

In Dubious Battle

IN DUBIOUS BATTLE:
MUSSOLINI'S MENTALITÉ AND
ITALIAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1936-1939

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Abstract

This thesis uses newly available archival material from the *Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, especially Ciano's *Gabinetto*, the Foreign Ministry office under which Mussolini and Ciano successively centralized and tightened Fascist control of foreign policy, as well as the *Serie Affari Politici*, copies of telegrams from embassies abroad plus the diplomatic traffic sent from the *Gabinetto* to various embassies. This research represents the most comprehensive archival study to date. It also adds a substantially new interpretive cast to the historical debate. It considers but rejects the writings of recent revisionist Italian historians, especially the late Renzo De Felice and several of his students. Their work inaccurately presents a picture of Italy balanced between England and Germany, hoping to play the role of the 'decisive weight' in European affairs.

This study argues instead that Benito Mussolini was the primary animator of Italian foreign policy during the 1930s. He was a programmatic thinker, whose ultra-nationalist *mentalité* included contempt for democracies, Bolshevism in Western Europe, and for the international Masonic order. More seriously, he held profoundly racist, militarist and social Darwinist beliefs, and routinely acted on these impulses. This complex of irrational beliefs led Mussolini to align Italy with Germany to expand the Italian Empire in East and North Africa at the expense of Britain and France.

From June 1936 to early February 1939, Mussolini clearly tightened Italian ties with Germany. These links allowed the Duce to challenge the Western democracies on a

broad number of issues. Although Mussolini hoped to achieve many concessions through a process of alternate intimidation and conciliation, he ultimately knew that he could realize his main territorial goals only through war with France and Britain. Only an alliance with Hitler's Germany offered Mussolini the chance to achieve his grandiose imperial plans, though at the profound risk of domination by Germany and military defeat against Britain.

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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 the Second World War, 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 focus to old, albeit unchanged 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 microfilmed the so-called *Carte Lancellotti*, 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 diplomatic 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 interpretative 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 amidst his seemingly opportunistic maneuvers and 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 focussed my explanation of Mussolini's policy on an understanding of his *mentalité*. Mussolini's ultra-nationalist 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 early February 1939. I chose to examine this period because, after the conquest of Ethiopia, Mussolini had the option to re-orient 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 favour. 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 in the Balkans. This policy would inevitably entail confrontation with Britain and France. In addition, this thesis 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 'fascisticizing' 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 February 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. In early February, Mussolini made an important address to the Fascist Grand Council, often called his "March to the Oceans" speech. This geopolitical statement is the strongest expression of Mussolini's future foreign policy intentions, and is the culmination of a series of

indications that the Duce intended to fight a war with France and Britain when the time seemed ripe. The speech was the only occasion on which Mussolini addressed the Fascist Grand Council at length on foreign policy issues. In a sense, it is the Italian equivalent to the infamous Hossbach memorandum in Nazi history, and Mussolini's decision for the alliance with Japan and Germany represents a watershed in Fascist foreign policy. Having chosen an alliance with Britain's enemies, Mussolini foreclosed the chance to realize a genuine rapprochement with the West, and although Mussolini's relationship with his German ally was sometimes difficult, it is not surprising that he threw Italy into the Second World War when Germany defeated 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.

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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 return Mussolini to Milan. 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 men proved inadequate to the task, primarily owing to failures of the regime. It did not provide sufficient modern tanks, trucks, airplanes or artillery pieces for

modern warfare, and 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 its own 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; the King dismissed him in favour of Marshal Badoglio, and had Mussolini arrested and imprisoned.

Given the appalling nature of Mussolini's failures during the Second World War, why had he so blithely committed Italy to the battle on the Nazi side? Many historians have ventured answers to this question.¹ 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

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*. 36.1 (March 1993), pp. 187-203.

Western opposition to Mussolini's regime.² In 1953, he published *Prelude to World War II*, a polemic based in part on a pre-war book; Salvemini condemned Mussolini as "an irresponsible improviser, half madman, half criminal."³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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*. Torino: Einaudi, 1956. Luigi Salvatorelli, *Storia del fascismo: l'Italia dal 1919 al 1945*. Roma: 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, *Philosophy, Poetry, History: An Anthology*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. vii.

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

H. Stuart Hughes, in a short article on Italian diplomacy, also suggested that Mussolini did not pursue a consistently irredentist policy.⁶

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 1960.⁷ Hampered by the lack of available documents for the period after 1925, he did not substantially revise the Salvemini 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 continue 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 anti-establishment 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

⁶ H. Stuart Hughes, "The Diplomacy of Early Italian Fascism, 1922-1932," in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.), *The Diplomats, 1919-1930, I*. New York: Atheneum, Princeton, 1954, pp. 210-33.

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

himself a vain, blundering boaster without either ideas or aims.”⁸ 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, Dennis Mack Smith has written highly entertaining, unflattering portrayals of Mussolini.⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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 anti-thesis of opportunism – they destroyed the

⁸ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*. London: Hamilton, 1961, p. 56. See also Alan Cassels, “Switching Partners: Italy in A.J.P. Taylor’s *Origins of the Second World War*,” in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered: The A.J.P. Taylor debate after twenty-five years*. Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1986, pp. 73-96.

⁹ Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*. London: Penguin, 1976. Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981.

¹⁰ Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, p. 252.

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 behaviour.¹¹ 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 irrendentism. 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 il 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

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

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 towards African conquest, which, despite the long military and diplomatic preparation necessary, seemed to offer Mussolini the only spectacular success remaining.¹²

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 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 that, "Mussolini had a genuine foreign policy programme: the creation of an Italian *spazio vitale* in the Mediterranean and the Middle East."¹³ 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

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: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 256.

by war, and to defeat the bourgeois opponents that remained as hangovers from the old, liberal, transformist regime.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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 dynamics of the Fascist party. His central argument was that Mussolini was an essentially conservative ruler, avoiding grand confrontations and seeking compromise. He sought merely to survive as ruler, while weakening potentially competing 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.

¹⁴ MacGregor Knox, "Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany." *Journal of Modern History*. 56.1 (1984), pp. 1-57. See also MacGregor Knox, "Il fascismo e la politica estera italiana," in Richard Bosworth and Sergio Romano (eds.), *La politica estera italiana (1960-1985)*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 287-330.

¹⁵ De Felice has organized the eight volumes into four categories: *Il rivoluzionario, 1883-1920*; *Il fascista, 1921-1929* (2 volumes); *Il duce, 1929-1940* (2 volumes); *L'alleato, 1940-1945* (3 volumes). Torino: Einaudi, 1965-96.

De Felice interpretation of foreign policy issues, however, is less credible.¹⁶ In De Felice's view, Mussolini's early policy was traditional and largely cautious; il 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."¹⁷ 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 "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.¹⁸

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*. 4.3 (1995), pp. 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*. 33.44 (1981), pp. 5-10; "L'ultimo Mussolini secondo De Felice." *Italia Contemporanea*. 43.182 (1991), pp. 111-119.

¹⁷ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, II: Lo Stato Totalitario, 1936-1940*. Torino: Einaudi, 1981, p. 37-8.

¹⁸ MacGregor Knox, *The Fascist Regime*, pp. 352-65.

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 any 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.¹⁹ Not to be outdone, Donatella Bolech Cecchi also argued De Felice's concept of the "*peso determinante*," or decisive weight. 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 towards Germany, and even then, expansion such as the annexation of Albania had a purely anti-German character.²⁰ One can find similar arguments in Paolo Nello's biography of Italian diplomat and Fascist heirarch Dino Grandi, *Un fedele*

¹⁹ Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino: La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940*. Roma: Bonacci, 1980, pp. 271-2, 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), pp. 607-716.

²⁰ Donatella Bolech Cecchi, *Non bruciare i ponti con Roma*. Milano: Giuffè, 1986, pp. 507-9, 513.

disubbidiente.²¹ 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 towards Germany were largely responsible for the catastrophe that was to come.²²

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.²³ In a somewhat different vein, H. James Burgwyn's recent monograph consciously attempts to bridge the

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

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

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

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.²⁴ Unfortunately, the significant lack of archival evidence for the vital period from 1936-9 undermines 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. 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*

²⁴ H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period, 1918-1940*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997, p. xiii, xv.

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 scholars 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 Foreign Ministry Archive has recently finished microfilming the so-called *Carte Lancellotti*, papers that Raffaele Guariglia, the Italian Foreign Minister, had secreted from the German military in September of 1943.²⁵ Accordingly, I have used extensively these papers and the other diplomatic documents housed in the 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 February 1939, by which time Mussolini had laid out the future line of his expansionist foreign policy.

Modern writing on foreign policy questions has developed beyond the hoary discipline of purely diplomatic history. Historians now tend to emphasize structural history rather than focussing purely on the diplomatic realm. We use diverse approaches, utilizing economic history, intellectual history, civil-military relations, military history

²⁵ 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, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975.

and public opinion, among other forms of inquiry. Purely structuralist history, however, ultimately cannot explain the actions of a seemingly irrational man. Mussolini largely ignored rational military planning, economics (except at the most rudimentary and backward-looking level), and public opinion. His behaviour, therefore, poses a problem for historians. How does one explain rationally the beliefs and actions of an irrational person? After considering the available evidence, I have determined that the only available path is to seek to explain Mussolini's *mentalité*. How, specifically, did Mussolini view the world and the arena of international politics in which he operated?

The first interpretive chapter therefore will provide an explanation of Mussolini's *mentalité*. It will canvass 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, I shall draw specific ties between Mussolini's *mentalité* as revealed in his intellectual world to specific actions and policies that he implemented. By making these essential connections, I intend to demonstrate that Mussolini had an internally consistent *mentalité* that governed both his thought and his actions as the ruler of Italy. His *mentalité* was ultra-nationalist; 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 interweaving strands to this ultra-nationalist worldview: anti-democratic and anti-Bolshevik leanings; opposition to the secretive international Masonic Order; belief in white supremacy over the so-called dark nations of Africa; anti-Semitism; and social-Darwinism, which included fatalism, war-worship, and the simplistic equation of the growth or decline and the vitality of

national populations with national power. Having developed the argument regarding Mussolini's *mentalité*, I shall then turn to a detailed discussion of Italian foreign policy from June 1936 to February 1939. The second chapter covers Mussolini's policy from the end of the Ethiopian war to January 1937. This period marked the Duce's decision to court Germany, to range himself against France in the Spanish Civil War, and to try to drive a wedge between Britain and France. The third chapter covers the year of 1937. During that year, Mussolini continued the policies begun the year before, intensified the Spanish Civil War, courted Japan as an ally against Great Britain, and wooed Yugoslavia as a client state in the Balkans. The fourth chapter covers January to August 1938, during which time Mussolini sought to manoeuvre Anthony Eden's resignation as British Foreign Secretary and continued to work to split Britain from France. The fifth and final chapter discusses Italian policy from August 1938 to February 1939. During that period, 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. 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. 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; though Fascist internal politics is fascinating, Mussolini operated in a realm outside the *Primat der Innenpolitik*. I do not intend to write about broad Italian societal beliefs; though 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 largely ignored public opinion and any dissenting views from within the Italian polity. Similarly, I am not especially concerned with arguing a continuity or discontinuity thesis. Again, though that point is interesting, and there is likely more continuity between fascist and liberal Italian politics than many Italians would like to admit, that question is not central to explaining Mussolini's foreign policy.

I do hope that despite these inevitable limitations, that this work will explain Mussolini's perilous decision to align himself with Germany and to fight the disastrous Second World War as the subordinate partner in the Axis.

Chapter One: Mussolini's *Mentalité*

Modern historical writing emphasizes deep structures and eschews studies of individuals, even in the realm of diplomatic history. Historians of international relations have added economics, social history, civil-military relations, and intellectual history (among others) to their repertoire in order to understand the past in ever more sophisticated ways. Why, then, would one revert to seemingly outdated practices and study the effect of one individual on a country's foreign policy? Why study Mussolini's *mentalité* and not, say, the wider context of Italian political culture? The answer is that, whatever the influence of his advisors or of public opinion, Mussolini ultimately decided Italian foreign policy. Unlike the case of Nazi Germany, where the unfortunately named intentionalist-functionalist debate rages, there is general consensus that Mussolini was the "sole unimpeachable creator ... and interpreter" of the Fascist movement.¹ During the 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

¹ MacGregor Knox, "Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History*. 56.1 (March 1984), p.5.

individuals. In this thesis, however, I am using the term to discuss Mussolini's individual view of the world and not applying in it 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 then current 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 world-view. Every individual has a *mentalité*, even the deranged.² 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 nationalism. One can see signs as early as 1909 that even while ostensibly a socialist internationalist Mussolini held nationalistic beliefs. He revered Mazzini and read with approval the writings of the extreme nationalist Alfredo Oriani.³ After his conversion to interventionism during the First World War, his nationalistic views rarely wavered. There are five identifiable, inter-related strands to Mussolini's *mentalité*. They are as follows: anti-democratic and anti-Bolshevik leanings; opposition to the secretive international Masonic Order; belief in white supremacy over the so-called dark nations of Africa; anti-Semitism; and social Darwinism, which included the simplistic equation of the growth or decline and the vitality of national populations

² Eberhard Jäckl, *Hitler's Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power*. Middleton, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1972, p. 14.

³ MacGregor Knox, "Conquest Foreign and Domestic," pp. 6-7, 8. Later writers saw Oriani as a precursor to the Fascist movement. See also Edoardo e Duilio Susmel (a cura di), *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini, II* [hereafter *OO*]. Firenze: La Fenice, 1951-63 (36 volume), Roma: G. Volpe, 1978-80 (8 volume), *II Popolo d'Italia*, 27 May 1909, p. 128.

with national power, war-worship, and imperialism. As a result of these views, Mussolini believed that it was necessary to expand Italy's borders and to create a new Italian Empire. These beliefs also helped to select the victims, namely, the population of North Africa and the seemingly effete French and British Empires.

Throughout his adult life, Mussolini opposed the democratic and transformist principles of Italian liberalism. Initially, he aligned himself with socialist opponents of the regime, but his latent nationalist leanings ensured that at some point he would break with the internationalist *Partito Socialista Italiana*. After World War One, Mussolini founded the inchoate Fascist movement, and began an uneasy process of compromise regarding his revolutionary leftist leanings. At the Piazza San Sepolcristi, the first open assembly of the Fascist Party, Mussolini spoke of nationalist claims on Dalmatia and of revolutionary changes for the working class. Despite Mussolini's public sympathies for the working class, Fascist *squadristi*, comprised largely of veterans unhappy with Italian transformist politics, fought the socialist working class in the cities and poor farmers in the country, the latter at the behest of Italian *latifondisti*, or wealthy land-holders. Mussolini had to accept these connections to maintain control of his then unruly movement. While seemingly determined to gain power, Mussolini refused to bet *va banque*, and until 1924 he worked loosely within the bounds of parliamentary and constitutional means.

Despite his initial compromises with liberal politicians, Mussolini was contemptuous both of parliaments and of liberal democracy. He believed that Fascism represented "the clear antithesis of democracy, of plutocracy, of freemasonry, of all ... the immortal principles of [17]89."⁴ He saw liberal democracy as the function of transitory social conditions arising out of the Nineteenth Century. In the Twentieth Century,

⁴ OO, XXII, *Discorso al Direttorate del Partito nazionale fascista*, 7 April 1926, pp. 107-10.

Mussolini argued, democratic forms of government were doomed to fail, as they could not unify the state; individuals who refused to co-operate with liberal governments could effectively usurp power from the state and “render it powerless.” Fascism aimed to overcome the “moral prostration, regional division, and personal ambition” inherent in liberalism and to instil in Italy’s citizens a “moral and spiritual patrimony.”⁵

In the realm of international relations, it is often difficult to determine Mussolini’s attitudes toward liberal democratic regimes. On several occasions, he reached agreements with France or Britain, and he cultivated the friendship of certain statesmen who represented democratic countries, most notably Sir Austen Chamberlain. Mussolini did tend, however, to see and to over-emphasize certain characteristics of the ‘demo-plutocracies.’ Mussolini assumed that ostensibly democratic governments were in fact controlled by unseen machinations of certain groups, usually Jewish financiers or Masons, who were inherently hostile to Fascist principles. He was intensely interested in any indications of pacifism in democratic societies, and ascribed to them importance far beyond their real effect. For example, Fascist propaganda amplified the results of an earlier debate in the Oxford Union Society in which students rejected the idea of fighting for king and country. In his own mind, Mussolini transformed this debate from the relatively insignificant event it was into an expression of the universal pacifism of British youth, and refused to accept any questioning of his reasoning.⁶ As he believed that pacifism was “an absurdity, or better a dangerous deformation,” he assumed a dogmatic belief that democratic Britain was a declining power and that it had lost any will to defend its

⁵ OO, XXII, *Intervista con Associated Press*, 1 August 1926, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 6 August 1926, pp. 187-8.

OO, XLIV, Appendix VIII, *Intervista con Henry Massis*, 26 September 1933.

⁶ Dennis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981, pp. 194-5.

empire.⁷ This belief, supported by the views of Dino Grandi, the Italian Ambassador in London, in part underlay Mussolini's determination to continue the Ethiopian campaign despite British objections and the half-hearted imposition of sanctions. Mussolini convinced himself that, merely because France and Britain were parliamentary democracies, they would be in future his sworn enemies.⁸

Similarly, Mussolini's views towards Bolshevism appear eccentric to outside observers. In his political infancy, Mussolini was, of course, a revolutionary socialist. His conversion to nationalist causes during the First World War alienated his socialist brethren, and, following the war, Mussolini associated himself openly with Italian nationalistic movements. By 1921, Fascism had aligned itself against socialist and rural labour movements. In the towns, Fascist *squadristi* frequently raided the offices of leftist newspapers or trade unions and treated opponents to beatings or purging doses of castor oil. In rural areas, Fascist violence was more extreme, as the *latifondisti* employed Fascist paramilitary thugs to break peasant leagues and associations. By the time Mussolini gained power, anti-socialism was the unifying theme of the Fascist movement, and there was a virtual state of civil war between Fascist blackshirts and Socialist redshirts.⁹ Although for

⁷ Quoted in Pier Giorgio Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo: Miti, credenze e valori nella stabilizzazione del regime*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985, p. 345. Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, pp. 194-5.

⁸ Alan Cassels, *Fascism*, Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, 1975, p. 78.

⁹ Adrian Lyttleton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919-1929*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973.

the first 15 years of the regime Mussolini's anti-bolshevism was primarily domestic, it did have some effect on Italian foreign relations.¹⁰

At times, Mussolini showed his distinct admiration for Joseph Stalin, the leader of the only avowedly socialist country. For example, he praised Stalin's "absolute realism," which made it possible for Italy to work to bring the Soviet Union back into European affairs. Both Italy and the Soviet Union were revisionist powers, and both chafed under the predominance of political power held by the 'demo-plutocracies' of Great Britain and France.¹¹ Mussolini hoped that Stalin might abandon communism in favour of a brand of authoritarianism akin to Fascism, as the Duce believed that Soviet communism was the less revolutionary movement; he thought the power of the state bureaucracy could transform the Soviet Union into some kind of Slav fascism. The two movements had similar potential enemies in the demo-plutocracies, and they shared a common belief in eradicating the power of the individual within society.¹² The two states also had trade interests. Italy built ships and planes for the Soviets in exchange for roughly one-third of Italy's oil requirements. On 2 September 1933, they signed an Italo-Soviet Pact of Friendship, Non-aggression and Neutrality, which signalled both Mussolini's regard for

¹⁰ P. V. Cannistraro and F. D. Wynot, Jr., "On the Dynamics of Anti-Communism as a Function of Fascist Foreign Policy, 1933-43." *Il Politico*, XXXVIII (1973), p. 647. See also Giorgio Pettracchi, *La Russia rivoluzionare nella politica italiana: Le relazioni italo-sovietiche 1917-1925*. Bari: Laterza, 1982.

¹¹ Quoted in Zunino, p. 341.

¹² *OO*, XXVI, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 30 June 1933, pp. 12-3. Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, pp. 171, 182.

Stalin and Italy's need for fuel.¹³ As long as Soviet influence was confined to Eastern Europe, Mussolini remained unconcerned.

Even while courting Soviet friendship and trade, however, Mussolini feared the threat of bolshevism in Western Europe. In a 1933 interview, he said that "more than ever I detest bolshevism! Spiritually it constitutes the greatest danger which can menace our civilization Bolshevism remains an infection against which the West must range all its forces."¹⁴ He feared that despite the "labyrinthine" internecine politics of the communist Third International it posed a threat to certain countries, particularly republican Spain and France. They were "enfeebled" by the predominance of "liberalism, democracy, socialism, [and] free-masonry," and were, therefore, more likely to fall victim to the Bolshevik "asiatic peril."¹⁵ He believed that the leftist French Popular Front government, installed on 4 June 1936, was inherently hostile to Italian Fascism, as it openly sympathized with Fascism's victims and housed the *fuorusciti*, or Italian opponents of Fascism living in exile. As Mussolini had said of the *fuorusciti*, they excited "all of the antifascist forces of democratic parliamentarism, of second and third internationalism, [and the] society of nations."¹⁶ The Popular Front's association with the French Communist Party further

¹³ Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p. 182. See also: Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe 1933-1939*. New York: St. Martin's, 1984; J. Calvitt Clarke, *Russia and Italy against Hitler: The Bolshevik-Fascist Rapprochement of the 1930s*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991.

¹⁴ *OO*, XLIV, Appendix VIII, *Intervista con Henry Massis*, 26 September 1933, pp. 54-67.

¹⁵ Quoted in Zunino, pp. 333, 341.

¹⁶ National Archive, Washington [hereafter NA], series T586, roll 1122, *Relazione al Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*, 17 June 1926, f074455-75.

alienated the Duce, and appeared to establish clear ideological differences between the two governments.¹⁷

In Spain, Mussolini took steps to deal with what he perceived to be the increasingly dangerous and unstable republican government. At a secret meeting held at the Palazzo Venezia on 31 March 1934, Mussolini promised a delegation of Spanish rightists that he would give them 1.5 million pesetas, 10,000 rifles, and other assorted equipment in order to organize a coup against the republican government. The arrangement included an agreement regarding the territorial integrity of the would-be new Spain, a commercial agreement, financial aid, and Italian immediate recognition of the new government whenever it could take power. Mussolini concluded by saying that he expected the coup plotters to “strike down the republic which defined the move backward to a century and loyalty to principles exceeding those not only in France but in all the world.”¹⁸ In part, of course, Mussolini was merely hoping to install a favourable regime in place of a relatively hostile one. There was, however, also the underlying desire to create an authoritarian government that would, in his view, know how to eliminate its opponents on the political left, as Fascism had done in Italy. Mussolini’s dislike of the political culture

¹⁷ Robert J. Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Civil Military Relations, 1933-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 135.

¹⁸ *Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Carte Lancelotti, Ufficio di Coordinamento* [hereafter *ASMAE, UC*], 44, Minutes of Meeting between Mussolini, Italo Balbo, General Barrere, Signor Goicochea, and Dr. Olazabal, 31 March 1934. See also: Massimo Mazzetti, “I contatti del governo italiano con i conspiratori militari spagnoli prima del luglio 1936.” *Storia contemporanea*. 10.4 (dicembre 1979), pp. 1181-94; William Askew, “Italian Intervention in Spain: The Agreements of March 31, 1934, with the Spanish Monarchist Parties.” *Journal of Modern History*. 24.2 (1952), pp. 181-3.

and the intellectual outlook of the Western democracies predisposed him to see both weakness in and threat from the demo-plutocracies.

Mussolini's detestation of Freemasonry intensified his distrust of the Western Democracies, and particularly of France. Domestically, Mussolini saw Freemasonry as a bulwark of the old bourgeois, liberal order, and as inherently hostile to the regime. The issue was slightly more complicated than he allowed. Many Masons supported Fascism, at least in its early days. One Grand Master, for example, said in 1923 that so far as Fascism had worked to defeat Bolshevism and to increase Italy's strength, Masons had supported its goals. The regime, however, had not abandoned violence after it took power, and it was destroying the accomplishments of the revolutions of 1848 and 1870. Masons deplored the returning power of clericalism. They had come to see the early dynamism of Mussolini's regime as the very antithesis of Masonic ideals.¹⁹

Mussolini, on his part, apparently never shared any affinity with Freemasonry. He said that his opposition to Freemasonry existed long before his entrance into national politics, and this claim is entirely in accord with his early socialist beliefs.²⁰ He argued that the regime needed to maintain its vigilance in order to prevent Italian Masons from coordinating their resistance to Fascism with outside organizations.²¹ He believed that Masons were responsible for past disastrous Italian military defeats such as Caporetto, and wanted to limit their influence on the Italian General Staff. More damningly, in Mussolini's view, Freemasons maintained their "aberrations of universal love which often annulled the

¹⁹ NA, T586, r1118, 12 November 1923, *Fascism and Masonry*: Interview between unnamed reporter and Masonic Grand Master, f073864-8.

²⁰ OO, XXII, *Discorso al Senato*, 20 November 1925, pp. 13-4.

²¹ NA, T586, r1122, *Relazione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*, 27 June 1926, f074455-75.

love owed to the country.”²² Not only would they not abandon their other allegiances in order to give their loyalty to the regime and to the nation, they persisted in their opposition to Fascism. Any attempt to destroy their power would be risky, as Masons would no doubt be forewarned; they had “tentacles in every area.”²³ In 1926, Mussolini banned Freemasonry, and many officers of the armed forces resigned their lodge memberships rather than risk a confrontation with the regime. The army and its loyalty to the monarchy comprised the greatest potential threat to Mussolini’s power, and Fascism made only limited inroads into control over military matters. Mussolini went no further on this issue, as he was unwilling to risk a purge of the armed forces.²⁴ Mussolini accepted an uneasy accommodation with the former adherents of Freemasonry, as he had apparently forced Freemasons to declare their loyalty to the Fascist regime.

In foreign relations, Mussolini also resented Freemasonry. He believed that Freemasons controlled French politics, and that they were hostile to Italian Fascism. He wrote that “the opportunism of French Freemasonry is chameleon-like [*camaleontesco*].” In his view, they existed within all French governments, and had been responsible for installing Louis Napoleon as Emperor. “In the course of half a century, French Masonry sold itself to five different patrons to have strength, to carry out its vengeance, gains, profits, honours ... all in fraternal brotherhood.”²⁵ Masons controlled the Quai d’Orsay, and, in the words of one member of the Italian Foreign Ministry, “the demo-masonic influence behind the scenes in French politics always rendered impossible the conclusion of

²² NA, T586, r1093, List of Masons for 1926, 14 June 1928, f068995-069042.

²³ NA, T586, r1193, Memorandum on Masonry, 17 May 1927, f069112-9.

²⁴ MacGregor Knox, “Conquest, Foreign and Domestic,” pp. 28, 32-4.

²⁵ OO, XXVI, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 23 June 1933, p.4.

a durable pact” between the two governments.²⁶ Mussolini’s advisors saw the French Radical Socialist Party as the political emanation of Masonry, and further resented its association with the Socialists and Communists in the Popular Front government.²⁷ The result of this climate of anti-Masonic opinion was that it helped to create a barrier of mistrust between the Italian and French governments, particularly in the aftermath of the Ethiopian campaign when the restoration of amicable relations otherwise appeared to be both desirable and possible.

Racialism was another strand to Mussolini’s *mentalité*. In his view, racial differences divided the world into civilized white and uncivilized coloured populations, both of which he believed were potentially revolutionary. By the early 1930s, Fascist Italy had dealt effectively with the white revolutionary ideas of democracy and liberalism, but it had not yet dealt with the perceived threat from the coloured races. He was obsessed with demographic trends, and believed that the coloured birthrate outstripped that of whites by five or six times. As he once responded to his own rhetorical question, “Are Blacks and Yellows at the door? Yes, they are at the door.” He believed that the United States, owing to an insufficiently developed racial consciousness and low white birthrate, would be swamped by the black population.²⁸ In Europe, coloured races would eventually swamp the less prolific European whites unless the latter took strong action to prevent their

²⁶ NA, T586, r1291, *Francia: Situazione politica nel 1935*, n.d.

²⁷ NA, T586, r417, Amedeo Landini to Galeazzo Ciano, 29 January 1936, f007929-34. Landini later called Yvon Delbos, the then French Foreign Minister, “a jesuit mason, the worst type of mason on the zoological scale.” NA, T586, r475, Amadeo Landini to Colonel Luciano, 2 September 1937, f043503-9.

²⁸ *OO, XXIII*, Mussolini’s Preface to Ricardo Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli*, also published in *La Gerarchia*, 9 September 1928, pp. 209-16.

destruction.²⁹ His response was to develop a racial consciousness, which would establish “not only the sharpest differences between races, but also levels of superiority.”³⁰ Fascist policy implemented these clear distinctions in Italy’s colonial conquests.

Italian colonial policy was brutal, even by the often dismal standards of the time. In Libya, for example, previous liberal governments had been unable to exert control over the entire territory that Italy claimed. During the First World War, Libyan rebels had driven Italians back to hold only four coastal towns. From 1921-30, Italians and Eritrean levies restored control over Tripolitania through the destruction of the nomadic tribes’ livestock, which constituted their main resource.³¹ In Cyrenaica, the Senussi religious sect and rebels under the command of Umar al-Mukhtâr still resisted, aided by difficult terrain. By 1929, neither sporadic battles nor truce talks had pacified the resistance, and Mussolini resolved to impose total Italian control. He charged Pietro Badoglio, then Governor of Libya, and General Rodolfo Graziani to eliminate all resistance.

The resulting campaign was conducted by some 10,000 Italian troops supported by light tanks and armoured cars against roughly 1,000 rebels. Unable to defeat the rebels in the field, despite the use of gas bombs, Italian commanders attempted to destroy all links between rebels and the pacified areas. Italian troops destroyed over 90,000 head of

²⁹ *OO, XXVI, Il Popolo d'Italia*, 5 May 1934, pp. 218-9. *OO, XXVI, Il Popolo d'Italia*, 15 December 1933, pp. 122-3. Mussolini apparently borrowed much of his argument from Oswald Spengler’s *Jahre der Entscheidung: Deutschland und die weltgeschichtliche Entwicklung*. München: C.H. Beck, 1933.

³⁰ Quoted in Gene Bernardini, “The Origins and Development of Racial Antisemitism in Fascist Italy.” *Journal of Modern History*. 49.3 (September 1977), p. 442.

³¹ Giorgio Rochat, “Le Guerre coloniali dell’ Italia fascista,” in Angelo del Boca (ed.), *Le Guerre coloniali del fascismo*. Roma: Laterza, 1991, p. 177.

livestock and erected 270 kilometers of barbed wire fence to interdict supplies from Egypt. Beginning in June 1930, Italian troops herded roughly 100,000 Senussi into concentration camps, where at least 20,000 died. Mussolini required the execution of all those who resisted Italian conquest, and anyone suspected of association with the resistance faced execution or imprisonment. The Senussi religious order forfeited a half million acres which the state ultimately turned over to Italian settlers. Italian soldiers eventually captured al-Mukhtâr and, in September 1931, executed him in a brutal public display before the population of one the camps. Estimates of the total dead in the three year campaign range from 100,000 to over 300,000.³² Mussolini sought not only to defeat local opposition but to replace the local populace with an emigrant Italian one.

Italian atrocities such as the use of poison gas in the Ethiopian campaign are well known, but the suppression of post-war rebellions proved even more brutal. Mussolini again ordered that anyone resisting Italian pacification should be shot. In one town, this punishment resulted in the execution of the entire male population over the age of eighteen and the complete destruction of the town. Mussolini urged Marshal Graziani, then Viceroy, "to initiate and systematically conduct [a] policy of terror and extermination against rebels and populations in complicity with them. Without the policy of ten eyes for one we cannot heal this wound in good time." These directives applied especially to Coptic clerics and other potential rallying points for dissent.³³ After the attempted

³² Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 36-40, 42. H.W. Al-Hesnawi, "Note sulla politica coloniale verso gli arabi libici," in Angelo del Boca (ed.), *Le Guerre coloniali del fascismo*. Roma: Laterza, 1991, pp. 44-5. Rochat, "Le Guerre coloniali dell' Italia fascista," pp. 177-80. MacGregor Knox, "Conquest Foreign and Domestic," p. 36.

³³ Quoted in Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 3-4.

assassination of Graziani, Italian troops executed thousands of innocent victims. In the Amhara rebellion of late 1937, Mussolini told Graziani that “prisoners, their accomplices, and the uncertain will have to be executed” in order to carry out the “gradual liquidation” of the area’s population.³⁴

In April 1937, Mussolini introduced Decree Law 880. As Italian diplomat Baron Pompeo Aloisi remarked, the “French made an appalling blunder by allowing sex between the races in Tunisia.”³⁵ Mussolini initially intended the law to prevent the practice of *madamismo*, which usually meant the practice by white soldiers or colonial officials of maintaining coloured mistresses. It prescribed a penalty of one to five years imprisonment for conjugal relations between whites and colonial subjects of Italian East Africa, or with any foreigners whose customs were similar to those of Italian East Africa, either in Italy or the colonies. In addition, Italians were to establish separate living quarters, and natives were never to see Italians performing menial tasks. The law applied only to Italian citizens, as Mussolini believed that their behaviour injured the prestige of the Italian race by blurring the necessary distinction between societies.³⁶ Another Decree Law passed in October 1938 eventually banned marriage between races.³⁷

Mussolini’s underlying rationale for Italy’s appalling colonial behaviour extended beyond the need to cow local resistance. He believed that those with black or brown skin

³⁴ NA, T586, r412, Mussolini to Graziani, 19 January 1938, f004908-9, 004907.

