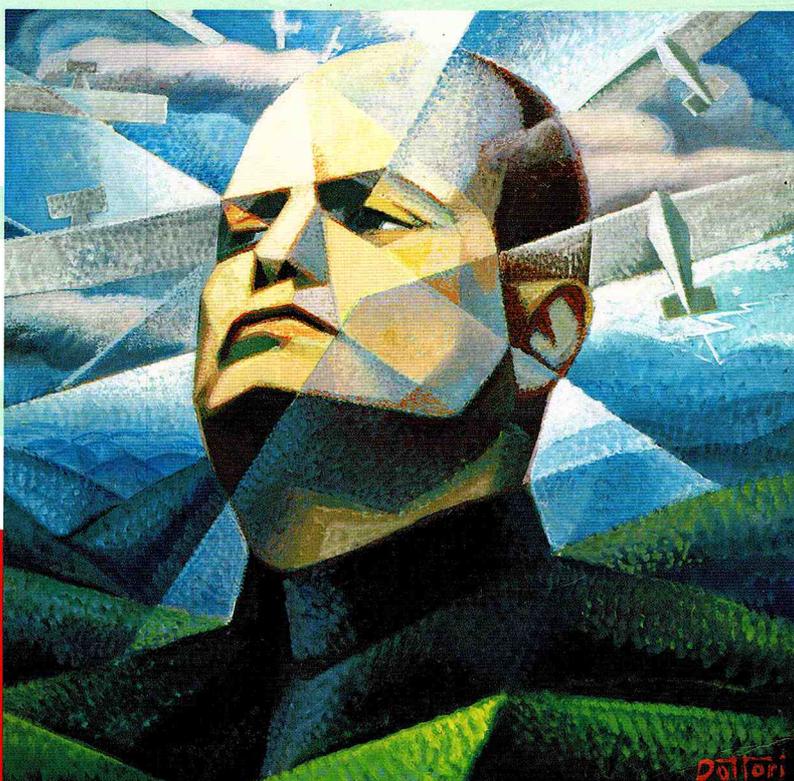


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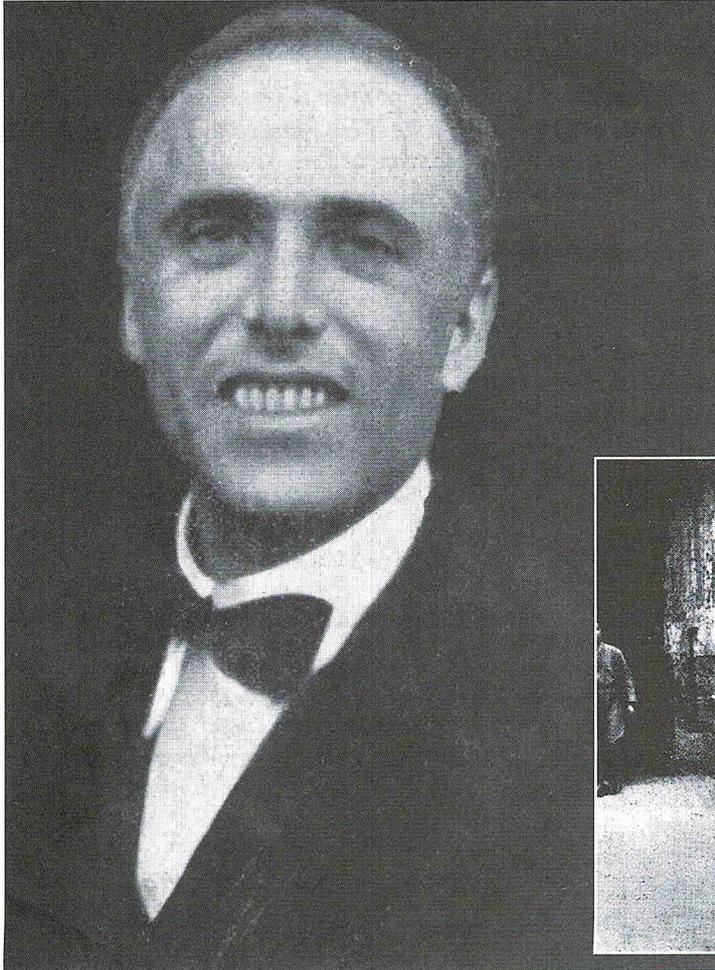
FASCIST ITALY



