

## 13.2 WHAT DID THE TERM 'FASCISM' STAND FOR?

It is important to try to define what the term 'fascist' stood for, because it was later applied to other regimes and rulers, such as Hitler, Franco (Spain), Salazar (Portugal) and Perón (Argentina), which were sometimes quite different from the Italian version of fascism. Nowadays there is a tendency among the left to label as 'fascist' anybody who holds right-wing views. The fact that fascism never produced a great theoretical writer who could explain its philosophies clearly in the way that Marx did for communism makes it difficult to pin down exactly what was involved. Mussolini's constantly changing aims before 1923 suggest that his main concern was simply to acquire power; after that he seems to have improvised his ideas as he went along. It eventually emerged that the type of fascism that Mussolini had in mind included certain basic features:

- *A stable and authoritarian government.* The Italian fascist movement was a reaction to the crisis situation outlined above that made stable democratic government impossible, just at the time when strong and decisive leadership was needed. An authoritarian government would arouse and mobilize the great mass of ordinary people, and would control as many aspects of people's lives as possible, with strong discipline. One aspect of this was the '*corporate state*'. This was a way of promoting efficiency by setting up a separate organization of workers and employers for each branch of the economy. Each 'corporation' had a government official attached to it. In practice it was a good way of controlling the workforce.
- *Extreme nationalism.* An emphasis on the rebirth of the nation after a period of decline; building up the greatness and prestige of the state, with the implication that one's own nation is superior to all others.
- *A one-party state was essential.* There was no place for democratic debate, because that made decisive government impossible and held up progress. Only fascism could provide the necessary dynamic action to guarantee Italy a great future. It also involved the cult of the great charismatic leader who would guide and inspire the nation to great things. Mussolini did not see himself as a prime minister or president – instead he took the title *il Duce* ('the leader'), in the same way that Hitler called himself *Führer*. Fascism was especially hostile to communism, which explains much of its popularity with big business and the wealthy.
- *Economic self-sufficiency (autarky).* This was vitally important in developing the greatness of the state; the government must therefore direct the economic life of the nation (though not in the Marxist sense of the state owning factories and land).
- *Great use was made of all the latest modern forms of propaganda* – uniforms, marches, songs and displays, all to demonstrate that fascists were a completely new and dynamic alternative to the boring, old-fashioned traditional parties, and to mobilize mass support behind the heroic leader.
- *Military strength and violence* were an integral part of the fascist way of life. In domestic affairs they were prepared to use extreme violence against opponents. Mussolini himself also gave the impression that they would pursue an aggressive foreign policy; he once remarked: 'Peace is absurd: fascism does not believe in it.' Hence the Italian fascists fostered the myth that they had seized power by force, when in fact Mussolini had been invited to form a government by the king.

## 13.3 MUSSOLINI TRIES TO INTRODUCE THE FASCIST STATE

There was no sudden change in the system of government and state institutions; at first Mussolini was merely the prime minister of a coalition cabinet in which only four out of