³⁵ Quoted in Esmonde Robertson, “Race as a Factor in Mussolini’s Policy in Africa and Europe.” *Journal of Contemporary History*. 23.1 (January 1988), p. 40.

³⁶ Luigi Preti, “Fascist Imperialism and Racism,” in Roland Sarti (ed.), *The Ax Within: Italian Fascism in Action*. New York: New Viewpoints, 1974, p. 190.

³⁷ Robertson, “Race as A Factor In Mussolini’s Policy in Africa and Europe,” p. 51.

could never acquire the moral stature or intellectual prowess of whites, even if educated in the European tradition over many generations. Arab Bedouins or Ethiopian tribesmen, by his definition inferior, could never develop an appropriate national consciousness; their resistance, therefore, consisted only of banditry. Mussolini believed the use of gas and widespread executions were appropriate techniques for dealing with these 'criminals.' His mission was not to civilize but to displace. He hoped to export millions of Italian citizens to Ethiopia and Libya and to create entirely separate Italian societies among the ruins of the ones he had destroyed.³⁸ As he wrote in 1931, "the Italians of tomorrow will consider Tripoli and Benghazi as two metropolitan cities the equal of Syracuse or Cagliari."³⁹ Mussolini's developing racial consciousness and anti-miscegenation laws signalled the eventual implementation of anti-Semitic laws as well.

Mussolini's anti-Semitism parallels some aspects of his opposition to Freemasonry. It too was often equivocal. He associated openly with and appeared to bear no personal animus towards individual Jews. He learned his early socialism from the Russian Jewess Angelica Balabanov. Margherita Sarfatti was his mistress as well as his biographer. He had Jewish officials in the early Fascist government, and there were 4,819 Jews in the ranks of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* by 1933. In 1930-1, the government passed legislation designed by Alfredo Rocco, the Justice Minister, which consolidated Jewish communities into one organization with legal standing; the legislation pleased both Jews and Fascists.⁴⁰

³⁸ Preti, "Fascist Imperialism and Racism," pp. 192-3.

³⁹ OO, XXIV, Preface to *Cirenaica verde*, pp. 326-8.

⁴⁰ Alan Cassels, "Italy and the Holocaust," in Saul S. Friedman (ed.), *Holocaust Literature: A Handbook of Critical, Historical, and Literary Writings*. Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1993, p. 382. For more on

There were, however, some subtle indications of Mussolini's bias against Jews. In 1929, Mussolini refused his daughter Edda permission to marry the son of a Jewish colonel; the *Duce* thought such a union would be "scandalous." Paradoxically, he criticized Jews who opposed mixed-marriages, as he believed that they should show themselves to be "good, sincere and loyal Italians."⁴¹

Similarly, the Duce's views on Jews as a group contained some contradictions. Hitler's biological racism embarrassed the Duce, as it implied German superiority over Italians as well as Jews. Mussolini worked for a short time with Chaim Weizmann, the President of the World Zionist Organization, to try to moderate Hitler's anti-Semitism.⁴² Mussolini did so not because of any love for Jews, but because he resented the power of an international Jewish conspiracy. In Mussolini's eyes, Jews were responsible for the Great War and the Russian Revolution, and a close connection existed between Jewish bankers and democratic governments.⁴³

World finance is in the hands of the Jews. He who owns the treasury vaults of the people, directs their policies. Behind the puppets in Paris are the Rothschilds, the Warburgs, the Schiffs, the Guggenheims, all of whom have

Jewish representation in the Fascist movement, see Susan Zucotti, *The Italians and the Holocaust: Persecution, Rescue, and Survival*. New York, Basic Books, 1987, pp. 25-7.

⁴¹ Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations and the Jewish question in Italy, 1922-1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 33. *Idem*, "The Attitude of the Fascist Regime to the Jews in Italy." *Yad Vashem Studies*. 4 (1975), pp.12, 14.

⁴² Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, pp. 65-71, 75.

⁴³ Bernardini, p.439.

the same blood as the dominators in Petrograd A race does not betray itself Bolshevism is defended by international plutocracy.⁴⁴

Because of the supposed power of this international conspiracy, Mussolini thought Hitler unwise to persecute Jews. "It is better to leave them alone." Nazi "anti-Semitism has already brought Hitler more enemies than is necessary."⁴⁵

There were some subtle yet important distinctions between Hitler's and Mussolini's anti-Semitism. Whereas Hitler believed that race was determined biologically, Mussolini equated race with nation. In an address to the Third National Fascist Congress in 1921, Mussolini said that "Fascism must take up the problem of race; Fascists must concern themselves with the welfare of the race, which is what makes history. We believe in the concept of the 'nation,' which for us is an indelible, insuperable fact. We are therefore hostile to all internationalisms," including, of course, Jewish internationalism.⁴⁶ Mussolini repeatedly used newspaper articles to attack alleged Jewish subversives, and thought that international Jewry underwrote the *fuorusciti* financially.⁴⁷ In the Duce's eyes, Jews were potentially disloyal and a therefore a threat to the Fascist regime.

Mussolini's various military adventures sparked renewed anti-Semitic attacks in the Fascist press. Fascist propagandists blamed international Jewry for the application of sanctions in the Ethiopian war. The renegade priest Giovanni Preziosi wrote that Italy was

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bernardini, p. 432. Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, pp. 12-3.

⁴⁵ Michaelis, "The Attitude of the Fascist regime to the Jews in Italy," p. 10. See also, *OO*, *XLII*, Mussolini a Vittorio Cerruti, 30 March 1933, p.36

⁴⁶ *OO*, *XVII*, *Discorso al terzo congresso nazionale fascista*, 8 November 1921, p.219.

⁴⁷ Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, p. 60, "The Attitude of the Fascist Regime to the Jews in Italy," p.16. For more on the Turin affair, where Mussolini trumped up charges against Jewish students, see Zucotti, pp. 28-9.

at war with “Jewish bankers,” and that Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, was “international Jewry’s confidence man.” Mussolini met with the anti-Semitic French journalist M. Batault, and endorsed the latter’s *Revue Hebdomadaire* articles which blamed the Ethiopian war on Judaeo-Masonic circles. Mussolini keenly resented Jewish opposition to his war of conquest. Similarly, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Mussolini again equated Judaism to Bolshevism, as Jews condemned Italian intervention, and supported the Republican government, and he said that Jews were the instigators of Spanish republicanism.⁴⁸ Opposition from international Jewry prompted Mussolini once again to question the loyalty of Italian Jews. He attacked their “ferocious exclusivism” and their “disproportionate political and economic influence.” Mussolini’s paper *Il Popolo d’Italia* congratulated those Jews who declared their loyalty to the regime, but castigated those who refused to “forswear their closed racial circle” or who would not repudiate Zionism, which was “incompatible with fascism.”⁴⁹

Mussolini also often assessed foreign statesmen in part according to their perceived Jewishness. He detested Léon Blum, the Jewish politician and, in 1936, soon-to-be French Premier.⁵⁰ Mussolini asked his subordinates to prepare a report on the connections between the British Cabinet and Jews. The report gave only Ernest Brown a clean bill of health. Viscount Halifax’s niece had married a Rothschild, and Ramsay MacDonald’s private secretary was Jewish. Mussolini’s *bête noire*, Anthony Eden, was an “intimate of the Rothschilds.” One of the directors of Baldwin’s company was a Jew, and

⁴⁸ Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, pp. 90-2, 100-1.

⁴⁹ Preti, “Fascist Imperialism and Racism,” p.190.

⁵⁰ OO, XXVII, *Appello agli studenti di tutti Europa*, 1 February 1936, p. 224.

Jews had supported the career of Neville Chamberlain's father.⁵¹ In the Duce's mind, even the most tenuous connection to Jews meant that these British politicians were tainted.

Eventually, Mussolini introduced a series of decree laws implementing anti-Semitic discrimination. Tellingly, the various laws, including the notorious "Defense of the Race Law," would apply only to those Jews who, in the Duce's view, had failed to prove their loyalty to the Italian State. Consequently, legislation exempted decorated or wounded war veterans, early Fascist Party members, or the families of those who had fallen in the cause of Fascism. The various decree laws prevented Jews from teaching at or attending school, banned Jews from government, the military, and the Fascist Party, limited Jewish doctors and lawyers to serving Jews, limited the size of Jewish businesses, and also stripped citizenship granted after 1 January 1919 to foreign-born Jews.⁵² In all, almost 4,000 Jews lost their jobs in business, teaching, or public service. Some 4,000 Jews converted to Catholicism, and 6,000 emigrated.⁵³

Given the occasionally contradictory nature of Mussolini's statements on anti-Semitism and the greater evil of Nazism and the Holocaust, it is easy to overlook Mussolini's anti-Semitism or to downplay it as mere opportunism. At the time he introduced the racial laws, most Italians assumed that the Duce passed the legislation as part of some agreement with Hitler. There is, however, no evidence to suggest any German pressure on Mussolini to introduce an anti-Semitic policy.⁵⁴ At the same time, one must allow for the possibility that Mussolini was merely imitating Nazi policy in an effort

⁵¹ NA, T586, r418, 5 February 1936, f008762-008765.

⁵² NA, T586, r1112, *Discorso al Gran Consiglio Fascista*, 6 October 1938, f074978.

⁵³ Cassels, "Italy and the Holocaust," pp. 385-6.

⁵⁴ Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews*, pp. 189-91, and *passim*.

to pave the way for closer relations or an alliance between the two countries. This alleged example of Mussolini's tactical flexibility, however, is not incompatible with his other expressions of anti-Semitism and does not explain indications of Mussolini's anti-Semitism that cannot be associated in any manner with German racialism. Diplomats and *confidants* were under no illusions regarding Mussolini's vitriolic attacks on the Jews. To William Phillips, the United States Ambassador, Mussolini recounted "the iniquities of the German Jews and of Jews in general, their lack of loyalty to the country of their residence, their intrigues and the fact that they could never assimilate with another race." Phillips was struck by "Mussolini's apparently genuine antagonism toward the Jews." Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and Foreign Minister, wrote of several of Mussolini's outbursts against the Jews.⁵⁵ Further, the actual implementation of the racial laws closely mirrors Mussolini's nationalist and racist *mentalité*. The laws' intended effects fell most harshly and completely on foreign Jews, who could never be part of the Italian race-nation. Domestically, Mussolini assumed that Italian Jews were not part of the Italian nation, unless they specifically proved their loyalty to the regime and the race through either religious assimilation or demonstration of nationalist credentials. In Mussolini's bizarre

⁵⁵ NA, T1284, r24, #1306, William Phillips to Secretary of State, 3 November 1939. See also: Galeazzo Ciano (Andreas Mayor ed. and trans.), *Ciano's Hidden Diary 1937-1938* [hereafter *CHD*]. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1953, 6 September 1937 to 28 November 1938, *passim*. I have used Ciano's diaries extensively. Our increasing access to Italian archival evidence has allowed historians to compare Ciano's version of events to the documentary record. For the most part, Ciano was an accurate chronicler. Though vain, cynical, and inclined to inflate his own importance and to denigrate the abilities of certain perceived competitors, there is little reason to doubt his veracity. For a longer discussion of Ciano's diaries and their essential accuracy, see Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, Appendix I, pp. 291-2.

reasoning, Judaism tied together the major internationalist threats to Fascism: bolshevism, capitalist democracy, and Freemasonry.⁵⁶

Unlike some other strands of Mussolini's *mentalité*, his social Darwinistic beliefs were not at all equivocal, and social Darwinism was also the most important element of his *mentalité*. He was prone to adopt programmatic beliefs, as his earlier acceptance of Marxist historical materialism would suggest. After his conversion to nationalism before the First World War, he displayed a consistent view that life consisted of fatalistic struggle and selection. He took many of his ideas from the philosophers Wilfredo Pareto and Friedrich Nietzsche. From Pareto, for example, Mussolini derived his views that humanitarian concern impaired the elite's resolution; it merely served to limit the appropriate process of selection. France and liberal Italy were "sick with excessive humanitarianism." This prevalence of humanitarian sensibilities would lead inevitably to social disintegration and decadence. Pareto believed that democracy was "demographic plutocracy." Perhaps most importantly, Mussolini adopted Pareto's idea that the only way to break the otherwise inevitable cycle of the renewal of the old elites was to create a new non-socialist elite which was prepared to use violence to achieve its ends. From Nietzsche, Mussolini adopted the idea of the elite and the belief regarding the importance of "heroism, dynamism and faith."⁵⁷ The Duce arranged these concepts into a fatalistic view of eternal struggle among races, populations, and nations.

A major element of Mussolini's social Darwinism was his obsession with population demographics. He believed that demographic expansion was necessary lest

⁵⁶ Bernardini, p. 437.

⁵⁷ Adrian Lyttleton, *Italian Fascisms From Pareto to Gentile*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973, pp. 20, 22.

Italy be reduced to the status of a colony. Italy needed to increase its population from the 40 million of the mid-1920s to 60 million by 1960. This growth was the prerequisite for Italy to face the challenge of an expected 90 million Germans and 200 million Slavs, plus 40 million Frenchmen supplemented by 90 million colonials and 56 million Englishmen supplemented by 450 million colonial subjects.⁵⁸ Only a full 60 million Italians would “make the weight of their numbers and their power felt in the history of the world.”⁵⁹ He stated that “a few unintelligent people say: ‘We are too many.’ The intelligent ones reply: ‘We are too few.’” He repeatedly returned to the theme that demographic strength underlay the economic and moral health of the nation.⁶⁰ For Mussolini, demographic strength was a fundamental determinant of historical processes. He detested Malthusian reasoning, which he believed was idiotic: “I hope that no one will hold forth to me the story of that greatest idiocy, the most phenomenal idiocy that appears in history and responds to the name of Malthus.”⁶¹ He argued instead his belief in “the influence of the birth rate in the life, power, and economy of the nations, demonstrated in the history of all the great peoples.”⁶² Mussolini made a clear and simplistic equation between demographics and a nation’s power; more births meant more soldiers. Mussolini tried to implement these views as policy. In 1924, he introduced penal sanctions against anyone

⁵⁸ OO, XXII, *Discorso alla Camera dei Deputati*, 1 June 1927, pp. 360-90.

⁵⁹ Quoted in MacGregor Knox, “Conquest Foreign and Domestic,” pp. 18-19.

⁶⁰ OO, XXII, *Discorso alla Camera dei Deputati*, 1 June 1927, pp. 360-90.

⁶¹ OO, XLIV, Appendix VIII, *Discorso al Consiglio Nazionale del Partito nazionale fascista*, 26 October 1933, pp. 70-6.

⁶² OO, XXIII, 234a riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 20 February 1928, p. 102.

guilty of advocating contraception. In 1926, he sponsored a nationwide campaign to double the birthrate in order to meet his population objectives.⁶³

This campaign and others that followed were not especially successful, and the failures left Mussolini perplexed. He determined that the fault lay in the people of urban centres, as only the people in Rome and the largely rural areas south of Rome performed their patriotic procreative duty.⁶⁴ The birthrate in northern industrial cities such as Milan stagnated or declined, and they maintained or increased their population only by immigration from rural Italy.⁶⁵ Mussolini concluded that industrialism caused birthrates to decline. In his words:

At a given moment the city grows morbidly, pathologically, not for a virtuous goal but toward another end. The more the city increases and becomes a metropolis, the more it becomes infertile The city dies, the nation - without the vital lifeblood of new generations - can no longer resist - composed as it is by now of a feeble and aged people - against a younger population that will require the abandonment of its frontiers. It has happened. It can happen. It will happen again and not only between city and nation, but in an infinitely greater magnitude: the entire white race, the Western race, can be submerged by the other races of colour which multiply with a rhythm unknown to us.⁶⁶

His solution to this perceived problem was to emphasize the development of rural over urban areas. Despite the absurdity of his views in retrospect, Mussolini exalted agriculture over industry, as only the former could give Italy the demographic strength that he

⁶³ Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p. 160.

⁶⁴ *OO*, XXVI, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 1 October 1933, pp. 64-5.

⁶⁵ *OO*, XXIII, *L'azione dell' Istituto nazionale delle assicurazione*, 25 November 1927, p. 71.

⁶⁶ *OO*, XXIII, Mussolini's Preface to Ricardo Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli*, also published in *La Gerarchia*, 9 September 1928, pp. 209-16.

deemed necessary for the creation of the new Italian Empire.⁶⁷ In addition, he believed that any increase in population would increase Italian industrial productivity, by the simplistic determination that as a country's population increased, then so did its economic markets.⁶⁸ Mussolini's odd beliefs regarding productivity and demographics help to explain his failure to develop a fully modern army during the late 1930s; he apparently believed his own rhetoric that military power lay simply in the strength of 8 million bayonets.

Mussolini also applied his demographic theories to external affairs. In his view, demographic stagnation in a country signalled its political and moral decadence. He noted the failure of a British government plan to encourage people to return to the countryside. He connected this failure with Britain's declining birthrate, which he believed had recently passed that of France as the lowest in Europe. As Britain's population aged and became more pacifistic, the country's elite lost the will and the ability to defend its empire.⁶⁹ Regarding France, he believed that its fertile plains were turning into veritable deserts as the urban population fed off the land while at the same time depopulating it. Mussolini believed that the decline in French population was "absolutely horrifying," and that its demographic decline made it weak and vulnerable to the will of the apparently more dynamic Italian people.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Luigi Preti, *Impero fascista, africani ed ebrei*. Milano: Mursia, 1968, pp. 69-72.

⁶⁸ OO, XXVI, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 16 September 1933, pp. 52-3.

⁶⁹ Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p. 194.

⁷⁰ OO, XXIII, Mussolini's Preface to Ricardo Korherr, *Regresso delle nascite: morte dei popoli*, also published in *La Gerarchia*, 9 September 1932, pp. 209-16.

The second aspect to Mussolini's social Darwinist *idée fixe* was his belief in the purifying virtues of war. As a young man, he seemingly lived for combat, although he did wait to be drafted by the army in the First World War. Fascism by its very nature was combative; most Fascists earned their spurs in the state of virtual civil war between the Fascist blackshirts and the Socialist redshirts. Much of Mussolini's talk of war appears almost comical. He referred to machineguns as "adorable," and often repeated the phrase "better one day as a lion than one hundred years as a lamb."⁷¹ Beyond the *opéra bouffe*, however, there were many more serious indications of the Duce's love of war. One of his diplomats wrote that Mussolini "all the time is inclined to the thought of war."⁷² Mussolini had an almost mystical belief in the historical necessity of violence; he wrote that "only blood could turn the bloodstained wheels of history."⁷³ He believed in the essential idea of permanent struggle, and saw war as ennobling because it revealed to man the nature of his ultimate commitments. "All other trials are substitutes which never really put a man in front of himself in the alternative of life and death."⁷⁴ The "Doctrine of Fascism," which appeared over Mussolini's signature in the 1932 *Enciclopedia italiana*, was rife with language that showed the Duce's worship of war. Mussolini wrote that Fascism "rejects the doctrine of pacifism which is a cloak for renunciation of struggle and cowardice in the face of sacrifice. Only war brings to the highest tension the energies of man and imprints the sign of nobility on those who have the virtue to confront it." Fascist principles understood "life as duty, moral elevation and conquest." Borrowing the language of

⁷¹ Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, pp. 157-8. *OO*, 25, 23 May 1932, p. 104.

⁷² Quoted in Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire Builder*, p. 84.

⁷³ *OO*, XXI, Discorso al Senato, 2 April 1925, p. 271.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Lyttleton, *Italian Fascisms From Pareto to Gentile*, p. 12.

Nietzsche, Mussolini extolled the “sanctity of heroism,” which was entirely alien to those motivated by materialism.⁷⁵ Fascism, in Mussolini’s view, embodied martial virtue.

More than merely revelling in struggle and violence, Mussolini hoped to use war to transform Italians into a martial race. He told the June 1925 Party Congress that he aimed to create a new Fascist man: “the class of warriors who are always ready to die.” Among the judges, captains of industry, and governors, he aimed to carry out a methodical selection and inculcation of the ideas of imperial and martial virtues.⁷⁶ He wanted to reorient the national character and mores of Italy in order to serve his demand for expansion.⁷⁷ In 1934, as Minister for War, he enacted a law that decreed every Italian citizen was a soldier and should be educated militarily from age 8. This education, he believed, would develop the martial ardour in the population necessary for Italy to take its figurative place in the sun.⁷⁸ Mussolini’s new race of hardened warriors would be necessary to carry out the expansion that he deemed vital for the existence of the Italian race.

Mussolini’s drive to Empire was the third aspect of his social Darwinism. From its earliest days, the Fascist movement made imperialism one of its central goals. Although Mussolini sometimes denied imperialist ambitions, in 1920, he wrote that “our imperialism is Roman, Latin, Mediterranean. It expresses itself through a need of all the individuals

⁷⁵ OO, XXXIV, *La Dottrina del Fascismo*, p. 124.

⁷⁶ MacGregor Knox, “Conquest Foreign and Domestic,” pp. 362-3.

⁷⁷ Alan Cassels, “Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy? Tradition and Novelty.” *International History Review*. 5.2 (May 1983), p. 259.

⁷⁸ Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire*, p. 63.

and all the peoples. The Italian people necessarily must be expansionist.”⁷⁹ In the 1921 electoral campaign, Mussolini demanded that Italy chase the British from the Mediterranean basin, and “imperialism” and “national expansion” were watchwords of the campaign.⁸⁰ He believed that the imperial mission was part of Italy’s inevitable rise to greatness; his goal was to create in Italians the will to empire.⁸¹ In 1926, he wrote that “everyone living, who wants to live, has imperialist tendencies, and therefore the people, who are the entire community conscious of living and the desire to live, must develop a certain will to power.” He related imperialism to the moral dignity of the Italian nation, and cited the need for “economic and intellectual expansion.”⁸²

Although imperialism was a staple of early Fascist doctrine, Mussolini emphasized its importance much more in the 1930s. He tightened the connection between national dynamism and imperialism. In the “Doctrine of Fascism,” he argued that

for Fascism the tendency to empire, that is to say, the expansion of the nation, is a manifestation of vitality; its opposite ... is a sign of decadence: people who rise or revive are imperialists, people who die are renunciationists. Fascism is a doctrine perfectly adapted to represent the tendency, the state of animation of a people such as the Italians who are rising after many centuries of abandonment or of foreign servitude. But Empire calls for discipline, co-ordination of forces, duty and sacrifice.⁸³

He claimed that Italy had “historic objectives” in Asia and Africa. He intended not only to make the Mediterranean Sea an Italian *Mare Nostrum*, but to occupy the northern half of

⁷⁹ Giorgio Rumi, *L'imperialismo fascista*. Milano: Mursia, 1974, p. 29.

⁸⁰ Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p.43.

⁸¹ Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, p.29.

⁸² Quoted in Preti, *Impero fascista*, p. 16.

⁸³ OO, XXXIV, *La Dottrina del Fascismo*, p. 131.

Africa and to take Italy into the Middle East. He assumed that Italy had the moral sanction for this programme of expansion owing to its superior culture and dynamic virtue.⁸⁴ He expected to make Italy the centre of European civilization once more, building a third Roman Empire, compelled by the laws of history.⁸⁵ He believed that Italy had to have an outlet for his hoped-for rapid expansion in Italy's population. In his words, Italy "must therefore expand or suffocate."⁸⁶

Mussolini's *mentalité* was that of a programmatic thinker. His belief system was at times simplistic and at times absurd, but it is necessary to try to understand it in order to explain Mussolini's actions. He combined several elements in his nationalistic *mentalité*: anti-democratic and anti-Bolshevik beliefs, anti-Masonism, crude racialism, anti-Semitism, and social Darwinism. Throughout his adult life this set of beliefs remained remarkably consistent, and he applied these beliefs in his actions in both domestic politics and in international relations. His beliefs led him to make certain assumptions about Italy's role in the world. Mussolini synthesized concepts of demographic expansion with a rudimentary understanding of geopolitics.⁸⁷ Italy needed to expand in order to seize its share of territory and raw materials and territory lest it perish. In a manner common amongst those who shared social Darwinistic beliefs, he was predisposed to overlook the necessary "logistical preparations for conquest of a world empire in favour of a naïve trust in a

⁸⁴ Cassels, "Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy?", pp. 260-1.

⁸⁵ Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, p. 15. MacGregor Knox, "Conquest Foreign and Domestic," p. 10. For more on Mussolini's cultivation of the myth of Rome, see Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità." *Journal of Contemporary History*. 27.1 (January 1992), pp. 5-22.

⁸⁶ OO, XXII, *Intervista con Associated Press*, 1 August 1926, p. 190.

⁸⁷ MacGregor Knox, "Conquest Foreign and Domestic," p. 17.

beneficent providence.” He was fatalistic and often impervious to reason. He made a simplistic division of the world into ‘declining’ and ‘rising’ states and assumed that Fascism’s vitality meant that he had destiny on his side.⁸⁸ He assumed that both Britain and France and their empires were in an inevitable state of decline, and he hoped that Fascist Italy would replace those empires with an Italian empire that would rival classical Rome at its height. He was, therefore, predisposed to associate Italy with revisionist Nazi Germany in order to carry out his hoped-for expansion.

Still, on occasion, Mussolini could make rational calculations, and it would be foolish to assume that Italian policy carried the imprint of inevitability. Mussolini, even as a programmatic thinker, had to act in the world as it existed; he was a politician as well as an ideologue. “The programmatic thinker of a movement has to determine its goals, the politician has to strive for their attainment. Accordingly, the former is guided in his thinking by eternal truth, the latter’s action depends to a greater extent on the practical realities of the moment.”⁸⁹ It is the intersection of Mussolini’s *mentalité* with the international system of the time that determined the course of Italian policy, and it is to that system that one must turn to explain fully Mussolini’s fatal path to war.

⁸⁸ Cassels, “Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy?,” p. 262.

⁸⁹ Jäckl, p. 14.

Chapter 2: Towards the Axis

By June 1936, Italian victory in Ethiopia was ultimately assured, and the end of League of Nations sanctions was only a matter of time. Mussolini faced three broad choices as to the future orientation of Italian foreign policy. He could return to the Stresa Front and co-operation with Britain and France; this choice would imply that Italy was content to maintain the *status quo ante* in Europe while consolidating its hold on Ethiopia. Alternatively, he could play the middle game and try to earn concessions from either Germany or the West. More dangerously, he could align Italy with Germany in an attempt to challenge the power of Britain and France. The now orthodox Italian school of interpretation, led by De Felice and Quartararo, contends that Mussolini chose the middle course, and that he would play the German card only “if he was not able to mend relations with the Western powers and with England in particular.”¹ An examination of Italy’s relations with France, Britain, and Germany, plus Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War and its policy in the Far East, however, suggests that Mussolini’s actual policy brought Italy much closer to Germany than to the Western democracies; he aimed not to preserve the *status quo*, but to challenge it.

On 10 June, Mussolini signalled his preference to explore the possibility of an Italo-German rapprochement by appointing his son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano di Cortelazzo as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Ciano was in some ways unlike most Fascist hierarchs. He was only forty-three years old, and had not fought in the First World War, nor had he

¹ De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, p. 339.

played a rôle in any of the pivotal battles that brought Mussolini to power. Ciano owed his position less to his abilities than to his father's war record and close friendship with Mussolini. Of course, Galeazzo Ciano's marriage to Mussolini's daughter Edda helped his rapid advancement.² His distinguishing characteristics were a taste for adventure and his unconcealed ambition. Though he admired the Nazis' strength and increasing power and prestige, Ciano was not precisely a Nazi-phile; he was not wedded to any particular ideology. In part owing to the apparent dynamism of Nazism, he was inclined toward friendly relations with Germany. Whatever Ciano's politics, he was ultimately Mussolini's creature; Mussolini could trust Ciano to implement his foreign policy decisions.³ The same day, Mussolini dismissed Fulvio Suvich, the Undersecretary of State at the Palazzo Chigi. Suvich had been a stalwart of Austrian independence, and he had opposed any substantive Italian alignment with Germany. Mussolini informed Suvich shortly before the latter's dismissal that he intended "to break with France and with England, to leave the League of Nations, and to throw myself in the arms of Germany."⁴ Suvich's continued presence was an obstacle to Mussolini's approaches to Germany, and he needed a more pliable

² Felix Gilbert, "Ciano and his Ambassadors," in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.), *The Diplomats, 1919-1939, Volume II: The Thirties*. New York: Atheneum, 1974, pp. 514-5. For more on Ciano's life, see: Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Galeazzo Ciano: una vita*. Milano: Bompiani, 1979; Orio Vergani, *Ciano: una lunga confessione*. Milano: Longanesi, 1974; and Edda Mussolini Ciano (Eileen Finsletter trans.), *My Truth*. New York: Morrow, 1977.

³ Malcolm Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers* [hereafter *CDP*]. London: Odhams Press, 1948, p. xiii-xv.

⁴ Quoted in De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, p. 338. Paradoxically, Mussolini also said that he planned to "make the same policy with Galeazzo that he had made with [Suvich]."

Undersecretary. Ulrich von Hassell, the German Ambassador in Rome, cabled that “the re-orientation of Italy’s policy toward Germany has played a part in the change of Foreign Ministers.”⁵ With Ciano and his new Undersecretary Giuseppe Bastianini installed in the Palazzo Chigi, the way appeared clear for a possible Italo-German rapprochement.⁶

Still, Mussolini had not publicly foreclosed any opportunities to treat with France and Britain. Instead, he and Ciano continued to play a double game regarding the Franco-Italian military alliance and France’s hoped-for Mediterranean Pact, which would have various Mediterranean powers guarantee the territorial *status quo ante* in the Mediterranean basin. In late May and early June 1936, Suvich, Ciano, and Mussolini all had given assurances to Charles De Chambrun, the French Ambassador in Rome, that Italy was prepared to co-operate with France, but that such co-operation depended on the end of sanctions at Geneva. On 16 May 1936, for example, De Chambrun had asked Suvich to clarify Italy’s position regarding the Rome Accords, the four public and four secret agreements signed by Mussolini and French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval in January 1935; French diplomats were especially concerned whether or not Mussolini still considered himself part of a system to contain potential German aggression. Suvich had equivocated about Italy’s precautionary troop movements toward the French border, but said that there had been no change in Italy’s position, and that the various accords were

⁵ *Documents on German Foreign Policy* [hereafter *DGFP*], *Volume C, V*, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1966, #381, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 18 June 1936, pp. 637-9. Von Hassell believed that Ciano played a rôle in Suvich’s dismissal. *DGFP, C, IV*, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1962, #486, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 7 January 1936, pp. 977-8.

⁶ *Documents diplomatiques français*, [hereafter *DDF*] *Tome II, Série II*, Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1964, #338, François-Poncet to Delbos, 23 June 1936, pp. 512-3.

still in effect. Suvich had warned, however, that the continuation of sanctions after the imminent end of the Ethiopian war would lead to problems with Italian public opinion, and that sanctions were inconsistent with the friendly relations implied by the political accord signed the last year in Rome.⁷ In early June, Mussolini had echoed these sentiments on different occasions to two distinguished French visitors, Jean-Louis Malvy, a French Senator touring Rome, and Hubert de Lagardelle, a prominent French socialist journalist. Mussolini had emphasized that Italy was prepared to abide by the terms of the Rome Accords and to consider the Mediterranean Pact, but only on the condition that Britain and France lifted sanctions.⁸

Mussolini did recognize that France was working to minimize and to end sanctions. During the Ethiopian war, while France had not maintained its end of the Rome Accords, as its long-term strategic interests required British support, successive Foreign Ministers Pierre Etienne Flandin and Joseph Paul-Boncour had “fought effectively for Italy” at Geneva.⁹ They had interceded to prevent Britain from instituting an oil sanction,

⁷ *DDF, II, II, #248*, De Chambrun to Flandin, 26 May 1936, pp. 388-9. For other examples, see: *I documenti diplomatici italiani, ottava serie, volume IV* [hereafter *DDI*]. Roma: Istituto poligrafico e zecca dello stato, 1993, #223, Il Capo di Stato Maggiore Generale, Badoglio, al Capo di Stato Maggiore Generale dell'esercito Francese, Gamelin, 9 June 1936, p. 273; #230, Mussolini to Cerruti, 11 June 1936, p. 282.

⁸ William Shorrock, *From Ally to Enemy: The Enigma of Fascist Italy in French Diplomacy, 1920-1940*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988, pp. 182-3.