John Hite

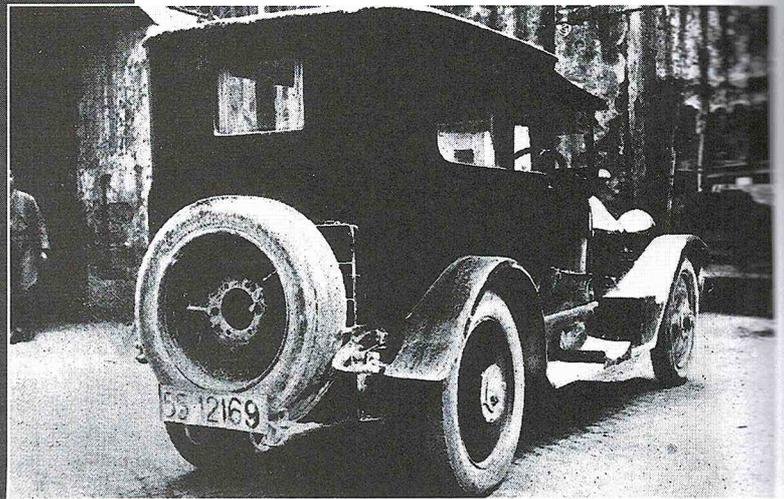
Chris Hinton

B How important was the Matteotti crisis?



SOURCE 4.9 Giacomo Matteotti

SOURCE 4.10 The car in which Matteotti was assassinated



On 30 May 1924 Giacomo Matteotti rose to his feet in the Italian Chamber of Deputies. Outraged by the Fascist violence in the recent elections, the Socialist leader had prepared a 30-minute speech denouncing the violence and calling for the annulment (cancelling) of the election results. He began to speak but within moments the interruptions began. Fascist Deputies were determined to stop Matteotti. Again and again they disrupted his speech but Matteotti struggled on. It took him two hours to complete his speech. Matteotti knew the likely cost of opposing the Fascists. As he left the Chamber of Deputies he turned to colleagues saying, 'Now you can prepare my funeral oration.'

Matteotti was right. He had predicted his own death and his prediction came true. Eleven days later, Matteotti (for once not under surveillance by the police) found his way to the Chamber blocked by a gang of ex-squadristi. They bundled him, desperately resisting, into a car. 'You may kill me,' he shouted, 'you will not kill the ideal. The workers will bless my dead body.' As the car screeched off, his abductors, armed with guns and knives, repeatedly stabbed him.

It was two months before Matteotti's death was confirmed. Dogs found his naked body, lying in a shallow grave 23 kilometres from Rome. A file was still sticking in his chest. An investigation was set up. The initial incident had been seen by a passer-by who noted down the car's licence plate registration. The car was found to belong to Filipelli, a leading Fascist. From this lead, many people linked to the government were implicated. The murder was traced to Dumini. He was a member of a secret hit squad called the Cheka (named after Lenin's secret police) that Mussolini had set up. Deservedly nicknamed 'nine homicides', Dumini was the personal assistant to Mussolini's press secretary and confidant, Cesare Rossi.

