

**On the Fiery March:  
Mussolini Prepares  
for War**

*G. BRUCE STRANG*

**PRAEGER**

# **On the Fiery March**



Italy, Southern Europe, and the Mediterranean



Italian East Africa

# On the Fiery March

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*Mussolini Prepares for War*

G. BRUCE STRANG

International History

*Erik Goldstein, William R. Keylor, and Cathal J. Nolan, Series Editors*

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PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut  
London

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Strang, G. Bruce, 1963–

On the fiery march : Mussolini prepares for war / G. Bruce Strang.

p. cm. — (International history, ISSN 1527–2230)

ISBN 0–275–97937–7(alk. paper)

1. World War, 1939–1945—Italy. 2. Mussolini, Benito, 1883–1945. 3. Fascism—Italy. 4. Italy—Politics and government—1914–1945. I. Title. II. Series.

D763.I8 S755 2003

940.54'0945—dc21      2002032984

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2002032984

ISBN: 0–275–97937–7

ISSN: 1527–2230

First published in 2003

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

[www.praeger.com](http://www.praeger.com)

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48–1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Nancy



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# Preface

Historians have sifted through the disastrous decisions of the 1930s that plunged the world into depression and war. Historians, political scientists, and philosophers have spilled proverbial rivers of ink trying to explain the causes of World War II, surveying an ever wider array of sources and evidence. Why, then, do we need another study that attempts to explain a part of the complex, interrelated origins of that war? The answer lies in two broad categories. The first, more nebulous one is that successive generations of historians bring new perspectives to old, unchanging histories. We have the benefit of assessing past writers' works, subjecting them to critical scrutiny, and, ideally, over time improving our collective understanding of the past. The second, more tangible reason is that historians occasionally achieve greater access to historical documentation.

Such is the case with this study on Mussolini and Italian foreign policy. After a long process of restoration, the Italian Foreign Ministry Archive has restored and microfilmed the so-called *Carte Lancelotti*, a collection of papers that then Foreign Minister Raffaele Guariglia removed in September 1943 from the Foreign Ministry to safeguard from German capture as the new Italian government tried to arrange its exit from the war. These papers from Galeazzo Ciano's *Gabinetto*, the Foreign Ministry office under which Mussolini and Ciano successively centralized and tightened Fascist control of foreign policy, comprise an important collection of telegrams, notes of interviews with foreign statesmen and diplomats, and personal memoranda. In addition, scholars now have access to the *Serie Affari Politici*, copies of telegrams from embassies abroad plus the diplo-

matic traffic sent from the *Gabinetto* to various embassies. These archival sources supplemented by published material, particularly Ciano's diaries, which historians and archival evidence have for the most part corroborated, provide the most comprehensive documentation available on Italian policy before the Second World War.

This study also adds a substantially new interpretive cast to the historical debate. During the archival research for this project, I became increasingly convinced that Mussolini's policy had a coherent thread and paradoxical consistency amid his seemingly opportunistic maneuvers and occasionally wavering policies. His decisions were not wholly rational; he was no mere opportunist, nor was he entirely inconsistent. In searching for the appropriate methodology to use to explain Italian policy, the evidence compelled me to discard many of the tools of recent international relations history; the now conventional reference to structuralist causation cannot properly explain the decisions of a fundamentally irrational thinker. Accordingly, I have focused my explanation of Mussolini's policy on an understanding of his *mentalité*. Mussolini's ultranationalist belief system, based on a high degree of racism, militarism, and social Darwinism, led him to cast his lot with Nazi Germany in order to expand Italy's power, influence, and territory at the expense of the Western democracies of France and Great Britain.

Given this focus, I have concentrated my detailed discussion of Italian foreign policy on the period from June 1936 to September 1939. I chose to examine this period because, after the conquest of Ethiopia, Mussolini had the option to reorient his foreign policy in the light of British and French attempts to restore the Stresa Front against Germany. This choice would protect Italy against the growing might of Germany and the potential German threat to Austrian independence and to Italy's northern frontier. It would also inhibit Mussolini's ability to carry out territorial aggrandizement in Europe or Africa, as British and French statesmen aimed to preserve the status quo. A second option would be to straddle the fence, to play each side against the other, hoping to extract concessions from both in exchange for temporary Italian favor. A third choice was to link Italy to the increasing dynamism of Nazi Germany, setting Italy on a course toward eventual expansion in Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans. This policy would inevitably entail confrontation with Britain and France. In addition, this monograph begins its detailed examination of Mussolini's foreign policy in June 1936 because Mussolini appointed his son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, to the Foreign Ministry, starting the process of Fascistizing Italian diplomacy. Ciano, Mussolini's thoroughly loyal subordinate, was his father-in-law's stalking horse for the implementation of this initiative as well as the rapprochement with Nazi Germany.