⁹ For a discussion on French inter-war strategic doctrine, see: Young, *In Command of France*, p.13-32; and *idem.*, “*La Guerre de longue durée*: Some reflections on French Strategy and Diplomacy in the

which would have had all but crippled Italy's military campaign. In Mussolini's view, while in London "hysteria" often ruled, in Paris many French politicians had greeted the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa with satisfaction, as it could presage the return of Italy to the Stresa Front against Germany.¹⁰ On 19 June, Léon Blum, the French Premier, summoned Vittorio Cerruti, the Italian Ambassador in Paris, to inform him that the French Council of Ministers had decided to abolish sanctions. Although this policy would not take formal effect until the following month's meeting at Geneva, Blum hoped that this decision would lead to improved Franco-Italian relations immediately.¹¹ At the end of June and beginning of July 1936, Yvon Delbos, the French Foreign Minister, worked at Geneva to achieve the most favourable outcome for Italy possible in the circumstances. France did not take the lead there regarding the end of sanctions. It could not break openly with England, and appearing to undermine League resolutions was not in keeping with the public image of the Popular Front, but it was still clear that the end of sanctions was imminent. More importantly, Delbos did not make any specific resolution at Geneva regarding recognition of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, which in effect worked to Italy's advantage. It meant that each member government was free of League dictates on the issue, and had the option to recognize the Italian Empire according to its own wishes.¹²

1930s," in Adrian Preston (ed.), *General Staffs and Diplomacy before the Second World War*. London: Croom Helm, 1978, 41-64.

¹⁰ NA, T586, roll 1291, Francia: situazione politica nel 1936, no f#.

¹¹ DDI, 8, IV, #326, Cerruti to Ciano, 19 June 1936, pp. 372-5.

¹² ASMAE, Carte Lancelotti, Ufficio di Coordinamento 84 [hereafter UC], 24 June 1936, 29 June 1936, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Francia; Carte Lancelotti, Archivio di Gabinetto 25 [hereafter GAB], 4 July 1936, Appunto per il Duce. Ciano used some of the documents from the Ufficio di Coordinamento

Nevertheless, despite France's somewhat limited attempts at accommodating Italy, Mussolini was clearly not keen on accepting any French *démarches*. In his view, the creation of the Popular Front government brought to power men who were seemingly his avowed political enemies. In Léon Blum, who took office on 4 June, Mussolini saw a Jew who was clearly hostile to Fascism. Blum had attacked the signing of the Rome Accords, as they violated the principles of disarmament and collective security through the League of Nations. He also believed in France's and Britain's close association in the League and its sanctions policy. Finally, Blum was a strong supporter of Zionism, and was a member of France-Palestine Committee and other Jewish agencies. Nor did Mussolini see the new French Foreign Minister in a better light. Delbos was a French Mason, and, like Blum, had opposed Laval's policy of accommodation with Mussolini. Delbos had stated publicly that the failed Hoare-Laval plan had served to encourage Mussolini's intransigence over Ethiopia. Like Blum, Delbos tended to believe in the League of Nations and collective security.¹³ In addition, the Popular Front's parliamentary co-operation with the French Communist Party further alienated Mussolini, and apparently established clear ideological

and the Archivio di Gabinetto in preparing his papers which eventually were published as *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*. Milano: Mondadori, 1948. In all possible cases, I have used the originals, as some of the published documents are incomplete.

¹³ NA, T586, r431, 5 June 1936, Servizio Storico Diplomatico - Ufficio I, f#016563-016614. See also Paola Brundu Olla, "Il Gentlemen's Agreement e la Francia (2 gennaio 1937)," in J.B. Duroselle and E. Serra (eds.), *Italia, Francia e Mediterraneo*. Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990, pp. 56-7. Vittorio Cerruti, the Italian Ambassador in Paris, described Delbos as a "doctrinaire without real ideas and ill-informed of foreign affairs." *DDI*, 8, IV, #227, Cerruti to Mussolini, 10 June 1936, pp. 276-8.

differences between the two governments.¹⁴ In short, Blum, Delbos and the Popular Front represented several of Mussolini's chief *bêtes noires*: freemasonry, socialism, communism, and internationalism in both its League of Nations and Jewish variants.

Mussolini's assurances to French politicians, therefore, were insincere. Accordingly, he openly declared to his subordinates that he intended to draw closer to Germany in an effort to begin isolating France. On 17 June, for example, Mussolini wrote to Dino Grandi, his Ambassador in London, directing him to pursue a new policy there regarding Anglo-French relations. Grandi should aim to reorient British thinking away from a multi-lateral Mediterranean Pact and toward a bilateral Anglo-Italian accord. He should belittle the idea that France, "nailed to the cross of the Soviets," would make an effective British partner in Mediterranean affairs. As France was too concerned about the German threat, Britain should jettison its association with the French in favour of a *modus vivendi* with Italy. Mussolini aimed to drive a wedge between the Western democracies in an attempt to isolate France.¹⁵

Italian approaches to Britain, therefore, had two compatible goals: ending sanctions and isolating France. In late May, Grandi, on instructions from Mussolini, had informed Anthony Eden, Britain's Foreign Secretary, that the Duce hoped to "restore confidence" in Mediterranean affairs. He would entertain any offers that the British

¹⁴ Young, *In Command of France*, p. 135.

¹⁵ ASMAE, GAB 25, 17 June 1936, Mussolini to Grandi. William Shorrock argues that French Popular Front leaders willfully and unwisely ignored Italian overtures in May and June 1936, and that this flawed policy led to the eventual malaise in Franco-Italian relations. Shorrock, pp. 182-3. But Mussolini's overtures at most aimed to convince French diplomats to remove sanctions, and Mussolini displayed no real interest at that time in a close political association with France.

government might make, but only after it raised sanctions. Grandi added disingenuously that Italy intended to make no difficulties for Britain in Egypt or Palestine through the use of anti-British propaganda.¹⁶ In early June, Mussolini had directed Grandi to emphasize that Italian patience regarding the continuation of sanctions was running out. Grandi should offer several concessions to Britain. Mussolini would rein in Italy's polemical press campaign against Britain, and would promise to respect the British Empire and to work towards an Anglo-Italian rapprochement. In addition, Marshall Graziani, the Viceroy of Ethiopia, would allow the Sikh guard at the legation in Addis Ababa to remain, even though after the proclamation of the Italian Empire it no longer had legal status. Grandi should warn Eden, however, that if His Majesty's Government did not respond by lifting sanctions, Italy would withdraw from the League of Nations, and that Italian patience was rapidly running out.¹⁷ Eden had replied that he could not open immediate conversations, as the crisis would have to be resolved through eventual League action.¹⁸ Still, Grandi knew from conversations held with Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Undersecretary, that most of the British Cabinet had been persuaded of the need to lift sanctions as soon as possible - the only question was the matter of timing, form, and how much face Mussolini was willing to allow the British government and the League of Nations to save.¹⁹

¹⁶ FO 371 20411, R3122/226/22, Eden to Drummond, 28 May 1936. At that time, Italy's Radio Bari was transmitting virulent anti-British propaganda supporting Arab insurrections in both Palestine and Egypt. Callum A. McDonald, "Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures, 1934-38. *Middle Eastern Studies*. 13.2 (May 1977), p. 196.

¹⁷ *DDI*, 8, IV, #171, Mussolini to Grandi, 3 June 1936, p. 218.

¹⁸ *DDI*, 8, IV, #180, Grandi to Mussolini, 4 June 1936, pp. 226-9.

¹⁹ *DDI*, 8, IV, #170, Grandi to Mussolini, 3 June 1936, pp. 215-7.

Mussolini's appointment of Ciano came as a mild shock to the Foreign Office. It was somewhat disconcerting, as Ciano, while Minister for Propaganda, had conducted the anti-British press campaign during the Ethiopian war. The change appeared to have little effect on Anglo-Italian relations, however, other than removing the access of Britain's diplomats to the Duce; as Mussolini had given up the Foreign Minister's title, diplomats would have to deal with Ciano as a matter of protocol.²⁰ Despite the implications of Mussolini's appointment of Ciano, the apparent impasse broke slightly in the middle of June. After repeated urging from British diplomats, Mussolini agreed to make a gesture to the League, announcing that his Minister there would read a conciliatory message to the next League Council meeting.²¹ Bastianini also told Sir Eric Drummond, Britain's Ambassador to Italy, that Italy was now a satisfied power, and that it had no more territorial desiderata. It wished only to return to take up its part in European affairs and to re-establish cordial relations with Britain.²² Mussolini also hinted at both his underlying motives by directing Grandi to tell British officials that ending sanctions would allow Britain "to demonstrate its courage" and help to "restore its prestige." It would also "deflect on to France the bitterness and rancour of the Italians." Mussolini also supported the idea of bilateral Anglo-Italian negotiations including the mutual respect of rights in the Mediterranean.²³ On 18 June 1936, at least in part owing to the Italian declaration to the League Council, Anthony Eden told the House of Commons that His Majesty's

²⁰ FO 371 20414, R3491/241/22, Drummond to Eden, 13 June 1936.

²¹ FO 371 20411, R3533/226/22, F.O. Minute, Sir R. Vansittart, 16 June 1936.

²² FO 371 20411, R3849/226/22, Drummond to Eden, 28 June 1936.

²³ DDI, 8, IV, #278, Ciano to Grandi, 15 June 1936, p. 328; #300, Mussolini to Grandi, 17 June 1936, p. 350.

Government no longer saw any need for continued sanctions against Italy. The effect was lessened by Eden's qualification that certain guarantees of assistance to Greece, Turkey, and Yugoslavia, replacing earlier mutual assistance agreements under Article 16 of the League Covenant, would remain for an indeterminate time after sanctions lapsed. Although the fear of the smaller powers prompted these guarantees, the implied distrust of the Duce's intentions was clear. Even though the entrance into force of the guarantees had been preceded by the withdrawal of the British Home Fleet from the Mediterranean, Ciano and Mussolini were chagrined.²⁴ Eden's announcement, therefore, removed one obstacle in the way of an Anglo-Italian rapprochement, but left others in place.

British charges of Italian espionage represented another source of tension. On 30 June 1936, Drummond met with Ciano to protest the espionage carried out by Italian Consul-General Ferrante in Malta. A British Maltese dockyard worker by the name of d'Elia had been sentenced to three years imprisonment for spying in Malta's Arsenal. D'Elia's public confession suggested that Ferrante was d'Elia's paymaster. Ciano protested that this evidence was insufficient, and refused to accept that the Consul-General should be expelled. A week later, Drummond insisted that Ferrante leave, but Ciano remained evasive, refusing to accept any responsibility for Ferrante's actions.²⁵ On 12 July, Ciano told Drummond that Anglo-Italian relations would not return to normal until all aspects of Article 16, including the guarantees, had been removed. In response, Drummond suggested unofficially that Italian diplomats in all three of the applicable

²⁴ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 11 July 1936. FO 371 20382, R4131/294/67, Drummond to Eden, 12 July 1936.

²⁵ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con L'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 30 June 1936. This aspect of the meeting does not appear in the edited collection of *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers*; see pp. 9-10.

capitals declare that Italy had no intention of retaliating for the imposition of sanctions. After receiving his orders from Mussolini, Ciano did as Drummond had suggested, and, after consulting with Athens, Ankara, and Belgrade, Eden eventually declared on 22 July that the guarantees were no longer operable owing to Italy's "spontaneous" gesture.²⁶

Despite the removal of these impediments to better Anglo-Italian relations, Whitehall's halting steps towards Italy ran counter to Mussolini's pursuit of closer ties with Germany. There were two issues in June and the first half of July which Germany and Italy settled: recognition of the declaration of the Italian Empire and the question of Austrian foreign policy. During Italy's war in Ethiopia, Hitler had taken no steps to end the period of cold relations sparked by the 1934 murderous putsch against then Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. While Germany had not adhered to the League sanctions policy, it did not increase its shipments of strategic supplies to make up for the losses owing to sanctions. Germany had also continued to send arms to Ethiopia's defenders. In short, Hitler was annoyed because Mussolini refused to play the rôle as the Mediterranean counter-balance to France in which Hitler had cast him.²⁷ Nevertheless, after the end of

²⁶ DDI, 8, IV, #520, Ciano to Galli (Ankara), Grandi, Cerruti, Rosso (Washington), Boscarelli (Athens), Viola (Belgrade), 14 July 1936, p. 580. For the various replies, see: #532, Boscarelli to Ciano, 15 July 1936, p. 595; #550, Viola to Ciano, 17 July 1936, p. 617; #588, Galli to Ciano, 22 July 1936, pp. 655-6. The Foreign Ministers all claimed that they had no need for any guarantee in light of the Italian declaration. For the British decision, see: FO 371, R4476/294/67, Ingram to Eden, 23 July 1936, Sargent Minute, 24 July 1936; R4492/294/67, Eden to Ingram, 22 July 1936.

²⁷ For more detail, see: Manfred Funke, *Sanktionen und Kanonen: Hitler, Mussolini und der internationale Abessinienkonflikt 1934-36*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971; *idem*, "Le relazioni italo-tedesche al momento del conflitto etiopico e dello sanzioni della società della nazioni." *Storia*

the conflict, with Germany facing the potential repercussions of the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the offer of recognition of the Italian conquest was a gesture which was a unique opportunity for Germany. Nazi Germany did not have the difficulty of hostile public opinion and League entanglements as did France and Britain, so recognition of Italy's conquest cost the German government nothing. Consequently, von Hassell told Ciano that Hitler was prepared to deal with the question of recognition whenever Mussolini thought the time was ripe, and that, in addition, the Führer would not expect any reciprocal gesture.²⁸

The other, more important, potential obstacle was the delicate question of Austria's position between Germany and Italy. During the height of the tension with the West regarding the war in Ethiopia, Mussolini had astonished German Ambassador von Hassell by suggesting an Austro-German agreement "which would in practice bring Austria into Germany's wake, so that she could pursue no other foreign policy than one parallel with Germany. If Austria, as a formally quite independent state, were thus in practice to become a German satellite, [Mussolini] would have no objection."²⁹ German officials had treated this *démarche* with extreme scepticism, but after repeatedly sounding Mussolini on the point, eventually accepted this sea change in Italian policy. In response to German probing, Mussolini had also confirmed that he considered the Stresa Front "dead," and that he would take no part in action by Britain and France in the possible

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contemporanea. 2.3 (1971), pp. 475-493; and Giovanni Bucciante, "Hitler, Mussolini e il conflitto italo-etiopeo," *Il Politico*. 37 (1972), pp. 415-28.

²⁸ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Germania, 29 June 1936. See also GAB #25, Appunto per il Duce. 18 June 1936, and 29 June 1936.

²⁹ DGFP, C, IV, # 485, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 7 January 1936, pp. 974-7.

event of a German breach of the Locarno Treaty.³⁰ Hitler had eventually sent Hans Frank, a Minister without Portfolio, to carry a personal message to Mussolini, assuring the Duce of Hitler's sympathy regarding the Ethiopian war and the Italian struggle against both bolshevism and the democracies.³¹ Mussolini had fulfilled his promise to place pressure on the Austrian government to come to an agreement with Germany. In essence, Mussolini had implied that if Chancellor von Schuschnigg resisted German advances, then Austria would find itself isolated from all outside support.³² Mussolini had greeted the resulting accord, signed on 11 July 1936, with great pleasure, as it removed "the only point of friction between Italy and Germany."³³ By the middle of July, therefore, Mussolini had taken substantive steps to reach a genuine rapprochement with Germany, while his relations with the West, and with France in particular, were plagued with mistrust and ill will. Events over the following three months would find Mussolini on a course of new expansion of Italian power in the Mediterranean and new conflicts with Britain and France, while at the same time he drew ever closer to the Germany camp.

From mid-July to the end of October, international relations in Europe were driven by two multilateral questions: the negotiations for a new Locarno, and, more importantly,

³⁰ *DGFP, C, IV*, # 579, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 22 February 1936, p. 1170. This declaration was especially important owing to Hitler's imminent remilitarization of the Rhineland.

³¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe 1933-36*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970, pp. 266-7.

³² *DDI*, 8, *IV*, #192, Colloquio del Mussolini con Schuschnigg, 5 June 1936, pp. 240-3.

³³ ASMAE, GAB 22, Aloisi appunto sul colloquio di Mussolini con von Hassell, 11 July 1936. For more detail, see Pietro Pastorelli, "L'Italia e l'accordo austro-tedesco dell'11 luglio 1936." *Annali dell'istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*. 15 (1989), pp. 395-410.

the Spanish Civil War. Still, there were interesting under-currents in bilateral relations between Italy and various powers, particularly regarding Ethiopia. Although Ciano refused to issue an ultimatum for the removal of the French and British Legations, during July Mussolini and Ciano directed Viceroy Graziani's harassment of the British and French Ministers remaining in Addis Ababa. De Chambrun complained that Graziani had summoned French Minister Bodard and had berated Bodard as an "enemy of Italy." The Viceroy also prohibited French radio broadcasts, as he argued that they spread alarmist news reports.³⁴ Graziani interfered with the British Minister's use of the Legation's telegraph route in direct violation of normal international protocol. A week after requiring the Legation to use Italian telegraphic services, he prohibited the use of cyphers; all British traffic, therefore, would have to go *en clair*. Next, he arbitrarily arrested one of the British Legation's interpreters. Finally, Graziani sent Italian *Carabinieri* to enter the Legation compound in order to secure the wireless.³⁵ In short, Mussolini and Ciano sanctioned the open harassment of Britain's and France's diplomatic representatives in order to try to close the Legations. To the protests of these highly improper and extraordinary actions, Ciano replied merely replied churlishly that the French and British Legations would have to leave.³⁶ These poor relations with the Western powers over Ethiopia were in sharp contrast to Italy's relations with Germany. On 25 July 1936, Ambassador von Hassell

³⁴ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Francia, 11 July 1936.

³⁵ FO 371 20201, J6348/3957/1, Drummond to Eden, 15 July 1936, J6529/3957/1, Roberts to Eden.

³⁶ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 30 July 1936. For a similar demand to the French Ambassador, see UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Francia, 29 July 1936.

informed Ciano that Hitler had decided to change Germany's legation in Addis Ababa to a Consulate.³⁷

Italy also continued to work against British interests elsewhere. In August, British officials noted that Italy was then conducting espionage campaigns against Britain, particularly in Malta and Gibraltar. It was involved in supporting the Imam of Yemen in the Arabian peninsula to try to extend Italian influence at the expense of Britain there. Italy continued its propaganda campaigns against Britain in both Egypt and Palestine, producing "mendacious and violently anti-British" propaganda; Italian agents had also distributed funds to spark Arab disturbances.³⁸ Unknown to Whitehall, in September Mussolini also ordered Grandi to maintain his propaganda network established during the the Ethiopian war. It published extensive numbers of books, articles and other propaganda pieces, many of which played on Mussolini's *idées fixes*.³⁹ Regarding France, Mussolini could scarcely conceal his contempt. He said that France was "weak and old," and a "country in which cuisine had become a principle of the State." Its demographic decadence was "horrifying," as it lost some 2,000 people per week. He would not be interested in pursuing friendly relations with France until it solved its overwhelming

³⁷ ASMAE, GAB 25, Appunto per il Duce, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Germania, 25 July 1936.

³⁸ FO 371 20411, R5102/226/22, McDermott (Southern Department) Minute, 1 September 1936. See also, Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 40.

³⁹ NA, T586, r415, Grandi to Alfieri, 18 September 1936, f#006513-8. The entire list of papers, books, subventions to journalists and publishers runs to over 20 pages.

internal problems.⁴⁰ In short, Mussolini showed no inclination to deal with either Britain or France on an amicable basis. The difference between his level of hostility to the two Western democracies was that he still hoped to compel Britain to give concessions to Italy in order to isolate France.

Italy's continuing rapprochement with Germany and estrangement from the West is apparent in the larger issues of the proposed renewal of Locarno and the Spanish Civil War. The negotiations for a new five Power agreement to replace the Treaty of Locarno had their roots in Hitler's offer following the Nazi remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936. With sanctions in place, however, there was no realistic prospect of any substantive meetings involving Italian representatives. With the imminent removal of sanctions at the beginning of July, Belgian, French, and British statesmen began to discuss the possibility of bringing Italy back into a system of guarantees against potential German aggression. The task was enormously difficult as, despite Hitler's offer, Germany was unlikely to participate in an arrangement which would seriously limit its freedom of action. Any reconstruction of the Stresa Front also appeared to be out of the question.⁴¹ There were substantial differences between France and Britain as to the best way to proceed. Officials in Whitehall wanted to postpone any meetings, lest they give Italy and Germany common cause to prevent any effective result as, following the German-Austrian

⁴⁰ ASMAE, GAB 22, Resconte del colloquio tra il duce e Ministero Frank al Palazzo Venezia, 23 September 1936.

⁴¹ FO 371 19908, C4721/4/18, Eden to the Foreign Office, 1 July 1936.

agreement of 11 July, an Italo-German rapprochement appeared possible. The French government wanted to push ahead, whether or not Italy decided to attend.⁴²

Early soundings of the Italian attitude did not bode well. Ciano stalled for time, using the pretext that he could not foresee Italy taking part in any negotiations until sanctions and the lingering effects of Article 16 through the British guarantee to Greece, Turkey, and Yugoslavia had been removed; he said their continued presence “stigmatized” Italy.⁴³ More importantly, Ciano also stated that though no decision had been taken as yet, Italy would not likely take part in any talks unless German representatives were also present.⁴⁴ On 24 July, De Chambrun, speaking for the British and Belgian *Chargés d’Affaires*, told Ciano that Germany would receive an invitation to the proposed new round of talks and, as the Mediterranean Accords under Article 16 had lapsed, Italy had no reason to avoid new meetings.⁴⁵ The next day, von Hassell told Ciano that Germany would accept the invitation provided certain conditions were met. Germany would require parity with the other countries present and would only proceed if there were extensive diplomatic preparation for any actual conference.⁴⁶ The following week, Ciano met again

⁴² FO 371 19909, C5195/4/18, F.O. Memorandum, 14 July 1936, C5141/4/18, Vansittart Memorandum, 14 July 1936.

⁴³ FO 371 19908, C4977/4/18, Drummond to Eden, 7 July 1936. Drummond was reporting the results of an unofficial conversation between the French Ambassador and Ciano.

⁴⁴ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l’ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 11 July 1936.

⁴⁵ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l’ambasciatore di Francia, e gli incaricati d’affari di Gran Bretagna e di Belgio, 24 July 1936.

⁴⁶ ASMAE, GAB 25, Appunto per il Duce, UC 84, Colloquio con l’ambasciatore di Germania, 25 July 1936.

with von Hassell. Ciano said that Italy was in complete accord with Germany regarding the obvious delaying tactic of the need for “careful diplomatic preparation.”⁴⁷ Constantin von Neurath, the German Foreign Minister, told Bernardo Attolico, Italy’s Ambassador in Berlin, that Hitler wanted to work in “full accord with Italy.” Given these tactics, von Neurath believed that they should be able to delay any meetings until late October. Both Foreign Ministers agreed that any new agreement should bear little relation to the old one, as any kind of mutual assistance pact, the heart of the original Locarno, would be damaging to Italy and Germany.⁴⁸ Essentially, by the end of July, Italy had established “100% accord” with Germany in response to the proposed new Locarno, as neither power wanted discussion of substantive issues at any putative conference.⁴⁹

The Spanish Civil War, which erupted on 15 July 1936, was the other major issue that helped Germany and Italy to develop closer relations. Mussolini initially resisted intervening in the generals’ rebellion against the Republican government. Despite long standing Italian contacts with Spanish anti-republicans and the March 1934 agreement with a group of Spanish monarchists, he had refused Franco’s initial requests for aid.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ He objected to one aspect of German policy. Germany wanted to accept a leadership rôle for Britain, as Hitler’s original offer in March had established. Ciano argued that no nation should have primacy. His intercession worked, and Germany dropped that specific part of its policy. *DGFP, C, IV*, #487, #488, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 31 July 1936, pp. 849-51, pp. 851-2. See also p. 852n6.

⁴⁸ *DDI, 8, IV*, #662, Attolico to Ciano, 31 July 1936.

⁴⁹ Ciano quoted in *DDF, II, III*, #256, De Chambrun to Delbos, 26 October 1936, pp. 625-6.

⁵⁰ ASMAE, Carte Lancelotti, Ufficio di Spagna [hereafter US] 1, Appunto per il Duce, 31 March 1934. For more information on the discussions and the level of Italian aid, see: John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 50-54.

Franco needed to move some 15,000 troops from Spanish Morocco across the Straits to Spain. As most of the Spanish Navy had remained loyal to the republic, he needed transport planes to do so. Franco's increasingly desperate appeals for planes accused Mussolini of "political myopia" for his failure "to save Spain from bolshevism."⁵¹ On 23 July 1936, Cerruti informed Ciano that the French Popular Front government had decided to send twenty-five Potez 54 bombers and 20,000 bombs to the Spanish government. It was also considering requests for eight Schneider 75mm artillery pieces, eight Hotchkiss machine guns, and 1,000 rifles. The French government started shipping part of the order on the evening of 24 July, even though no contract had then been signed.⁵² It was only in response to France's intervention that an emissary from General Mola, the chief planner of the revolt, was able to convince Mussolini to send twelve Savoia s.81 planes to Franco, although Ciano demanded cash in advance. The planes eventually left on 27 July. Although only nine actually reached Franco's forces, they were an essential factor in early Nationalist successes in the war.⁵³

⁵¹ For the list of appeals, see: *DDI*, 8, *IV*, #570, #578, #592, Luccardi (Tangiers) to Ministero della Guerra, 20, 21, 23 July 1936, pp. 640, 647, 659-60, 663; #599; De Rossi (Tangiers) to Ciano, 23 July 1936, pp. 664-5. Franco also sent personal representatives to Mussolini, but il Duce refused the appeals in person. Coverdale, pp. 70-2.

⁵² *DDI*, 8, *IV*, #598, #601, Cerruti to Ciano, 23 July 1936, p. 664, 669-70. See also NA, T586, r415, signature illegible to De Peppo, 28 August 1936.

⁵³ Coverdale, pp. 73-4. De Felice, *Lo Stato totalitario*, p. 366. See also *DDI*, 8, *IV*, #611, #630, Ciano to De Rossi, 24, 27 July 1936. The operation was very hastily laid on. The two planes which crash-landed in French Morocco had Italian markings visible through a sloppily applied coat of paint.

Mussolini himself made no clear statement at the time as to his motives for intervention. The discussion of any ideological component in Italy's initial intervention has been clouded by the fact that there was little threat of an actual communist take-over in July 1936.⁵⁴ Mussolini, of course, did not place such a narrow definition on his generic use of the term 'bolshevism.' He detested precisely the kind of leftism that the Spanish Republican government represented. Essentially, in Mussolini's view, it did not matter whether the particular brand of leftism was democratic, communist, socialist, or anarchist; all carried the threat of introducing bolshevism into Spain and even beyond Spain into other countries in Western Europe.⁵⁵ In addition, the intervention of the French Popular Front government promised the extension of French influence even further over its sister Popular Front government in Madrid. Mussolini hoped that a Nationalist victory would allow him greater leverage over France, as an unfriendly Spain would require France to guard the Pyrenees frontier and would threaten French imperial communications. It is important to note, however, that Mussolini's initial decision to intervene was made independently of German influence, and that it was at a very low level of involvement.

In early August, there were two new outside initiatives regarding the civil war. On 1 August, Admiral Canaris, the head of the German armed forces intelligence office, the *Abwehr*, asked his Italian counterpart, General Roatta, head of the *Servizio Informazioni Militari*, for a meeting, which took place on 4 August. Canaris said that Germany had sent four Junkers transport planes, plus one ship carrying various small arms to the insurgents. He hoped that the Italian government could satisfy Franco's urgent demand for fuel; would the Italians send a ship? The German Air Ministry also wanted to know if it could

⁵⁴ Coverdale, pp. 78-9.

⁵⁵ De Felice, *Lo Stato totalitario*, pp. 369-70.

stage planes through Italian air fields to reach Nationalist forces in Spain. Roatta reserved any decision until he could speak with Mussolini, but replied three days later that Mussolini had agreed to the German requests.⁵⁶

At another meeting later in August, Canaris and Roatta detailed the respective levels of support for Spanish Nationalists. They agreed on several issues to co-ordinate their support for Franco, such as consultation over sending specialists and whether or not to allow their specialists to fight in battle. Both sides pledged that they would not demand territorial concessions from Spain.⁵⁷ Roatta and Canaris also discussed the advisability of creating and sustaining a fleet for Franco's forces. Perhaps most importantly, they decided to send a joint mission to Franco to determine appropriate levels of arms shipments and use of advisors, to advise Franco on the war against the "reds," and to guarantee Italy's and Germany's political, economic, and military interests.⁵⁸ Ciano met with Canaris the

⁵⁶ *DDI*, 8, IV, #685, Roatta to the Gabinetto, 5 August 1936, p. 751-2, p. 752n1.

⁵⁷ In fact, Ciano hoped to gain the Balearic islands or the concession of a permanent base there.

⁵⁸ The total list of German and Italian arms to Spain as of 28 August 1936 reads as follows: Germany; twenty-six Junker bombers with equipment, fifteen Heinkel fighters without equipment, twenty anti-aircraft guns and machine guns, fifty machine guns, 8,000 rifles, various bombs and munitions, and 5,000 gas masks, and from Italy; twelve AA 20mm cannons plus 96,000 rounds, 20,000 masks, five armoured cars plus equipment, 100,000 rounds for the mod. 35 machine gun, forty St. Etienne machine guns plus 40,000 rounds, twelve bombers with equipment, twenty-seven fighters with equipment, 20,000 2kg bombs, 2,000 50, 100, or 250kg bombs, 400 tonnes of fuel plus 300 tonnes shipped for the Reich, and eleven tonnes of oil. ASMAE, UC 44, US 1, *Proposte e richieste recate da ammiraglio Canaris il 28 agosto 1936 a nome del governo tedesco*, 28 August 1936.

same day and confirmed the decisions.⁵⁹ Essentially, Italian and German officials had decided to co-ordinate closely their intervention in the Spanish Civil War.

While Germany and Italy began a slow crescendo in their intervention, the Blum Cabinet announced in early August that France had reversed its policy regarding the supply of arms to Spain, and that it hoped to establish instead an international arms embargo.⁶⁰ On 3 August, De Chambrun called on Ciano to give him the French government's appeal for a non-intervention agreement in Spain. Ciano reserved his answer, as Mussolini was not then in Rome. He also lied to De Chambrun regarding the two Italian planes which had landed in French territory; Ciano disclaimed any knowledge of their mission.⁶¹ Upon his return to Rome, Mussolini told Ciano that he should adhere

⁵⁹ DDI, 8, IV, #819, Colloquio tra Ciano e Canaris, 28 August 1936.

⁶⁰ For but two examples of the debate over Blum's decision, see: David Carlton, "Eden, Blum and the Origins of Non-intervention." *Journal of Contemporary History*. 6.3 (1971) pp. 44-55; M.D. Gallagher, "Leon Blum and the Spanish Civil War." *Journal of Contemporary History*. 6.3 (1971) pp. 56-64. Carlton argues that Blum determined his policy owing primarily to French domestic concerns. Gallagher takes the more traditional line that Blum subordinated French policy to that of Britain. What most of the debate ignores, however, is that France did not even remotely adhere to the non-intervention agreement until 1938, when Edouard Daladier, then Premier, closed the border. In the meantime, as Blum later acknowledged, France gave arms to Spain through a system in which it "organized arms smuggling almost officially." Gallagher, p. 64. For more detail on the internal debate and politics of the Popular Front, see Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France Defending Democracy, 1934-1938*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. At the time it was negotiating the proposal, France was shipping Potez bombers to Spain. DDI, 8, IV #714, Bossi (Barcellona) to Ciano, 11 August 1936, p. 786.

⁶¹ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Francia, 3 August 1936.

“in principle” to the proposal. Ciano should inquire, however, whether the moral solidarity, including public demonstrations, press campaigns, monetary suscriptions and the like would also be prohibited under any agreement. He should also ask if the French plan would cover only government aid. If so, it would allow British or French private firms to continue to supply aid to the government forces. Finally, Mussolini wanted to know whether or not there would be any kind of direct observation or control.⁶²

These early communications spelled out the problem that would plague the non-intervention committee throughout its dubious existence. France wanted to prohibit Italian and German direct governmental aid to Franco, while maintaining a free hand for French civilians and businesses to give a wide array of aid to the government side. Ciano insisted repeatedly that any realistic agreement would have to prohibit all foreign aid, especially the raising of money and of volunteers that already was occurring. Further, Ciano demanded that any agreement would have to include the Soviet Union, which, he argued, was already underwriting the government in Madrid.⁶³ In a formal counter-proposal, Ciano said that Italy would participate provided any agreement banned all forms of direct *and* indirect aid, including arms, munitions, war matériel, and civilian planes and ships, plus public subscriptions and volunteers. Any agreement would have to include a specific definition of ‘indirect aid.’ Finally, Ciano argued that any accord would have to include Great Britain, France, Portugal, Germany, and the Soviet Union.⁶⁴

Four days later, however, Ciano decided to accept the French proposal without insisting on all of his previous conditions. He arrived at that decision after the German

⁶² *DDI*, 8, IV, #683, Mussolini to Ciano, 5 August 1936, pp. 749-750.

