated this policy of territory reclamation were called 'irredentists'.

### QUESTION

How did the practice of *trasformismo* undermine support for parliamentary democracy in Italy before 1922?

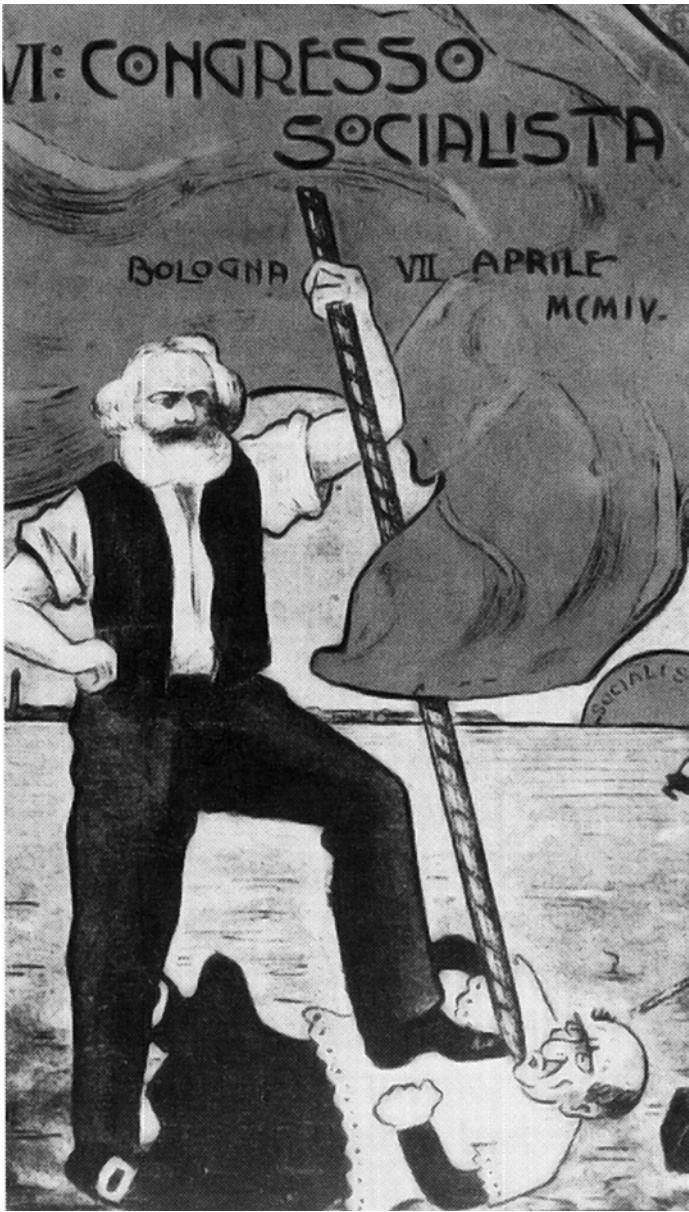
2

Mussolini and Italy

Turkey formally accepted its loss. Many Italian nationalists, still angry at their defeat by Abyssinia in 1896, continued to press for a more aggressive imperial policy.

**Fact:** ‘The papacy’ refers to the office of the pope, while ‘the Vatican’ refers to the central administration of the Catholic Church. *Risorgimento* was not supported by the papacy, which had previously ruled a large part of central Italy. The creation of the new kingdom deprived the papacy of all its territory except that surrounding Rome itself – also seized by Italian troops in 1870 to complete Italy’s unification. In 1873, the government confirmed the confiscation and in 1874, the pope retaliated by banning Catholics from all involvement in politics – even voting.

**Fact:** Industrial development in the newly unified Italy was limited. The north had some iron and steel concerns, but development was hindered by the lack of coal and iron ore. The south’s traditional silk industry was soon wiped out by more efficient manufacturers in the north. In the 1880s, hydroelectric power in the north provided the basis for rapid industrialisation.



**Figure 2.3** A postcard advertising a meeting of socialists in Bologna, 1904

2.2 How did conditions during 1914–22 contribute to Mussolini’s rise to power?

Although Italy was a member of the **Triple Alliance**, it did not join in when the First World War began in 1914. Instead, it decided to stay neutral.

**Triple Alliance:** The military alliance formed in 1882 between Germany, Austria and Italy. Opposed to this was the Triple Entente, consisting of Britain, France and Russia.

## Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy

## The impact of the First World War and the peace treaties, 1914–19

## Italian participation

While most Italians (especially the socialists) were in favour of neutrality, nationalists felt that intervention in the war would offer Italy an opportunity to gain more land and expand its empire. In view of its ambition to reclaim the country's *terra irredenta*, the liberal government decided to see which side would offer the best terms in exchange for Italy's support. Negotiations with the other two Triple Alliance nations in the period 1914–15 revealed that Austria would never concede Trentino or Trieste. However, the Entente nations promised that in the event of their victory, these territories would be granted to Italy, along with similarly contested Austrian territory in the South Tyrol, and Istria and northern Dalmatia on the Adriatic coast.

## The Treaty of London

While the Italian parliament debated the issues, interventionists organised street demonstrations demanding Italian involvement in the war. Many were members of the *fasci*, a mixture of anarcho-syndicalists (see Mussolini and the Fascio di Combattimento below) and national socialists who believed war would hasten revolution. They were joined by the right-wing nationalists of the **Associazione Nazionalista Italiana (ANI)** – the Italian Nationalist Association – which had previously pushed for the conquest of Libya. However, the leading liberal politicians had already decided on Italy's participation in the war. Consequently, in May 1915, Italy signed the Treaty of London and promised to join the war on the side of the Triple Entente.

## Italy's performance in the First World War

Despite the interventionists' hopes, the war did not go well for Italy. Over 5 million Italians were conscripted, and though most fought bravely they were ill-equipped and ill-supplied. In particular, military leadership was often poor and the Italian army found itself fighting a costly war of **attrition**.

In November 1917, the Italians suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Austrians at the Battle of Caporetto. Over 40,000 Italian soldiers were killed and about 300,000 were taken prisoner. The nationalists blamed the government for its inefficiency and for failing to supply the troops with enough equipment. Although the Italians won a costly victory at Vittorio Veneto in October 1918, this was overshadowed by previous defeats and the high casualties suffered. In addition, with the socialists maintaining strong opposition throughout, the war had clearly failed to unite Italians.

## The economic impact of the First World War

The First World War had a significant impact on the relatively weak Italian economy. In order to finance its involvement, the liberal government had borrowed heavily from Britain and the US, and the national debt had risen from 16 billion lire to 85 billion. Even this proved inadequate, so the government printed more banknotes, causing rapid inflation – prices increased by over 400 per cent between 1915 and 1918. This inflation destroyed much of the middle class' savings, reduced rental incomes for many landowners, and caused a drop of more than 25 per cent in the real wages of many workers. At the end of the war the situation was worsened by high

**Fact:** In 1889, Abyssinia signed a Treaty of Friendship with Italy, recognising Italy's acquisition of Massawa and agreeing to use the city as its main port. However, the Italian conquest of Eritrea led the Abyssinians to oppose any Italian interference in their country's affairs. In 1895, Italy occupied the province of Tigre in Abyssinia, but after several military clashes the Italians were heavily defeated at the Battle of Adowa in 1896. This was seen by many Italians as a terrible national humiliation.

**Associazione Nazionalista Italiana (ANI):** Italy's first nationalist party, formed in 1910. It supported war against Austria as a way of gaining the *terra irredenta*. The ANI grew close to Mussolini's Fascist Party, and merged with it in 1923.

**attrition:** The process of wearing down the enemy by sustained attacks. Italian officers often sacrificed thousands of lives needlessly – in all, over 600,000 Italians were killed, about 450,000 were permanently disabled, and a further 500,000 were seriously wounded.



## 2

**Bolsheviks:** The more revolutionary element of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (a Marxist party). Led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin – later joined by Leon Trotsky – they took power in Russia in November 1917. The Bolsheviks later changed their name to the Russian Communist Party, and worked hard to aid and encourage socialist revolutions in other regions, especially in more advanced capitalist countries such as Germany.

**Fact:** Companies such as Pirelli (tyres) and Montecatini (chemicals) made huge profits during the war. Fiat continued to expand and, by 1918, it was the largest motor manufacturer in Europe. However, the end of the war meant the loss of lucrative state contracts as the government cut expenditure in order to cope with mounting debts.

**QUESTION**

What do you understand by the term 'mutilated victory'? What areas were claimed by Italian nationalists after 1919?

**Mussolini and Italy**

unemployment as war industries closed down and more than 2.5 million soldiers were demobilised.

The war also deepened the economic divisions between north and south Italy. Those industries linked to war production (especially steel, chemicals, motor vehicles, and the rubber and woollen industries) did extremely well before 1918, as they were guaranteed large state contracts. When inflation began to rise, industrialists simply passed on the price increases to the government.