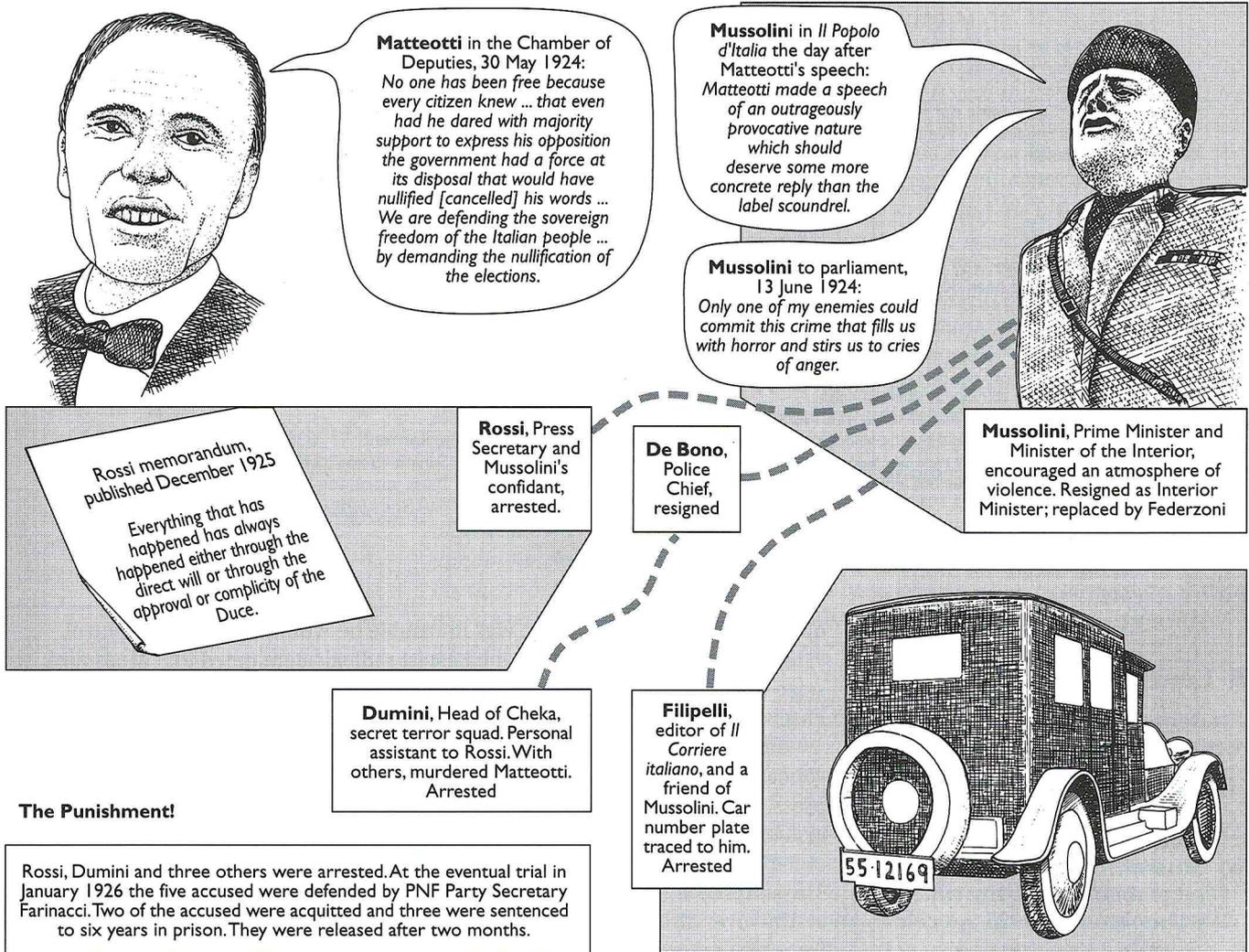
FOCUS ROUTE

Using pages 76–81, write structured notes on the Matteotti crisis.

- i) Describe what happened.
- ii) Explain why Mussolini survived.

Find evidence to support each of the following:

- a) Attitudes/actions of the King
- b) Attitudes/actions of the elite
- c) Nature, actions of the opposition
- d) Mussolini's actions
- e) Fascism's strengths
- f) Other reasons for Mussolini's survival.