⁶³ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l’ambasciatore di Francia, 10, 14 August, 1936.

⁶⁴ *DDI*, 8, IV, #781, Ciano to De Chambrun, 21 August 1936, p. 857.

government decided to accept the French proposal. Still, Ciano accepted only in order to avoid being blamed for the failure of the negotiations and to ensure continued French neutrality. Even if the Blum Cabinet implemented the non-intervention agreement, Ciano believed that the perceived betrayal of the Spanish Popular Front would help to undermine Blum's government, as its radical supporters might turn against it.⁶⁵ He told his liaison with Franco that Italy would insist on the eventual acceptance of its views on subscriptions and volunteers and would wait for the other states to adhere. At that point, then Italy would reconsider its position. In the meantime, Germany and Italy both would keep supplying arms to the Spanish insurgents.⁶⁶ Accordingly, Ciano gave his formal acceptance of the proposal to De Chambrun on 29 August. At the end of August, therefore, Germany and Italy had established tight co-operation on both their intervention in Spain as well as their resistance to the resurrection of Locarno. Italy was engaged in something close to a proxy war with France in Spain, and circumstances offered Mussolini the opportunity to carry out a thorough rapprochement with Germany.⁶⁷

In a marked contrast, Italy's confrontation with France would escalate in August as Italy struck at France's imperial communications. On 16 August, some 10,000 Republican forces landed on Majorca in an attempt to retake it from the primarily Falangist defenders. In response to a request from the local Falange leader on the island of Majorca for a military advisor, Mussolini sent Major Arconovaldo Bonaccorsi, a former

⁶⁵ ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 7 September 1936.

⁶⁶ *DDI*, 8, IV, #793, Magistrati (Berlin) to Ciano, 24 August 1936, pp. 864-5, #801, Ciano to De Rossi (Tangiers), 25 August 1936, pp. 872-3.

⁶⁷ *DDI*, 8, IV, #625, Magistrati to Ciano, 25 August 1936, pp. 700-2.

Fascist *squadrista*, who would become known as Conte Rossi.⁶⁸ Mussolini's interest in the Balearic islands lay in the fact that they straddled the main routes between France's North African colonies and its Mediterranean ports. In wartime, French planners expected to move roughly one million soldiers over those routes to metropolitan France. If Italy could interdict that troop movement, then its position in the Mediterranean would be strengthened by the considerable weakening of that of France. In sending Bonaccorsi, an adventurer who could easily be disowned, Mussolini took a small risk that could pay great dividends. Bonaccorsi arrived on Majorca on 26 August. Dressed in a black Fascist uniform and bedecked with pistols, hand grenades, and daggers, he set out to stiffen the defences of the dispirited Nationalist forces. Owing in part to Bonaccorsi's élan, and in part to the incompetence and timidity of the Republican invaders, he was able to convince the commander of the Republican troops to evacuate the bridgehead, despite the Republican's roughly six to one superiority in troops. Undoubtedly Conte Rossi had saved Majorca, even though he never had more than 250 Italians fighting with him.⁶⁹

Italian possession of the Balearics eventually became an international issue. The obvious threat to France's imperial communications was too great to ignore. Further,

⁶⁸ De Felice, *Lo Stato totalitario*, p. 368. Mussolini had already made plans to send a small scale Italian air mission of nine planes and three anti-aircraft batteries in exchange for 3,000,000 lire. The first planes did not arrive until 19 August. Coverdale, pp.130-3.

⁶⁹ Bonaccorsi was also exceedingly brutal in carrying out reprisals in Majorca after the Italian and Nationalist victory. He executed some 3,000 Majorcans, most of whom were killed without trial. Italian authorities did not seem particularly concerned with Bonaccorsi's murderous activities. Coverdale, pp. 128-9, 130-139.

Italian planes based in Majorca could strike any of France's Mediterranean ports.⁷⁰ Eventually, Ciano yielded to diplomatic pressure from France and Britain and declared that Italy would observe the territorial integrity of Spain.⁷¹ Still, Ciano's assurances did not allay French fears, for their vital strategic interests were undoubtedly affected. Potentially more seriously, Bonaccorsi had reported that among those killed in the fighting at Port Christo were French cadavers, meaning that Italian and French citizens were ranged in combat with each other as early as August.⁷² Despite his public assurances that Italy had no intention of remaining in the Balearics after the end of the Civil War, Ciano clearly hoped to do so. He told Colonel-General Göring that Italy wanted a naval base as a permanent territorial concession from Spain. If Republican forces won the war, there would be little doubt that Italy would try to maintain its control over the Balearics.⁷³ Italian policy seemed to be striking at France's Mediterranean position.

There was one other area in August where Italy and Germany reached a *modus vivendi*. German economic penetration in the Balkans worried Attolico, the Italian Ambassador in Rome. Both Italy and Germany had interests in the region, with Italy supporting Hungarian revisionism against the Trianon Treaty and sponsoring the terrorist Ustaša to destabilize Yugoslavia. The 1934 Rome Protocols established tripartite political consultation between Austria, Hungary and Italy, and also provided for economic co-operation among the three countries. Concluded as a bulwark against German economic and political influence in the Balkans, Mussolini initially believed that the agreement

⁷⁰ DDF, II, III, #10, Note de l'État-Major général de la Marine, 20 November 1936, pp. 11-3.

⁷¹ DDF, II, III, #40, Corbin to Delbos, 26 November 1936, p. 55.

⁷² DDI, 8, IV, #760, De Rossi to Ciano, 20 August 1936, p. 827.

⁷³ DGFP, C, IV, #600, Mackensen (Budapest) to von Neurath, 14 October 1936, pp. 1083-5.

secured the Italian position in the Balkans, but German influence continued to grow. In light of the increased German economic interest in the Danube basin, Attolico thought that direct competition between them would be very damaging. He argued that it would be wise for Italy to work towards some kind of restoration of friendly relations with Yugoslavia in order to facilitate Italian commercial interests in the Danubian Basin. Mussolini concurred.⁷⁴ Von Neurath responded reasonably well to Italian suggestions for economic co-operation. He suggested that Italy work toward bilateral treaties which had worked for Germany with Bulgaria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and even Rumania. He thought that Italy could sign basic commercial agreements which then could become treaties of preference in the future. Finally, he suggested that Italy and Germany should not attempt to delimit "geographical sheres of influence," as those would alienate the countries in the region. Instead, Germany and Italy should co-operate in negotiating agreements with third party states.⁷⁵ Accordingly, Italy began negotiations toward a commercial agreement with Yugoslavia, which was eventually signed on 2 October 1936, and which paved the way for the later Italo-Yugoslav political accord in 1937.⁷⁶

During September and October, Italy and Germany strengthened their ties still further. In London, where the non-intervention committe was meeting, Grandi worked closely with Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador, to scuttle any effective limits on Italian and German intervention in Spain. Grandi told the committee at its second meeting on 14 September that Italy was prepared to adhere to an arms embargo. He also ensured that any previous violations prior to the accord would be outside its scope. At a

⁷⁴ *DDI* 8, IV, #782, Attolico to Ciano, 21 August 1936, pp. 781-2.

⁷⁵ *DGFP*, C, IV, #523, vonNeurath to von Hassell, 31 August 1936, pp. 936-42.

⁷⁶ NA, T586, r1291, Ufficio V, Jugoslavia, Situazione politica nel 1936. no ff#.

sub-committee meeting a week later, Grandi insisted that any accord would have to give equal weight to indirect intervention as it did to direct intervention. He said that the committee would have to prohibit the following: the recruitment of volunteers, whether by governments or individuals; the presence in Spain of “political agitators;” and both public and private financial aid. Grandi was successful in convincing the sub-committee to consider indirect intervention, over Soviet objections for obvious reasons, thus ensuring that its work would proceed at a glacial pace. Throughout the month of meetings, Grandi and his Soviet counterpart repeatedly denounced the others’ alleged violations.⁷⁷ More importantly, Grandi worked in virtual lockstep with von Ribbentrop in delaying the various committees’ work. German and Italian policy toward the non-intervention accord was nearly identical.⁷⁸

Given the great similarities between Italian and German policies regarding Locarno and Spain, it was not surprising that both desired a more formal arrangement. On 23 September, Hans Frank met with Mussolini at the Palazzo Venezia. Frank carried a personal message from Hitler extending an invitation to Ciano to visit Berlin. In a rambling, sometimes aimless, discussion, Frank and Mussolini noted the similarity of Italian and German views regarding several issues. The Duce offered his support for Germany’s claims for the restoration of German colonies. He said that Germans, like Italians, were a people “without living space,” though he fully expected that England would prove obdurate in redistributing colonial holdings; Mussolini also offered the

⁷⁷ ASMAE, SAP - Spagna - B. 10, Grandi to Ciano, 9, 14, 19, 23, September 1936.

⁷⁸ ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 11 September 1936. See also, for example, *DGFP, D, III, #85*, Woermann (Rome) to the Foreign Ministry, 22 September 1936, p. 93.

information that Anglo-Italian relations were bad and unlikely to improve. Given France's internal disarray, Italy could find no common policy with the Popular Front government.⁷⁹

In early October, Ciano agreed that he would go to Berlin later in that month. The agenda for that conference and the secret protocol officially approved there show the extent of German and Italian co-ordination of policies.⁸⁰ The protocol covered the following issues: co-ordination of resistance to the proposed five power conference to renew the Locarno Treaty, recognition of Franco upon his occupation of Madrid, German recognition of Italy's conquest in Ethiopia, common attitude towards potential Italian withdrawal from the League of Nations, Italy's support for Germany's demands for colonial restoration and raw materials, and an agreement on economic co-operation in the Danube basin.⁸¹ Ciano also wanted to make a public statement on a common attitude toward defence against communism and a declaration of the concept of Italo-German "parallelism in action." Both men agreed that the war in Spain showed their common struggle against bolshevism. That said, there were some minor differences between the powers. Though they shared a common resistance to the five power pact, they had different tactics in mind in how to doom any conference. Though both were making approaches to Japan, Germany had decided to negotiate a different set of agreements with Japan, while Italy was more willing to recognize Manchukuo. Finally, although Germany

⁷⁹ ASMAE, GAB 22, UC 84, Resconto del colloquio tra il Duce e il Ministro Frank, 23 September 1936.

⁸⁰ For a copy of the protocol, see: ASMAE, UC 44, Protocolli di Berlino del 23 ottobre 1936, 23 October 1936; also *DGFP, C, V*, #624, German-Italian Protocol, 23 October 1936, pp. 1136-8.

⁸¹ During a meeting with von Hassell Mussolini insisted on rejecting the five power pact, as it was backed by Britain, which was "to a remarkably large extent dominated by Jewish influence." *DGFP, C, V*, #572, von Hassell to von Neurath, 6 October 1936, pp. 1041-5.

and Italy had agreed to co-operate at some level in economic expansion in the Danube basin, Germany did not allow any real limits on its ambitions in the region.⁸²

Ciano arrived in Berlin on 20 October and met von Neurath the next day. In a wide ranging discussion Ciano and von Neurath covered many of the points of the protocols to be signed. In addition, they spoke of Britain's "*policy of encirclement against Italy*."⁸³ Ciano referred to certain documents that Mussolini had ordered turned over to the Führer which showed Britain's unfavourable intentions toward Germany. Grandi had procured the documents in London; they were a collection of reports and telegrams which discussed in frank terms the British view on the perceived Nazi expansion of power. In another anti-British vein, von Neurath emphasized that Italy should try to establish better relations with Yugoslavia, as it would have the double advantage of "*attaching Yugoslavia to the anti-communist bloc and subtracting it from the British camp*." In Ciano's discussion with Hitler three days later at Berchtesgaden, both men rubbish British policy and British statesmen. They also emphasized their common heroic defence against bolshevism in Spain. Hyperbole aside, they essentially rehashed the various points of agreement in the secret protocol.⁸⁴

Though Ciano and von Neurath did not negotiate any kind of strict alliance, Italy's relations with Germany were of an entirely different character than those with any other

⁸² DGFP, C, V, #588, von Neurath Memorandum, 12 October 1936, p. 1065, #593, von Hassell to von Neurath, 13 October 1936, pp. 1072-3.

⁸³ Mussolini added the emphasis. ASMAE, UC 2, Resconto del primo colloquio Ciano-von Neurath, 21 October 1936. See also DGFP, C, V, #618, von Neurath Memorandum, 21 October 1936, pp. 1125-30.

⁸⁴ Mussolini added the emphasis. UC 44, UC 84, Colloquio del Ministro Ciano col Führer, 24 October 1936.

nation. Mussolini did not desire and was not pursuing a policy of equidistance; he had moved Italy into a partnership with Germany in order to expand Italian power at the risk of confrontation with the Western democracies, especially France. Mussolini made this policy explicit in his 1 November speech in Milan which publicly announced the Rome-Berlin Axis. He denounced the League of Nations as, in Mussolini's view, it was based on the "absurdity" of equality among nations, which served only to confine "a virile people." He condemned France for allowing sanctions to remain in force for almost two months after the occupation of Addis Ababa and for allowing the Ethiopian representative to appear at the Geneva League meetings. Regarding Yugoslavia, he noted that there was the possibility of genuine friendship between Italy and that country on the basis of spiritual, political, and economic ties. Ciano's meetings in Berlin created an "axis around which can co-operate all the European states." That said, however, Italy and Germany would fight their common enemy, bolshevism, against which they had sacrificed much blood and won many victories. Finally, Mussolini said that democracy was the "antithesis" of Fascism. Turning to grand strategy, he spoke to his potential British listeners, saying that for Britain, the Mediterranean Sea was "a road, one of many roads, or rather a short cut with which the British Empire reaches more rapidly its peripheral territories If for others the Mediterranean is a road, for us Italians it is life." Mussolini demanded that the British Empire accommodate itself to Italy's parity of rights in the Mediterranean, preferably through a comprehensive bilateral agreement.⁸⁵ Mussolini's penchant for grand, sweeping phrases makes it easy to dismiss much of this speech as hyperbole.⁸⁶ What is interesting

⁸⁵ *OO, XXVIII*, 1 November 1936, pp. 67-72

⁸⁶ Sir Robert Vansittart, for example, called the speech "flapdoodle." FO 371 19914, C7824/4/18, Vansittart Minute, 4 November 1936.

here, however, is how closely the speech represents Italy's actual policy. Mussolini stressed rapprochement with Germany and Jugoslavia, the need for extension of Italy's power and influence in the Mediterranean, a bilateral agreement with Britain that recognized Italy's growing power, and the complete exclusion of France from the equation. Mussolini's policy was in no way equidistant between Germany and the West.

While Ciano was preparing his trip to Berlin, there were two other events which would serve to alienate Mussolini even further from France: the impending retirement of De Chambrun and the increased Soviet involvement in the Spanish Civil War. De Chambrun was scheduled to retire as he reached age sixty in October 1936. The difficulty for France was that the Italians would likely demand credentials addressed to the King of Italy, Emperor of Ethiopia. In diplomatic parlance, that designation could imply both *de facto* and *de jure* recognition of Italy's conquest, which the Blum government was not prepared to do; in any event, its hands were tied by its loyalty to the League Covenant. Delbos instructed De Chambrun to inform Ciano that the Ambassador would leave his post at the end of October. Although De Chambrun offered to stay on, Delbos refused; if the Italians insisted on trying to achieve a backhanded recognition of the Empire, then Jules Blondel, the Chargé d'Affaires, would represent France in Rome. Mussolini replied through Ciano that he "would prefer to see France represented by a Chargé d'Affaires, more so than to admit a new Ambassador who would be accredited only to the King." What was galling to the French government was that Italy had already accepted the

credentials of a new United States' Ambassador made out only to the King of Italy.⁸⁷ Neither side would compromise, and De Chambrun left at the end of the month.⁸⁸

More seriously, Stalin decided in September to carry out a major intervention in the Spanish Civil War. The republic faced imminent defeat, as Franco appeared to be close to occupying Madrid. Stalin decided to work on two fronts. He would send large quantities of war matériel to government held ports, and he would recruit "an international army for use in Spain."⁸⁹ During the latter half of September, Italian intelligence sources counted some twenty-seven Soviet shipments reaching Spain. They unloaded roughly seventy-five modern fighters, more than a hundred trucks, dozens of artillery pieces, and some one hundred T26 tanks, which were then likely the best in the world, plus thousands of military advisors and thousands of tons of ammunition, rifles, explosives, and diesel and aviation fuel. Total Soviet supplies, in broad terms, equalled or exceeded those of

⁸⁷ DDF, II, III, #318, #329, De Chambrun to Delbos, 7, 9 October 1936, pp. 476, 491. #340, Delbos to De Chambrun, 13 October 1936, pp. 506-7.

⁸⁸ William Shorrock over-emphasizes the importance of the French decision. He blamed France entirely for the impasse, as Delbos ignored "all good sense." In his view, Delbos sent the Italians the signal that the foreign policy of Laval was dead by insisting on a purely technical point. Shorrock, p. 192. Of course, this comment raises the question that if the point were a mere technicality, why did Ciano and Mussolini insist on treating France and the United States differently? The likely answer is that they did want France to confront the question of recognition of Italy's conquest. The fault, therefore, lay at least equally with Italy, and likely more so, as il Duce did not then value good relations with a France he viewed as decadent.

⁸⁹ R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982, p. 176.

Germany and Italy combined.⁹⁰ These weapons, plus those from France, helped to arm government forces, but also supplied the back-bone of the war matériel to equip the International Brigades which arrived in the front lines in early November. Though there has been much myth-making that the Brigades consisted primarily of volunteers fighting to preserve democracy against fascism, that claim is largely false. While there were some non-communists in the Brigades, particularly in the forces from North America, the Comintern army allocated all command positions to Communist Party members, and the Comintern paid for most of the volunteers to reach Spain. The Comintern also provided “direction and control” through its political commissars. The International Brigades clearly saved Madrid, and with it the republic, during several battles between 8 November 1936 and January 1937.⁹¹ The Spanish Civil War, which had begun owing to domestic reasons, had become an international ideological struggle.

Mussolini and Ciano both reacted strongly to the increasing ‘bolshevization’ of the war. In late October, after his triumphant visit to Berlin, Ciano proposed that Italy and Germany recognize Franco immediately. He still hoped for a quick victory, as the weight of red reinforcements had not then been felt. In case the fall of Madrid were delayed, however, Ciano thought that both countries should establish “open relations” with the insurgent government in Burgos. Finally, he informed the German Ambassador that Italy was sending two submarines to the Nationalist forces in order to try to interdict Soviet

⁹⁰ ASMAE, SAP - Spagna, Ciano to Grandi, 3 November 1936, US 30, Ministero di Guerra, Comando del Corpo di Stato Maggiore, Promemoria per il Sig. Capo Ufficio S del Ministero degli Esteri, 15 November 1937. FO 371 20586, W16391/9549/41, Major Napier (War Office) to St. C. Roberts, 23 November 1936.

⁹¹ Richardson, pp. 14-5, 31, 176-8.

shipping. Von Neurath demurred regarding the immediate recognition of Franco, as Hitler believed that it might cause Franco to delay the occupation of Madrid, and Ciano acquiesced at that time.⁹² Eventually, the Führer changed his mind, and Italy and Germany both agreed to recognize Franco's regime in Burgos as the official Spanish government on 18 November.⁹³

Also during November, the International Brigades halted the Spanish Nationalist forces' drive on Madrid. Mussolini became disenchanted with Franco's slow rate of progress, which the Duce blamed partly on the lack of offensive spirit of Franco's troops, and partly on the influx of Soviet arms and the Soviet-inspired International Brigades. On 27 November, he decided to send a division of Blackshirts to fight in Spain. Before he did so, however, he wanted assurances from Franco that Nationalist Spain would conduct its future foreign policy in "harmony" with Italy. Mussolini demanded that Nationalist Spain promise to build certain airports and to guarantee that it would not allow French troops to cross Spanish territory. Accordingly, Italian officials prepared a text, dated 28 November, for Franco to sign. It promised further Italian military aid until such time as Franco would be able to establish a secure Nationalist order. In exchange, Franco agreed not to allow transit of enemy troops without Italy's permission, to work to eliminate Article 16 of the League Covenant, to refuse to participate in any collective measures through the League, to give preferential treatment toward Italy in supplying raw materials, and, in

⁹² *DGFP, D, III*, #110, #111, von Hassell to von Neurath, 28, 29 October 1936, pp. 122, 122-3, #113, von Neurath to von Hassell, 30 October 1936, pp. 123-5.

⁹³ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe*, p. 295.

general, to co-operate with Italian foreign policy.⁹⁴ Officials in the Wilhelmstrasse, never keen on Hitler's intervention, saw the scope of the Italian agreement, which by its very nature precluded an equally wide-ranging German pact, as a pretext to require Italy to take the lead in Spain.⁹⁵

Consequently, Admiral Canaris, Mussolini, Ciano, and other officials held a meeting at the Palazzo Venezia on 6 December to determine future Axis policy. Faced with the augmentation of red military power, Mussolini thought that it was time to prepare to send actual military units which would serve as a separate foreign legion, to increase the numbers of specialists and advisors, to send German and Italian instructors to train Franco's troops, and to establish a combined Italo-German General Staff. In addition, he argued that Germany and Italy should take the war to sea, and attempt to blockade red ports through aviation and submarine units. He was prepared to increase the number of Italian submarines he would give to Franco's forces from two to eight. Mussolini believed that Germany and Italy should "divide the work." Canaris agreed with the Duce's proposed course of action, but said that Germany would be unlikely to send units of ground troops. Germany would, however, provide forty more Junkers bombers and 4,800 aviation specialists. Italy, for its part, would send more C.R. 32 and R.O. 37 fighters. Finally, Admiral Cavagnari torpedoed, so to speak, Mussolini's scheme to interdict shipping in Spanish territorial waters; he emphasized the difficulty of identifying ships and

⁹⁴ *DGFP, D, III*, #130, #133, von Hassell to von Neurath, 27, 28 November 1936, pp. 139-40, 143-4. For the published text of the proposed agreement, see #137, von Hassell to von Neurath, 1 December 1936.

⁹⁵ *DGFP, D, III*, #142, von Neurath to von Hassell, 5 December 1936, pp. 152-3. Eventually, Hitler decided not to send units of ground troops, while Italy would ultimately send thousands. See also Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe*, pp. 296-7.

the likely international backlash to Italian submarine attacks.⁹⁶ Still, with the Italian decision to send *Regio Esercito* military units, Mussolini had decided to escalate Italian participation in the war to a higher level.

In addition to their ever closer ties to Germany, Mussolini and Ciano also tried in the latter half of 1936 to reach a rapprochement with Britain's chief Asian rival, Japan. Italy had until 1936 supported the Chinese nationalist government in its defence against both Japanese aggression and the Chinese Communist insurgency. Italian and Chinese relations had been strong up until the time of sanctions. Chiang Kai-Shek had adhered to sanctions much more strictly than Mussolini had expected, as the Chinese dictator hoped to be able to use the precedent of sanctions against the Japanese. Still, after sanctions had obviously failed, relations had returned to normal. As Mussolini had promised, the Italian military air and naval missions to the Kuomintang returned to work helping to defend the Nationalist army against the Japanese invaders and communist insurgents. Italy had also developed a strong commercial position in China.⁹⁷ Simultaneously, Britain and the United States both seemed unwilling to challenge Japanese aggression in Northern China, suggesting that British power was over-strained by the confrontation with Italy. Furthermore, the Soviet Union had increased its arms shipments to the Chinese communists; this change in policy threatened the power of the Chinese Nationalists.⁹⁸ The Japanese "intrepid resistance" in the face of opposition from the League of Nations

⁹⁶ ASMAE, UC 44, US 1, Verbale della riunione a Palazzo Venezia del 6 Dicembre 1936, 6 December 1936.

⁹⁷ NA, T586, r1289, Ufficio V, Cina 1936, f#107185.

⁹⁸ Valdo Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera Italiana, 1935-41*. Roma: Giuffrè Editore, 1983, pp. 115, 119.

pleased Mussolini, and demonstrated the vitality of the Japanese in the face of the “old” British Empire.⁹⁹ According to Giacinto Auriti, Italy’s Ambassador in Tokyo, despite Japanese domestic political and industrial problems, its population was fiercely patriotic and had “the need and the power to struggle and to expand.” Accordingly, Japan would tie up British and Soviet resources in the Far East, which would “*diminish their power and liberty of action in Europe.*”¹⁰⁰ The time seemed ripe, therefore, for Mussolini to exploit the comparative isolation of Japan.

During April through June 1936, diplomats explored the possibilities of mutual recognition of the Italian Empire and the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. The Japanese desire not to offend Britain and Italy’s missions in China complicated the discussions, but the common interests between Italy and Japan was too great to ignore. On 19 July 1936, Ciano promised Japanese Ambassador Sugimara Yotaro that Italy would reconsider its policy which had supplied the Chinese Nationalist army with most of its air power, as Japan’s anti-bolshevik struggle took precedence.¹⁰¹ Eventually, in October, Ciano and Sugimara worked out the details of *de facto* recognition of the two countries’ mutual conquests, plus an agreement on future *de jure* recognition. After the publication of the German-Japanese anti-Comintern Pact of 23 October 1936, Ciano and Japanese Foreign Minister Arita Hachirō reached agreement on the *de jure* recognition of the status on Manchukuo and Ethiopia.¹⁰² In November, Ciano authorized Ambassador Auriti to

⁹⁹ NA, T586, r1289, Ufficio V, Giappone 1936, f#107386

¹⁰⁰ Mussolini added the emphasis. *DDI*, 8, IV, #428, Auriti to Ciano, 2 July 1936, pp. 487-91.

¹⁰¹ GAB 26, Appunto per il Duce, 19 July 1936.

¹⁰² ASMAE, Serie Affari Politici [hereafter SAP]- Giappone, Busta 13, 7,18, 20 November 1936, Auriti to Ciano. For an English language version of the anti-Comintern Pact, see: *DGFP*, C, V, #625, German-

pursue negotiations for a commercial accord with Japan. The accord would cover cultural and economic interests, but also common defence against bolshevism. Auriti believed that the accord would pave the way for a three way anti-Comintern Pact between Germany, Japan, and Italy.¹⁰³ The Japanese government saw these steps as primarily anti-bolshevik in nature, as Japan's main enemy was the Soviet Union. For Mussolini and Ciano, however, the impetus for the rapprochement with Japan came primarily from European affairs. The potential bloc of Germany, Japan, and Italy would create conditions where Italy could dictate terms to a British government which feared the loss of the Empire.¹⁰⁴

While Mussolini arranged with Germany the massively increased Italian involvement in Spain, he continued to try to separate France from England. Several senior British diplomats, including Vansittart and Drummond, could scarcely credit that Italy would permanently side with Germany. Vansittart wrote that "if we are reasonably polite to both we needn't be afraid that they will go into partnership against us."¹⁰⁵ In early

Japanese Exchange of Notes on the Occasion of the Initialling of the Agreement Against the Communist International, 23 October 1936, pp. 1140-1.

¹⁰³ ASMAE, SAP - Giappone, Busta 13, 15 November 1936, 11 December 1936, Auriti to Ciano, 18 November 1936, 12 December 1936, Ciano to Auriti.

¹⁰⁴ Ferretti, pp. 128-9.

¹⁰⁵ FO 371 20418, R6636/341/22, Vansittart Minute, 11 November 1936. One official, Lawrence Collier, on the other hand, argued that "the 'expansionist' creed of both Germany and Italy *must* force them together in opposition to us." Emphasis in original. FO 371 20418, R6636/341/22, Collier (Northern Department) Minute, 23 December 1936. See also FO 371 20385, R7312/1167/67, Sargent Minute, 11 December 1936, Vansittart Minute, 12 December 1936. The Admiralty also demanded that Whitehall try

November, the Cabinet, recognizing the need to ensure the separation of Germany and Italy, decided over Eden's objections to make a considered effort to court friendlier Anglo-Italian relations.¹⁰⁶ On 6 November, Drummond signed two trade accords which had been long in negotiation. Drummond also informed Ciano of the Cabinet's decision to convert the Legation in Addis Ababa into a Consulate, thus giving the Italian government *de facto* recognition of the conquest of Ethiopia.¹⁰⁷ On 8 November, British journalist Ward Price interviewed Mussolini, and the latter mentioned a possible Gentlemen's agreement. Whitehall officials seized on this unstructured format for talks to try to further develop better relations with Italy. In doing so, they specifically rejected the French formula for a wider Mediterranean pact. There were two sets of outstanding issues which neither party addressed formally in the agreement. Britain hoped that Italy would stop its propaganda campaigns in Palestine and Egypt and its intrigues in Yemen.¹⁰⁸ For its part, Italy hoped that Britain would grant *de jure* recognition of the Italian Empire. Relations were too strained to make substantial headway on these issues, so the discussions evolved toward a mutual exchange of notes highlighting Italy's and Britain's respect for the *status quo* in the Mediterranean, though neither side made any real commitments even in this

to wean Mussolini from the Axis, as Britain could not face war against the feared combination of Japan, Italy, and Germany. FO 20412, R6974/226/22, Admiralty to the Foreign Office, 21 November 1936.

¹⁰⁶ FO 371 20412, R6694/226/22, CAB. Conclusions (Extract) 63 (36), 4 November 1936, R6794/226/22, 64 (36), 11 November 1936, R6968/226/22, 66 (36), 18 November 1936.

¹⁰⁷ FO 371 20412, R6585/226/22, Drummond to Eden, 7 November 1936.

¹⁰⁸ FO 371 19979, E8029/2617/91, Lampson (Cairo) to Eden, 18 December 1936.

area.¹⁰⁹ After drawn out negotiations, Drummond and Ciano eventually signed the essentially meaningless agreement on 2 January 1937.

While these diplomatic discussions took place, however, Mussolini and Ciano continued a foreign policy hostile to the British Empire. In a series of letters, Ciano and Grandi discussed present and future Anglo-Italian relations. Only Grandi's letters apparently survive, but they show clearly Ciano's policy toward Britain. Italy and Britain were entering a "permanent conflict" over such issues as Malta *irredenta* and the fate of the British Empire in the Mediterranean and Near East.¹¹⁰ Britain feared the Axis and the resulting threat to the Empire. Therefore, as Grandi congratulated Ciano:

If Italy and Germany will show England an increasingly united bloc without cracks, without dead ends, without tendencies to exploit the difficulties of the other, determined to follow a common direction and a united front to the other Powers, British policy will be constrained to come to agreements with Rome and Berlin simultaneously, accepting those conditions that Rome and Berlin together will dictate to London in order to guarantee and maintain in Europe and the world that peace which

¹⁰⁹ FO 371 20412, R6600/226/22, 8 November 1936, Drummond to Eden, 8 November 1936. R6813/226/22, Vansittart conversation with Grandi, 13 November 1936, R6918/22/22, Vansittart conversation with Grandi, 17 November 1936, R7117/226/22, Eden to Drummond, 3 December 1936. For more detail, see Christopher Seton-Watson, "The Anglo-Italian Gentleman's Agreement of January 1937 and its Aftermath," in Wolfgang Mommsen and Lothar Kettenacher (eds.), *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983, pp. 267-82.

¹¹⁰ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, Grandi to Ciano, 27 October 1936.

*alone will permit the British Empire to maintain itself laboriously in existence.*¹¹¹

Despite the fact that, in Grandi's words, Italy had nothing to fear from Britain, the Axis would give Italy the power to extort concessions from Britain. Further, the possibility of the addition of Japan to the Axis meant the union of the three states "which are the youngest, the fiercest, the most heavily armed, and the most coldly determined to expand their power." It would create "the gravest danger that has ever threatened the British Empire in the course of its history."¹¹² Ciano's aims, as Grandi understood them, were not to reach genuine a rapprochement with Britain, but rather to manage through temporary agreements with Britain the advancement of Italy's power and influence in the Mediterranean.

The Anglo-Italian conversations which led to the Gentlemen's agreement worried French officials; they correctly feared what was in reality an Italian attempt to isolate France from Britain. Delbos followed in British footsteps regarding the transformation of the French Legation in Addis Ababa to a Consulate, but it led to little change in Italy's attitude.¹¹³ Ciano instructed Ambassador Cerruti to placate Alexis Léger-St. Léger, the Secretary-general at the Quai d'Orsay in an effort to extract *de jure* recognition from France. Ciano said that he wanted more than mere friendly words from France, but friendly deeds; he was unimpressed with only *de facto* recognition.¹¹⁴ At the same time, however, Italy made no gestures of reconciliation toward France. Despite Ciano's promise

¹¹¹ Emphasis in original. ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, Grandi to Ciano, 6 November 1936. The document also appears in NA, T586, r499, f#026759-79.

