activity there that gave the fascists their opportunity. In the economic turmoil affecting post-war Italy, socialist Labour Leagues had managed to organise the landless labourers of the region and challenge the power of the large tenant farmers and landlords by threatening to seize control of farms (see page 26). Young fascists, organised into ***squadristi***, went out from the towns and violently attacked the socialist Leagues. The traditional leaders of rural society – landowners and large farmers – were happy to encourage their new allies, and the local police took their lead from them and did not interfere.

These early 'victories', trading on fear of socialism and appealing to right-wing elements, not only gave the fascists a much higher profile across northern and central Italy but also began to change the nature of fascism. The gangs of ex-soldiers who went out on lorries to terrorise the rural trades unions became a major and enduring feature of fascism across the country and one that was copied in the towns to oppose union attempts to browbeat employers by occupying factories.

The *squadristi* had no difficulty in obtaining arms and, with their anti-socialist commitment, often received help, or at least helpful indifference, from the army and the police. By late 1920, they had proved so effective that many rural landlords and urban industrialists in northern and central Italy, tired of government indifference to their plight, were willing to pay generously for their help against the threat from socialists and trades unionists. A pattern of tolerated right-wing violence became established and important economic groups were drawn into supporting the fascists, morally and financially. Many liberals applauded the violence that the fascists handed out, seeing them as defenders of the country against the threat of a left-wing takeover.

Mussolini stood apart from the early activity of the *squadristi* but, when they began to attract not just financial contributions but also a steady flow of new **rural recruits** for the movement, he was quick to take credit for their role as protectors of society.

KEY TERMS

Squadristi Members of the fascist paramilitary movemen run by ex-army officers. The movement's title was *squadrismo*. Often they were simply thugs in black shirts. The *squadristi* leaders were known as *ras*. Their main enemy were socialists. On some occasions, such as in Parma in 1922, they fought pitched battles against their enemies.

Rural recruits The membership of the *squadris* came from those who feared the rise of socialism: the labourers, small tenant farmers, farm managers, better-off peasants – and th growing strength enabled th fascist *squadristi* to challeng the socialist hold on the countryside in northern and central Italy.

KEY THEMES

Pact of Pacification This was part of Musslini's attempt to make the fascist movement more respectable and committed to a legal path to power and directly challenged those *squadristi* leaders who saw fascism as a revolutionary movement and were committed to destroying its enemies by violent confrontation. Mussolini probably also hoped to woo members of the other unions away from their support of the Socialist Party.

Mussolini's relationship with the *ras* Several of the *ras* were to be bitterly disappointed with Mussolini's cautious constitutional behaviour after he became prime minister in October 1922. They had assumed that there would be a revolutionary takeover of the state from which they and their *squadristi* members would be the chief beneficiaries. Mussolini, however, still had to devote much time and thought to retaining their support while not alienating important respectable opinion.

There were major confrontations, which, during 1920 alone, led to over 200 people being killed. By mid-1921, the rural socialists had been beaten and the fascist *squadristi* were in control of large areas of the countryside.

The Pact of Pacification, 1921

The emergence of the *squadristi* as the result of a series of independent local initiatives did, however, present Mussolini with a number of problems that were not really resolved until the late 1920s.

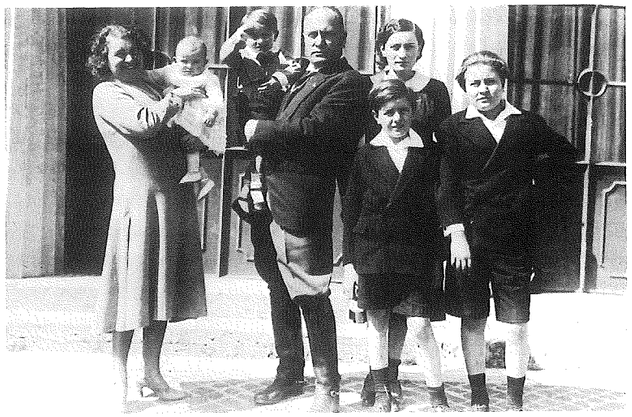
- The *squadristi* leaders (the *ras)* each had their own local power base through the control of *their* men and the position they had created in their own locality.
- The *ras* were usually more radical – politically and socially – than Mussolini himself and their views could not just be ignored.