The south, still predominantly agricultural, did not share in this prosperity. Farming was badly affected by the conscription of large numbers of peasants and farm labourers. However, during the last years of the war – in an attempt to limit the attraction of socialism and the ideology of the Russian **Bolsheviks** – the government promised a programme of land reform after the war.

**The terms of the peace treaties**

When the war ended in November 1918, many Italians thought that their sacrifices should be repaid by substantial territorial rewards. **Vittorio Orlando**, the Italian prime minister, went to the Paris Peace Conferences in January 1919 expecting to receive all that had been promised by the Treaty of London. Under pressure from the nationalists, he also demanded the port of Fiume on the border of Istria as it contained a large Italian-speaking population. Finally, Orlando wanted Italy to gain a share of the former German colonies in Africa.

**Nationalists and the 'mutilated victory'**

Although most of Italy's post-war demands were eventually met, there were some important exceptions. The country gained no African territory, and Britain and the US refused to grant Italy Fiume and northern Dalmatia, arguing that these were vital for the development of the new state of Yugoslavia.

Italy's long-term opponent, Austria-Hungary, had been defeated and its empire dismantled, leaving Italy the dominant power in the Adriatic. Yet Italian nationalists were disgusted once the likely terms of the peace agreements became clear, and accused the liberal government of allowing Italy to be both humiliated and cheated. The popular nationalist Gabriele D'Annunzio spoke for many Italians – especially war veterans – when he called it a 'mutilated victory'.

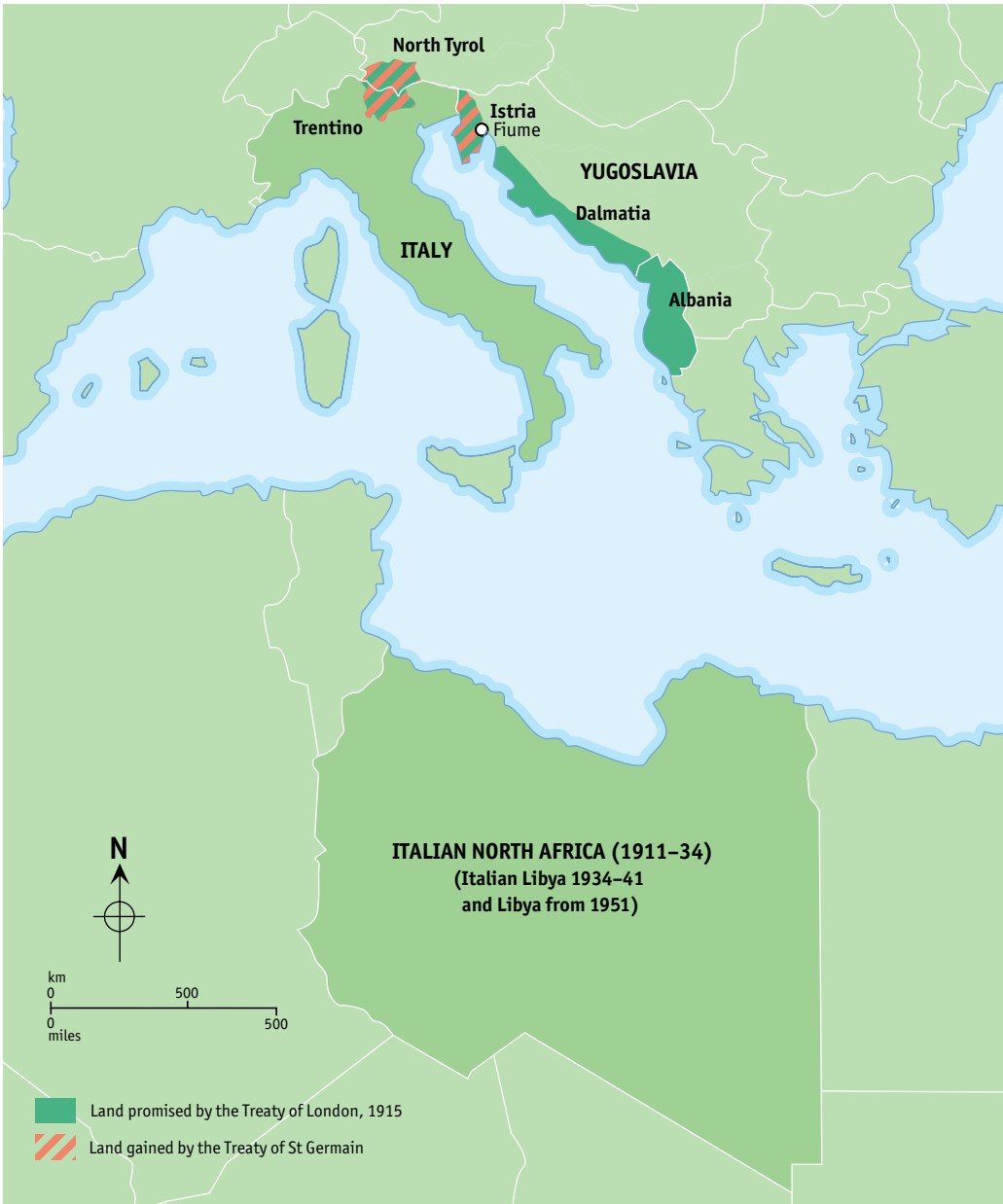
By 1919, it was clear that the liberal regime would face many problems in post-war Italy. In addition to the growing dissatisfaction of the nationalists, the liberals faced increased political opposition from other quarters. In January 1919, the papacy finally lifted its ban on the formation of a Catholic political party, leading to the foundation of the **Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI)**, or Italian Popular Party.