¹¹² ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, Grandi to Ciano, 23 November 1936.

¹¹³ DDF, II, IV, #175, Delbos to Blondel, 19 December 1939, p. 285.

¹¹⁴ ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Cerruti, 18 December 1936.

that Italy expected no territorial gains from the Spanish Civil War, Italian troops had established virtual sovereignty in the Balearics, which constituted a grave menace to French security. With British co-operation, Ciano had worked to reject French overtures toward a Mediterranean Pact, and conducted instead negotiations which deliberately excluded France.¹¹⁵ By the end of 1936, Franco-Italian relations had reached a “dead end point.”¹¹⁶ In Mussolini’s view, he had heard from France only “useless and irritating words.”¹¹⁷

By the end of 1936, therefore, Mussolini had changed most of the important aspects of Italian foreign policy that had existed only two years earlier. He had abandoned the Rome Accords and the Stresa Front, and he had replaced them with open hostility toward France and with attempts to compel concessions from Britain. He had replaced the watch on the Brenner with tight co-operation with Germany on the central questions in European Affairs. He had decreased his support for Chinese Nationalists in favour of closer ties with Japan. He co-operated with Britain where he thought it profitable, but he did so primarily in order to isolate France. Each of these changes followed from the desire to expand Italy’s power in the Mediterranean, primarily at the expense of Britain and France. In short, De Felice’s and Quartararo’s arguments regarding Mussolini’s policy of equidistance constitute a retrospective construction based on partial evidence; they would have been unrecognizable to the architects of Italian foreign policy. Mussolini’s social

¹¹⁵ *DDF, II, III*, #490, Delbos to Corbin (London), 16 November 1936, p. 771, *DDF, II, IV*, #102, Delbos to Corbin and Blondel, 5 December 1936, pp. 158-9.

¹¹⁶ NA, T586, r1291, Ufficio V, Francia, Situazione politica nel 1936, no f#.

¹¹⁷ ASMAE, GAB 23, Mussolini to Cerruti, 10 October 1936.

Darwinism seemingly compelled him to challenge the power of the apparently weak Western democracies. He would continue to do so in 1937.

Chapter 3: The Spanish Imbrolio and the Strengthening of the Axis

Despite the slight hopes for an Anglo-Italian rapprochement engendered by the Gentlemen's Agreement, there was little progress in early 1937. The earliest and most important sticking point came from Mussolini's escalation of the Spanish Civil War which came to full fruition in January, close on the heels of the Gentlemen's Agreement. By mid-February, almost 50,000 Italian ground troops had landed in Spain. Members of Black Shirt militias represented a slight majority of these troops, but the units included roughly 14,000 infantry and artillerymen from the *Regio Esercito*, plus some 4,000 men in supporting units. Mussolini also sent an additional 130 planes, plus bombs, artillery, machine-guns, submachine guns, rifles, hand grenades, and munitions to support Italian and Spanish Nationalist units. While some of these troops were legitimate volunteers seeking some kind of adventure, most were not. The bulk of them merely happened to be members of four divisions: the Black Shirt divisions "Dio lo Vuole," "Fiamme Nere," "Penne Nere," and the *Regio Esercito* division "Littorio."¹ Mussolini ordered the dispatch of these troops as he believed that "it is absolutely indispensable that Franco is victorious. In the contrary case it would be a defeat for us and Russia would be able to claim its first

¹ ASMAE, US 2, unsigned memorandum. For more information see also Coverdale, pp. 169-182.

victory over Western Europe.”² Mussolini had the corollary consideration that a Popular Front victory could push France ever closer toward its own version of Bolshevisation.³ Mussolini committed Italy to a Nationalist victory in the war - at almost any cost.

Despite their commitment to Franco’s victory, however, Mussolini’s and Ciano’s policy towards the Spanish war also worked on another track; they heeded the necessity to play lip service to the non-intervention committee. Accordingly, they tried to justify the flagrant Italian violation of non-intervention by citing previous French and Soviet violations.⁴ The recent massive influx of Italian and German troops and equipment led the Duce to believe that Italy had given Franco a clear military superiority over Spanish government forces. In order to lessen temporarily the perceived challenge to the western democracies and the ensuing level of international tension, Italy and Germany intended to promise to uphold the non-intervention agreement provided that France and especially the Soviet Union also did so. Italy’s offer was, of course, largely disingenuous, because Italian tactical manoeuvres in the non-intervention committee were subordinate to Mussolini’s requirement of a Nationalist victory. For example, Grandi told the non-intervention committee that Italy would cease shipping volunteers to France after 20 February 1937. Mussolini had no intention of honouring that commitment, as the Italian military build-up

² ASMAE, US 1, Verbale della riunione a Palazzo Venezia del 14 gennaio 1937.

³ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio del Duce con S.E. Schuschnigg presente S.E. Ciano, 22 April 1937.

⁴ ASMAE, US 24, Ciano to Grandi, Cerruti, and Attolico, 6 January 1937.

was not then completed.⁵ Fortunately for Italy, neither France nor the Soviet Union were committed to ensuring the application of genuine non-intervention, and their violations of the agreement gave Ambassador Grandi considerable latitude in delaying tactics and in creating convenient anti-Bolshevik propaganda.⁶ The essential division over the withdrawal of volunteers between Germany and Italy on one hand, and France and the Soviet Union on the other, occurred over Soviet and Spanish government insistence that Franco's Moroccan soldiers were foreign volunteers, and should be counted among the total of Nationalists who would have to leave Spain under any withdrawal scheme. That method of calculation would likely ensure a government victory. Italy, Germany, and Franco insisted that the Moroccans would not be counted under any withdrawal scheme. If only German, Italian, and Soviet-backed volunteers withdrew, then most observers believed that Franco's victory was assured. This issue deadlocked the non-intervention committee for most of 1937, as neither side would concede the point.⁷ Still, Mussolini

⁵ See, for example: ASMAE, US 229, Cerruti to Ciano, 15 March 1937; US 24, Ciano to Colli (Spain), 19 January 1937.

⁶ ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 8 February 1937.

⁷ ASMAE, US 6, Grandi to Ciano, 21, 26, 29 January 1937. Italian policy fluctuated on the issue of withdrawal of volunteers. At times, Mussolini and Ciano strictly opposed it. At other times, however, they considered that it might serve to create a permanent Nationalist superiority. For example, after the Italian defeat at Guadalajara in March 1937, Mussolini considered a policy of a phased withdrawal of volunteers provided there was an equal number of Soviet advisors and International Brigade members withdrawn. Ultimately, however, he decided that Italians had to avenge Guadalajara with a decisive victory, and the

hoped for either a quick Nationalist victory or for some face-saving agreement that would allow Italy to wind down its support for Franco, as Italy could not afford to maintain its increased level of commitment for long. Ciano, therefore, warned Franco that Italian aid would not last indefinitely, and that Mussolini wanted to see a rapid and decisive Nationalist offensive in order to end the war soon.⁸

Events surrounding the non-intervention agreement's international control schemes also demonstrated Italy's devotion to moving in lock-step with Germany. On 24 May, Spanish government aircraft bombed the Italian ship *Barletta* which was lying in the harbour at Palma, and, five days later, bombed the German battleship *Deutschland*, which was lying in the roads of Ibiza. Both these ships were involved in implementing the non-intervention committee's control scheme; unsurprisingly, the bombings provoked a strong Axis reaction. Grandi vigorously protested the former attack, while the German government withdrew from the control scheme and from the non-intervention committee

momentary consideration passed. *DGFP, D, III, #237*, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 27 March 1937, pp. 260-1, #238, 29 March 1937, pp. 261-2. Grandi complicated the process, when, on 27 March 1937, he contradicted his instructions, and declared in the non-intervention committee that Italy would not withdraw any volunteers until after a Nationalist victory. *DGFP, D, III, #237*, von Hassell to von Neurath, 27 March 1937, pp. 260-1.

⁸ ASMAE, UC 44, comunicazione fatta al Generale Franco a nome del governo italiano e del gov. tedesco, 23 January 1938. See also ASMAE, US 226, Ciano to Attolico, 18 January 1937. This latter telegram reported Ciano's view of the results of a 14 January 1937 meeting with Göring.

itself until it received guarantees that such events would not recur.⁹ The Wilhelmstrasse took these decisions without first consulting the Italian government, and it hoped that Italy would continue to attend the non-intervention committee in Germany's absence. Mussolini, however, refused to follow a divergent course from Germany, which he feared would give the appearance of differences between the Axis partners. Accordingly, Italy followed suit. After minor Anglo-French concessions, both Axis powers returned to the patrol scheme and to committee meetings. On June 18, the German cruiser *Leipzig* reported that an unknown submarine had fired four torpedoes at her, and both Italy and Germany withdrew permanently from naval patrols. This Italo-German action frustrated any possible control schemes. Italy and Germany, of course, remained in the Non-intervention committee primarily to prevent France and the Soviet Union from having free rein there.¹⁰

Italy's transparent attempts to court public opinion and to placate Western leaders largely failed. Léon Blum and the Popular Front government bitterly resented Mussolini's attack on a fellow leftist government. Although nominally committed to non-intervention, primarily for domestic reasons, France continued to allow war matériel and volunteers to

⁹ ASMAE, US 225, Attolico to Ciano, 31 May 1937. US 6, Grandi to Ciano, 23 June 1937, 31 May 1937. *DGFP, D, III*, #267, #268, von Neurath to von Ribbentrop, 30 May 1937, pp. 296-7, p. 297, #269, #270, von Neurath Memoranda, same date, pp. 297-8, 298. #272, Memorandum by an Official of the Foreign Minister's Secretariat, 31 May 1937, pp. 299-300.

¹⁰ ASMAE, US 6, Ciano to Grandi, Attolico, and Viola (Salamanca), 15 June 1937.

cross the Pyrenees frontier.¹¹ Yvon Delbos criticised the Italian decision to continue sending volunteers to Spain, especially after Italy's broken commitment regarding the rules of non-intervention after 20 February 1937.¹² Most importantly, neither Blum nor Delbos could ignore the Italian air power stationed in the Balearics, which potentially represented a serious threat to French imperial communications.

Italy's increased intervention in Spain also annoyed British decision-makers, and it led to sharp divisions amongst them.¹³ Several, including Sir Orme Sargent, the Deputy Undersecretary of State, Sir Eric Drummond, and Sir Robert Vansittart, argued that Britain had to ignore the Italian provocations. The Admiralty and the Chiefs of Staff had repeatedly called for close Anglo-Italian relations in order to lessen the strategic threats to

¹¹ Italian intelligence sources reported widespread French violations of the non-intervention agreement, including: shipments of modern French anti-tank guns, French planes with scarcely concealed Air France colours, thousands of volunteers crossing the Pyrenees, Soviet military advisors travelling through France, plus French military aviators training volunteer pilots on French territory. ASMAE, US 231, Pietromarchi (Rome) to Ministero di Guerra, 22 January 1937, Vice Consule (Tolosa) to Ciano, 16 December 1936, Pietromarchi to Ministero della Cultura Popolare, 23 July 1937, Consule Generale (Tolosa) to Ciano, 3 March 1937, Ministero degli Affari Esteri al Ministero di Guerra, 27 March 1937. In the Spring of 1937, Blum relaxed France's rather limited commitment to non-intervention even further. Several French Ministries co-ordinated French shipments to Spain. Jackson, pp. 199-205.

¹² ASMAE, US 229, Cerruti to Ciano, 15, 27 March 1937.

¹³ For Britain's early protests over the dispatch of volunteers, and Ciano's rather dismissive response, see ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Inghilterra, 6 January 1937.

the Empire. There was no alternative, they argued, to the unpalatable job of conciliating Mussolini, however difficult that might be.¹⁴ Others, such as Sir Miles Lampson, the British Minister in Cairo, and, more importantly, Anthony Eden, believed that it was inopportune to try to reach any wider agreement with Mussolini until the latter had shown evidence of good-will toward Britain. Eden, especially, saw Mussolini's recent policy as a personal insult. They had taken a dislike to each other after the ill-fated meeting in the summer of 1935 during which Eden could not dissuade the Duce's from his plan to conquer Ethiopia. More recently, Eden bitterly resented Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and defiance of the League of Nations, and also believed that the Duce had used the Gentlemen's Agreement as diplomatic cover for Italy's escalation of the Spanish Civil War, particularly since the various shipments appeared to arrive immediately following Eden's signing of the agreement on 2 January 1937. Eden unrealistically hoped to use the non-intervention committee "to call a halt" to Italy's and Germany's actions in Spain; if successful, he thought that he could return Italy to comparative respectability and develop

¹⁴ FO 371 21174, R863/200/22, Sargent minute, 15 February 1937; Vansittart Minute, 16 February 1937.

For a recapitulation of Admiralty and Chiefs of Staff argument and the documentary sources, see also: FO 371 21136, R2261/5/67, Sargent minute, 1 April 1937; and FO 20412, R6974/226/22, Admiralty to the Foreign Office, 21 November 1936.

Anglo-Italian relations sufficiently warm to enable the two powers to resume negotiations for a wider agreement.¹⁵

Italian policy alienated Britain and France on other fronts as well. In early 1937, Ciano carried out a major *volte face* regarding relations with Yugoslavia. Mussolini's long-held view was that Yugoslavia was an unnatural creation of the various Versailles Peace Treaties. Even worse, Yugoslavia had aligned itself with France, Rumania, and Czechoslovakia through the Little Entente and various agreements with France. During the Ethiopian war, Yugoslavia faithfully implemented sanctions against Italy at grave cost to its own economy. Finally, Italy had territorial claims against Yugoslavia remaining from the days of the so-called 'mutilated victory.' Given Mussolini's hostility to Yugoslavia, he had provided varying levels of moral and logistical support for anti-government terrorist groups, particularly the Croat extremist Ustaša, in the decade prior to 1937.¹⁶ Italy provided most of the training and financing for the Ustaša, led by Ante Pavelić, and

¹⁵ Avon Papers, The University of Birmingham Library, AP 20/1/17, Diary entry, 4 January 1937. Several Italian historians argue that Eden's anger over the Italian troop shipments was unreasonable. For example, Paola Brundu Olla argues that the Italian escalation did "not constitute a violation of the commitments assumed because it responded to the intentions of Eden who through his comportment had succeeded in legitimizing Mussolini in the role of defender of Spain and the Mediterranean from the threat of communism in the place of Britain." *L'Equilibrio difficile*, p. 227. Simply put, it is impossible to reconcile this rather extravagant claim with Eden's attitude at the time.

¹⁶ For more information, see James Joseph Sadkovich, *Italian support for Croatian Separatism, 1927-1937*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982.

Mussolini allowed its terrorists refuge in Italy. After the Ustaša's assassination of Yugoslav King Alexander and French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou in 1934, Mussolini had refused French requests to extradite Pavelić and his cohorts, though he did disarm Ustaša units and isolate Pavelić in a kind of exile on the Isle of Lipari.¹⁷

In December 1936, Ciano, with Mussolini's approval, undertook to reverse the course of Italo-Yugoslav relations, and negotiations with the Stoyadinović government began in January 1937. Ciano hoped to sign an Italo-Yugoslav alliance, but the Yugoslav negotiators balked. Instead, they reached a reasonably comprehensive agreement short of an alliance. Both parties secured several objectives, with Ciano making by far the more important concessions. There was, of course, the usual language regarding mutual non-aggression and friendship. Ciano also offered to relax considerably restrictions that the Italian government had placed on ethnic Slavs living in Italy. Negotiators reached an economic agreement which was to Yugoslavia's benefit, as it went a long way to restore trade lost during Yugoslavia's adherence to League sanctions against Italy.¹⁸ Most importantly, there were two secret clauses in the agreement. One gave an Italian pledge

¹⁷ Italy allowed Ustaša members sanctuary beginning in 1929, and trained and organized Ustaša military units beginning in 1932. Unfortunately, much of the Italian documentation on the Ustaša kept in the *Carte Lancelotti* has been destroyed by damp and rot. ASMAE, UC 50, Istituto Generale di P. S. (Anfuso), 18 April 1941.

¹⁸ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/3, Grandi to Ciano, 9 January, 1937. *DGFP, C, VI*, #138, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 12 January 1937, p.282; #143, as above, 14 January 1937, pp. 294-5. *DDF, 2, V*, #152, de Dampierre (Belgrade) to Delbos, 23 March 1937, pp. 244-5.

regarding the independence of Albania, which partially placated Yugoslav concerns about Italian expansionism there. In the other clause, Ciano promised to rein in the Ustaša even further. Italian police would intern Pavelić and other Croat leaders, and prevent any Croat terrorist action emanating from Italian soil.¹⁹ In short, Italy made some serious concessions in order to achieve the agreement.

In return, Ciano won some important tactical victories over France, Britain, and even Germany. The Italo-Yugoslav agreement occurred at the same time as an outright Yugoslav rejection of a French offer for a pact of mutual assistance that would link the powers of the Little Entente. The rebuff of the French *démarche* by Milan Stoyadinović, the Yugoslavian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, sent a clear signal rejecting a close association with Western security interests. As the Italo-Yugoslav agreement promised neutrality in the event of third party conflicts, it formally ruptured the Little Entente; the terms of the two pacts were irreconcilable. Furthermore, the Yugoslav defection from the French camp meant that Czechoslovakia seemed increasingly isolated. Stoyadinović also wounded French prestige, as he failed to give Delbos prior notice of the signing as was required under the Franco-Yugoslav Treaty of 1927, and he cavalierly rejected the French

¹⁹ ASMAE, UC 49, Strictamente Segreto - patto segreto sull' accordo italo-iugoslavia, 25 March 1937. Mussolini commented dismissively to von Hassell that he did not mind abandoning the Ustaša as it had accomplished nothing in the prior eight years. *DGFP, D, III, #236*, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 25 March 1937, pp. 258-60. In a relatively rare occurrence, Mussolini actually maintained this promise

suggestion that he delay the public signing of the agreement with Ciano.²⁰ The Italo-Yugoslav accord represented a clear set-back for French policy in the Balkans, and a corresponding gain for France's Italian enemy.²¹

Similarly, Ciano aimed this blow at Great Britain. Britain had maintained friendly relations with the Yugoslav Regent, Prince Paul, and had issued a guarantee of assistance to Yugoslavia in event of Italian reprisals in the aftermath of sanctions. Whitehall counted on a friendly Yugoslavia both to resist German encroachment in the Balkans and to support indirectly Britain's important Mediterranean ally, Greece. Its adherence to sanctions during the Ethiopian crisis had apparently confirmed both Yugoslavia's friendship with England and its support for the League of Nations. After the Italo-Yugoslav accord, however, Foreign Office officials could no longer make such easy assumptions regarding Yugoslavia's loyalty. In addition, the lowering of tensions with Yugoslavia allowed Italy to re-orient its naval forces away from the Adriatic and toward

for roughly two years. He re-activated the Ustaša only in 1939. See also, *DGFP, C, VI*, #291, von Plessen (Rome) to the Foreign Ministry, 23 March 1937, pp. 593-4.

²⁰ FO 371 21198, R2108/224/92, Eden conversation with the French Ambassador, 24 March 1937. *DGFP, D, III*, #236, von Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, 25 March 1937, pp. 258-60. For Yugoslav resistance to French overtures, see Shorrock, *From Ally to Enemy*, pp. 199-200; Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II*, pp. 79-80.

²¹ ASMAE, SAP - Francia, B. 27, Prunas (Paris) to Ciano, 3 April 1937. FO 371 21197, R650/224/92, Harvey (Geneva) to Millar (London), reporting Eden's conversation with the Yugoslav Minister, 25 January 1937. Jackson, p. 195. See also Shorrock, p. 200.

the Mediterranean; Italy thus improved its relative power in any potential confrontation with Britain. Finally, the accord seriously damaged British prestige and influence in the Balkans. Eden concluded that the accord showed that "Italy's hostility to us is at present real, and I believe vindictive."²² The agreement fulfilled von Neurath's October 1936 prediction that Italy could detach Yugoslavia from the Anglo-French orbit and add it to the Rome-Berlin Axis. The policy was a great success for the Italian Foreign Minister; as Grandi wrote to Ciano, the latter had successfully courted a country which previously had been a mercenary "in the service of England against Italy."²³

Ciano's final aim in signing the accord with Yugoslavia was to give both countries some ability to resist and some protection from the seemingly inevitable German absorption of Austria. After the 1 June 1936 agreement with Germany, Ciano viewed the Anschluss as a foregone conclusion; the only question was when it would occur.²⁴ In order to protect Italy from the increase in German power and its penetration of South-east Europe, Ciano wanted to develop Yugoslavia as a counterweight. Stoyadinović feared potential German domination and resented the stinginess of Britain and France in

²² FO 371 21158, R2258/1/22, Eden Minute, 1 April 1937. See also Sargent Minute, 3 April 1937. For another copy, see FO 954/13, It/37/3, Memorandum dictated by the Secretary of State for the guidance of the Departments concerned, 1 April 1937.

²³ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/3, Grandi to Ciano, 9 January 1937. See also *DGFP, C, VI*, #347, Memorandum by the Head of Political Division IV, 30 April 1937, pp. 708-14.

²⁴ *DGFP, C, VI*, #254, Heeren (Belgrade) to von Neurath, 8 March 1927, pp. 515-6, #274, von Hassell to von Neurath, 15 March 1937, pp. 559-61.

supporting Yugoslavia with arms and economic aid, so Ciano's overture seemed opportune. Both Italy and Yugoslavia could benefit from lessening German domination of their respective economies and from the resulting benefits of increased trade.²⁵ In addition, Italy's preferential association with Yugoslavia allowed it to continue and even to extend its influence in the Danubian basin. Italy maintained its role as the primary sponsor of Hungarian revisionism, and the accord with Yugoslavia even provided Italy with a diplomatic opening to the previously hostile Rumania. Finally, as Ciano later wrote, the accord allowed Italy "to view with calmness the possibility of the Anschluss."²⁶ In short, the Italo-Yugoslav accord of 25 March 1937 fulfilled several goals for Italy. In part it reflected Ciano's knowledge of the extent to which Italy was becoming increasingly dependent on Germany, and his desire to preserve some freedom of manoeuvre within the close co-operation developed within the Rome-Berlin Axis. Ciano's more important aim,

²⁵ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con il Presidente Stoyadinovitch, 26 March 1937. The Yugoslav government had asked the Wilhelmstrasse for advice on the approaches from Italy and France. The response suggested the Stoyadinović regime avoid tying itself too closely to any power, but especially the French. *DGFP, C, VI, #295*, von Ermansdorff Circular to the Foreign Ministry, 25 March 1937, p. 601.

²⁶ *CHD*, 5 December 1937, p. 41. The Wilhelmstrasse was well aware of Mussolini's and Ciano's views regarding the inevitability of the Anschluss and their desire to use Yugoslavia as a potential counterweight to Germany. German officials assumed correctly that both Mussolini and Ciano recognized the need for German support, and that their moves in the Balkans were not directed against Germany, but represented instead friendly competition with Germany. *DGFP, C, VI, #254*, Heeren (Belgrade) to von Neurath, 8 March 1937, pp. 515-6, and #274, von Hassell to von Neurath, 15 March 1937, pp. 559-61.

however, was to weaken Anglo-French power and prestige in the Balkans and the Mediterranean, and simultaneously to strengthen the Italian challenge to the Western powers.

In the aftermath of this accord, Ciano also worked to develop Italy's relations with both Hungary and Rumania. The latter country approached Ciano with a suggestion that Italy and Rumania reach a rapprochement through an agreement analogous to the one recently signed by Italy and Yugoslavia. The offer intrigued Ciano, but he believed that Italian policy should look to Hungary first. He would encourage the Hungarian Foreign Minister to approach Rumania in an attempt to undermine the Little Entente, which aimed primarily at resisting Hungarian revisionism. If the two Balkan powers could reach an accord, then Hungary would be able to concentrate its limited power against Czechoslovakia, a nation which Mussolini particularly despised. Ciano hoped that this path would lead to a complete revolution in Balkan politics; in one blow, he could shatter French policy and complete the destruction of the Little Entente, and rally three Balkan powers to the Axis cause. Ultimately, his attempts failed owing to Rumanian opposition to an accord with Hungary. Bucharest refused to make concessions on minority rights and Hungarian re-armament without its Little Entente partners. Ion Lugusiano, the Rumania Minister in Rome, said that his government feared Soviet interference, and relied on

Czechoslovak support. Ciano's dreams of a system of Italian diplomatic domination of the Balkans foundered on the shoals of regional, ethnic and territorial disputes.²⁷

Despite Ciano's limited competition with Germany for influence in the Balkans, the Axis continued to function well regarding several issues. In Spain, of course, both powers co-operated in supplying Nationalist forces with matériel and men. Hitler had developed somewhat different aims than Italy; above all, he wanted to see the war continue indefinitely; it helped to keep Italy loyal to the Axis and to create a level of international tension which served to divert attention from German expansionism in Central and Eastern Europe. He also hoped to be able to exploit Franco's dependence on supplies in order to develop German economic control over certain Spanish natural resources.²⁸ Despite this difference in ends, Germany co-operated fully with Italy in the non-intervention committee and in Spain itself. For example, in April, German officials sent a request to Italy regarding the shipment of German airmen and supplies to Spain across Italian territory. They hoped that Ciano would allow the transshipment, and that he would create a "small logistical nucleus" to facilitate the process. He concurred, despite some objections from Italy's

²⁷ ASMAE, SAP - Romenia, B. 10, Sola (Bucharest) to Ciano, 31 March 1937, Ciano to Vinci (Budapest), 21 April 1937, GAB 28, Ciano to Vinci, 20 April 1937, Ciano to Vinci (Budapest), Attolico, Sola (Rumania), 11 May 1937.

²⁸ Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, pp. 142-4, 147-154. For the standard study on the economic dimension of Hitler's intervention in Spain, see: Robert H. Whealey, *Hitler and Spain: The Nazi Role in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

naval staff.²⁹ In London, Grandi continued to meet with von Ribbentrop every day to co-ordinate their activities in the non-intervention committee. Grandi described to Ciano the complete sense of trust that he had developed with his German colleagues, and how they exchanged information on all aspects of the Spanish situation.³⁰

In the economic sphere, Ciano also moved Italy into a closer embrace with Germany. In early March 1937, he told von Hassell that given the challenge of the Axis to the Western powers war was likely, and could break out at any time. He argued, therefore, that Italy and Germany should strike a co-ordinating committee in order to achieve Axis autarky in the event of war. Ciano was particularly concerned that the two powers co-operate in exchanging each others' raw materials needs.³¹ The talks proceeded sporadically, through both exchanges of experts' drafts and high level talks between the likes of Göring and Mussolini.³² Eventually, in May, an Italo-German commission signed a secret protocol that allowed for reciprocal economic aid "in normal and abnormal times." The scope of the agreement included not only raw materials but also transport, exchange of industrial licences, and the provision of labour detachments. Though neither power was disinterested enough to allow this protocol to function at a very high level, it is indicative of Mussolini's and Ciano's growing belief that the Axis represented something more than

²⁹ ASMAE, US 225, Pro-memoria, 22 April 1937, Ciano to Attolico, 26 April 1937.

³⁰ ASMAE, US 6, Grandi to Ciano, 7 July 1937.

³¹ *DGFP, C, VI*, #247, von Hassell to von Neurath, 5 March 1937, p. 503.

³² *DGFP, D, III*, #236, von Hassell to von Neurath, 25 March 1937, pp. 258-60.

a mere political arrangement; Italian and German decision-makers both expected that their strategies would require close military and economic co-operation in the expected Axis wars to come.³³

Ciano also tried to convince the German government to join the Rome Protocols, which had been in effect since 17 March 1934. These agreements linked Italy, Austria, and Hungary in a loose consultative arrangement regarding affairs in the Danubian basin. Ciano hoped eventually to convince both Poland and Yugoslavia to join; this new group of supposedly like-minded authoritarian states would then appear to be a serious counterweight to the League of Nations and to the Little Entente. More importantly, for Mussolini, it would show the solidarity of the Axis. The Wilhelmstrasse strongly resisted this *démarche*, as the first proposal contained language referring to Austrian independence. Germany's adhesion to the Protocols could imply its acceptance of that clause, and, for obvious reasons, Hitler was unwilling to limit his ambition of achieving the Anschluss. Eventually, German intransigence convinced Mussolini to let the initiative drop, but he was keenly disappointed by Germany's reluctance to make this public display of its commitment to Italy. Despite the failure to reach an agreement, the episode demonstrates Mussolini's desire to tighten the ties of the Axis.³⁴

³³ *DGFP, C, VI*, #368, Secret Protocol between the German and Italian Governments, 14 May 1937, pp. 752-5. See also #536, The Foreign Ministry to von Plessen, 28 August 1937, pp. 1041-2, and p. 1042n2.

³⁴ *DGFP, C, VI*, #453, #458, von Neurath Memoranda, 7, 12 July 1937, pp. 902-3, 908, #461, von Neurath to von Hassell, 13 July 1937, pp. 910-1, #485, von Hassell to von Neurath, 21 July 1937, p. 948,

In marked contrast to his warm relations with Germany, Mussolini apparently sought confrontation with Britain. One important issue concerned British press coverage of the Italian defeat at Guadalajara. Italian troops suffered a disastrous set-back when a numerically inferior group of the International Brigade, including Italian nationals, blunted an Italian attack and forced the *Corpo Truppo Voluntarie* into a humiliating retreat. In truth, the defeat was relatively minor. Republican soldiers had the support of Soviet-built T26 tanks, superior to anything in the Nationalist arsenal. More significantly, Franco and his generals had conspired to place the *C.T.V.* in a position where its offensive would likely fail; they sought to take the arrogant Italians down a peg, while at the same time bleeding Republican forces of their reserves. Franco deliberately delayed launching a parallel offensive that would have pinned down Republican forces.³⁵ Nevertheless, despite the circumstances, the “Italian Skedaddle,” as former British Prime Minister David Lloyd George triumphantly labelled it, shattered the myth of Fascist Italian invincibility.

Franco’s behaviour and British press accounts outraged Mussolini. He wrote a major article defending his troops’ actions. In particular, he argued that bad weather, Spanish Nationalist inaction, and superior numbers of Red soldiers had determined the outcome at Guadalajara. Mussolini followed foreign press coverage with ill-concealed anger; British attacks such as Lloyd George’s on Italian courage and honour particularly

#499, #503, von Hassell to von Weizsäcker, 29, 31 July 1937, pp. 972-4, 986-8, #502, von Neurath to von Weizsäcker, 29 July 1937, pp. 985-6,

³⁵ Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography*. London: HarperCollins, 1993, pp. 233-6.

enraged him.³⁶ Most significantly, Mussolini decided that it would be impossible to withdraw any troops until the perceived stain on Fascist Italy had been wiped away. Consequently, the Duce made a virtually open-ended commitment to prosecute the Spanish Civil War to its conclusion, whatever the cost to Italy.³⁷ This decision was certain to continue to strain Italy's relations with France and Britain.

Italy also challenged Britain on several other issues in the spring of 1937. Mussolini continued to sponsor anti-British propaganda in the Middle East. Radio Bari criticised British rule in Palestine and attempted to foment and to exploit rebellion there. Italian workers disseminated propaganda and agents supported the rebellion from within Palestine.³⁸ The Italian community in Egypt used cultural centres and other agencies as outlets for attacking Britain's tutelage of the nominally independent country. Italians in Egypt even formed a 'green shirts' organisation modelled on the Fascist Party. During his visit to Libya in 1937, Mussolini hypocritically named himself the 'Protector of Islam,' with its implication that he was protecting Islam from Great Britain, despite the hundreds of thousands of Muslims that his troops had killed in Africa.³⁹ In Ethiopia, Marshall

³⁶ *OO, XLII*, Mussolini a Ciano, 20 March 1937, p. 183, Mussolini a Grandi, 31 March 1937, p. 187. See also ASMAE, UC 45, Azione di Guadalajara, n.d..

³⁷ *OO, XLII*, Mussolini a Grandi, 25 March 1937, pp. 184-5, Mussolini a Vittorio Emanuele III, 26 March 1937, pp. 185-6.

³⁸ FO 371 20786, E1488/145/65, Warner Memorandum, 13 March 1937.

³⁹ FO 371 21157, R1908/1/22, Drummond to Eden, 19 March 1937. McDonald, 'Radio Bari,' p. 200. Pratt, pp. 66-7.