The *Duce* (see page 33) was given a sharp reminder of the influence of the *ras* in August 1921 when, fearful that the growing violence between left and right would lead the government to take action, he signed a deal, the **Pact of Pacification**, between the fascist and socialist trades unions. However, Mussolin's deal was rejected by several of the leading *ras*, some of whom went so far as to urge D'Annunzio to replace Mussolini as fascist leader. A split was avoided only when Mussolini abandoned the pact. The episode illustrates the difficulties he had at this stage in keeping control of the movement he had done so much to create and his deteriorating **relationship** with it.

FASCISM'S CHANGING PROGRAMME, 1919–22

Appeal to vested interests

By 1921 the fascist programme became more conservative. Fascism's strident, often violent, opposition to communism and socialism had from the start appealed to the prosperous middle classes and to the better-off peasantry, to anyone who owned a little property or had a job that earned a wage slightly above that of the urban worker. By late 1921, fascism meant *squadrismo*, anti-communism, patriotism and strike-breaking. In different



Benito and Rachele Mussolini with their five children, 1930.

areas it had different meaning. However, it became attractive to those who felt the Liberal State no longer protected their interests.

The fascist direction appealed to conservatives through attempts to calm the fears of the Catholic Church by making clear the movement's strong commitment to family values, particularly in opposing divorce. There were hints in 1921 that the fascists would be prepared to negotiate sensible terms to resolve the Roman Question. The strength of fascism was that it remained a diverse ideology, the early fascists retained their radical idealism, the *squadristi* continued to emphasise their virility and, frequently, their violent disposition but undoubtedly, during 1920 and 1921, there was a move to the right that helped to attract more conservative support.

1921 election

Mussolini's opportunity to place candidates on Giolitti's government list in the 1921 election made fascism more respectable. Mussolini took a detailed interest in the selection of the candidates, ensuring their respectability and, by fascist standards, their moderation. He had been quick to recognise the progress fascism had been able to make as a result of the violent threat coming from the *squadristi* but, by 1921, he was aware that violence alone did not provide a **route to government**.

KEY THEMES

Mussolini's family Rachele Mussolini kept out of the limelight and seemed to prefer the private life of an ordinary housewife. Benito Mussolini had several mistresses but only in 2001 did it become public that the long-suffering Rachele also had a secret love for many years. Their daughter Edda, widow of the executed fascist foreign minister, Ciano, revealed this in a taped deathbed interview given in 1995. She claimed that her mother told Benito of the affair but that he took no steps to end it and that it was Edda's own adolescent outrage that brought it to an end.

Mussolini and the route to government The more success *squadristi* violence achieved the more likely it was to provoke a powerful reaction, either galvanising the liberal leaders or provoking action from the army. Mussolini therefore had to hold his more radical followers in check in order to convince the other political leaders and the electorate that he was willing to work within the parliamentary constitution.

KEY THEME

The Fascist Party (the PNF) Founded in October 1921, it attracted many recruits to fascism and, with 300,000 largely middle-class members by mid-1922, quickly became a valuable base for Mussolini to assert his pre-eminence within fascism.

KEY PEOPLE

Italo Balbo 1896–1940 The *ras* in Ferrara and one of the most extreme *squadristi* leaders. He wanted to win power by continued use of *squadristi* violence leading to a revolutionary takeover of the state. He was one of the four men responsible for organising the March on Rome and was later made national leader of the Fascist Militia.

Cesare Mori Possibly the only provincial prefect who was trying to resist the fascist onslaught.