By August 1939, Mussolini had substantially changed the orientation of Fascist foreign policy, having chosen in January to pursue a tripartite Italo-German-Japanese alliance directed against Great Britain. He hoped to reach that agreement so that he could carry out a program of expansion to displace France and Britain as the great North African colonial powers. In other words, he had chosen the third alternative. Although Mussolini chose to remain a nonbelligerent in September 1939, he did so only because Fascist Italy was woefully unprepared for a war that the Duce considered premature. Nevertheless, Mussolini had foreclosed the chance to realize a genuine rapprochement with the West, and although Mussolini's relationship with the German ally was sometimes difficult, it is not surprising that he threw Italy into the Second World War as Germany overran France. The German alliance offered Mussolini the best chance to realize his extravagant imperial dreams, and although events would conspire against his idealized, fatalistic vision of the future, Mussolini had deliberately embarked Italy on a course that carried Italy to defeat and him to a bitter, violent end.

Although this monograph is in many ways an individual accomplishment, I never could have completed it without the advice and support of many people. I owe a profound debt of gratitude to so many, though I can name only a few here.

I would like to thank colleagues Alan Cassels, Robert H. Johnston, Martin Horn, and Stephen Morewood, who read all or part of the manuscript. Their thoughtful criticisms made this a better work. Naturally, the responsibility for the text is my own. I would like to thank Alan Cassels in particular for agreeing to supervise my thesis well into his retirement. I would also like to thank Wayne Thorpe for his encouragement during my graduate years and Rob Hanks and John Schindler for the many discussions that we have had about history and politics, as well as less weighty matters.

The staff of many archives, the Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, the Public Record Office, the National Archives and Record Administration, and the University of Birmingham Library, provided access to important research material. I would especially like to thank Michele Abbate of the Archivio Storico for his gracious assistance during my most recent trip to Rome.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Ontario Graduate Scholarships Committee, and McMaster University provided vitally important funding support, and I would especially like to thank the family of Richard J. Fuller, whose generous bequest to the History Department made my archival research possible.

I owe a profound debt to members of my family: to many aunts, uncles, and cousins; to Lynn Mitchell-Pederson for showing me that it could be

done; to Kent, Shawna, and especially David and Kristel, for their financial and emotional support, as well as their fellowship in Hamilton; to newfound family, Oliver, Mavis, and Bill Whitworth and Margi and Brian Hennen; to Alex Cruickshank; to my grandmothers, Eva Mitchell and the late Agnes Strang, who instilled in their children the value of education; and to George and Joyce Strang, without whom I could not have made it this far. My profound regret is that my father did not live to see this work completed.

I have saved three people for the last. I thank Robert J. Young of the University of Winnipeg for making my academic career possible. He continues to be a mentor and a friend. His graciousness and academic accomplishments inspire me to strive to achieve a higher level in my own work. I would like to express my profound thanks to my mother, Ruth Mitchell, for inspiring me to pursue this goal, for encouraging me to carry on when the path seemed bleak, and, most of all, for convincing me to keep the courage of my convictions. I could not have done it without her. Finally, I am amazed and grateful for the good fortune that Nancy Hennen shares in my life and work. Although we pursue different paths, in our own ways we both aspire to artistry.

## *Series Foreword*

This series furthers historical writing that is genuinely international in scope and multiarchival in methodology. It publishes different types of works in the field of international history: Scholarly monographs, which elucidate important but hitherto unexplored or underexplored topics; more general works, which incorporate the results of specialized studies and present them to a wider public; and edited volumes, which bring together distinguished scholars to address salient issues in international history.

The series promotes scholarship in traditional subfields of international history such as the political, military, diplomatic, and economic relations among states. But it also welcomes studies that address topics of nonstate history and of more recent interest, such as the role of international non-governmental organizations in promoting new policies, cultural relations among societies, and the history of private international economic activity.

In short, while this series happily embraces traditional diplomatic history, it does not operate on the assumption that the state is an autonomous actor in international relations and that the job of the international historian is done solely by consulting the official records left behind by various foreign offices. Instead, it encourages scholarly work that also probes the broader forces within society that influence the formulation and execution of foreign policies, social tensions, religious and ethnic conflict, economic competition, environmental concerns, scientific and technology issues, and international cultural relations.

On the other hand, the series eschews works that concentrate exclusively on the foreign policy of any single nation. Hence, notwithstanding

the central role played by the United States in international affairs since World War II, or of Great Britain in the nineteenth century, history written according to “the view from Washington” or “the view from London” does not satisfy the editors’ criteria for international history, in the proper sense of that term. The books in this series do not assume a parochial perspective. In addition to reviewing the domestic context of any one country’s foreign policies, they also accord appropriate consideration of the consequences of those policies abroad and the reciprocal relationships between the country of primary interest and other countries (and actors) with which it comes into contact.