Graziani, the Viceroy, maintained the policy of low-level harassment of British subjects and diplomats. In one case, Graziani closed the British-controlled firm of Mohamedally, blocked its bank accounts, and gave the staff two days to leave. The capricious deadline was impossible to meet, as there were no trains during that time. In another incident, Fascist Blackshirts broke into the French legation.⁴⁰ In Italy proper, Mussolini banned certain British newspapers, while Italian government-controlled newspapers and even school textbooks carried the message that Britain was a “decadent, feeble, and finished nation, and that the Roman legions would shortly destroy [it] for ever.”⁴¹ Ciano dismissed out of hand British protests of these activities, and, as they were largely controlled by the Fascist Party, Whitehall had to assume that Mussolini or Ciano had ordered these manifestations of ill-will toward Britain.⁴²

Even more seriously, Mussolini directed an expansionistic policy against Britain in Africa and the Middle East. In Libya, Italian engineers continued to build a coastal road toward the Egyptian and Libyan border. The primary function of this road would be to

⁴⁰ FO 371 20932, J1077/74/1, Stonehewer-Bird (Addis Ababa) to Eden, 6 March 1937, J1174/74/1, Wikely-Harrar (Addis Ababa) to Eden, 13 March 1937.

⁴¹ FO 371 21158, R3301/1/22, Drummond to Eden, 13 January 1937. FO 371 21158, R2869/1/22, Drummond to O'Malley, 21 April 1937. For more on British reactions to the barrage of Italian propaganda, see also FO 371 21158, R2376/1/22, O'Malley minute, 20 March 1937, plus the ensuing commentaries by Cadogan and Eden.

⁴² FO 371 21157, R1908/1/22, Drummond to Eden, 23 March 1937.

support an Italian military attack toward Egypt and the Suez Canal.⁴³ Italian military planners directed preparations southward toward British possessions with the development of air bases in Southern Italy, Pantelleria, and Sicily. In violation of the Rome Understanding of 1927, which prohibited Italian alteration of the status quo in the Arabian peninsula, Italian agents fomented unrest against Britain in Yemen. The *Servizio Informazione Militare* directed its efforts to creating an eventual protectorate or a colony on the East bank of the Red Sea. Italian agents provided rifles, artillery, and tanks to Yemeni opponents of British influence over Ibn Saud, the most powerful local leader.⁴⁴ The simultaneous Italian control of Ethiopia and Yemen would allow Italy to interdict British use of the Suez Canal; this Italian policy, therefore, potentially represented a grave threat to British imperial communications.⁴⁵ Mussolini openly contemplated war with the British in the Middle East. In February, he ordered Marshall Graziani, the Viceroy in

⁴³ FO 371 21157, R1579/1/22, Drummond to Eden, 2 March 1937.

⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the available Italian archival evidence on this issue is rather sketchy, and certainly incomplete, but see ASMAE, SAP - Yemen, B. 13, Pariani to Ciano, 1 June 1937, Ciano to Dott. Dubbiosi (Sanaa), 7 November 1937.

⁴⁵ FO 371 10780, E2979/872/91, Lampson to Eden, 18 December 1936. FO 371 20772, E1242/27/91, Lampson to Eden, 18 February 1937. FO 371 20786, E1488/145/65, Warner Memorandum, 13 March 1937. See also Rosaria Quartararo, "L'Italia e lo Yemen. Uno studio sulla politica di espansione italiana nel Mar Rosso (1923-1937)," *Storia contemporanea*. X.4/5 (ottobre 1979), pp. 855-6. Although Quartararo is a seemingly tireless researcher who has uncovered some excellent archival material, her conclusions about Anglo-Italian relations are often highly suspect.

Ethiopia, to begin recruiting a black African Army of some 300,000 troops. This new force would have to be in place by 1940. In the meantime, Mussolini demanded that Graziani should prepare for autarky in Italian East Africa “in times of peace and above all in times of war.”⁴⁶ On several fronts, therefore, Italy created and pressed deliberate political conflicts with Great Britain and its empire.

There is an important historiographical issue regarding Mussolini’s and Ciano’s reasons for provoking diplomatic conflicts with Britain. Dino Grandi, the Italian Ambassador in London, wrote at this time that these various irritants in Anglo-Italian relations were necessary in order to compel Britain to reach an agreement between the two powers. In his view, Anthony Eden constituted the central obstacle on the path to that agreement, and so it was necessary to outflank him in the British Cabinet and foreign policy-making apparatus. The closer the relations between Germany and Italy, the more that both Westminster and Whitehall would see the need for a fundamental agreement with the Fascist government in order to prevent an outright Italo-German alliance. Even though he expected the then incoming Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to be ready to reach a comprehensive settlement with Italy on its own merits, Grandi argued that it was necessary to maintain and even to increase the pressure in London. In short, the best policy was to try to coerce British decision-makers to reach an Anglo-Italian agreement.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ ACS, Carte Graziani, B. 72, fasc. 59, Mussolini to Graziani, 22 February 1937.

⁴⁷ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B.40, fasc. 93/3, Grandi to Ciano, 7 April 1937.

Several Italian and English-language historians have taken Grandi's words at face value as evidence that Italian policy aimed only at reaching an agreement with Great Britain, and that the Rome-Berlin Axis was merely a tactical ploy to further this aim. Italy sought first British *de jure* recognition of its Ethiopian conquest, and second, parity of rights and prestige with Britain in the Mediterranean. Accordingly, they blame British statesmen for failing to understand Italy and this Italian policy; the result of this failure was that the British government forced Italy into an ever closer arrangement with Berlin. Eventually, Italy became trapped in the Axis owing to the alleged obduracy of His Majesty's Government.⁴⁸

There are several problems with this interpretation. First, Grandi's views are more complex than this surface view. While Grandi was in one sense an Anglophile, he also had profound contempt for aspects of English life. In the Fascist style, he ridiculed the "death" of the late nineteenth-century British imperial impulse, which left the empire "a lion without teeth." Fifteen years of "pacifist, anti-militarist, and anti-patriotic propaganda" had wrought its mischief on the British psyche; the ensuing "pacifist corruption" extended

⁴⁸ See, for example: De Felice, *Mussolini, il duce, I: Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 686-8, 706-8, 743; idem, *Mussolini il duce, II: Lo Stato totalitario*, pp. 333, 339, 466; idem, *Mussolini l'alleato, I/1/2, L'Italia in Guerra*, p. 61; Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, pp. 326-518 (*passim*); Brundu Olla, *L'equilibrio difficile*, p. 227; Nello, *Un fedele indisubbidiente*, p. 305; MacDonald, "Radio Bari," p. 200. De Felice did allow at one point that "in the historical-political conception of the Duce Italy would sooner or later have turned against England," though the balance of his work attempted largely to argue that Mussolini wanted to avoid that very occurrence. De Felice, *Lo Stato totalitario*, p. 348.

to all aspects of British life. Yet the defeat in Ethiopia had woken some statesmen to the need to re-arm, and the governing class was at last preparing for war against Italy. Grandi's views could hardly do more to incite Mussolini's dreams of replacing the British empire through military conquest.⁴⁹ Second, Mussolini and Ciano were the architects of Italian foreign policy, not Grandi; his wishes were of little consequence. Even if one took Grandi's view as representing Italian policy, it failed to achieve his objectives, serving mainly to irritate Eden and to postpone an Anglo-Italian agreement.⁵⁰ Third, the De Felice school ignores entirely the larger aims of the Duce, which included replacing first France, and, ultimately, Great Britain, as major Mediterranean powers.⁵¹ Fourth, there is a mass of evidence which demonstrates that Mussolini and Ciano believed that an Italian war against Britain was becoming inevitable, as it was Italy's destiny to replace what they saw as decrepit and declining empires.⁵² Briefly, then, it is very unlikely that either Mussolini or

⁴⁹ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 43, fasc. 106, *Appunti per il Gran Consiglio Fascista*, 1 March 1937.

⁵⁰ See, for example, footnotes 9, 11, and 18 of this chapter. Through stolen documents, Grandi, Ciano, and Mussolini all knew of the deleterious effects that their many provocations created in London, particularly with Eden. Instead of modifying Italian policy, however, Mussolini merely focussed his anger against Eden. Pratt, p. 68n13.

⁵¹ See footnote 109 of Chapter 2.

⁵² For Ciano's views in this vein, see: *CHD*, 5 October 1937, pp. 17-8; 6 November 1937, pp. 28-9; 19 24 December 1937, pp. 45; 48-9. For Mussolini's views, see: *CHD*, 21 December 1937, pp. 46-7. MacGregor Knox, "The Fascist Regime," pp. 355. This brief list is by no means exhaustive; a full recounting could run to dozens of citations.

Ciano sought a genuine long-term agreement with Great Britain based on mutual respect of each others' rights. In early 1937, they did hope to achieve the temporary goal of Britain's *de jure* recognition of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. More importantly, however, they sought to create the best climate possible for the expansion of Italian power at the expense of the Western democracies. Their expansionistic aims underpinned the strength and durability of Italy's and Germany's partnership despite British and French attempts to wean Italy from the Axis. Only Germany could provide Italy with the wherewithal to realise Mussolini's dreams of Mediterranean hegemony.

In May of 1937, Mussolini escalated tensions with Great Britain even further. He worked on two tracks. The first track consisted of particularly nasty anti-British propaganda spewed out by Radio Bari. It accused Britain of being "false and hypocritical" in its dealings with Italy, which was not surprising given the "villainy and falsehood" of British politicians.⁵³ An Italian Wireless Broadcasting Institute report declared that Italy could destroy the Suez Canal in two to three hours and Britain's Malta base in sixty minutes; Italy, therefore, held the real keys to the Mediterranean. Simultaneously, Ciano threatened Drummond with "something more than a press campaign" if Britain did not meet Mussolini's demands. Whitehall officials feared possible Italian air strikes in the Middle East.⁵⁴

⁵³ FO 371 21158, R3160/1/22, O'Malley to Drummond, 10 May 1937.

⁵⁴ FO 371 21159, R3795/1/22, Lampson to Eden, 22 May 1937, R3825/1/22, Lampson to Eden, 21 May 1937.

At the same time, Mussolini continued to redeploy his air strength southwards - away from Germany and towards Britain's Mediterranean bases. Britain's Air Attaché in Rome concluded that this new stance signalled Mussolini's "contemplation clearly of possible hostilities."⁵⁵ Even more seriously for Britain, Mussolini played what he thought would be a trump card. He strengthened the Italian garrison in Libya to constitute two European Army Corps, the XXth and XXIst, totalling roughly 60,000 men. The new troops would arrive in September 1937 after preparatory exercises in Sicily. Two of these divisions were mechanised, which made a potentially powerful striking force against Egypt. Because Britain was bound by its treaty with that nominally independent country, it could station no more than about one-tenth the strength there of Italy's Libyan garrison. Mussolini assumed that these troops would represent both an effective negotiating tool and an unstoppable striking force against Egypt.⁵⁶ As a result of these various Italian provocations, the Committee of Imperial Defence decided that Italy would have to be considered as a potential enemy for "an indefinite period."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ FO 371 21181, R3542/1920/22, Ingram to Eden, 20 May 1937.

⁵⁶ *OO, XLII*, Mussolini to Vittorio Emanuele, 4 October 1938. FO 371 21168, R3475/69/22, Lt. Col. Arnold (War Office) to Nichols (Foreign Office), 20 May 1937. See also Vansittart's Minute, 26 May 1937.

⁵⁷ FO 371 21159, R3831/1/22, O'Malley Memorandum, 15 June 1937. This note reported the contents of the C.I.D. paper 1332-B, 1 June 1937. Within a few months, C.I.D. language had changed from "Italy cannot be counted on as a reliable friend, but in present circumstances need not be regarded as a probable enemy," to "Italy cannot be considered as a reliable friend and must for an indefinite period be regarded as

In mid-June, Mussolini and Ciano decided that the time was ripe for a new push for the negotiations toward British *de jure* recognition of the Italian empire. There were two reasons underlying the timing of this démarche. First, the British Foreign Office asked German Foreign Minister von Neurath to pay a visit to London for a wide-ranging discussion of mutual concerns. Despite German assurances to the contrary, Ciano believed that the British government would try to weaken Germany's commitment to the Axis. Accordingly, Ciano received the news with "strict coldness." He feared that, at the very least, such a visit would allow anti-fascists in the West to predict the decline of the Axis. A simultaneous Italian approach to Britain regarding an Anglo-Italian rapprochement would discourage any idle talk that there were differences between the Axis partners.⁵⁸ Second, there was conflicting, even paradoxical, evidence on the state of Anglo-French relations. There were many public manifestations that Britain and France were increasingly relying on the other for imperial defence and for maintaining European peace in the face of fascist revisionism.⁵⁹ The new Camille Chautemps Cabinet in Paris was in public less

a possible enemy, especially if she can count on the goodwill and potential support of Germany, or if the United Kingdom were involved in difficulties elsewhere."

⁵⁸ ASMAE, GAB 26, Appunto per il Duce, 14 June 1936, GAB 30, Ciano appunto per il Duce, 16 June 1936.

⁵⁹ For example, Cerruti cited several speeches made at a 1 July 1937 dinner honouring Sir Eric Phipps. Blum called for tight Anglo-French relations "in the face of great danger." A week earlier, Lord Lloyd spoke in Paris of the need for greater understanding in London of French policy toward Fascist Italy.

ideologically ranged against Mussolini and Fascism, which implied the possibility of lowering the level of tension between Italy and Britain and France.⁶⁰ At the same time, there were signs that Anglo-French relations were strained over French policy toward the Soviet Union and Spain, perhaps as far as the point where it was possible to divide the two Western powers. Vittorio Cerruti, Italy's Ambassador in France, thought the time opportune to approach Chautemps, but Ciano refused. He said instead that it was better that "Paris understands only that our intransigence is absolute."⁶¹ If, however, an Italian offer of negotiations could pry Britain from its French association, then any minor Italian concessions to Britain would be worthwhile. Ciano, therefore, would try to split the Western democracies through a proposal for negotiations with Great Britain.⁶²

From the Italian side, the proposed negotiations would have a strictly limited scope. As a gesture toward reconciliation, Mussolini ordered Radio Bari to abstain temporarily from any anti-British activity.⁶³ But Italy was prepared to go little further. It refused to modify its policy in the Red Sea or to stop expanding its forces in Libya. In his

ASMAE, SAP - Francia, B. 27, Cerruti to Ciano, 30 June 1937, 3 July 1937. See also Young, *In Command of France*, pp. 156-9.

⁶⁰ ASMAE, SAP- Francia, B. 36, Cerruti to Ciano, 23 June 1936. US 229, Cerruti to Ciano, 26 June 1936.

⁶¹ ASMAE, US 229, Cerruti to Ciano, 5 July 1937, Ciano to Cerruti, 6 July 1937.

⁶² ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 5 July 1937, US 227, Ciano to Grandi, 3 July 1937. See also *DGFP, D, III*, #306, von Hassell to von Neurath, 12 June 1937.

⁶³ ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 7 July 1937.

letter to Grandi ordering the Ambassador to pursue negotiations with Chamberlain, Ciano argued that Italy should have to make no concessions regarding Italy's war in Spain. British statesmen should realise that Italy did not have territorial ambitions there, and that both Britain and Italy would benefit from Franco's victory, as neither power wanted a Bolshevik government in Western Europe. Italy's sole negotiating point was to achieve Britain's *de jure* recognition of the Italy's Ethiopian conquest.⁶⁴ At the same time, Grandi was told to lose no occasion to emphasise to British decision-makers that they would have to choose between France and Italy; as Grandi told Chamberlain, "an agreement between Rome and London cannot exist alongside an agreement between London-Paris."⁶⁵ The extremely limited nature of Italy's possible concessions, combined with its efforts towards splitting Britain from France, belies any suggestion that Mussolini and Ciano wanted to achieve a genuine Anglo-Italian rapprochement; on Italy's side, the negotiations were purely self-interested and tactical in scope. As Ciano told a young fascist writer at the time, he maintained contacts with Britain in order to ensure breathing room for his policy in Spain, while simultaneously keeping Anglophile elements in Italy quiescent.⁶⁶ Mussolini wanted the British Cabinet to recognise the Italian empire, and he wanted to separate Britain from France; there was no genuine comity of interests between Fascist Italy and Britain.

⁶⁴ ASMAE, UC 89, Ciano to Grandi, 20 June 1937.

⁶⁵ ASMAE, US 231, Colloquio con Chamberlain, 2 August 1937.

⁶⁶ Coverdale, p. 311.

This Italian offer sparked a lengthy debate in the Cabinet and in Whitehall. There were two major opponents to recognition of Italy's Ethiopian Empire: Anthony Eden and Lord Cranborne, Eden's Parliamentary Private Secretary. The latter believed that Britain would eventually have to grant recognition, but Cranborne wanted to ensure that "we shan't cringe before Musso[lini]." Italian economic weakness, he believed, offered Britain the best chance to appeal to the Fascist dictator; Italy's need for British economic assistance could eventually bring Mussolini to heel.⁶⁷ Eden believed that British recognition of Italy's Ethiopian conquest would grant Mussolini too great a boost in prestige. The Foreign Secretary hoped to tie Mussolini more tightly in a wider-reaching Mediterranean Pact. Without this more encompassing agreement, Eden feared, Mussolini would simply accept any British recognition as a *fait accompli* and return to a position of hostility to Britain, as he had appeared to do after the Gentlemen's agreement.⁶⁸ There were few Whitehall advisers, however, who accepted this reasoning. Virtually no Foreign Office officials trusted Mussolini, but some believed that the timing was appropriate to use the one negotiating card which Britain still held - *de jure* recognition. Britain had no other issues on which it could appeal to Italy, so it could be useful to pry as many concessions as possible from the Duce. The prospects for restoring Italy to the Stresa Front were

⁶⁷ The University of Birmingham Library, Avon Papers, AP 20/5/20, Cranborne to Eden, 18 August 1937. FO 371 21167, R5617/64/22, Cranborne Minute, 30 August 1937.

⁶⁸ FO 371 21167, R5617/64/22, Eden Minute, 26 August 1937. FO 954/13, It/37/29, Halifax to Eden, 12 August 1937, It/37/30, Eden to Halifax, 13 August 1937.

undoubtedly weak, but this first step toward better relations was necessary. The Chiefs of Staff's warnings regarding the tripartite threat posed by Germany, Italy, and Japan seemingly compelled Britain to seek to turn at least one of these potential enemies. The major goals on the British side were to require Italy to cease anti-British propaganda in the Middle East and in Italy, to modify its policy in the Red Sea, to withdraw its volunteers from Spain, and to remove a substantial part of the threatening garrison in Libya. The last two of these desiderata were by far the most important objectives.⁶⁹

Even more importantly, Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister since May 1937, was determined to reach an accommodation with Italy. He approached Italy through both regular and highly irregular channels. For example, an exchange of letters of mutual

⁶⁹ Advocates of this position included: Sir Maurice Hankey, the powerful Cabinet Secretary; Sir Orme Sargent; Sir Robert Vansittart; and Viscount Halifax, the Lord President of the Council, and, during August, the replacement for the vacationing Eden as Foreign Secretary. PREM 1/276, Hankey to Chamberlain, 19 July 1937, FO 954/13, It/37/12, Hankey to Eden, 23 July 1937. FO 371 21160, R5104/1/22, Sargent Minute, 27 July 1937. PREM 1/276, Halifax to Vansittart, 4 August 1937. For the clearest statements of the British position, see: FO 37121161, R5532/1/22, F.O. Minute, Record of a meeting held in the S[ecretary] of S[tate's] room on August 10th to deal with the question of de jure recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia and conversations with the Italian government as proposed in the P[rime] M[inister's] letter to Sr. M[ussolini] of 27th July; and PREM 1/276, Halifax to Chamberlain, 11 August 1937.

goodwill with Mussolini helped to clear the way for negotiations.⁷⁰ Simultaneously, however, Chamberlain also set up a so-called 'secret channel' to Italy's Foreign Ministry. The secret channel was routed through Sir Joseph Ball, the Head of the Conservative Research Office. This office, which Chamberlain considered his personal fiefdom, had as its main task spying on the Labour Party. Ball was an intimate friend of Chamberlain's, and maintained a close association with Britain's intelligence services. The channel to the Italian Embassy in London operated through a Maltese national by the name of Adrian Dingli. Dingli, trained in Malta and Italy as a lawyer, served the Italian Embassy in London as legal counsel. He was a member of the Inns of Court as well as the Carlton Club, the official club of the Conservative Party. Ball approached Dingli in early July in order to determine through unofficial channels the prospects of a accord between Britain and Italy. Over the following months, the highly unusual relationship flourished, and Dingli, Ball, and Grandi held several clandestine meetings. On one occasion, Dingli even carried messages from Ball directly to Ciano in Rome. Chamberlain often used this route to circumvent the Foreign Office, and, in particular, Anthony Eden.⁷¹ Chamberlain, like most

⁷⁰ ASMAE, US 231, Colloquio con Chamberlain, 2 August 1937. For a description of Dino Grandi's inventiveness in creating a first fictitious letter from Mussolini, see William C. Mills, "The Chamberlain-Grandi Conversations of July-August 1937 and the Appeasement of Italy." *International History Review*. 19.3 (August 1997), pp. 594-619. It is important to note, however, that the impetus for this démarche came from Ciano, not Grandi's own initiative.

⁷¹ For Grandi's description of the initiation of this secret channel, see ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 49, fasc. 93/3, 12 July 1937. In 1976, Rosario Quartararo published extensive selections from the lengthy records

Foreign Office officials, believed that it was necessary to try to use the prospect of recognition to compel Mussolini to grant concessions over the series of outstanding issues creating Anglo-Italian tension.⁷² Given Chamberlain's opposition and his intriguing, Cranborne's and Eden's objections were over-ruled, and both the British and Italian governments tacitly agreed in mid-August to begin negotiations in September, after Drummond's return to Rome. This delay would have to occur owing to Britain's need to co-ordinate its recognition with the League of Nations meeting scheduled for Geneva in the second week of September, as Ciano well recognised.⁷³

Mussolini and Ciano had already known that their aggressive anti-British actions provoked divisions between British officials, and that Chamberlain had decided to negotiate with Italy. For years, an Italian national working as a janitor in Britain's Rome Embassy had been removing documents from the Embassy safe at night, and returning them before the next morning, although only after Italian intelligence officials had copied their contents. British diplomats remained largely oblivious to this leak, even when faced with circumstantial evidence that Ciano had used evidence obtained from British

which are now available in the Italian Foreign Ministry Archives after an extremely long delay in cataloguing. Rosaria Quartarao, "Inghilterra e Italia. Dal Patto di Pasqua a Monaco, Con un' appendice sul «canale segreto» italo-inglese." *Storia contemporanea*. 7.4 (December 1976), pp. 607-716.

⁷² For the best indication of Chamberlain's views regarding negotiations, see FO 954/13, It/37/20, and PREM 1/276, Chamberlain to Halifax, 7 August 1937.

⁷³ ASMAE, SAP - G.B., B. 19, Drummond aide-memoire to Ciano, 6 August 1937. Mussolini initialled "d'accordo" on this note. FO 371 21160, R5280/1/22, Drummond to Eden, 2 August 1937.

documents. Mussolini thus had excellent knowledge that his various anti-British measures encouraged Chamberlain and certain Foreign Office officials to pursue an agreement with Italy, but at the same time they profoundly discouraged Eden from negotiating seriously. The Duce's tactic of varying the level of friction while trying to weaken Eden's position was apparently working.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ For more detail on this issue, see: David Dilks, "Flashes of Intelligence: The Foreign Office, the SIS, and Security before the Second World War," in David Dilks and Christopher Andrew, (eds.), *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984, pp. 101-124; David Dilks, "Appeasement and 'Intelligence,'" in David Dilks (ed.), *Retreat from Power, Volume I, 1906-1939*. London: MacMillan, 1981, pp. 136-69, especially pp. 136-9 and 150-5; and Mario Toscano, *Designs in Diplomacy*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970, pp. 409, 412-3. Incidentally, the Italo-Yugoslav accord had provided Britain with the best chance to prevent Italy from stealing British documents. Ronald Campbell, the able British Minister in Belgrade, reported that Prince Paul believed that the Italians had penetrated British security. He asked Campbell to keep his communications both secure and confidential, and not to allow the Foreign Office to send them to the Rome Embassy. The Foreign Office blithely continued to send documents to Rome, however, and the Italians used the written record of some of Prince Paul's rather indiscreet comments to secure additional concessions from the Stoyadinović government. Campbell reported that the Italians had broken British security, but, with one exception, Foreign Office officials refused to believe the evidence. Amazingly, one less than vigorous official argued that it was not worth the expense to bring in an outside investigator, as the diplomatic cyphers were, in his view, entirely safe and the Rome Embassy well knew how to handle sensitive documentation. FO 371 21198, R187/224/92, Campbell to the Foreign Office, 10 March 1937; O'Malley Minute, 11 March 1937; Norton Minutes, 16, 19 March 1937; R1688/224/92, Campbell to the

Ultimately, however, Mussolini's push for a limited bargain to secure *de jure* recognition of the Ethiopian conquest did not occur as planned. Mussolini cavalierly threw away the chance for negotiations because of a new adventure in Spain. On 3 July 1937, Francisco Franco had sent a letter with his brother Nicholas to Mussolini informing the latter of large scale Soviet shipments through the Mediterranean to Spanish government forces. He asked the Duce to intervene in order to prevent these shipments from reaching port. If not, the massive influx of matériel would imperil the Nationalist victory.⁷⁵ Two days later, at a meeting with Nicholas Franco, Mussolini agreed to institute a blockade against any shipping that Italian forces even suspected might be carrying supplies to red Spain. Italian *Regia Marina* submarines would provide the primary force, with secondary support coming from the Italian air units stationed in the Balearics.⁷⁶ During the month of

Foreign Office, 11 March 1937. Interestingly, an Italian spy with a diplomatic cover as a consular official in Paris reported in July 1937 that British agents had cracked Italian military and diplomatic cyphers. This claim was partially correct, but the Italian military apparently took little action to remedy the situation. NA, T586, r416, Landini (Paris) to Luciano (Rome), 22 July 1937, f008738-40.

⁷⁵ ASMAE, UC 46, Franco to Mussolini, 3 August 1937.

⁷⁶ ASMAE, UC 46, Processo Verbale, Riunione a Palazzo Venezia, 5 August 1937. See also: Ciano to Attolico, 6 August 1937; and US 2, Colloquio tra il Capo di Gabinetto ed il Sottocapo di Stato Maggiore della Marina spagnola, 7 August 1937. There is considerable evidence to suggest that Italian submarines previously had torpedoed ships in the Mediterranean. One report mentions that Italian submarines had launched twenty-seven torpedoes by mid-February 1937. ASMAE, US 1, Contributo della Regia Marina alle operazioni in Spagna, 18 February 1937. See also ACS, Segreteria Particolare del Duce, Categgio

August, Italian submarines sank several ships, and identifiably Italian airplanes also carried out several attacks. Through naval wireless intercepts, the British government knew that Italy was responsible for the attacks.⁷⁷ This provocative behaviour demanded a response, and, eventually, at the end of August, the French government proposed holding a conference at the Swiss town of Nyon to deal with the issue of the allegedly unknown perpetrators of Mediterranean piracy.

The proposal gradually marshalled supporters, especially after the night of August 31-September 1, when the Italian submarine *Iride* attacked the British destroyer *Havock*, which it had mistaken for a Spanish government vessel. Potential British or French counter-attacks against Italian submarines could spark a war, and neither the French nor

Riservato, 72/463/R-6, Contributo della Regia Marina alle operazioni O.M.S. dal 1 dicembre 1936 al 19 gennaio 1937. Another file contains a letter sent to Ciano, and forwarded from Ciano to Mussolini, suggesting that intelligence sources knew the rendezvous of a Soviet destroyer with a cargo ship carrying twenty-five tanks, 30 artillery pieces, four aircraft, and two hundred Soviet military advisors. The Spanish Nationalist Embassy had asked the Italian government to order Italian submarines to torpedo the destroyer. The letter asked for special permission to carry out the attack, as Mussolini had previously ordered Italian submarines to suspend such attacks. Unfortunately, that file does not contain Mussolini's response to the request. ASMAE, US 233, Appunto per S. E. Il Ministro, 18 March 1937. Another document implies that Mussolini had ordered the cessation of attacks on 18 February 1937. US 19, Promemoria, 25 March 1937.

⁷⁷ PREM 1/360, Ismay (War Office) to Chamberlain, 18 August 1937. FO 371 21357, W15727/23/41, Meeting of Ministers, 17 August 1937.

British governments were prepared to risk that outcome. The role of the Nyon conference, therefore, was to head off continued Italian submarine attacks without publicly naming Italy as the offending party. Even after Whitehall learned that Ciano had ordered the attacks to cease on 4 September, the conference went ahead as a public relations exercise.⁷⁸ Accordingly, the Western democracies invited Italian participation at the conference. Ciano was initially prepared to accept this formal offer, but the Soviet Union interceded, publicly accusing Italy of having carried out the attacks. Ciano, after consulting with Mussolini and the Wilhelmstrasse, refused to take part owing to the Soviet's "sabotage" of the conference.⁷⁹ Britain and France proceeded, apparently moving forthrightly to protect shipping in the Mediterranean.⁸⁰ As Eden described British policy, "In any retreat there must be an occasional counterattack, and the correct method to counterattack is to do so against the weakest member of the three in overwhelming force."

⁷⁸ For more on the origins of the conference, and, especially, the intelligence aspects, see: Dilks, "Appeasement and 'Intelligence,'" pp. 144-5; and Vice Admiral Sir P. Gretton, "The Nyon Conference - the naval aspect,' *European History Review*. XC (1975), pp. 103-12. The German Foreign Ministry informed the Italians that Britain had broken Italian naval cyphers, but Ciano appears to have taken no action in this regard. *DGFP, D, III*, #418, von Neurath to von Hassel, 12 September 1937, p. 433.

⁷⁹ *CHD*, 6, 8, September 1937, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁰ For more detail on the Nyon conference, see: Pratt, pp. 89-92; William C. Mills, "The Nyon Conference: Neville Chamberlain, Anthony Eden, and the Appeasement of Italy in 1937." *International History Review*. 15.1 (February 1993), pp. 1-22.

That is the justification of Nyon.”⁸¹ He blunted his allegedly sharp riposte to Italy’s attacks, however, through his insistence on two cardinal points: the conference should not allow the Soviet Union a presence in the Mediterranean, and it should not alienate Italy.⁸² Seeing that Italy’s refusal to attend had not prevented the conference’s decision on Mediterranean patrols, Ciano convinced Mussolini that Italy should take on a patrol zone under the Nyon regime, provided it had a position of parity with Britain and France.⁸³ Somewhat optimistically, Ciano crowed that Italy had earned a “fine victory. From suspected pirates to policemen of the Mediterranean - and the Russians, whose ships we were sinking, excluded.”⁸⁴ Despite the element of bravado in this claim, it held considerable truth. Italy had prevented Soviet shipments from reaching Spain, and the Soviet Union did not resume shipping supplies until October; the Italian piracy, therefore, despite its limited operation, did serve to give Franco some breathing room. Furthermore, Mussolini decided in the aftermath of Nyon to dispatch four more submarines with Italian personnel to the Spanish Nationalists to allow them to interdict supplies closer to Spain. He also increased the shipment of Italian planes and advisors to Spain. The Nyon

⁸¹ The University of Birmingham Library, Avon Papers, AP13/1/58M, Note by the Secretary of State at Geneva, 14 September 1937.

⁸² PREM 1/360, Eden to Chamberlain, 14 September 1937. The University of Birmingham Library, Avon Papers, AP13/1/58P, Eden to the King, 23 September 1937.

⁸³ ASMAE, GAB #28, Ciano to Grandi, Cerruti, and Viola (Salamanca), 19 September 1937.

⁸⁴ *CHD*, 21 September 1937, p. 15.

conference, therefore, did little to hamper Mussolini's drive toward a Nationalist victory in Spain.⁸⁵

Despite this small victory, it did have a cost. Mussolini's reckless piracy tossed aside his chance to secure *de jure* recognition, at least in the short term. His determination to win the war in Spain was, in Mussolini's eyes, far more important than any mere agreement with Great Britain. He could not, however, endlessly provoke Britain without some consequences. His Mediterranean adventures meant that it was impossible for Britain to bring the question of *de jure* recognition to the League of Nations, and so Mussolini lost the chance to secure that objective in September. The death of Drummond's half-brother gave Whitehall a convenient excuse to delay the return of their Ambassador, newly called Lord Perth, to Rome until after the League meeting.⁸⁶

While Britain and Italy jostled over negotiations and piracy, Ciano tried to further Italy's influence in the Balkans and in the Far East. In August, Italy signed a commercial accord with Hungary. Italy made some relatively minor concessions regarding preferential treatment in clearing arrangements, exports, and tourism, in an effort to convince the

⁸⁵ ASMAE, US 2, Appunto per Sua Eccellenza il Ministro, 9 October 1937, GAB #30, Ciano to Viola, date missing. *DGFP, D, I, #2*, von Bülow-Schwante Memorandum, 2 October 1937.

⁸⁶ ASMAE, GAB #26, Appunto per il Duce, 27 August 1937. SAP - G.B., B. 26, Grandi to Ciano, 31 August 1937. For the calculated use of Perth's family situation to delay having to treat with Italy, see FO 371 21161, R5928/1/22, Sargent to Perth, 28 August 1937, Perth to Sargent, 30 August 1937, Sargent Minute, 6 September 1937, Vansittart Minute, 7 September 1937.