Mussolini now faced a crisis that threatened to topple him from power. There was a widespread belief that Mussolini was personally involved in the murder of his chief political opponent. Fierce criticism came from many sections of the press. Large crowds gathered in the streets to protest. People tore up Fascist membership cards. Communists called for a general strike.

The murder of Matteotti raised in a stark form the question of the nature of the new Fascist government, which had not been clarified during the previous two years. Was it a terrorist regime where opponents were at the mercy of Fascist thugs, or was it merely a strengthened form of parliamentary government that operated within the law? Mussolini had wavered between the two approaches. Now he had to make a decision between one approach or the other, or face removal from power.

How did Mussolini respond to the crisis?

Mussolini was initially unsure what to do: 'My position is untenable. It is impossible to remain in power with a dead man at one's feet,' he said. For a time he was paralysed by depression, partly caused by severe ulcers. Most opposition Deputies walked out of Parliament, in a move known as the Aventine Secession named after a group of ancient Roman politicians who had set up a rival assembly on the Aventine Hills above Rome. They met elsewhere and declared themselves to be the true representatives of the Italian people. They expected the King to dismiss Mussolini.

King Victor Emmanuel, however, wanted others to take the lead and, fortunately for Mussolini, his opponents were divided. Despite most Deputies' opinions, many in the elite still considered a Mussolini government the best

CHART 4D Benito finito? Those who would decide his fate**Ras**

- Wanted to set up a Fascist dictatorship, smash the Liberal state.
- Farinacci: 'Duce, untie our hands.' 'All that is needed to solve the Italian problem is a few hundred thousand deaths.'

Elite

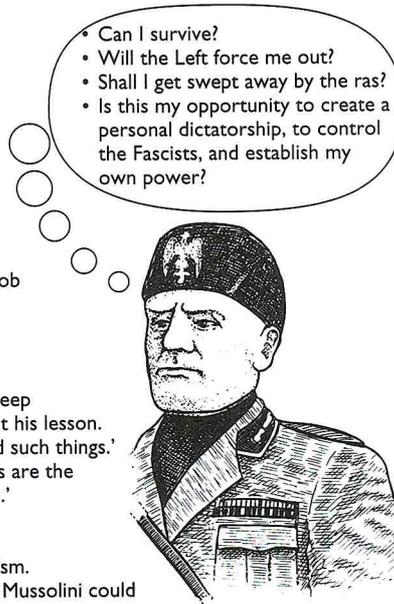
- Not entirely happy with Mussolini, but thought he'd been doing a good job – especially when faced with the alternatives.

King

- Unwilling to act, thinking it safer to keep Mussolini in office and that he'd learnt his lesson.
- 'I am not a judge. I should not be told such things.'
- 'I am blind and deaf; my eyes and ears are the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.'

Church

- Mussolini had saved Italy from Socialism.
- Cardinal Gaspari: 'The overthrow of Mussolini could plunge the country in fire and blood.'

**Opposition leaders**

- Turati: 'Everyone feels that something ought to be done, but no positive decision can be reached.'
- Giolitti: 'Mussolini has all the luck; the opposition was always very troublesome to me, but with him it just walks out and leaves the field free.'

Army

- Would obey the King.

Moderate Deputies

- Now Mussolini was weak, believed they'd be able to control him.

Parliament

- Senate vote of confidence 225 v 21. Most opposition MPs left Chamber; large Fascist majority remained.

Learning trouble spot

Students sometimes come away with the impression that:

- The Matteotti murder led straight away to a Fascist dictatorship.
- Mussolini admitted direct responsibility for the murder in his January 1925 speech.