The vast majority of recent publications in international history, in both book and article form, deal with the period since the end of the Second World War. The Cold War in particular has generated an impressive and constantly expanding body of historical scholarship. While this series also publishes works which treat this recent historical period, overall it takes a long view of international history. It is deeply interested in scholarship dealing with much earlier, even classical, eras of world history. The prospect of obtaining access to newly declassified documentary records (from Western governments and especially from the former members of the Warsaw Pact Organization) is an exciting one and will doubtless lead to the publication of important works that deepen our understanding of the recent past. But historians must not be dissuaded from investigating periods in the more distant past. Although most of the pertinent archives for such periods have been available for some time and have already been perused by scholars, renewed interpretations and assessments of earlier historical developments are essential to any ongoing understanding of the roots of the contemporary world.

The editors of this series hold appointments in departments of history, political science, and international relations. They are, therefore, deeply committed to an interdisciplinary approach to international history and welcome submissions from scholars in all these separate, but interrelated, disciplines. But that eclectic, humanistic approach should not be misconstrued to mean that any political science or international relations work will be of interest to the series, or its readers. Scholars from any discipline who locate their research and writing in the classical tradition of intellectual inquiry, that which examines the historical antecedents of international conflict and cooperation in order to understand contemporary affairs, are welcome to submit works for consideration. Such scholars are not interested in constructing abstract, and abstruse, theoretical models that have little relation to historical reality and possess no explanatory

power for contemporary affairs, either. Instead, they share the conviction that a careful, scrupulous, deeply scholarly examination of historical evidence is a prerequisite to understanding the past, living in the present, and preparing for the future. And most fundamentally, although they may disagree on the precise meaning of this or that past event or decision, they reject the fashionable but ultimately intellectually and morally sterile assertion that historical truth is entirely relative and therefore that all interpretations of past events are equally valid, or equally squalid, as they merely reflect the whims and prejudices of individual historians. This group of scholars, the natural clientele of this series, instead believe that it is the principal obligation of scholarship to ferret out real and lasting truths. Furthermore, they believe that having done so, the results of scholarly investigation must be conveyed with clarity and precision to a more general audience, in jargon-free, unpretentious language that any intelligent reader may readily comprehend.

*Erik Goldstein, William R. Keylor, and Cathal J. Nolan*



# Introduction

In April 1945, Mussolini's imperial dreams lay in ruins. Victorious Western allied armies advanced up the Italian peninsula, and Mussolini fled Milan hoping to postpone his day of reckoning. At dawn on 27 April, Mussolini and his entourage, including his mistress, Clara Petacci, joined a retreating German column heading for Austria. The column encountered a group of partisans, and having no stomach for a fight, agreed to turn over any Italian personnel in exchange for free passage. Mussolini was victim of yet another German betrayal. The partisans secluded him in a farmhouse near the town of Dongo. Word of Mussolini's capture reached Milan, and the self-styled Colonel Valerio (Walter Audisio), a communist member of the *Comitati di liberazione nazionale*, went to find the Duce. About a mile from the farmhouse, he lined Mussolini and Petacci up against the wall of a local villa and machine-gunned them. The following day, their bodies hung upside down at a gas station in Milan's Piazzale Loreto. Mussolini's dreams of expansion had led him to an ignominious end.

Mussolini's decision to declare war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940 was fraught with peril. Even though France lay prostrate, the British empire represented a formidable foe—one that would stretch Italian men and resources to the limit. Mussolini, his generals, and his men proved inadequate to the task, primarily owing to failures of the regime. The regime did not provide sufficient modern tanks, trucks, airplanes, or artillery pieces for modern warfare, and there was insufficient will on the part of soldiers to bring Mussolini the victories for which he thirsted. The British counterattack and victory at Beda Fomm in February 1941 doomed

Mussolini's African campaign, and it was only with a German-dominated army that he could stave off defeat there until 1943. Similarly, his folly in invading Greece in October 1940, when he thought that the Greeks were too intimidated to fight effectively, essentially ended Italy's role as an independent power. Rescuing Mussolini's hollow legions in both North Africa and in the Balkans, Hitler took his fellow dictator and the Italian war effort in tow. In July 1943, Mussolini's henchmen, including his own son-in-law, plotted to overthrow him; King Vittorio Emanuele III dismissed him in favor of Marshal Badoglio and had Mussolini arrested and imprisoned.

Given the appalling nature of the failures of Mussolini's Italy during the Second World War, why had he committed Italy to the battle on the Nazi side? Many historians have ventured answers to this question.<sup>1</sup> The earliest writers were harsh critics. Contemporaries of Mussolini, many had been active in the domestic resistance to Fascism. Gaetano Salvemini is the most notable. A social democrat and one of Italy's leading historians, Salvemini founded an anti-Fascist newspaper after Mussolini's rise to power. Harassed into exile in 1925, Salvemini wrote several polemics attempting to raise Western opposition to Mussolini's regime.<sup>2</sup> In 1953, he published *Prelude to World War II*, a polemic based in part on a prewar book; Salvemini condemned Mussolini as "an irresponsible improviser, half madman, half criminal."<sup>3</sup> Salvemini's interpretation dominated Italian scholarship until the 1960s, not so much owing to the accuracy of his vision but rather to his place in Italian society. His last volume appeared before the release of official documents. His stature as historian and member of Italy's political and intellectual elite reinforced his work, and, by almost casually dismissing real meaning from Mussolini's Fascism, he gave some comfort to a society that did not want to confront its expansionist, imperialist, and sometimes racialist past.<sup>4</sup> Nor did early international writers challenge this interpretation. British journalist Elizabeth Wiskemann also argued that for all Mussolini's bluster, he never had any clear foreign policy goals.<sup>5</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, in a short article on Italian diplomacy, also suggested that Mussolini did not pursue a consistently irredentist policy.<sup>6</sup>