Foundation of the Fascist Party

A key step in keeping control over the *squadristi* came in October 1921 when **the Fascist Party** was formally established on a national basis (*Partito Nazionale Fascista* or PNF). By 1922, the main elements in fascism's appeal were:

- its vigorous and apparently effective anti-socialism;
- its stress on patriotism as contrasted to the liberal failures to protect Italian interests;
- its emphasis on Mussolini's leadership and the beginning of the cult of the *Duce* (Mussolini as the great leader of fascism and, potentially, of the nation).

The radical political agenda of the first meeting in Milan in 1919 had, however, disappeared.

THE MARCH ON ROME, OCTOBER 1922

The fascist advance, January–September 1922

The political weaknesses that plagued Italy after the First World War reached their climax in the summer and autumn of 1922. From the beginning of the year, fascist violence had increased in intensity and scope throughout northern and central Italy. It was no longer a question of picking off the enemies of fascism; the fascists were now deliberately geared to seizing control of both towns and entire provinces.

- In May, the leading *ras*, **Italo Balbo**, used 50,000 unemployed men to occupy Ferrara and forced the council there to set up public works schemes to provide them with work. In June, he led his *squadristi* in force to Bologna and evicted **Cesare Mori**.
- In July, the extremist *ras* Roberto Farinacci of Cremona, launched a savage attack on the lives and the property of non-fascist leaders in the town.
- In September, *squadristi* moved out from Venice to seize the main towns in the German-speaking area of South Tyrol and drove out the legal administration.

Fascist successes in gaining local control almost everywhere

except in Rome and in the south were greatly helped by the active support, or at least helpful indifference, of many of the police and local government officials, vast numbers of whom thoroughly approved of the fascist stand against the socialists. The outcome of the fascist March on Rome (see page 37) only makes sense in the context of this series of earlier fascist coups in the provinces. This left the central government powerless in these areas, its decrees unenforceable. Here the fascist *squadristi*, not the government in Rome, were the rulers.

Failure on the left

The **natural enemies of the fascists** did remarkably little to prevent the fascists entering government. Indeed, the few things that were done by the left were actually helpful to the fascist cause.

- The socialist movement had split in two in January 1921 and a small **Communist Party** emerged from the split, linked to and partly financed by the Bolshevik government in Russia.
- In late July 1922, the socialist-dominated trades unions formed an **Alliance of Labour** to resist the fascists and called a 24-hour general strike. This received little support, even in the big industrial centres like Milan and Turin, and the Catholic and communist unions did not participate. The weakly supported strike provided an opportunity for the fascists to attack the strikers and to make a show of providing voluntary services before posing as the saviours of the country.

Government weakness

By summer 1922, it was clear that the maintenance of law and order required the liberal ruling elite to strike some sort of deal with Mussolini – either that or take decisive, presumably military, action against him and his violent followers. Throughout the previous three years a series of weak governments had consistently failed to confront the country's internal problems (see pages 22–6) and this would not change in 1922. From February, **Luigi Facta** was prime minister, a post he accepted reluctantly only because the *Popolari* refused to co-operate with Giolitti.

KEY PEOPLE

Natural enemies of the fascists Those embracing socialist ideas and committe to defending working-class interests

KEY THEMES

The Communist Party However feeble the threat th party posed, its mere existen was a propaganda goldmine to the fascists. More serious even after the communists had broken away the socialis were unable to agree to wor with the liberals so long as they in turn were associated with the Catholic *Popolari*.

Alliance of Labour strike Support was weak, which c be seen in the fact that only 800 out of 10,000 Fiat workers went on strike.

KEY PERSON

Luigi Facta 1861–1930 Was twice appointed prime minister in 1922, leading weak, divided governments for a few weeks on each occasion. He sought compromise with fascist violence but finally decided make a stand against Mussolini's threats only fo the king to refuse to back him. Facta's government w narrowly based and many its supporters were more fearful of a socialist *coup* th of the fascists. They believe that the fascists could be brought into government would then be useful allies against the left.

