Benito Mussolini (1883-1945)

Benito Mussolini was born in a small town in North Italy. His parents were a blacksmith and a teacher. He grew up to become a prominent member of the Socialist Party.

When **World War One** broke out in 1914, Mussolini fell out with his socialist comrades. He wanted Italy to enter the war while most of them wanted to stay neutral. As a result he was expelled. This led to a radical change in Mussolini's politics. He no longer believed in the working class struggling against the rich; now he believed in the whole nation coming together, across class lines.

He fought in World War One and received funds from rich people to convince other socialists and workers to support the war. After the war, he and 200 supporters set up the **Fascist movement** in Milan in March 1919. At first, the Fascist movement was small and its political programme was a confused mix of left-wing and right-wing ideas.

In April they attacked and burned down the offices of a socialist newspaper, killing four people. This was the start of a long campaign of violence against socialists and communists. Mussolini formed *fasci di combattimento*, or combat squads. In October 1920 Bologna elected a left-wing city council; the fascists invaded the council chamber and killed nine people.

Mussolini's combat squads grew rapidly, spreading all over Italy. They were made up of middle-class and wealthy young men. They dressed in black uniforms and were known as **Blackshirts**. They performed public rituals such as the straight-arm salute of ancient Rome. They celebrated Mussolini. They went from town to town and village to village, killing socialists or beating them up. They would capture people and force-feed them castor oil, a laxative which would cause humiliation, disability and in some cases death. They burned down left-wing newspaper offices and trade union headquarters.

Hundreds were killed and thousands injured in a virtual civil war. The socialist and communist parties and the trade unions were utterly crushed. In 1922 Mussolini felt that the Fascist movement was ready to seize power, and he declared a March on Rome.