These early efforts, hampered by a lack of even published documentation, did not provide an entirely convincing picture of Mussolini's foreign policy. If Mussolini were a mere propagandist and opportunist, then how could he have deeply entangled himself so deeply in the Second World War? Ennio Di Nolfo, a Professor at the University of Florence, published his *Mussolini e la politica estera italiana* in 1960.<sup>7</sup> Hampered by the lack of available documents for the period after 1925, he did not

substantially revise the Salveminian version. Still, Di Nolfo held that, by subordinating foreign policy to domestic policy, Mussolini did have at least some concept of eventual ends.

Two modern, often acerbic British writers continued this tradition. The iconoclastic A. J. P. Taylor wrote his famous, or infamous, *The Origins of the Second World War* in 1961. Taylor, a strong anti-Fascist and antiestablishment figure, had refused to visit Italy while Mussolini ruled it. Not surprisingly, he denounced Mussolini's pretensions. "Everything about fascism was a fraud. The social peril from which it saved Italy was a fraud; the revolution by which it seized power was a fraud; the ability and policy of Mussolini were fraudulent. Fascist rule was corrupt, incompetent, empty; Mussolini himself a vain, blundering boaster without either ideas or aims."<sup>8</sup> Taylor's depiction allowed little room for explaining the importance for Mussolini's foreign policy; Taylor consigned Mussolini to the periphery of European affairs. In a similar manner, Denis Mack Smith has written highly entertaining, unflattering portrayals of Mussolini.<sup>9</sup> Mack Smith's Mussolini is a man of few convictions, without real talent, save the highly skilled use of propaganda. "He had got used to living in a cloud-cuckoo-land, where words and not facts mattered, where the army was judged by its parade ground performance rather than by anything more substantial, where wars were won not by superior munitions and by superior strategy but by knowing how much to manipulate the news so as to give the illusion of strength." Mack Smith saw Mussolini as a sawdust Caesar for whom "prestige, propaganda, and public statements were what counted; and it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was the central message and the real soft core at the heart of Italian fascism."<sup>10</sup> As historical analyses, however, these views do not seem to have the power to explain Mussolini's Axis policy and his rash entry into the Second World War. These events were essentially the very antithesis of opportunism—they destroyed the Fascist regime—and a real opportunist without any central vision would not have driven Italy to this disastrous defeat.

Since the wider availability of documentation, historians have generally subjected these interpretations to a substantial revision. For the most part, scholars agree that Mussolini had a coherent foreign policy, despite the rhetoric he often employed. The difficulty now is that these interpretations differ so widely regarding Mussolini's aims. Alan Cassels's 1970 monograph, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*, based on published evidence, argued that the first decade of Mussolini's rule was not a decade of good behavior.<sup>11</sup> Mussolini flirted with a German alliance to immobilize the French army on the Rhine and openly considered foreign military adventures such as the Corfu crisis, though his cautious diplomats usually managed to rein

him in. In Cassels's view, Mussolini's foreign policy was much more consistent and not generated purely for propaganda reasons. In the early years, he generally played a policy of equidistance between the revisionist Germany and the conservative Britain and France, though always with an eye toward defending the Brenner frontier against German irredentism. His main aim was to establish Italy as a member of the four European great powers.

Similarly, Esmonde Robertson, who published *Mussolini as Empire Builder* in 1977, portrayed the Duce as a man who planned a foreign policy. Initially, within the strained European states system, Mussolini sought to profit in prestige from playing a kind of role as balancer of power. If Britain and France refused to accommodate his demands for increased power in the Mediterranean, then he could threaten to disrupt their control of British and French territories. His approaches to and divergences from the European powers determined Mussolini's policy. When he failed to profit from European tension, he turned toward African conquest, which, despite the long military and diplomatic preparation necessary, seemed to offer Mussolini the only spectacular success remaining.<sup>12</sup>

MacGregor Knox is perhaps the most important English-language writer on Fascist foreign policy. He published *Mussolini Unleashed* in 1982, a monograph on Italian foreign policy and military adventure from the outbreak of the Second World War to the summer of 1941. Although denied access to the Italian Foreign Ministry files at the time, MacGregor Knox made extensive use of Mussolini's *Carteggio Reservato*, or private papers, as well as other archival documents. MacGregor Knox argued, "Mussolini had a genuine foreign policy programme: the creation of an Italian *spazio vitale* in the Mediterranean and the Middle East."<sup>13</sup> In his later work, MacGregor Knox has slightly qualified and expanded his earlier views; he has argued that foreign expansion also served a role in helping Mussolini to conquer domestic resistance to his attempts to transform the Italian political culture and people. Through military conquest, MacGregor Knox argued, the Duce sought to radicalize Italians, creating new Fascist men, hardened by war, and to defeat the bourgeois opponents that remained as hangovers from the old, liberal, transformist regime.<sup>14</sup>