In fact, it is more complex:

- **Matteotti was murdered in June 1924; this led to a prolonged crisis, during which Mussolini was uncertain how to act.**
- **He finally asserted himself six months later with his speech to Parliament in January 1925.**
- **In this he took responsibility for Fascism (and its violence) but denied ordering Matteotti's murder.**
- **Although this speech was followed by a wave of arrests and repressive action that marked the beginning of dictatorship, the major formal decrees were made gradually over the next two years.**
- **The most important of these, giving Mussolini power to rule by decree as Head of Government, was not passed until December 1925, eighteen months after Matteotti's murder.**

option, and thought that as he was in trouble he would be easier to control. While the opposition hesitated the Fascist radicals demanded that Mussolini seize the initiative, abandoning his conciliatory approach and setting up a full Fascist dictatorship.

Mussolini's first response was a policy which combined repression and concession. The militia was MOBILISED and tighter controls were imposed on the press, but there were concessions when the militia was integrated into the armed forces, with a new loyalty oath to the King. The suspects Rossi and Chief of Police de Bono were sacked, and the conservative Federzoni replaced Mussolini as Interior Minister.

However, this was not enough to take the pressure off Mussolini. Criticism from his opponents mounted as new evidence emerged implicating him in Fascist violence. On 27 December a newspaper published Rossi's testimony, directly implicating Mussolini in Fascist murder. However, the King refused to read the incriminating report, let alone act.

Mussolini was also under pressure from his own party. The Fascist radicals were equally critical, fearing that if Mussolini lost power their chances of a Fascist revolution would disappear. The ras pressured Mussolini to act, culminating in a tense meeting on 31 December 1924. Finally Mussolini took the plunge.

On 3 January 1925 he addressed the Chamber of Deputies. He took responsibility for Fascism (though not for the actual murder of Matteotti), and announced he would act within 48 hours to set up a dictatorship. The speech was followed by a wave of arrests, and measures against opponents. Over the following year a series of increasingly repressive DECREES and laws were issued. Mussolini was given the power to issue decrees, which he used to increase government controls. In January 1926 alone, over two thousand decrees were issued, and the powers of the government to act against critics were vastly extended. A new secret police, the OVRA, was established. Other parties were banned, and elected councils were replaced by appointed officials (see Chart 4F). The government ceased to be a mere ministry, and became a regime, as Mussolini established his dictatorship. However, contrary to the wishes of the ras, it was a personal dictatorship, rather than a fully Fascist one. Although Mussolini appointed the radical ras Farinacci as Party Secretary in February 1925, he cleverly used him to centralise the party (see page 94), and then dismissed him in March 1926. Thus Mussolini survived the Matteotti crisis due both to the actions he took, and the limitations of his opponents. In the end he gained considerably from a potentially fatal setback.

Activity

- 1 Read the following historians' assessments (Sources 4.11-16). Fill in a chart to record what each historian says about each of the following areas:
 - Attitudes/actions of King
 - Attitudes/actions of elite
 - Nature, actions of opposition
 - Mussolini's actions
 - Fascism's strengths
- 2 What points do all the historians make?
- 3 Are there any actual disagreements?
- 4 Which historians put more stress on Mussolini and the Fascists controlling their own fate?
- 5 Hold a discussion, set in early 1926, amongst a group of politically aware Italians (ranging from a Fascist sympathiser to a Socialist) over what you feel about Mussolini's government.

Historians' assessments of the Matteotti crisis

SOURCE 4.11 M. Gallo, *Mussolini's Italy*, 1974, pp. 189-91

The Aventine 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 and to continue making broad statements. 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. Thereupon the anti-Fascist tide receded . . . Turati [the Socialist] noted: 'We feel that it is essential to do something, but we cannot decide on anything positive. We feel that with the passage of time the enemy is catching his breath and that without doubt the Matteotti affair has now been drained of its possibilities.'

[After the Rossi memorandum was published] The Liberals of the Aventine thought that this indictment [damning report] would be read by at least one person, the King. 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 and a comfortable majority in the Chamber supported him. Furthermore, the battle was already lost because disillusion had swept the Italian masses once roused by hope and rebellion. In addition, the Fascists everywhere were arming themselves and reinforcing the militia.