**The Italian Socialist Party (PSI) – the socialist 'threat'**

A more serious threat to the liberal regime was posed by the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). The economic problems resulting from the First World War caused great discontent among industrial and rural workers. The Socialist Party had moved increasingly to a revolutionary position. In 1917, inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, it called for the overthrow of the liberal state and the establishment of a socialist republic. Industrial workers resented the imposition of wartime discipline in the factories, which increased working hours and banned strikes – to the benefit of the employers. With

Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy

only about 50,000 members in 1914, Socialist Party membership had increased to over 200,000 by 1919. At its congress in that year, delegates talked of the need to use force in order to achieve ‘the conquest of power over the bourgeoisie’. In practice, however, many socialist leaders were stronger on rhetoric than on action.



**Figure 2.4** The land promised by the Treaty of London in 1915 and land actually gained by Italy in the 1919 peace treaties

The *biennio rosso*, 1919–20

Unemployment rose to over 2 million in 1919, and industrial workers began a wave of militant action that lasted from early 1919 to 1920. These years became known as the *biennio rosso* – the ‘two red years’. Throughout 1919, strikes, factory occupations

**Vittorio Orlando (1860–1952)**  
Orlando was appointed prime minister a few days after the Italian defeat at Caporetto in October 1917. At the Paris Peace Conferences, Italy had expected to be granted control of the Adriatic coastline. Orlando’s failure to win this territory prompted his resignation in June 1919. His inability to secure all of Italy’s territorial expectations at Versailles was used by Mussolini and the fascists in their campaign to demonstrate the weakness of the Italian government. Orlando initially backed Mussolini in 1922, but he withdrew his support in 1924.

**Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI):** Often known simply as the Popolari, this party was a coalition of conservative and liberal Catholics who wanted to defend Catholic interests and improve life for the peasants. It was led by the priest Luigi Sturzo, and was backed by Pope Benedict XV in order to oppose the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). In 1919, the Popolari won 20 per cent of the vote, and from 1919 to 1921 it was the second-largest party in Italy after the PSI. The Popolari was generally suspicious of liberalism because of the latter’s history of anti-clericalism. Some members became ministers in Mussolini’s fascist government.



2

Giovanni Giolitti (1842–1928)

Giolitti was prime minister of Italy five times between 1892 and 1921. Bowing to nationalist pressure, he agreed to the Italo–Turkish war of 1911–12. In 1915, Giolitti opposed Italy’s involvement in the First World War, believing the country was unprepared. His last period as prime minister was 1920–21. He was supported by the fascist *squadristi*, and did not oppose their violent takeover of towns and regions. Giolitti backed Mussolini at first, but he withdrew his support in 1924.

**Arditi:** The term translates as ‘the daring ones’. These were the black-shirted commando (or ‘storm’) troops of the Italian army, whose officers hated the liberal political system which they felt had betrayed their wartime sacrifices by failing to obtain the land promised to Italy. These troops were demobilised in 1920, but their name – and uniform – was used by D’Annunzio’s supporters who took over Fiume in 1919.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944)

Writer and artist Marinetti proclaimed the unity of art and life. The artistic movement he founded, futurism, incorporated elements of both anarchism and fascism. Marinetti was an early supporter of Mussolini. He later distanced himself from what he saw as the more conservative aspects of fascism, but he remained an important influence on fascist ideology.