Italian scholars, however, continue to dominate the historiography of Italian Fascism, especially the late Renzo De Felice. The longtime doyen of the Italian historical community, his magisterial, eight-volume biography represents the most comprehensive account of Mussolini's life.<sup>15</sup> De Felice and his assistants and colleagues trolled a vast array of archival material and private papers. De Felice wrote a magnificent account of Mussolini's political life, and De Felice has few if any equals when it

comes to explaining the internal dynamics of the Fascist party. His central argument was that Mussolini was an essentially conservative leader, avoiding grand confrontations and seeking compromise. He sought merely to survive as ruler while weakening potential competitors—leftists, industry, monarchy and army—at least until 1929. By his fourth volume, De Felice wrote of a Mussolini turned radical, attempting to change Italian society fundamentally, trying to create a third road between capitalism and communism. The Ethiopian war represented the culmination of this new dynamism and represented Mussolini's greatest victory.

De Felice's interpretation of foreign policy issues, however, is less credible.<sup>16</sup> In his view, Mussolini's early policy was traditional and largely cautious; the Duce sought above all a general settlement with France that would allow Italy to pursue colonial expansion while firmly establishing itself as a European great power. Mussolini pursued this goal through unusual means; he "pursued an anti-French policy in order to reach an agreement with France."<sup>17</sup> After the Ethiopian war, he sought a general agreement with the Western powers, which the Popular Front government in France and the seemingly uncomprehending government in Britain failed to grasp. Only when this effort at a general settlement failed did Mussolini consider playing the German card. Over time, Mussolini, primarily owing to the Spanish quicksand, increasingly failed to navigate his policy of the applying the *peso determinante*, or decisive weight, to European affairs. Despite this general line of argument, De Felice admitted that eventually the Duce would have turned against the British empire. This internal inconsistency, among others, suggests that De Felice's explanations of Mussolini's character and of his foreign policy have considerable difficulties.<sup>18</sup>

Renzo De Felice's disciples have presented similar yet even more extreme arguments—Rosaria Quartararo foremost among them. In her 1980 monograph *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, she in essence removed responsibility from Mussolini's shoulders for Italian entry into the Second World War. In her view, Mussolini played a waiting game; he refused to choose between France and Britain on one hand and Germany on the other, but waited to see their policies. British failure to appreciate what Mussolini saw as legitimate claims led to a series of blunders. British statesmen such as Neville Chamberlain pushed Mussolini into the German camp through failure to arrange French concessions to Italy, planned war against an unwilling Italy, and, incredibly, forced an unwilling Mussolini into war in 1940. To be blunt, these conclusions strain credulity.<sup>19</sup> Not to be outdone, Donatella Bolech Cecchi also argued De Felice's concept of the *peso determinante*. For Bolech Cecchi, Mussolini wanted nothing more than an

accord with Great Britain that would have recognized Italy's place in the Mediterranean. Only after Britain refused this reasonable request did Mussolini turn toward Germany, and even then, expansion such as the annexation of Albania had a purely anti-German character.<sup>20</sup> One can find similar arguments in Paolo Nello's biography of the Italian diplomat and Fascist heirarch Dino Grandi, *Un fedele disubbidiente*.<sup>21</sup> One recent Italian writer, Paola Brundu Olla, has broken somewhat from this tendency. While she still apportioned some blame to Britain and France for their lack of understanding of Mussolini's policy of *peso determinante*, she wrote that the Duce himself failed to carry out that policy effectively. In her view, Mussolini could have achieved a pact that would have created Mediterranean stability. He did not aim to do so, primarily because that policy would limit his freedom of action. Consequently, Mussolini's expansionist pursuits, trying to wean France from Britain and his moves toward Germany, were largely responsible for the catastrophe that was to come.<sup>22</sup>

De Felice's interpretation, though, is not entirely limited to Italy; one British author shares its essential conclusions. Richard Lamb argued that British failure to appease Mussolini, in spite of the Duce's occasional bluster, meant the cleavage of the Anglo-French-Italian Stresa Front against Hitler's revisionism. In particular, Lamb singled out Anthony Eden as the chief culprit because Eden's hostility to an Anglo-Italian agreement pushed Mussolini into Hitler's embrace. This vital miscalculation squandered the chance to create an effective front against German expansionism and helped to create the conditions that sparked the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> In a somewhat different vein, H. James Burgwyn's recent monograph consciously attempts to bridge the gap between MacGregor Knox and De Felice. Burgwyn argued that Mussolini had "expansionist goals that remained constant and were never forgotten," and that Mussolini, like many Italian nationalists, was a convinced social Darwinist. At the same time, Burgwyn argued that the Duce was too much "a believer in action based on expediency and day-to-day interests for any pre-ordained doctrine or fixed program to dictate his diplomacy." After the *Anschluss*, Mussolini struggled to escape "Germany's iron cage," and the Pact of Steel represented his attempt to restore Italy's balancing role between Germany and the West.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the significant lack of archival evidence for the vital period from 1936 to 1939 weakens Burgwyn's interpretation.