Facta saw himself simply as a caretaker until Giolitti could yet again manufacture a coalition.

For his part, Mussolini was content through the summer of 1922 to continue negotiating quietly with the parliamentary leaders. He created an impression that he would be only too happy to co-operate in maintaining the normal political processes, but first asked for four government posts for his handful of parliamentary followers and then went on to demand that he be made prime minister.

Mussolini threatens the March

It was Mussolini's threat to organise a fascist march on Rome to take control there, and so, he claimed, to save Italy from anarchy and from communism, that provoked the final crisis that, in turn, led to his becoming prime minister. The threat was issued at a fascist rally in Naples on 24 October which was attended by over 40,000 supporters. Facta's government was so nervous that the military garrison in Rome was increased in the face of the fascist threat.

In pursuing his twin strategy, of allowing fascist violence to intimidate opponents while at the same time conducting political negotiations with them, Mussolini faced two grave dangers.

- Despite all the obstacles, an anti-fascist coalition could be made, led by a politician such as Giolitti that would block his rise to power.
- His own followers, led by the more excitable of the *ras*, and emboldened by their recent successes in taking over the government of so many provincial towns, would reject his frustrating political manoeuvres and seek someone else to lead them towards a revolutionary seizure of power.

Calling the March on Rome was his way of averting both these dangers.

The more immediate danger was that the anti-fascists would agree to work together. In **Mussolini's speech on**

KEY SPEECH

Mussolini's speech on fascist intentions *Our programme is simple. We want to govern Italy … It is not programmes of salvation that are missing in Italy. It is the men and the determination … We must tackle the problem of how to replace this political class which has always, in the last few years, pursued a policy of abdication when confronted by that wind-filled puppet which is called Italian socialism. I believe this replacement is urgent and the more radical it is the better it will be … I believe that the monarchy has no reason to oppose what we must now call the fascist revolution. It is not in its interests because if it did it would immediately become an adversary, and if it became an opponent it is clear we could not save it because for us it is a matter of life and death … We must have the courage to become monarchists.*

fascist intentions given on 20 September 1922 at Udine, Mussolini went out of his way to limit this danger by trying to reassure both the king and the army that, whatever fascism's other objectives, it did not seek to challenge *their* role in the state. However, the underlying menace was scarcely hidden. Mussolini was particularly concerned that Giolitti, the most experienced and resolute of the liberal leaders, who had ended the Fiume occupation in 1920 by using the armed forces, would be persuaded by Facta to end his differences with D'Annunzio. This would be a first step towards forming a new and stronger coalition government that would apply pressure on the king to use the army to end the violence in 1922. Mussolini opened separate negotiations with D'Annunzio and also swiftly prepared his plans for the March on Rome. At the same time, he used the public platform provided by the party conference in Naples to demand that Facta took leading fascists into his cabinet or face the consequences. He played heavily in his conference speech of 24 October on the alternatives before fascism – whether it would come to power legally or violently – because its coming to power was inevitable. The fascist delegates were swept into a frenzy. This political blackmail – 'Let us into government legally now or we let loose a revolution against the state' – produced panic among some, but not all liberal politicians.

Immediately after he left the Naples conference Mussolini returned to Milan to set the much-publicised **March on Rome** on its way and at the same time continue his negotiations with leading liberals. Such moves succeeded in giving the impression to those in Rome that a successful revolution of national proportions was underway.

Nevertheless, Prime Minister Facta, having first hesitated, then kept his nerve and, at 5 am on 28 October, resolved at last to resist the insurrection. He had already reinforced Rome's military and checked on the loyalty of the troops there and had then established that the king as head of state and therefore commander of Italy's armed forces would issue a royal decree establishing **martial law**. The initiative had already slipped to the fascists. Now they would have to be forcibly turned out of the public buildings that they had just occupied rather than simply being prevented from entering them.

KEY THEME

March on Rome There were to be four columns of marchers starting from different points, each led by prominent fascist and under the overall direction of Balbo the *ras* from Ferrara.