SOURCE 4.12 Cassels, p. 47

The reluctant attitudes of King and Pope summarised the problems in a nutshell: the Italian power structure was slow to admit that its creature, Fascism, was out of control, and without leadership from the power structure, the anti-Fascist opposition remained fragmented and embryonic.

SOURCE 4.13 R. Eatwell, *Fascism, a History*, 1995, p. 52

Visitors to Mussolini at this time found him red-eyed and unshaven; he 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 . . . Other prominent figures rallied to Mussolini . . . many clearly believed that Mussolini deserved a further chance to show he could provide firm government. Mussolini too played his part, shrewdly exploiting the fear that if he resigned the result would be further political chaos, and a squadristi wave of violence.

SOURCE 4.14 Blinkhorn, p. 19

Mussolini panicked and would have resigned had the King required it. The King did not [make Mussolini resign], demonstrating the unwillingness of conservatives even now to abandon Mussolini, partly from fear of a LEFT-WING revival and partly in the hope of exploiting Mussolini's vulnerability to increase their influence over him.

SOURCE 4.15 Clark, pp. 227-28

His victory, once again, owed much to the militant squads and to their power in the provinces; and, once again, it owed much to the King's unwillingness to use the army against the Fascists. Yet once again, it was not inevitable. If the opposition parties had been present in the Chamber . . . or if the Rossi memorandum had not been published when it was (on 27 December, the holiday period) . . . or if the militia 'consuls' [leaders] had not conveniently put pressure on in late December, or if the elder statesmen . . . had shown more initiative, then Mussolini might have fallen . . . The King had decided, and Mussolini was safe.

SOURCE 4.16 E. Wiskemann, *Fascism in Italy, Its Development and Influence*, 1969, p. 16

Mussolini lost his confidence for months. By the end of the year he recovered it partly because of the hopeless divisions among his enemies. Most of them left the actual Chamber to form the Aventine Secession . . . but most of the Liberals disapproved of this as contrary to parliamentary principles. The King disliked the Aventine people because most of them were REPUBLICANS. The decisive voices, however, were those of the Church and of industry. The Pope expressed approval of the regime . . . Industrialists were opposed to another fresh beginning, all the more so since Mussolini had gone all out to propitiate them [win them over] by reducing the state's interference in the economy.

Activity

(Marks are given in brackets.)

- 1 Explain the references in Source 4.17 to:
 - a) 'from the days of intervention' (2)
 - b) 'castor oil and the club'. (2)
- 2 What do the extracts from Mussolini's speech suggest about his attitude to violence? (3)
- 3 Explain Orlando's description of the role of Fascist violence and state power (Source 4.18). (3)
- 4 What can you learn from Source 4.20? (2)
- 5 Study the cartoons (Sources 4.19 and 4.21). Compare the impression given of Mussolini in the two cartoons. What message is conveyed by each cartoon? (5)
- 6 'These sources illustrate how force and violence helped Fascism gain and keep power, but also the dangers for Mussolini of such an approach.' To what extent do you agree with this comment? (8)

Source exercise: The Matteotti crisis

SOURCE 4.17 Extracts from Mussolini's speech to the Chamber, 3 January 1925 (reported in the parliamentary record)

The speech I am going to make may not be classifiable as a parliamentary speech

...
I here declare, before this chamber, and before the whole of the Italian people, that I, I alone, assume full political, moral and historical responsibility for all that has happened. (Most lively and repeated applause; many shouts of 'We are all with you! We are all with you!') ... If Fascism has been nothing more than castor oil and the club and not a proud passion of the best Italian youth, the blame is on me. If Fascism has been a criminal association, then I am the chief of this criminal association (vigorous applause). If all the violence has been the result of a particular historical, political, and moral atmosphere, the responsibility is mine, because I have created this atmosphere with a propaganda from the days of intervention down till today ...