Despite the variations within the debate, MacGregor Knox called recent Italian historiography the "anti-anti-fascist orthodoxy." For the sake of convenience, I shall use the rubric "De Felice school" to represent this scholarship.<sup>25</sup> The difficulty with the interpretations of the De Felice school is that they cannot account for substantial archival evidence that

tends to contradict them. More damningly, it is very convenient for Italian scholars to write history that absolves Italians of responsibility for the origins of the Second World War and minimizes Italy's expansionist and imperialist past on which Fascism built.

This brief survey of some of the available literature suggests some lacunae in the historiography. First, the published documents do not yet cover the period from 1938 to May 1939; Italian historians are still preparing these last volumes in *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*. Furthermore, during the 1970s and 1980s, while other major Western archives had opened their door to scholars, the Italian Foreign Ministry Archives remained closed. With the exception of certain Italian historians who had privileged access, most researchers and writers on the period from 1936 to 1939 have not been able to use these centrally important documents. In particular, the Italian Foreign Ministry Archive has recently finished restoring and microfilming the so-called *Carte Lancellotti*, papers that Raffaele Guariglia, the Italian foreign minister, had secreted from the German military in September of 1943.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, I have used these papers extensively as well as the other diplomatic documents housed in the Italian Foreign Ministry. Second, considerable debate remains regarding Mussolini's foreign policy, and the De Felice school, with its tendentious claims regarding Mussolini's decision making, seems to dominate the historiographical landscape. This study, therefore, uses original archival research to explain Mussolini's foreign policy during the period from June 1936 and the end of the Ethiopian war to the outbreak of World War II in September 1939.

Modern writing on foreign policy questions has developed beyond the hoary discipline of purely diplomatic history. Historians now tend to emphasize structural constraints in history rather than focusing purely on the diplomatic realm. We use diverse approaches, utilizing economic history, intellectual history, civil-military relations, military history, and public opinion, among other forms of inquiry. Structuralist history, however, ultimately cannot explain Italian foreign policy before the Second World War. In the case of Fascist Italy, the evidence is overwhelming that Mussolini himself controlled Italian foreign policy. Mussolini made every major decision, tightly controlled his subordinates, frequently ignored advisers, and often adopted potentially unpopular policies. He largely ignored rational military planning and economics (except at the most rudimentary level) and often did not heed public opinion, although he tried very hard to control and to shape it. His behavior, therefore, poses a problem for historians. How does one explain rationally the beliefs and actions of an irrational person? After considering the available evidence, the only available path is to seek to explain Mussolini's *mentalité*. How, specifi-

cally, did Mussolini view the world and the arena of international politics in which he operated?

The first chapter therefore provides an explanation of Mussolini's *mentalité*. It canvasses his public speeches and writings to try to determine Mussolini's thoughts about international relations. In addition, because Mussolini was something of a propagandist and a very prolific orator and writer, it is necessary to draw specific ties between Mussolini's *mentalité*, as revealed in his intellectual world, and the specific actions and policies that he implemented. By making these essential connections, one can demonstrate that Mussolini had an internally consistent *mentalité* that governed both his thought and his actions as the ruler of Italy. His *mentalité* was ultranationalist; he subordinated many elements of his ideology to a simplistic test—how did the individual or issue in question relate to the power of the state? There were five distinct yet interwoven strands to this ultranationalist worldview: anti-Bolshevik leanings; opposition to the secretive international Masonic Order; contempt for democracies; belief in white supremacy over the so-called dark nations of Africa and anti-Semitism; and social-Darwinism, which included the simplistic equation of the growth or decline and the vitality of national populations with national power, war worship, and a kind of fatalism seemingly common to messianic dictators.

Mussolini's *mentalité* governed Italian foreign policy, and from 1936 to the outbreak of the Second World War, it led the Duce to tie Italy ever more tightly to Nazi Germany. During the finale of the Ethiopian war, Mussolini decided to court Germany as a potential ally against the decadent Western democracies. He also ranged Italy against France in the Spanish Civil War while at the same time trying to drive a wedge between Britain and France. In 1937, Mussolini continued the policies begun the year before. He intensified the Spanish Civil War, courted Japan as an ally against Great Britain, and wooed Yugoslavia as a client state in the Balkans. During the first eight months of 1938, Mussolini sought to maneuver Anthony Eden's resignation as British foreign secretary and continued to work to split Britain from France. Mussolini followed an aggressive policy during the Czechoslovak crisis that culminated in the Munich agreement; he drew back from the brink of war only after realizing that a general war would unite Britain and France in a grand offensive against Italy. In the aftermath of Munich, Mussolini aimed to convert the Axis into a tripartite, Italo-German-Japanese military alliance against Britain and France, and he set the conditions under which he would feel confident in undertaking a war with the Western democracies. The Pact of Steel, signed in May 1939, drew Italy and Germany together in a strictly