In order to heighten tension the arrangements were deliberately given the appearance of military operation.

The first step, late at night 27 October, was to demoralise the government and its supporters by seizing police stations and other government buildings in the towns that the fascists already controlled.

KEY TERM

Martial law Comes about when military government is imposed and ordinary law is suspended. However, the king feared martial law.

KEY PEOPLE

Victor Emmanuel III King of Italy 1900–46. In 1922, he allowed Mussolini to become prime minister rather than impose martial law. Having again failed to stand up to Mussolini in 1925, as the *Duce* assumed dictatorial powers, he was politically powerless until, in 1943, he summoned the courage to dismiss him. He abdicated in 1946 and died in 1947.

The marchers They came to Rome in buses, lorries and cars, not on foot.

However, when Facta went to obtain the king's signature on the decree at 9 am, he found that **Victor Emmanuel** had changed his mind and now declined to sign it. A stunned Facta offered his resignation as prime minister and the king immediately accepted it.

Royal dilemma

The various factors that might account for the king's change of heart are examined in A2 Section 1 of this book, but it would pay ambitious AS students to spend a few minutes considering them here, for the significance of his action is difficult to overestimate.

- Having failed to back Facta, Victor Emmanuel had to find a new prime minister. Facta had been a follower of Giolitti, who was unlikely to be willing to succeed him in these fraught circumstances and who had indeed deliberately stayed away from Rome as the crisis deepened.
- It was therefore logical for the king to approach Salandra, Giolitti's great enemy among the liberals. Salandra accepted the king's request to form a government, but insisted that any viable coalition would have to include fascists in the cabinet. He offered them four places, which gave Mussolini what he had demanded less than a week earlier at the Naples conference.
- Safely back in Milan, Mussolini was by now prepared to play for higher stakes and, ignoring contrary advice from leading fascists, he rejected the offer. Salandra then informed the king that without fascist co-operation he could not form a government, and that Mussolini would have to be invited to see if he could do so.
- The king was therefore driven to telephone Mussolini, who first established that he was being invited to Rome to be offered the post of prime minister, and not some lesser role, before setting out by train from Milan.

Victor Emmanuel III in 1930.

Mussolini becomes prime minister

On 30 October, Victor Emmanuel formally asked Mussolini to form a government and, on 31 October, a victory parade of 70,000 fascists marched through the streets of Rome to be saluted by the king. **The marchers**

The fascist leaders in Rome after the March on Rome. (They were, from left to right: leading syndicalist Michele Bianchi; Emilio de Bono who became the first leader of the Fascist Militia; Cesare de Vecchi, *ras* in Turin; Mussolini and Italo Balbo, *ras* in Ferrara.)

had only set out for Rome after the king had made his offer to Mussolini and when all prospect of opposition from the police and army had vanished. For those *squadristi* members who had dreamed of a revolutionary conquest of Rome and the forcible seizure of the state, it was an anti-climax but for Mussolini it was a great political and personal triumph. He was prime minister, appointed by the king and he now insisted that the king allow his 'fascist legions' a victory march through Rome.

CONCLUSIONS

Political breakdown?

By 1922, Italian political life had reached a point of breakdown.

- The origins of the breakdown lay in the weaknesses of the Liberal State and were made more acute by the changes in the franchise and the growth of new political parties before 1914. This in turn helped to undermine the coalition politics that made the system function.
- The war and its aftermath created new problems. Most dangerous was the division among the ruling elite between those who had supported it and those who had been adamantly opposed to it, making co-operation against a common enemy virtually impossible.
- The war raised expectations of land and social reform, especially among the demobbed soldiers.
- Post-war extremist parties flourished and political violence became the norm. The infant fascist movement, vigorous in defending the urban streets against left-wing extremism, was seen by influential sections of Italian society including the king as the best hope to end the political crisis of the Liberal State and to safeguard Italy, and their own vested interests, from a communist revolution.

Political miscalculation?