When two irreducible elements are in conflict, the solution is force ... In history there never has been any other solution, and there never will be ...

You thought Fascism was finished because I was restraining it, that it was dead because I was punishing it and because I had the audacity to say so. But if I were to employ the hundredth part of the energy in unleashing it that I have used in restraining it, you would understand then (vigorous applause). But there will be no need for this, because the government is strong enough to break the Aventine's sedition completely and definitely (vigorous, prolonged applause). Gentlemen, Italy wants peace and quiet, work and calm. I will give these things with love if possible and with force if necessary (lively applause).

You may be sure that within the next 48 hours after this speech, the situation will be clarified in every field (vigorous, prolonged applause). Everyone must realise that what I am planning to do is not the result of personal whim, of a lust for power, or of an ignoble passion, but solely the expression of my unlimited and mighty love for the fatherland (vigorous, prolonged and reiterated applause. Repeated cries of 'Long live Mussolini!')

SOURCE 4.18 From a speech given on 16 January 1925 by Orlando, former Liberal Prime Minister who had joined the Fascist list in 1924, but then broke with Fascism during the Matteotti crisis

You say that the country is calm. Well, if you are willing to be content with that kind of calm! ... During these last two and more years of government we have gone through various phases. In some of these there prevailed what I would call the private violence of the Fascist party and its organisations. This violence was deplored, even by the government. Then there followed governmental restrictions on personal freedom, with the justification that this was the way to contain the aforementioned violence. And thus pressure from the government replaced that of the party ... Now we have both; we have both governmental reaction and party violence.

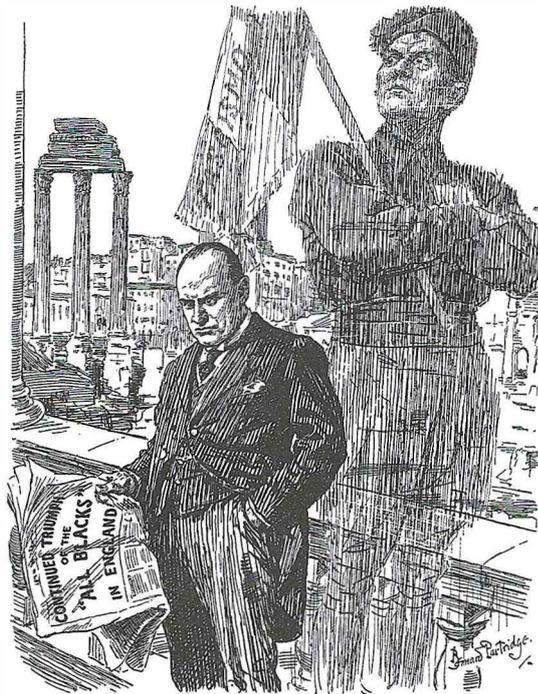
SOURCE 4.19 A 1924 cartoon from the Italian underground newspaper *Becco Giallo*



SOURCE 4.20 Italians placing a wreath on the spot where Matteotti was assassinated



SOURCE 4.21 A British cartoon from *Punch*, 26 November 1924



BLACK JERSEYS AND BLACK SHIRTS.

Signor Mussolini. "I SOMETIMES WISH MY 'ALL BLACKS' WERE ONLY FOOTBALLERS!"

The significance of the Matteotti crisis

This question, like the question of who was responsible for the Reichstag fire in Germany in 1933, and whether Stalin ordered the assassination of Kirov in 1934, has intrigued many historians.

In reality, the results of the Matteotti murder were far more important than the question of Mussolini's involvement. However, if Mussolini did order the murder, it could be used as evidence for those who question his political judgement.

The Matteotti crisis marked the turning point of Mussolini's regime. Until 1925 his ministry had appeared as just a stronger form of constitutional government. Mussolini eventually used the Matteotti crisis to set up a dictatorship, under which liberal freedoms and safeguards were replaced by a system concentrated on the power of one man.