offensive-minded military alliance, and the two dictators contemplated war with the West when they deemed it opportune. Mussolini's subordination of foreign policy questions to the needs of social Darwinist expansion ultimately compelled him to seek out the German alliance in order to expand Italian territory at the expense of Britain and France. But his failure to understand the pace of German expansion doomed Italy to fight a major war before it was ready. In June 1940, he deliberately cast Italy into the Second World War because he thought the conditions ripe to make a long-contemplated grab for control of North Africa and the Suez Canal.

Any study such as this one has limits; no author can hope to cover every possible aspect of a topic. This study concerns itself with foreign policy; although Fascist internal politics is fascinating, Mussolini operated in a realm outside the *Primat der Innenpolitik*. I do not intend to write about broader Italian societal beliefs; although they are interesting in and of themselves, they do not specifically bear on Mussolini's decisions regarding foreign policy. Though of course his ideas developed within the context of Italian society, as a decision maker he often ignored constraints of Italian public opinion and dissenting views from within the Italian polity. He also departed from the tenets of traditional Italian nationalism in one central respect; he openly pursued policies that would pit Italy against the British empire. Still, I am not especially concerned with arguing a continuity or discontinuity thesis. Again, although this point is interesting and there is likely more continuity between Fascist and liberal Italian politics than many Italians would like to admit, this question is not central to explaining Mussolini's foreign policy. Despite these inevitable limitations, this work explains Mussolini's perilous decision to align himself as Hitler's partner in the events leading to the outbreak of the Second World War.

## NOTES

1. For some useful historiographical surveys, see R. J. B. Bosworth, *The Italian Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of Mussolini and Fascism* (London: Arnold, 1998); Stephen Corrado Azzi, "The Historiography of Fascist Foreign Policy," *Historical Journal* 36, no. 1 (March 1993): 187–203.

2. Gaetano Salvemini, *The Fascist Dictatorship in Italy* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967); Gaetano Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936); Gaetano Salvemini, *Italian Fascism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938).

3. Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953).

4. Others who shared Salvemini's essential interpretation include Luigi Salvatorelli and Giovanni Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel periodo fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956); Luigi Salvatorelli, *Storia del fascismo: l'Italia dal 1919 al 1945* (Rome: Edizioni di Novissima, 1952). For a brief statement on Benedetto Croce's theory that Fascism represented a parenthesis in Italian history, see C. Sprigge, "Introduction to Benedetto Croce," in *Philosophy, Poetry, History: An Anthology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), vii.

5. Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis: A History of the Relations between Hitler and Mussolini* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).

6. H. Stuart Hughes, "The Diplomacy of Early Italian Fascism, 1922–1932," in *The Diplomats, 1919–1030*, vol. 1, eds. Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (New York: Atheneum, Princeton, 1954), 210–33.

7. Ennio Di Nolfo, *Mussolini e la politica estera italiana, 1919–1933* (Padua: Facoltà di scienze politiche dell'Università di Padova, 1960).

8. A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamilton, 1961), 56. See also Alan Cassels, "Switching Partners: Italy in A. J. P. Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*," in *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered: The A. J. P. Taylor Debate after Twenty-Five Years*, ed. Gordon Martel (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 73–96.

9. Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London: Penguin, 1976); Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981).

10. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, 252.

11. Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

12. Esmonde M. Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire Builder: Europe and Africa 1932–36* (London: MacMillan, 1977).

13. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939–1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 256.

14. MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000). This work collects and expands on several earlier articles, including MacGregor Knox, "Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 1 (1984): 1–57. See also MacGregor Knox, "Il fascismo e la politica estera italiana," in *La politica estera italiana (1960–1985)*, eds. Richard Bosworth and Sergio Romano (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 287–330. Another recent monograph, Aristotle Kallis's comparative work assessing both Nazi and Fascist ideology, also questions the early historiographical dismissal of Mussolini's alleged ideological pretensions (Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922–1945* [London: Routledge, 2000]).

15. De Felice has organized the eight volumes into four categories: *Il rivoluzionario, 1883–1920*; *Il fascista, 1921–1929*, 2 vols.; *Il duce, 1929–1940*, 2 vols.; *L'alleato, 1940–1945*, 3 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1965–1996).

16. For a penetrating criticism of De Felice's foreign policy writing, see MacGregor Knox, "The Fascist Regime, Its Foreign Policy and Its Wars: An 'Anti-Anti-Fascist' Orthodoxy?" *Contemporary European History* 4, no. 3 (1995): 347–65. For the views of a prominent scholar of Italian military history, see Giorgio Rochat, "Ancora sul 'Mussolini' di Renzo De Felice," *Italia Contemporanea* 33, no. 44 (1981): 5–10; "L'ultimo Mussolini secondo De Felice," *Italia Contemporanea* 43, no. 182 (1991): 111–19.

17. Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, II: Lo Stato Totalitario, 1936–1940* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), 37–38.

18. Knox, "The Fascist Regime," 352–65.

19. Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino: La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940* (Rome: Bonacci, 1980), 271–72, 413–25, 610, 616–20. See also Rosaria Quartararo, "Inghilterra e Italia: Dal Patto di Pasqua a Monaco (con un'appendice sul 'canale segreto' italo-inglese)," *Storia Contemporanea* 7 (1976): 607–716.

20. Donatella Bolech Cecchi, *Non bruciare i ponti con Roma* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1986), 507–9, 513.

21. Paolo Nello, *Un fedele indisubbidiente: Dino Grandi da Palazzo Chigi al 25 luglio* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 285.

22. Paola Brundu Olla, *L'Équilibre difficile: Gran Bretagna, Italia e Francia nel Mediterraneo, 1930–7* (Milan: Giuffrè Editore, 1980); Brundu Olla, "Il Gentleman's Agreement e la Francia (2 gennaio 1937)," in *Italia, Francia e Mediterraneo*, eds. J. B. Duroselle and Enrico Serra (Milan: Angeli, 1990), 52–70.

23. Richard Lamb, *Mussolini and the British* (London: John Murray, 1997).

24. H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918–1940* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), xiii, xv.

25. For a recent effort to counter MacGregor Knox's criticisms of the orthodox Italian interpretation and to argue the essentially defensive nature of Italian policy, see Fortunato Minniti, *Fino all' guerra: Strategie e conflitto nella politica di potenza di Mussolini, 1923–1940* (Naples: E.S.I., 2000). Structural problems of causality and use evidence similar to those in Quartararo's *Roma tra Londra e Berlino* undermine Minniti's conclusions. See, for example, chapter 3, note 100. The strange lack of consideration of Mussolini's expansionist thinking means that Minniti cannot accurately explain the Duce's entry into the war in spite of the strategic considerations that strongly argued against it. Nevertheless, Minniti's fairly detailed coverage of Italian military planning is welcome.

26. For a description of the unusual treatment of Italian diplomatic documents during the war, see Howard McGaw Smyth, *Secrets of the Fascist Era: How Uncle Sam Obtained Some of the Top Level Documents of Mussolini's Period* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975).



## CHAPTER 1

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# *Mussolini's Mentalité*

Mussolini ultimately determined the course of Italian foreign policy. Unlike the case of Nazi Germany, where the unfortunately named intentionalist-functional debate rages, there is general consensus that Mussolini was the “sole unimpeachable creator . . . and interpreter” of the Fascist movement.<sup>1</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, the Duce was responsible for making the final decision on foreign policy questions, often apparently irrationally and over the objections of his advisors. In order to understand Italian policy, therefore, one must try to understand Mussolini's mind. Methodologically, some of the instruments at hand have potential pitfalls. The word “ideology” carries with it great baggage. The Marxist appropriation of the term means that it is associated with a priori assumptions of control and hegemony. The term *mentalité* seems, therefore, to be the more appropriate. Philosophers sometimes apply the term to group consciousness, not individual consciousness. In this book, however, the term applies to Mussolini's individual view of the world and not in any way to groups.

Mussolini's *mentalité* was a set of related intellectual constructs that represented a coherent, though not necessarily rational, framework for interpreting both history and contemporary events. One can identify someone's *mentalité* while at the same recognizing that it does not have to be entirely consistent; inconsistency can be part of a worldview. Every individual has a *mentalité*, even the deranged.<sup>2</sup> In Mussolini's case, it consisted of both rational and irrational concepts. It is clear, though, that throughout his career he expressed the ideas of a programmatic thinker, both in public and in private. The central principle of Mussolini's *mentalité* was extreme

Through his intervention in the Spanish Civil War and his attempts to challenge French Power in Europe and British imperial domination of the Middle East and East Africa, Mussolini sought to decisively change Italy's long-standing position as the least of the Great Powers. Although the Pact of Steel did not always function smoothly, Mussolini remained loyal to its principles, eventually throwing Italy into the Second World War, where he would belatedly discover that his regime had signally failed to prepare his legions for fighting in a modern war. Excerpt. Historians have sifted through What Mussolini instinctively understood was that to win a place at the top table of the Great Powers he needed to forge a "new resurgent state", while modernising his inadequate military. What he really dreamed of was a new Roman empire, full of Italianità and Romanità, one that would cover the Mediterranean and north Africa, include a generous slice of the Balkans and open gateways to the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. He is good on the meetings between Mussolini and Hitler, when the Führer harangued a partner whose feebleness he increasingly deplored and whose needs he seldom met. Italian soldiers sent to the Arctic Russian plains to crush, so they were told, the barbaric Bolsheviks, sometimes marched on paper boots.