Mussolini and Italy

and land occupations, organised by trade unions and peasant leagues and involving over 1 million workers, swept across Italy. By the end of 1919, socialist trade unions had more than 2 million members, compared to about 250,000 at the beginning of the year.

In many areas, especially in the north, socialists seized control of local government. To many industrialists and landowners, and to the middle classes in general, it seemed that a communist revolution was about to begin. Yet the government, headed by **Giovanni Giolitti**, did little. Believing that the workers were less dangerous inside the factories than on the streets, and that militancy would soon decline, the government urged employers and landowners to make some concessions. In response to riots over the high price of food, the government set up food committees to control distribution and prices. This lack of forceful action led many of the middle and upper classes to view the government as dangerously incompetent.

The threat from the right

After the war, the various militant and disaffected right-wing groups were joined by another force that was also in search of change. This comprised demobilised and unemployed officers and troops, who found it difficult to accept many aspects of post-war Italian society. One notable group was the **Arditi**.

In early 1919, the Arditi formed themselves into organised groups. The first Arditi Association was set up in Rome in January, while **Filippo Tommaso Marinetti** established another in Milan. Throughout February, many other Arditi groups were formed across Italy. They increasingly used weapons to attack socialists and trade unionists, whom they regarded as the enemies of the Italian nation.

Mussolini and the Fascio di Combattimento

In March 1919, Mussolini – himself a member of the Arditi – tried to bring these disparate groups together. On 23 March, 118 people, representing various political groupings, met in Milan and formed a Fascio di Combattimento (‘combat’ or ‘fighting group’). These founding members later became known as the Fascists of the First Hour (see section 2.3, Fascist beliefs in 1919). They intended to bring together nationalists and socialists, and a militant-sounding *Fascist Programme* was published on 6 June 1919, which combined various left- and right-wing demands. However, what really united these nationalists, **syndicalists**, artists and ex-servicemen was a hatred of the liberal state.

**SOURCE A**

*Comments on the backgrounds of the fascist squadristi by Angelo Tasca, a member of the Italian Communist Party in the early 1920s.*

In the Po valley, the towns were on the whole less red than the country, being full of landowners, garrison officers, university students, rentiers, professional men, and trades people. These were the classes from which Fascism drew its recruits and which offered the first armed squads.

Tasca, A. *The Rise of Italian Fascism 1918–22*. Quoted in Macdonald, H. 1999. *Mussolini and Italian Fascism*. Cheltenham, UK. Nelson Thornes. p. 17.

## Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Italy



**Figure 2.5** Benito Mussolini and Gabriele D'Annunzio in 1925

### D'Annunzio and Fiume

Although Fasci di Combattimento were established in about 70 other towns, Mussolini's tiny network of militant agitators was soon overshadowed by the actions of **Gabriele D'Annunzio**, who led 2,000 armed men to the city of Fiume – one of the areas Italy had sought but not won in the peace treaties. D'Annunzio's force quickly took control, and in open defiance of the liberal Italian government and the Allies, they ruled the city for the next 15 months. This bold action made D'Annunzio a hero to Italian nationalists, and proved an inspiration to Mussolini. In particular, Mussolini decided to adopt the theatrical trappings used by D'Annunzio, especially the black shirts of the Arditi, the ancient Roman salute they used, and the many parades and balcony speeches they performed.

The relative weakness of Mussolini's Fasci di Combattimento was underlined by the results of the November 1919 elections. These were for appointments to the Chamber of Deputies – the lower house of the Italian parliament (the upper house was the Senate). For the first time, the elections were held using a system of **proportional representation**.

**syndicalists:** These were originally people who believed that the workers, not the state, should control the economy through trade unions. This form of syndicalism was most often associated with left-wing anarcho-syndicalism (such as existed in Spain in 1936–39), but some syndicalists were politically involved with early fascism.

### Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938)

D'Annunzio was a poet and writer. As an ultra-nationalist, he supported Italy's entry into the First World War on the side of the Triple Entente. He joined up as a pilot and became something of a war hero after dropping propaganda leaflets over Vienna. He was an irredentist (see section 2.1, The problems of *terra irredenta* and the desire for empire), and was angered when Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia) was handed over to the new state of Yugoslavia after the First World War.

**proportional representation:** A method of voting whereby each party gains representation in parliament to a greater or lesser extent, according to the proportion of the total votes it receives in an election. Some proportional representation systems are more closely proportional than others.