There was no 'fascist seizure of power', no 'fascist revolution' and it could be argued that Mussolini became prime minister by entirely constitutional means. Victor Emmanuel appointed Mussolini as prime minister in a coalition government as the best hope for preserving law and order. Others must share the blame for this outcome. In a catalogue of mistakes:

- Facta had called for martial law too late to make an effective stand;
- Salandra, the right-wing liberal leader, declined to form a government that did not include fascists in it;
- Giolitti, the grand old man of Italian politics, stayed away from Rome at the critical moment.

Most of the old political class chose to ignore the daily acts of fascist violence and saw Mussolini's appointment as just another turn in the game of *trasformismo* politics. They comforted themselves with the thought that experience of office and its rewards would calm the fascists who were, after all, in a minority within the government. Few politically experienced onlookers expected the Mussolini government to last any longer than its short-lived immediate predecessors.

Even in the last few days of October 1922 fascism's success was not inevitable. If the king or any one of a handful of liberal politicians had acted differently towards the fascist threat, even at the last minute, then in all probability

Mussolini could have been stopped. As it was, the calculation that the most sensible course was to tame fascism by bringing it into the political system and requiring it to assume the burden of government in coalition with other political parties, seemed at the time an entirely rational one. In practice, it proved a gigantic miscalculation.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

1 How did the policies of the fascists change between 1919 and 1921? How did this affect the nature of their support?

2 Describe how important decisions by Giolitti, in 1921, and Victor Emmanuel, in 1922, helped the political fortunes of the fascists.

3 'The March on Rome never took place.' Why then was Mussolini able to bluff the king into appointing him prime minister?

KEY TERMS

Normalisation Mussolini's attempts after 1922 to end the violence and return to normal constitutional political methods. Some historians doubt whether he ever intended to do this.

National Government This consisted of:
- four fascists, including Mussolini as prime minister as well as interior minister and foreign minister;
- four liberals;
- two members of the *Popolari* (Catholic) Party;
- one member of the Nationalist Party;
- three eminent independents, General Diaz, Admiral di Revel and the distinguished philosopher Giovanni Gentile (see below).

KEY PERSON

Giovanni Gentile 1875–1944 By 1914, Gentile was Italy's pre-eminent philosopher. Having entered Mussolini's government in 1922, he became the main apologist for fascism, trying to create a distinctively fascist political philosophy. He was a government minister from 1922 to 1924, and chaired committees on constitutional reform and education. In the 1930s, he edited the 35-volume *Enciclopedia Italiana*, a mixture of high cultural writing and fascist propaganda – perhaps the only major fascist intellectual achievement. He was killed by communist partisans.

CHAPTER 3

Consolidating the fascist regime, 1922–5

INTRODUCTION

- In 1922, Mussolini was in office as yet another coalition prime minister, dependent on the support of political rivals, and apparently no more likely to provide long-term stability than earlier post-war governments.
- By the end of 1925, he had formed a stable and subservient government, having bluffed his way through a major political crisis provoked by the murder of the socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti. He had defeated his opponents, freed himself from the constraints imposed by his own followers and made himself indispensable to the conservative elements in the state, including the monarchy and the Catholic Church.
- From 1926 to 1929, a series of institutional changes and deals with conservative groups secured his rule on a permanent basis and, in 1929, an extraordinary agreement with the Catholic Church ensured acceptance of his regime for much of the 1930s.

ESTABLISHING GOVERNMENT: FIRST STEPS

Having accepted the king's summons to form a government Mussolini faced urgent problems for which he had no readily prepared solutions and, indeed, no set programme of reforms to enact. In the first instance he wanted above all to convince non-fascist politicians that nothing had really changed and that, once law and order had been restored, politics would soon be **normalised.**

There were only 32 fascist deputies in a Chamber of 535 and Mussolini therefore had no choice but to form a government largely of non-fascists. Therefore, he proceeded to create a coalition of right-wing elements, which he called a **National Government.**