Gömbös regime of Italian friendship toward Hungary.⁸⁷ Ciano was also successful at promoting negotiations for an agreement between the Little Entente powers and Hungary, as he subordinated any Italo-Rumanian discussions to a prior Rumanian agreement with Hungary. Rumania, therefore, was prepared to make considerable concessions regarding removing the Trianon Treaty's limits on Hungarian arms. In addition, the three countries of the Little Entente were prepared to accept Hungary's adherence to the Kellogg Pact as constituting its guarantee of non-aggression, so Hungary assumed no new obligations towards the Little Entente. The talks broke down, however, over Hungary's insistence on generous minority rights, which the Rumanian negotiators refused to grant. Still, Ciano hoped to be able to remove this roadblock, and, eventually, to bring Rumania into a pro-Italian bloc with Hungary and Yugoslavia.⁸⁸ Such an arrangement would further enhance Italian power and prestige in Southeast Europe, and would continue the dismantling of the Little Entente begun with the Italo-Yugoslav Accord.

Even more importantly, events in the Far East gave Ciano a chance to rally Japan to an anti-Bolshevik and anti-British coalition. In early 1937, European events dominated Italian foreign policy, and the Far East was relatively quiet. Rome was concerned primarily

⁸⁷ ASMAE, Ungheria, B. 19, Ciano to Vinci (Budapest), 2 August 1937.

⁸⁸ ASMAE, SAP - Ungheria, B. 19, Sola (Bucharest) to Ciano, 31 August 1937, Ciano to Attolico, Vinci (Budapest), and Sola (Bucharest), 11 September 1937, Bova Scoppa (Geneva) to Ciano, 17, 23 September 1937, Capece (Bucharest) to Ciano, 20 October 1937, *DGFP, C, VI*, #543, von Hassell to von Neurath, 2 September 1937, pp. 1048-9.

to ensure that both Chinese Nationalists and the Japanese focussed on fighting Chinese communism and, by extension, the Soviet Union. As long as both parties maintained their anti-Communist aims, then Italy would not have to sacrifice its potential political and commercial development with either.⁸⁹ During the first six months of 1937, the Palazzo Chigi and the Gaimushō made only sporadic attempts to improve relations, as Giacinto Auriti, Italy's Ambassador in Tokyo, believed that it would be necessary to establish close cultural and economic arrangements before any substantive Italo-Japanese political rapprochement would be possible.

In May, however, Hirota Kōki, the Foreign Minister in a new and more aggressive Japanese Cabinet, spoke to Auriti on several occasions about the need to strengthen Japan's ties to Italy.⁹⁰ Ciano followed up these overtures, suggesting to Sugimara that it would be useful for Japan and Italy to reach an anti-Comintern accord, but Sugimara demurred, citing the negative effects for Japan in its dealings with Britain and the United States.⁹¹ In June, Captain Chiapparo, the Italian Air Attaché to the Chinese Nationalist government at Nanking, recommended liquidating Italy's air mission in China. The Soviet Union had dispatched some 1,800 relatively modern aircraft to the Chinese Nationalists, and the latter had established clear air superiority over Japanese forces. Given Japan's

⁸⁹ Valdo Ferretti, "La politica estera italiana e il Giappone imperiale (gennaio 1934-giugno 1937)." *Storia contemporanea*. 10.4/5 (October 1979), p. 921.

⁹⁰ ASMAE, SAP - Giappone, B. 18, Auriti to Ciano, 5, 25 May 1937.

⁹¹ *DGFP*, C, VI, #38, von Hassell to von Neurath, 26 May 1937, pp. 739 40.

marked inferiority, it would be more profitable, Chiapparò argued, to concentrate on giving technical aid to the Japanese.⁹² Eventually, Hirota dispatched a letter dated 3 July 1937 to Mussolini, carried by Hotta Masaki, Japan's new Ambassador to Italy. The letter spoke of the possibility of bringing Italy into the anti-Comintern Pact. Such an accord would include a secret clause allowing for "technical collaboration in the military sphere," plus possible Japanese arms purchases from the technologically more advanced Italians. The Japanese military also wanted aid from Italian naval and air missions. In the political realm, it would help both powers in their various confrontations with the Soviet Union and Britain.⁹³

A chance occurrence in the Far East gave tremendous impetus to these previously halting steps toward tighter Italo-Japanese relations. On 7 July 1937, while Hirota's letter was still in transit, Japan and the Chinese Nationalists renewed their war in Northern China. A confused small-unit engagement at the Marco Polo bridge on that day led to wider fighting, as both the Japanese Government and Chiang Kai-Shek believed the time opportune to solve the issue of Japan's status in Manchuria and China by force.⁹⁴ Ciano

⁹² ASMAE, Giappone, B. 18, Chiapparò to Ministero dell' Aeronautica and Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 6 June 1937.

⁹³ ASMAE, UC 53, UC 84, GAB 26, CDP, pp. 130-131, Hirota to Ciano, 3 July 1937, delivered 31 July 1937.

⁹⁴ For more on the various military and economic issues, as well as public opinion considerations, see: Akira Iriye, *The Origins of World War II in Asia and the Pacific*. London: Longmans, 1987, pp. 41-2; and Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera italiana, 1935-41*, pp. 145-6.

initially tried to remain neutral and to act as a mediator. Neither side, however, was prepared to accept such help. Ciano had to face, therefore, the problem of Italy's air mission to the Chinese Nationalists. Even if it did not take part in combat, the mission was incompatible with Italy's declared friendship towards the Japanese government. On 17 July, Sugimara, as one of his last official acts in Rome, raised this issue with Ciano. The latter assured Sugimara that the mission was purely commercial and would not take part in combat, but that, given Italy's friendship toward Japan, it would be useful to reconsider Italian policy and the mission's continued presence in China.⁹⁵

As Hotta delivered Hirota's letter to Ciano on 31 July, the Ambassador argued even more strongly about the need for an anti-Comintern pact and military and technical co-operation. Immediately thereafter, Ciano spoke to Mussolini about Italian policy in the Far East. The Duce decided to proceed on the basis of the Japanese proposals. Ciano thought that Japan's regard for the Italian military was flattering and the economic aspects of an agreement would be useful, but the Duce's prime consideration was Italy's foreign policy and its various alliances around the world. Ciano wrote to Grandi in London to sound out the latter's views on Britain's reaction to an Italo-Japanese accord. Would Italy be able to carry out talks toward Britain's *de jure* recognition of the Ethiopian conquest

⁹⁵ ASMAE, GAB 26, Appunto per il Duce, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Giappone, 19 July 1936. For more detail, see Michael R. Godley, "Fascismo e nazionalismo cinese, 1931-1938. Note preliminari allo studio dei rapporti italo-cinese durante il periodo fascista." *Storia contemporanea*. 4.4 (dicembre 1973), pp. 772-3.

simultaneously with negotiations with Japan? Would such talks serve to alienate Britain, or would they serve to coerce Britain to come to an agreement with Italy? Both men agreed that such talks in the short term would likely damage Italy's chances of securing *de jure* recognition. Grandi supported the Japanese initiative, but thought that it seemed prudent to move slowly until after the September meeting of the League of Nations at which Chamberlain intended to raise the question of recognition.⁹⁶

These questions proved moot, however, as the ever shifting political alignments in Japanese politics led the Cabinet to back away from the proposed agreement. Japanese parliamentarians feared that an open agreement with Italy could drag the Japanese into a war with Great Britain.⁹⁷ Despite this rather abrupt rejection, Ciano continued to move Italian policy toward closer ties with Japan. The Chinese Nationalist government hastened these changes in Italian policy when it signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. Ciano was incensed. He denied any further Chinese requests for Italian military shipments, and told Hotta that, in future, Italy would send no more military supplies of any kind to the Chinese Nationalists. Instead, he would look very favourably on Japanese requests for

⁹⁶ ASMAE, UC 53, Ciano to Grandi, 2 August 1937, Grandi to Ciano, 5 August 1937.

⁹⁷ Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera italiana, 1935-41*, pp. 166. See also ASMAE, SAP - Giappone, B. 18, Il Capitano di Vascello to Ciano, 30 September 1937. For Auriti's perceptions of the complicated relationship between the Japanese parliament, the Gaimushō, and the various factions of the military, see ASMAE, SAP - Giappone, B. 18, Auriti to Ciano, 3 July 1937.

aid.⁹⁸ By September, Ciano had virtually ruptured relations with Chinese Nationalists, with whom he had had such close ties only a few months before. He spoke of his confidence in Japan's imminent victory in China and in the common anti-Bolshevik struggle which they carried out: Italy in Spain and Japan in China.⁹⁹

It is interesting to note the marked differences between Italian and German policy in the Far East. Although it was Germany which had signed an anti-Comintern pact with Japan, and not Italy, Germany lagged far behind Italy in its support for Japan. Germany's primary interest lay in protecting its economic influence in China. It supplied military advisors and war matériel to China in exchange for raw materials. Paradoxically, Germany sought Japan's friendship at the same time that it armed Japan's greatest foe.¹⁰⁰ After the Marco Polo bridge incident, Germany stopped shipping supplies to China only after extremely vigorous protests from by the Japanese Ambassador. Germany refused to accept that Japan's war in China was an anti-Bolshevik struggle at all. Though Hitler decided that Germany would be officially neutral, it would not withdraw its military advisors, as von Neurath feared that Soviet advisors would quickly replace the departing German ones. In short, German officials believed that the Japanese war in China would serve primarily to increase Bolshevik penetration there. Germany, far from supporting its

⁹⁸ ASMAE, SAP - Cina, B. 61, Ciano to Consolato Shanghai, 26 August 1937. *CHD*, 23, 27 August 1937, pp. 3, 5.

⁹⁹ *CHD*, 16 September 1937, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ *DGFP*, C, VI, #162, Trautmann (Nanking) to von Neurath, 27 January 1937, pp. 341-50.

purported anti-Bolshevik ally, strongly criticised it. Germany's sole involvement was to offer to serve as a mediator if the two belligerents decided to carry out armistice talks.¹⁰¹ As a result, the only serious foreign policy disagreement between Germany and Italy during 1937 occurred over Italy's far more aggressive and pro-Japanese posture in the Far East.

At the end of September, Mussolini and Ciano visited Berlin. The trip was relatively uneventful; the German government refused to sign any agreements that were not strictly anodyne. It served primarily as a public relations exercise showing the solidarity of the Axis. In von Neurath's view, Mussolini's major aim was to ensure that neither Germany nor Italy would conclude a separate agreement with either Britain or France. On the German side, von Neurath sought Mussolini's agreement to even greater German encroachment on Austrian independence; Mussolini guaranteed that he would not impede German "special interests" in the ostensibly independent country.¹⁰² After his return, Ciano, in one of his rare moments of introspection, noted how closely he had associated Rome with Berlin.

No one can accuse me of being hostile to the pro-German policy. I initiated it myself. But should we, I wonder, regard

¹⁰¹ *DGFP, D, I, #469*, Dirksen (Tokyo) to von Neurath, 217 July 1937, p. 740. #472, von Neurath to Dirksen (Tokyo), 28 July 1937, pp. 742-4. #478, von Neurath Memorandum, 17 August 1937, p. 750.

¹⁰² *DGFP, C, VI, #568*, von Hassell to von Weizsäcker, 1 October 1937, pp. 1086-9. *DGFP, D, I, #1*, von Neurath to all German Diplomatic Missions in Europe and to the Consulate General at Geneva, 30 September 1937, pp. 1-2.

Germany as a goal, or rather as a field for manoeuvre? The incidents of the last few days and above all Mussolini's fidelity to his political allegiance make me incline towards the first alternative. But may not events develop in such a way as to separate our two peoples once again?

We shall see. The Rome-Berlin Axis is to-day a formidable and extremely useful reality. I shall try to draw a line from Rome to Tokyo, and the system will be complete.¹⁰³

The real effect of Mussolini's visit, however, was psychological. German officials feted Mussolini throughout, and adoring crowds showered him with applause. He lauded Germany for its support during the sanctions episode, and announced with fateful words, "We shall never forget." German army manoeuvres, parades, and a tour of the Krupp works in Essen convinced the Duce of the renaissance of German power. He sensed that Hitler, far from being the clownish figure that Mussolini had thought on their first meeting, represented instead a man of destiny such as Mussolini fancied himself. The Axis represented a fatalistic partnership of two men, and two countries destined for glory. Though Ciano speculated that the German and Italian peoples might part ways in the future, that occurrence was unlikely after German strength beguiled Mussolini.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ *CHD*, 29 September 1937, p. 16.

¹⁰⁴ Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, pp. 281-3. Weinberg based his argument on part on Filippo Anfuso's memoirs. Though Anfuso's memoirs, like so many of those written by Italian participants in the events of the 1930s and 1940s are often tendentious, there is little reason to disbelieve Anfuso's argument; it did nothing to exonerate Anfuso in the eyes of an anti-fascist post-war public. Filippo Anfuso, *Da Palazzo Venezia al Lago di Garda (1936-1945)*. Bologna: Capelli, 1957. Mussolini's former mistress held

After his return to Rome, Ciano continued to try to convince the reluctant Japanese government to reach an anti-Comintern agreement with Italy. On 3 October, he directed Auriti to determine the exact stance of the Konoe Cabinet's attitudes towards negotiations with Italy. For his part, Ciano was prepared to conclude a pact on the following bases: a public anti-Bolshevik accord analogous to the German and Japanese anti-Comintern Pact, and a secret protocol indicating at worst neutrality in the event of conflicts with a third party, with a codicil calling for mutual consultation and in certain cases limited technical support in the event of war.¹⁰⁵ After more than two weeks passed, the Japanese Ambassador in Rome apologised to Ciano for the delay. He said that Japan was interested in an accord with Italy, but that Germany had raised the possibility of an Italo-German-Japanese pact. Mussolini quickly agreed, and, on 23 October, he decided to join the already existing anti-Comintern Pact, provided that Italy entered in a position of parity with the other two powers.¹⁰⁶

After a brief diplomatic preparation, Italy signed on to the prior German-Japanese pact on 6 November 1937 in Rome. Mussolini and Ciano had two primary aims. The first, and most obvious, was anti-Bolshevik. The briefing notes prepared by the Palazzo Chigi

a similar perception. Philip Cannistraro and Brian R. Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman*. New York: Morrow, 1993, p. 504.

¹⁰⁵ ASMAE, GAB 28, Ciano to Auriti, 3 October 1937.

¹⁰⁶ *CHD*, 22 October 1937, pp. 23-4. ASMAE, UC 53, *Appunto per il Duce*, 20 October 1937. *Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Giappone*, 23 October 1937.

emphasised that anti-Bolshevik did not necessarily mean anti-Soviet. As long as the Soviet Union did not try to expand its power, neither Mussolini nor Ciano bore it any especial ill-will. In Spain and in China, however, Italy and Japan respectively were fighting against what Mussolini saw as Soviet-sponsored movements. He was not willing to see Bolshevik expansion in Western Europe or against Italy's new Asian ally.¹⁰⁷ More importantly, however, Mussolini and Ciano directed the pact against Great Britain; as Ciano wrote, the tripartite accord was "anti-Communist in theory but in practice unmistakably anti-British." He expected that the weight of the three powers would force Britain "to reconsider her position everywhere." Ciano was not merely contemplating applying pressure to Britain to concede *de jure* recognition. He believed that the new pact created the "most formidable political and military combination that has ever existed." The three powers were embarking on a course which could lead them to war to "break through the crust which is stifling the energy and aspirations of the young nations." The ultimate enemy of all three powers was, in both Mussolini's and Ciano's eyes, the decadent British empire.¹⁰⁸

The signing of the tripartite anti-Comintern Pact provided the opportunity for a wide-ranging discussion between Hitler's emissary, von Ribbentrop, and the Duce. They

¹⁰⁷ ASMAE, SAP - Giappone, B. 17, Ufficio #5, Segreto, N. 50, L'accordo-italo-nippo-tedesco contro l'internazionale comunista, 6 November 1937. For a published English language version, see *DGFP, D, I*, #17, Protocol, 6 November 1937, pp. 26-7.

¹⁰⁸ *OO, XLII*, Mussolini to Vittorio Emanuele, 4 October 1937. *CHD*, 1, 2, 6 November 1937, pp. 27, 28-9.

expressed mutual hopes that Franco's Aragon campaign would bring a quick end to the Spanish war. If, however, some new force were to threaten to delay Franco's victory, then Mussolini was prepared to commit new *Regio Esercito* units. The major problem, in the Duce's point of view, was that Britain would come around to supporting Franco. This potential manoeuvre posed two threats. First, Italy had invested many lire and lives in Franco's victory, and Italians would "want to be and have to be paid." Only if Nationalist Spain remained in the Axis orbit would that repayment occur. Second, Franco's Foreign Minister displayed alarmingly Anglophile tendencies. The Duce's plans needed a Spain hostile to the Western democracies, so Italy and Germany both would have to work to attach Franco ever more tightly to fascist politics. Further, Mussolini hoped to be able to maintain the Italian air and naval bases in the Balearics as long as possible, and well beyond Franco's ultimate victory. They offered Italy the best chance to defeat France's strategy of *la guerre de longue durée*; the Duce believed that France would not be able to transport one colonial soldier past Italy's military blockade as long as it was based on Majorca. Mussolini also hoped that Franco would soon adhere to the anti-Comintern pact, with potentially serious consequences for both France's and Britain's strategic positions. Likewise, Mussolini thought that he had the measure of Britain. In the imminent war between the Axis and the West, the major Italian land war would occur in the desert. There, he argued, Italy had the advantage, as Westminster had no stomach for conscription. He boasted of having sent six divisions to Libya, which he thought would paralyse the British Cabinet because, in his view, British troops in Egypt would inevitably be outnumbered, and could not in any event stand up to desert conditions. In short,

though the time was not then ripe for the next war, as neither Germany nor Italy had sufficiently re-armed, Mussolini fully expected that, when the time came, the Axis would have a decisive advantage in the Mediterranean theatre.¹⁰⁹

While Ciano secured his tripartite association, the British government renewed its attempts to lessen Italy's confrontations with the empire. On 1 October, Chamberlain approved a telegram to Perth suggesting that the Ambassador approach Ciano to determine whether or not Italy was prepared to discuss the outstanding issues in the Near and Middle East and in Libya. Owing to British public opinion, Whitehall was unwilling to discuss the question of *de jure* recognition at that time. It offered instead a rather vague *quid pro quo* of exchanging limited military information in an effort to lessen tension. The next day, Britain and France also made a démarche to try to begin tripartite discussions regarding the withdrawal of Italian volunteers from Spain.¹¹⁰ Ciano initially reserved judgement on the proposals, but he rejected the Anglo-French one a few days later. His primary objection was that he did not want to appear to be involved in any discussions without German delegates present. Given Ciano's reservations, the Anglo-French initiative died a quick death. The Foreign Minister did, however, make a moderately conciliatory response to Perth; Ciano sought the resumption of negotiations toward an Anglo-Italian

¹⁰⁹ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio Duce - Ciano - von Ribbentrop, 6 November 1937. See also UC 46, though this copy is missing five pages.

¹¹⁰ ASMAE, GAB 26, Appunto per il Duce, 2 October 1937. FO 371 20781, E5804/872/91, Eden to Perth, 1 October 1937.

agreement. He would not proceed, however, until Britain agreed to put the question of *de jure* recognition back into play, and, at that time, Whitehall refused to consider that concession owing to the tense political climate.¹¹¹

Despite this dilatory renewal of negotiations, there was virtually no chance of a genuine Anglo-Italian rapprochement, for that was not Mussolini's desire. While Ciano was telling Perth that Mussolini wanted better relations, the Duce sought a new issue to create tension in Italy's relations with Britain. He decided on the question of alleged British re-armament in Egypt. When Ciano replied that these armaments existed only on paper, Mussolini admitted that he knew, but that he needed a "subject for dispute at the right moment." Mussolini gave Ciano virtual *carte blanche* in waging war in Spain and in reaching an agreement with the Japanese; Mussolini no longer feared alienating the British. As he told Ciano, "Either they [Britain and France] refuse to recognise us, and we are free to act. Or they recognise us and we are equally free, because of the Fascist rule that once a thing is done it's done." In Mussolini's view, the decadent British would not react strongly, as there were two million more women than men, and twelve million subjects over the age of fifty, "the age limit for bellicosity." Britain's population, therefore, consisted of those who favoured a "static" life rather than "the dynamic elements of youth." Against such weakness, Italy could afford to take a high hand.¹¹² In light of Mussolini's rejection of the British and French proposals, Ciano remarked that it was

¹¹¹ *CHD*, 9, 15 October 1937, pp. 19, 21.

¹¹² Quoted in *CHD*, 2, 3 September 1937, pp. 7-8, 8-9.

“enough to make one speculate about the decline of the British and French peoples. The moment will come, it has perhaps already come, when we shall stake all on the final throw.”¹¹³

Faced with an apparently increasing Italian threat in the Mediterranean, Chamberlain sought to reinvigorate the drive for an Anglo-Italian rapprochement. British strategic policy could not succeed given the tripartite cabal of Italy, Germany, and Japan, and Chamberlain and most Whitehall officials hoped to subtract at least one of these powers from the list of putative enemies. It appeared that Italy might be the easiest to placate, at least as seen from London, so despite Eden’s reservations, Britain would not close any path to compromise. Foreign Office officials still maintained four major goals: to remove the threat of Italian troops in Libya, to end the Italian occupation of the Balearics, to get Italian troops out of Spain, and to convince Mussolini to cease Italian propaganda in the Middle East.¹¹⁴ Eden offered to meet Ciano during the forthcoming Brussels conference, during which the nine signatories of the 1922 Washington Naval Conference would seek to mediate between China and Japan. Eden hoped that he and Ciano could clear the air. Ciano was initially disposed to accept. Mussolini vetoed the idea, as he did

¹¹³ *CHD*, 14 October 1937, pp. 20-1.

¹¹⁴ FO 371 21162, R7339/1/22, Nichols Memorandum, 25 October 1937. FO 371 20819, E6462/22/31, Rendel Minute, 28 October 1937, R6569/22/31, Kelly (Cairo) to Eden, 27 October 1937. For an example of Eden’s objections, see FO 371 21162, R7536/1/22, Cranborne Minute, Eden Minute, 16 November 1937. FO 371 21163, R8100/1/22, Lampson, 27 November 1937.

not want to see such a meeting fail for lack of diplomatic preparation, and he resented the association of the League of Nations with the conference.¹¹⁵ In London, Grandi used some rather disingenuous tactics to try to give some impetus to negotiations. He insisted that Germany was placing great pressure on Italy to sign an alliance. If that document were signed, then Italy would have no longer any need to preserve Austria as a buffer, and Austrian independence would be sacrificed on the altar of German friendship. Grandi argued that Britain needed to grant *de jure* recognition of Italy's Ethiopian Empire and to make concessions regarding Spain immediately in order to avoid such an occurrence.¹¹⁶ Grandi also used the secret channel to out-manoeuvre Eden. He held several conversations with Joseph Ball; he argued that the tripartite anti-Comintern pact proved the bankruptcy of Eden's foreign policy. Chamberlain, Ball said, agreed with that appreciation.¹¹⁷

Grandi fundamentally misunderstood British policy, however, despite his close contacts with Chamberlain, and he fed this misunderstanding back to Ciano. In Grandi's view, the British and French had developed a close military alliance. The Quai d'Orsay and the Popular Front were ready to attack Italy at any time, and French politicians tried to exploit every sign of tension between Italy and Britain in order to prevent any rapprochement. Up to that point, Britain had always adhered to its alliance with France, though it always refused at the last minute to follow France into war. The result of this

¹¹⁵ *CHD*, 28, 29 October 1937, 11, 12 November 1937, pp. 25-6, 26, 31, 31.

¹¹⁶ FO 371 21162, R7419/1/22, Leeper Minute, 6 November 1937.

¹¹⁷ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/3, Grandi to Ciano, 9 November 1937.

pernicious French influence was that many people in Britain saw Italy as public enemy number one. In light of this analysis, Grandi strongly supported Mussolini's attempts to extort concessions from Britain.¹¹⁸ His tactics, however, served largely to give Eden more evidence of Italian ill-will toward Britain, and, therefore, to prevent Britain from negotiating with Italy.

Despite the delays in negotiations caused by these disreputable Italian tactics, Chamberlain would not let the chance for Anglo-Italian talks pass, and he met with Grandi on several occasions. Chamberlain, through Ball, said that Britain would not place any prior conditions upon negotiations. In addition, the Prime Minister indicated his keen desire to bring about a genuine rapprochement.¹¹⁹ Ciano hoped that Grandi could meet Chamberlain officially and convince the Prime Minister to override Eden's objections. Grandi was bound by diplomatic protocol to secure Eden's permission to pay an official visit to the Prime Minister, and Eden, aware of Chamberlain's inclinations, refused to grant such permission. Instead, he declared to Grandi that Italy would first have to cease its anti-British propaganda as a goodwill gesture. Without this precondition, Eden argued, His Majesty's Government would not be able to consider *de jure* recognition.¹²⁰ In short, the two countries had reached an impasse, Britain would not start conversations without a

¹¹⁸ ASMAE, UC 53, Grandi to Ciano, 11 November 1937.

¹¹⁹ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 66, fasc. 158/1, B. 40, fasc. 93/3, 16 November 1937.

¹²⁰ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 66, fasc. 158/1, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 4 December 1937. FO 371 21163, R799/1/22, Eden conversation with Grandi, 2 December 1937.

conciliatory gesture on Mussolini's part, and Mussolini was determined that the best path to achieving recognition of the Italian empire lay through threatening Britain. This mutual incomprehension effectively prevented any substantive progress for the rest of December. As a result, Ciano thought that Italians "had better sharpen our swords."¹²¹

Even though Mussolini still sought a limited agreement with Britain, he maintained his attitude of outright hostility to France. Italy and France continued to fight their virtual proxy war in Spain, as the French government allowed torrents of supplies and volunteers to reach Spain.¹²² But the rift went far deeper than that, as Mussolini refused to consider any kind of reasonable discussions with France in order to end the tension. Instead, he directed Ciano to concentrate his efforts to ensure that France would have no part of any Anglo-Italian rapprochement. Instead, Mussolini wanted an "attitude of strict severity in [Italy's] confrontation with France."¹²³ He decided, therefore, to withdraw the Italian Ambassador from Paris both as a reprisal for the absence of a French Ambassador in Rome and to show his disdain for the French. Cerruti left his post on 31 October 1937. After Cerruti arrived back in Rome, he rather daringly criticized Mussolini's policies which had convinced Frenchmen that Italy represented its greatest threat. Mussolini replied that the French did him "a great honour. I want to be feared and hated, rather than tolerated or

¹²¹ *CHD*, 24 December 1937, pp. 48-9.

¹²² *ASMAE*, US 229, Ciano to Cerruti, 6 August 1937.

¹²³ *ASMAE*, GAB 28, Ciano to Grandi, 17 October 1937.

protected.” Bombast aside, he clearly had no interest in cultivating better relations with France.¹²⁴

Mussolini’s withdrawal from the League of Nations gave another signal of his contempt for the Western democracies. In late October, he announced to Ciano that he wanted “an unexpected” meeting of the Fascist Grand Council to declare Italy’s withdrawal from the League on 18 November, the second anniversary of sanctions. Mussolini wavered over the precise details. He thought at one point that it would be sufficient to send a telegram to the “Secretary of the moth-eaten League.” In the end, he decided on the full ceremony of the Grand Council, and, on 11 December he notified the League of his decision to leave.¹²⁵ Mussolini’s action had the appropriate effects in the West. As the French Chargé d’Affaires in Rome correctly interpreted the deed, Mussolini was annoyed by the League’s refusal to recognise the conquest of Ethiopia. It displayed his hostility toward France, and showed his solidarity with the other *bêtes noires* of the League, Germany and Japan.¹²⁶

In furthering Italy’s confrontation with the Western democracies, Ciano continued to work to create a coalition of states hostile to Britain. Accordingly, Italy quickly proved its loyalty to its Japanese partner in the aftermath of the anti-Comintern agreement. The

¹²⁴ Quoted in *CHD*, 11, 12, 31 October 1937, 17 November 1937, pp. 19, 19-20, 27, 34.

¹²⁵ *CHD*, 25 October 1937, pp. 24-5, 22, 24, 25 November 1937, pp. 36, 36-7, 37, 11 December 1937, p. 43.

¹²⁶ *DDF*, 2, VII, #326, Blondel to Delbos, 9 December 1937, pp. 645-6.

Japanese Cabinet was willing, eventually, to negotiate with Chiang Kai-Shek's government to end the Manchurian war, but would not do so through the intermediaries of the Nine-Power conference at Brussels. Japan preferred first to establish a clear military superiority over the Chinese Nationalist army before any negotiations could take place. Consequently, Ambassador Hotta asked Ciano if he would be willing to prevent the conference from taking any effective action. Mussolini and Ciano, naturally, obliged. Ciano told Auriti that Italy would simply refuse to attend the conference, which Ciano believed would scupper it.¹²⁷ Ambassador Hotta instead asked Ciano to send an Italian delegation, as Italy could better work from within the conference in "obstructing decisions hostile to Japan." The head of the Italian delegation, Count Luigi Aldrovandi-Marescotti annoyed Mussolini by voting on 7 November to issue a second invitation to Japan to attend. Ciano quickly interceded to put Aldrovandi on the proper obscurantist track. From then on, the Italian delegation worked to prevent the member nations from carrying out any effective intervention. As Ciano noted in his diary, "Nothing could be more dangerous than to fall for this technique of collective security. If your finger gets caught in the machine you could lose your whole arm." Italy voted down a strongly worded motion condemning Japan, and the conference failed to make any headway toward ending the Sino-Japanese fighting.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ ASMAE, GAB 26, Appunto per il Duce, Ciano to Auriti, 7 November 1937.

¹²⁸ CHD, 7, 12, 14, 16 November 1937, pp. 29, 31, 32, 33. For more detail, see Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera italiana, 1935-41*, pp. 192-9.

Ciano continued to cultivate Japanese friendship during November. On 14 November, Hotta told Ciano that the Japanese Cabinet was prepared to recognise Franco's regime as the legal government of Spain. As a tacit *quid pro quo*, Hotta asked whether or not Italy would be willing to recognise the Japanese conquest of Manchuria. Mussolini had no objection, but wanted to co-ordinate the recognition with Berlin. In response to the Italian query, von Neurath said that Germany was unprepared to do so, as it hoped to maintain a policy of equidistance between Nationalist China and Japan. Still, he gave Italy a free hand to determine its own path. Mussolini, who had abandoned any pretence of neutrality, decided to recognise the Japanese conquest, despite the obvious repercussions that this policy would have in Sino-Japanese relations. On 28 November, Ciano informed Hotta that Italy would act, and the Italian Foreign Minister made the announcement public on 12 December.¹²⁹ Another example of Italy's attempts to curry favour with Japan occurred the same day as Ciano told Hotta of the Italian decision to recognise Manchuria. The Italian Consul, Alberto Perego, in yet another example of the Italian penetration of British security, had stolen the plans for the British base at Singapore. Mussolini ordered Ciano to give the Japanese Ambassador a set of the plans, which he did a few days later. As he did so, Ciano declared that his next goal was to sign a

¹²⁹ *CHD*, 14, 25, 26, 28 November 1937, pp. 32, 37, 37-8, 38-9. *DGFP*, *D*, *I*, #523, von Weizsacker Memorandum, 20 November 1937, pp. 784-5, #524, von Neurath Memorandum, 22 November 1937, pp. 785-6. *ASMAE*, *SAP - Giappone*, B. 17, Auriti to Ciano, 28, 30, November 1937.

military agreement with the Japanese General Staff, as, in his view, “that alone can decide the issue with England.”¹³⁰

In late December, Mussolini directed Ciano to make the anti-British nature of Italy’s policy completely clear to the Japanese Ambassador. Ciano wanted Japan to moderate its behaviour toward Washington, but to “be rougher toward Britain.” Mussolini cited two elements to his reasoning. First, Japan could drive a wedge between London and Washington in order to isolate Britain. Second, in the event of war between Japan and the United States, Italy could give little help to the Japanese effort. Against Britain, however, Italy would give Japan “the greatest possible assistance.” Ciano left unspoken the fact that the reverse was true. Japanese action against the United States did not further Italian aims, whereas a Japan hostile to Britain was an important strategic pillar for Italy.¹³¹ As Auriti understood Ciano’s policy in the Far East, it was primarily directed against Britain and France. It was necessary to court Japan as “our expansion cannot continue except at the expense of these two states.”¹³² Just as Ciano made this initiative, however, he learned that Japan had rejected Italian hopes to act as mediator between China and Japan. Instead, the Gaimushō accepted a German offer to do so because Italian relations with China were

¹³⁰ *CHD*, 28 November 1937, 1 December 1937, pp. 38-9, 39.

¹³¹ *CHD*., 25 December 1937, p. 49.

¹³² ASMAE, SAP - Giappone, B. 17, Auriti to Ciano, 22 November 1937.

so poor. Ciano, in a fit of pique, could only complain that Italy's relations with China were so poor precisely because Italy had gone to great lengths to be a loyal friend to Japan.¹³³

Despite this Japanese rebuff, Ciano did not waver in his loyalty to the tripartite anti-Comintern Pact. In the immediate aftermath of the decision, Ciano merely tried to convince Germany to abandon its neutrality in the Sino-Japanese war. He wrote to Massimo Magistrati, his brother-in-law and Counsellor at the Embassy in Berlin, directing him to see Göring, or perhaps von Ribbentrop or Göbbels, to demonstrate Italy's concern over Germany's "dangerous and absurd" policy in China. Ciano believed that, in effect, alleged German neutrality and its military missions there meant that Germany was making common cause with the Soviet Union in favour of China. He wanted Germany to recognise Manchuria immediately, and to order its military mission to end its support for Chiang Kai-Shek's forces. As Italy had already withdrawn its military mission and recognised Japan's conquest of Manchuria, Germany's policies represented the appearance of a strong divergence between the Axis partners.¹³⁴ Despite Ciano's request, Magistrati made no immediate headway in changing Berlin's policy.

As 1937 drew to a close, therefore, Mussolini and Ciano had moved Italy further towards a possible confrontation with the Western powers. Italy's relations with France

¹³³ *CHD*, 26 December 1937, pp. 49-50.

¹³⁴ *ASMAE*, UC 3, Ciano to Magistrati, 21 December 1937. For more detail on Italy's withdrawal of its military mission in China, see Godley, p. 776, Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera italiana, 1935-41*, pp. 208-9.

were so poor as to be almost non-existent. Mussolini bitterly resented French support for the Spanish government, and refused to make allowances for Italy's tremendous provocation in continuing to threaten France from the Balearics. Likewise, Mussolini directed his foreign policy against Britain. He hoped to be able to achieve an agreement with Chamberlain regarding *de jure* recognition of the Italian empire, but there was no prospect of a genuine Anglo-Italian rapprochement. Even after any agreement with Britain, he would not honour any promises; Mussolini expected to preserve a free hand in Libya, the Middle East, and Spain. Both Mussolini and Ciano thought that their perceived need for Italian expansion would eventually lead to a war with Britain. Their policy, therefore, aimed primarily to ensure that when this war occurred, Italy would fight it on the best possible terms. Italy's relations with Germany were, in contrast, excellent. Mussolini was ready to concede an enormous German dominance in Austria, which removed the greatest barrier of potential confrontation between the two Axis powers. Though Germany and Italy pursued slightly different aims in Spain, they continued to co-operate at a high level there, and both committed themselves to Franco's ultimate victory. Though they maintained a relatively friendly competition for influence in the Balkans, on most of the important diplomatic questions during the year, the Axis powers engaged in very close consultation. The only serious difference of opinion between Italy and Germany occurred over the Sino-Japanese war. Even then, it was Italy that took by far the more aggressive posture. It deliberately ruptured its relations with the Chinese Nationalists in order to court Japan. Italian adhesion to the anti-Comintern Pact was, in part, anti-Bolshevik. More importantly, however, both Mussolini and Ciano intended the pact to

operate primarily against Britain. They hoped that Japan's growing power in the Far East would fatally undermine Britain's strategic situation. In short, during 1937, Italy moved further into the embrace of the Axis, and into greater opposition to the West. In no way was Italian policy equidistant between London and Berlin.

Chapter 4: The Easter Accord and the Flourishing of the Axis

In early 1938, Mussolini and Ciano faced the threat of German annexation of Austria, as Hitler exploited Austrian Nazi agitation to further his pursuit of the Anschluss. He had outlined his desire to annex Austria the previous November in the infamous Hossbach memorandum, and thereafter German officials had repeatedly stressed that some form of German action against Austria was imminent. In an effort to accelerate potential action, Hitler's Minister in Vienna, Franz von Papen, had arranged a meeting between Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg and the Führer to be held some time around the end of January. In preparing manoeuvring room for this meeting, von Schuschnigg carried out two bold moves. He directed Austrian Police to raid the Vienna headquarters of the Austrian National Socialists, and arrested several Nazi members. Simultaneously, von Schuschnigg negotiated with Arthur Seyss-Inquart, whom the Chancellor believed was both a less radical member of the party, and whatever his fascist leanings, loyal to Austria. If von Schuschnigg could make an arrangement with Seyss-Inquart before meeting Hitler, then he could present a relatively calm domestic front, having alternately smashed extreme elements of the Austrian Nazis and brought others into the comparative fold of respectability. This plan was fatally flawed. Seyss-Inquart was not loyal to Austria, and betrayed von Schuschnigg's proposed concessions to Hitler. Extraneous domestic German matters delayed the meeting between the two leaders, but when von Schuschnigg

showed up at Berchtesgaden on 12 February, he faced a far different situation than he expected. Hitler demanded a set of concessions based on those that von Schuschnigg had already given to Seyss-Inquart, and created an aura of military ultimatum by summoning several senior military generals. Hitler's threats worked, and von Schuschnigg capitulated, agreeing to implement Hitler's demands within three days.¹

Hitler's brinksmanship did not especially worry either Mussolini or Ciano. As reports came in, they learned that Seyss-Inquart would control the public security forces, and the Austrian government would legalise the Nazi Party and grant amnesty to certain of its members. Pellegrino Ghigi, the Italian Minister in Vienna, reported that the Austrian Chancellor had made these concessions in the face of Hitler's threats. With the Austrian police under Nazi control, the initiative lay entirely in Hitler's hands. In essence, Ghigi argued, von Schuschnigg had capitulated.² Ciano thought that these events signalled the nazification of Austria. Mussolini concurred. The abrupt German move and the lack of notification did annoy Mussolini, but he had long since forfeited control of the situation. As Ciano noted, "The Anschluss is inevitable, the only thing to do is to delay the inevitable."³ Despite his private annoyance at Hitler's tactics, Mussolini supported the deal in public. He issued "Informazione Diplomatica #15," an official declaration of Italian policy. He rejected the current opinion that von Schuschnigg's concessions represented a

¹ Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, pp. 287-93. For more detail, see Jürgen Gehl, *Austria, Germany and the Anschluss, 1931-1938*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.

² ASMAE, UC 57, Ghigi to Ciano, 13, 14, 16 February 1938.

³ CHD, 11, 13, 14, 15 February 1938, pp. 73-5.

defeat for Italy. They were instead, he argued, a natural outgrowth of German, Italian, and Austrian relations as established by the 11 July 1936 agreement that Italy had approved. He condemned the “absurd” suggestions emanating from France that Austria could do anything other than co-operate with Germany.⁴

Hitler did not stop there, and the following month he carried out another of his foreign policy coups; he accomplished the Anschluss. In his efforts to maintain Austrian independence, Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg had made yet another critical error. At a meeting at Innsbruck on 9 March, he announced a plebiscite to occur four days hence. Every Austrian voter would have the chance to determine whether or not Austria would maintain its independence. Fully confident of victory, von Schuschnigg failed to consider that Hitler would not allow a plebiscite to thwart his expansionist ambitions. On 11 March, the Führer sent a special envoy to deliver his response to the Austrian government. This ultimatum called for the immediate dismissal of von Schuschnigg’s government and its replacement by a Seyss-Inquart administration, plus the cancellation of the plebiscite. If von Schuschnigg failed to yield, then the *Wehrmacht* would invade. The Austrian military had taken only minor steps to prevent any attack, so von Schuschnigg appealed to foreign governments to help him stave off Hitler’s threatened attack.⁵

The Austrian Chancellor’s appeals to Mussolini fell on deaf ears. Two weeks before, Mussolini had determined Italian policy if faced with this eventuality. A

⁴ OO, XXIX, “Informazione Diplomatica #15,” *Popolo d’Italia*, 18 February 1938, pp. 495-6.

memorandum dated 27 February and signed by Mussolini, laid out the strategic situation that required Italian acquiescence in the Anschluss. The first consideration was that Mussolini preferred Austria to be independent. The same conditions that had previously guided Italian policy still existed. It was better to avoid having the weight of 70 million Germans on Italy's northern border, and an independent Austria would help to prevent German irredentism in the Alto Adige. Despite Mussolini's preference, however, Austria was undeniably a German state, and any attempt to steer a course independent of Germany could provoke Hitler to hasten the Anschluss. Moreover, Italian interest in Austrian independence was worth neither a war in its defence or "still less the revolution of our political position in our relations with Germany." Mussolini would not sacrifice the Axis and his revisionist goals in order to defend Austria. Accordingly, the best that he could do was to ensure that the Anschluss did not appear to be an Italian defeat, and at the same time try not to provoke a hostile Germany on Italy's northern frontier. Well before the Anschluss, therefore, Mussolini had determined that Italy would rather meekly accept this accretion of German power.⁶

Mussolini had limited forewarning of the Anschluss. On 5 March, Attolico had sent a report from the Air Attaché at the Berlin Embassy. Colonel Teucci reported recent discussions with Hermann Göring and State Secretary Erhard Milch. In their view, Austria had become an entirely German issue. The Führer had decided, they said, that any

⁵ For more detailed coverage of Hitler's and von Schuschnigg's beliefs and actions, see Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, pp. 294-9.

interference by other countries would lead to war. Attolico concluded that Hitler believed that he had *carte blanche* to deal with Austria on his own terms and timetable.⁷ Mussolini learned of von Schuschnigg's planned plebiscite on 7 March. The Austrian Minister in Rome had no direct access to Mussolini, as the Duce no longer held the official portfolio of Minister of Foreign Affairs. Consequently, von Schuschnigg ordered his Military Attaché in Rome, Colonel Emilio Liebitzky, to see Mussolini in the latter's official capacity as Minister of War. Liebitzky informed the Duce of von Schuschnigg's planned plebiscite. Mussolini, confident of Göring's assurances of January and September 1937 that Germany would not move against Austria without first informing the Duce, was not overly worried. He cautioned against the radical step that von Schuschnigg planned, and gave no commitment of support.⁸

On 10 and 11 March, Mussolini and Ciano learned of the escalating danger of the situation. As Ciano noted in his diary, the plebiscite bomb was exploding in von Schuschnigg's hands. Reports flowed in about German military preparations for an invasion of Austria, but Mussolini took no steps to preserve Austrian independence. With von Schuschnigg's resignation at 6:00 p.m., Ciano concluded that Austria had ceased to exist.⁹ At 9:00 that evening, the Prince of Hesse asked to see Ciano. Both men went to see the Duce at the Palazzo Venezia. Hesse bore a letter from the Führer explaining recent

⁶ ASMAE, UC 57, Appunto, autographo del Duce, 27 February 1938.

⁷ ASMAE, UC 57, Attolico to Ciano, 5 March 1938.

⁸ ASMAE, UC 57, Col. Emilio Liebitsky appunto, 7 March 1938.

⁹ CHD, 10, 11 March 1938, pp. 86-7.

events. Hitler cited von Schuschnigg's plebiscite plan as a direct violation of the German-Austrian accord of 1936. More importantly, Hitler gave Mussolini a solemn and precise declaration guaranteeing the Brenner frontier and an assurance of German support in future Italian endeavours. When Hesse informed the Führer of Mussolini's acquiescence, Hitler asked his messenger to tell Mussolini, "I will never forget this."¹⁰ Through official channels the next day, Magistrati confirmed the preceding language, but in even more effusive terms. "The Führer and Nazi Germany will never forget what il Duce has done this day." Hitler further promised to prevent any problems raised by the ethnic German residents of the Alto Adige.¹¹

Hitler's assurances both belied and indicated the extent to which the Anschluss represented a serious setback for Italy. At the Fascist Grand Council on 12 March, the day that Hitler's troops carried out their occupation, the Fascist hierarch Italo Balbo criticized Hitler's policy. Mussolini quickly squelched this incipient opposition.¹² He tried to put the best face on the Anschluss; he wrote to Hitler assuring the German dictator that "my attitude is determined by the friendship between our two countries as consecrated in the Axis." In a speech two days later to the rubber-stamp Chamber of Deputies, Mussolini sought to minimise the importance of Hitler's coup. Mussolini spoke of the long decline in

¹⁰ ASMAE, UC 87, Führer to il Duce, 11 March 1928. *CHD*, 12 March 1938, pp. 87-8.

¹¹ ASMAE, UC 4, Magistrati to Ciano, 12 March 1938. Hitler sent another letter some two weeks later confirming his eternal friendship and his ideological solidarity with il Duce. ASMAE, UC 87, Führer to il Duce, 25 March 1938.

¹² *CHD*, 12 March 1938, pp. 87-8.

Austrian power. The rise of Hitler had led to Mussolini's temporary flirtation with the Stresa Front, but British and French hostility had prevented any genuine co-operation between Fascist Italy and the West. Accordingly, Mussolini had agreed at the April 1937 meeting in Venice that Austrian independence would be a fundamental concession to the Axis, and that Austrians would have to maintain their own independence in future. Mussolini trumpeted the "categorical" guarantee from Hitler regarding the immutability of the Brenner frontier. With considerable *bragadoccio*, he said that "for we Fascists frontiers, all frontiers, are sacred. We don't discuss them: we defend them." Finally, the Duce condemned the false hopes of international communism and the Western democracies that the Anschluss would break Axis solidarity; such hopes, he argued, were "simply puerile." Axis policy, he concluded, was both united and parallel.¹³ Though this speech contained a certain amount of bravado, it represented elements of continuing Italian policy. Ciano summed up the unpleasant realities in his diary in the immediate aftermath.

To-day all is calm again. The fatal event has reached its conclusion. It has not been pleasant for us – far from it. But one day the world will realise that all this was inevitable. The Duce says that one ambiguity has been removed from the map of Europe. And he enumerates three others still in existence, which will, in his opinion, one after the other and in the following order, have to go the same way: Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and Belgium.

Mussolini apparently failed to realise the extent to which these hypothetical changes would increase relative German strength within the Axis at the expense of Italy. Ciano concluded

¹³ *OO, XXIX, Discorso sul' Anschluss, Camera dei deputati, 16 March 1938, pp. 67-71.*

that “German friendship is a fatality, oppressive perhaps, but very real.”¹⁴ Mussolini’s perceived need for German friendship had led him to sacrifice Austrian independence, for years a cardinal element of Italian policy, on the altar of Axis solidarity.

Mussolini’s actions during the Anschluss demonstrated the extent to which he had estranged himself from the Western democracies and tied himself to the rising power of Nazi Germany. Both the British and French governments had made last ditch attempts to co-ordinate policy with Italy during the crisis. On 11 March, Jules Blondel, the French Chargé d’Affaires, had phoned Ciano to request an urgent meeting. Blondel said that he had received instructions from his government to ask Italy to join an Anglo-French appeal to von Schuschnigg to resist Hitler’s ultimatum. Ciano had categorically and rudely rejected this démarche, saying that he and Mussolini did not “intend to associate ourselves with France and England in regard to Austria.” Ciano had cited French support for sanctions and its non-recognition of Ethiopia as preventing any co-operation in resisting the Anschluss. He had argued that if Blondel had nothing more to say, then he might as well not bother appearing. Given this sharp rebuff, Perth had thought it inopportune to follow his orders to seek a meeting with Mussolini. He had interceded to have these orders cancelled, and had not pursued the Austrian question at his meeting with Ciano on 12 March.¹⁵ Despite the ongoing Anglo-Italian negotiations, therefore, there was no realistic

¹⁴ *CHD*, 13 March 1938, p. 88.

¹⁵ ASMAE, GAB #29, Ciano to Attolico, 11 March 1938. *CHD*, s.d., p. 87. ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l’ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 12 March 1938. The published version exists in *CDP*, Conversation with the British Ambassador, 12 March 1938, pp. 194-5. This evidence directly contradicts Shorrock’s

prospect of resurrecting the Stresa Front in defence of Austria. Mussolini's faithfulness to the Axis and his acquiescence in the Anschluss had made any French or British intervention futile.

Still, despite Mussolini's commitment to the Axis and his break with West, the Anschluss did require some relatively minor adjustments in Italian policy, primarily in the Danube Basin. At the beginning of 1938, Ciano had continued his attempt to create tighter relations between the Rome Protocol powers of Hungary, Austria, and Italy in advance of an imminent meeting in Budapest. He had sent a draft agreement to both Rome Protocol governments regarding tighter adherence by both Vienna and Budapest to the principles of the Axis and the anti-Comintern Pact. This *démarche* reflected Mussolini's concern that both governments failed to be sufficiently grateful for Italian friendship. Though both Austria and Hungary feared German encroachment in the Balkans, neither would align themselves too tightly to Mussolini's Italy, as neither wanted to foreclose their relations with the West. The Austrian Foreign Minister wanted a firm declaration of Italian support for continued independence in the face of Germany, an assurance that Ciano could not give. The Hungarian Foreign Minister Kálmán de Kánya hoped for Italian support of Hungarian revisionism regarding the substantial Magyar minority populations in Rumania and Yugoslavia. Ciano refused, as he did not want to alienate Prime Minister Stoyadinović

claim that French Foreign Minister Delbos's "absolute distaste for dealing directly with Italy" effectively sacrificed Austrian independence. Shorrock's sole reliance on French sources betrayed him. Shorrock, p. 218. Certain French diplomats did hope that a French *démarche* could increase Italian support for Austria, but their opinion was obviously unfounded.

of Yugoslavia. Ciano used Italy's diplomatic muscle to secure an anodyne agreement, but he concluded that the Rome Protocols had become "impotent."¹⁶ The Anschluss effectively dissolved the Rome Protocols, signalling the need for a renewed Italian diplomatic initiative in the Balkans.

Ciano re-assured himself that Italo-Yugoslav relations remained strong. In a 13 March meeting with Bosko Crstić, the Yugoslav Minister in Rome, Ciano had recalled his past meetings with Stoyadinović in which he had stated that the Italo-Yugoslav pact of March 1937 foresaw increased German power after the Anschluss. Italy's horizontal axis with Yugoslavia would help to counter-balance German domination of the official vertical Axis. Ciano informed Crstić that after an appropriate time, Italy and Yugoslavia would have to reinforce their previous agreement, though tighter relations with Yugoslavia would of course be subordinate to those of Germany.¹⁷

Against the backdrop of the Anschluss, negotiations toward a second Anglo-Italian agreement speeded up in large measure owing to developments in the Austrian question. Mussolini and Ciano had continued to hope for an agreement with Britain, though still on their own disingenuous terms of the previous autumn. The Anglo-Italian deadlock started to break in early January 1938. Perth saw Ciano on 3 January to indicate Britain's reconsideration of the Italian demand for *de jure* recognition of the Ethiopian conquest. Such discussion represented an advance over the British position after the Nyon affair,

¹⁶ *CHD*, 2, 4, 5, 8, 10-14 January 1938, pp. 58-9, 63-5. *CDP*, Conversation of the Duce with Count Bethelen, 5 January 1938, pp. 158-9.

which had excluded the possibility of such recognition.¹⁸ Perth's careful words reflected the division within the British Cabinet. Chamberlain hoped to be able to reach an agreement which would neither grant recognition without conditions nor appear to be a corrupt bargain. He wanted instead a spirit of general reconciliation which would settle outstanding issues. The Foreign Office staff generally agreed with Chamberlain's view regarding the necessity of granting *de jure* recognition. It was necessary to gain some concessions for this one card which Britain still held. Eden disagreed, however, arguing that Mussolini was a "complete gangster and his pledged word mean[t] nothing."¹⁹

In order to outmanoeuvre Eden and the Foreign Secretary's resistance to his policy, Chamberlain continued to work through his secret channel to Grandi. On 10 January, Chamberlain's representative, Sir Joseph Ball, contacted Dingli, conveying a sense of great urgency. Ball informed the intermediary that if the Italians would agree to open conversations in London, then Ball could guarantee that Chamberlain would override Eden's objections. Such discussions would have no preconditions and would have the

¹⁷ *CHD*, 13, 24 March 1938, pp. 89, 93.

¹⁸ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretania. A copy exists in SAP - G.B., B. 17, *CHD*, pp. 58-9. For the published version, see *CDP*, 3 January 1938, p. 158.

¹⁹ PREM 1/276, Chamberlain to Eden, 7 January 1938, Avon Papers, University of Birmingham Library, [hereafter AP] 13/1/49Z, Chamberlain to Eden. FO 954/13, It/38/1, Cadogan to Eden, 12 January 1938. AP 13/1/49W, Eden to Chamberlain, 9 January. For further information on the highly detailed debate within the foreign policy establishment, see also FO 371 22395, R249/7/22, Sargent Minute, 31 December 1937, R306/7/22, Eden to Chamberlain, 9 January 1938.

widest possible latitude. In essence, this démarche conceded the bulk of Italian demands, with the sole exception that Mussolini and Ciano both had maintained their insistence that any talks would have to occur in Rome. Dingli duly informed Guido Crolla, the Chargé d’Affaires in the London Embassy. Crolla, however, did not know where Ambassador Grandi could be found, and he did not want to telephone Rome; he understood that the Embassy’s phone calls were monitored by British intelligence, and he could not let the secret channel be compromised. Eventually (and ironically) Crolla tracked Grandi to the Hotel Eden in Rome, and arranged to send a cipher telegram to Grandi’s attention at the Foreign Ministry. In order to give greater impetus to the démarche, Ball confirmed to Dingli on 14 January that his proposal came from Chamberlain himself. After his return to London, Grandi attempted first to arrange to see Chamberlain alone. Foiled once more by the demands of protocol, Grandi tried to arrange a meeting with both Eden and Chamberlain together. Ball assisted this endeavour, having Chamberlain approve a draft note for Grandi to submit to Eden. The Foreign Secretary skilfully thwarted this attempt at an end run, and summoned Grandi instead for a face-to-face meeting.²⁰

At his unwanted meeting with Eden on 19 January, Grandi found a cold reception, with the Foreign Secretary emphasising the difficulty of talks that would consider *de jure* recognition of the Italian Empire. Afterward, Grandi wrote to Ciano that, owing in part to Eden’s obduracy, negotiations with Britain offered an unusual opportunity. Grandi had

²⁰ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 66, 158/1, Crolla Note, 10 January 1938, and hand-written addition 14 January 1938; B. 40, fasc. 93/2, Summary of Adrain Dingli’s Action, n.d.

believed for several months that Eden's anti-Italian attitudes betrayed an attempt to usurp Chamberlain's Prime Ministership. Eden needed to prevent an Anglo-Italian rapprochement in order to maintain standing with a left-leaning block in Parliament that would form the basis for a new government. Accordingly, Italian policy of seeking an agreement while maintaining diplomatic and strategic pressure in other ways would outflank Eden. In particular, the presence of the otherwise needlessly large Libyan garrison created great fear for the safety of Egypt in the British General Staff. This perceived need for an agreement would compel Chamberlain to reach an agreement on relatively favourable terms for Italy - both to preserve Britain's Mediterranean position and to diminish Eden's political influence.²¹

While Grandi plotted against Eden, the British Cabinet debated whether or not to pursue discussions with Italy. President Roosevelt's appeal to diminish world tension by establishing agreed principles of international law and order had complicated this debate. The President's vague plan had four main points: to establish essential principles of international behaviour, to limit armaments, to allow equal access of the world's population to raw materials, and to determine the rights and duties of governments in time of war. In addition, Roosevelt had raised the potentially difficult issue of the alleged inequities of the Versailles treaty and had spoken of the traditional freedom from European involvement of the United States. He had sent this rather uninspiring and likely

²¹ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/4, Grandi to Ciano, 20 January 1938. See also SAP - Gran Bretagna, B. 25, Grandi to Ciano, s.d. For Eden's impressions of the 19 January meeting, see FO 371

quixotic proposal first to the British government to secure its approval. In Eden's temporary absence, Chamberlain had dealt with this proposal without referring it first to his Foreign Secretary, as protocol normally demanded. The Prime Minister feared that this proposal would prevent the opening of Anglo-Italian talks – either it would offend the dictators with its implications of their bad behaviour or would take precedence over direct talks with Italy. Sir Ronald Lindsay, the British Ambassador in Washington, while supporting the President's initiative, confirmed that Roosevelt would not insist on carrying through his *démarche* if Chamberlain decided to pursue direct Anglo-Italian talks. Eden disagreed with Chamberlain's thinking and actions. He thought that the need for Anglo-American co-operation outweighed any agreement with Mussolini. By 20 January, Chamberlain decided on a compromise; he would pursue talks with Italy, while at the same time offering qualified support for Roosevelt's plan in an effort not to alienate Roosevelt. He still thought that plan would prove futile, but he too did not want to alienate American opinion. Given lukewarm British support and changed conditions owing to German government restructuring, Roosevelt eventually dropped the plan, clearing the field for Chamberlain's preferred policy. The episode, however, had signalled a clear breach between Chamberlain and Eden.²²

22402, R662/23/22, Eden to Perth, 19 January 1938.

²² PREM 1/259, Lindsay to Eden, 11, 14, 16, 17, 20, January 1938, 25 February 1938, Chamberlain to Lindsay, 13 January 1938, Eden to Chamberlain, 17 January 1938, Eden to Lindsay, 21 January 1938, AP 20/1/18, Diary entries 14, 17 January 1938; AP 13/1/45F, Eden Minute, 17 January 1938; AP 13/1/45G Eden to Lindsay, 22 January 1938; AP 13/1/45H Eden to Lindsay, 25 January 1938; AP 20/6/38, full

In the aftermath of Eden's 19 January meeting with Grandi, Chamberlain expressed his frustration at the slow pace of discussions. Still working through Joseph Ball and Adrian Dingli, Chamberlain assured the Italian Ambassador that he still intended to meet with Grandi as soon as Eden returned from the League Meeting at Geneva. If Grandi thought that conditions were so desperate that he needed an immediate meeting with Chamberlain, then the Prime Minister would gladly oblige, despite the consequences of this obvious usurpation of Eden's position. Chamberlain preferred to wait, however, as he thought it wiser to secure the Foreign Secretary's approval rather than to provoke an incident which might lead Eden to resign. Chamberlain asked Grandi to "hold the fort" for the near future. Grandi concurred, though he chafed at the delay. Chamberlain later promised to arrange the meeting as soon as possible after Eden's return on 30 January 1938.²³

After Eden's return, he summoned Grandi, but the meeting covered only technical matters arising from the torpedoing of a British ship, the *Endymion*.²⁴ On 5 February, Grandi submitted Ciano's agreement with Eden's request for tighter Mediterranean patrols

record of 19 January 1938 FP (17th) mtg from the notes of Mrs. Scott. For more detail on this plan and the British government's reaction, see Ritchie Ovendale, *'Appeasement' and the English Speaking World: Britain, the United States, the Dominions, and the Policy of 'Appeasement', 1937-1939*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975, pp. 84-98.

²³ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/2, Summary of Adrain Dingli's Action, n.d.

²⁴ For more on this attack, see ASMAE, US 2, Questione Spagnola dal marzo 1937 al febbraio 1938, 31 January 1938 to 6 February 1938.

under the Nyon agreement. This apparent Italian concession, which Ciano brushed off as “simply a waste of time,” somewhat mollified Eden’s anti-Italian rancour. More importantly, in Grandi’s view, recent German rebuffs of Eden’s attempts at a rapprochement were proving a frustration. Consequently, Eden discussed at that meeting possible conditions for opening Anglo-Italian talks.²⁵ The next day, Grandi and Eden discussed once more possible recognition of the empire. Eden cordially suggested that both he and the Prime Minister shared the same policy, and would consider *de jure* recognition of the Ethiopian context as part of any negotiations. He referred to Spain and Italy’s continuing participation in the Spanish Civil War as the primary outstanding issue between Britain and Italy. Eden expected to be able to reach an accommodation with Italy provided that Mussolini was willing to make concessions regarding non-intervention. Despite the primacy of the Spanish issue, however, Eden also mentioned other issues remaining from the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 2 January 1937. Grandi replied that he thought that none of these issues would prove difficult.²⁶ A few days later, Dingli and Ball communicated Chamberlain’s express desire that Grandi should help to smooth conclusion of any talks by convincing Mussolini to reduce tensions in Spain. This information convinced Grandi that the imminent negotiations essentially would trade British recognition of the Ethiopian conquest for Italian concessions in Spain.²⁷

²⁵ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Grandi to Ciano, 5 February 1938, *CHD*, 4 February 1938, pp. 69-70. FO 371 22402, R1058/23/22. Eden to Perth, 5 February 1938.

²⁶ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Eden to Ciano, 6 February 1938.

²⁷ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/2, Summary of Adrain Dingli’s Action, n.d.

On 8 February, Grandi spoke once more with Eden. Eden raised Italian-sponsored anti-British propaganda as another of the important elements of the tension between the two countries. Grandi refused to consider this issue as a precondition for any negotiations, as the British government had suggested in the past. He further denied that Italian propaganda caused any tension between Italy and Britain; rather disingenuously, Grandi argued that this propaganda barrage merely reflected the already existing tension. Eden replied to Grandi's claims by stating that he merely wanted the Italian Ambassador to know that the cessation of propaganda would have to be an important element of the talks, not a precondition. This exchange of views further narrowed the number of outstanding issues.²⁸

The same day, Ciano cabled Mussolini's formal approval for Grandi to inform Eden that the Italian government was ready to initiate talks at any time. Mussolini's minimum conditions were that any discussions would have to be general, cover all outstanding issues, and definitively recognise the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. The negotiations would have to take place in Rome. Ciano further instructed Grandi that he should present this *démarche* in such a manner to convince Eden that Italy was not at all anxious to reach an accord at any price; in Ciano's words, the Fascist government was "not ready to throw ourselves at the first offer." Ciano also wrote that he ascribed Eden's apparent change of heart entirely to German snubs of British approaches; in particular, he believed that the appointment of Joachim von Ribbentrop as German Foreign Minister

²⁸ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Grandi to Ciano, 8 February 1938.

indicated a clear rebuff of British efforts to appease Germany. Eden, failing to weaken the Axis in Germany, was trying the same gambit on the Italian end. Ciano, however, was unwilling to allow that manoeuvre to succeed.²⁹ In his diary, he noted that he would remain loyal to the Axis; he believed that any Anglo-Italian agreement would carry few onerous Italian commitments.³⁰

As potential negotiations inched forward in London, Lady Ivy Chamberlain, the widow of Sir Austen Chamberlain, unwittingly furthered the tension between Eden and Neville Chamberlain. She and her husband had met Mussolini on several occasions during Sir Austen's tenure as Foreign Secretary. She was sympathetic to Italian Fascism and admired Mussolini. On 1 February 1938, she met Mussolini at Ciano's initiative. Mussolini inquired as to whether or not she had received a letter from Neville Chamberlain, and if so, whether he could see it. This letter, almost certainly opened and read by Italian intelligence authorities, stated that the British Prime Minister expected to have negotiations well in hand by the end of February. Lady Chamberlain also told Mussolini that the Cabinet was coming round to the idea of formal recognition of the Italian Empire. Mussolini readily

²⁹ ASMAE, GAB 29, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Ciano to Grandi, 8 February 1938. See also *CHD*, 5 February 1938, p. 70.

³⁰ Ciano insisted that the conversations take place in Rome. He thought that Grandi was trying to position himself as "the Man who made peace with England." Ciano thought that only Mussolini could assume that role. It is also likely, however, that Ciano did not want to see a competing Fascist heirarch scoring a major policy coup. Negotiations in Rome would inevitably be under Ciano's and Mussolini's control. *CHD*, 7-9 February 1938, pp. 71-2, 12 February 1938, p. 74.

encouraged this view. He dictated a five-point memorandum that Lady Chamberlain would send to her brother-in-law, indicating the Duce's desire for a comprehensive agreement.³¹ Eden learned of this informal diplomacy roughly a week later, and sent a note to Neville Chamberlain protesting this end run around his department. The Foreign Secretary argued, in retrospect correctly, that Lady Chamberlain's actions helped to create the view in Mussolini's mind that he could ignore any conditions that Eden might impose for the opening of conversations and could divide Eden and Chamberlain over the question. Eden asked the Prime Minister to instruct Lady Chamberlain not to see Mussolini in future. Chamberlain complied, but thought that she had caused little harm. He also wrote to Eden that Britain "should not appear so reticent that we do not want to open conversations at all."³² Unquestionably, however, Lady Chamberlain's diplomacy helped to further the divide between Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary by undermining the latter's authority.

In February, Hitler's increasing threat to Austrian independence gave added impetus to Italian efforts to sign an accord with Britain. To that point, Grandi had shown

³¹ *CHD*, 1 February 1938, p. 68. FO 371 22402, R1069, R1071/23/22, Perth to Alexander Cadogan (personal), 6 February 1938.

³² PREM 1/276, Eden to Chamberlain, Chamberlain to Eden, 8 February 1938. Privately, Chamberlain placed great store in Ivy's dealings with Ciano. In a diary entry under the date 19 February 1938, but, based on internal evidence, likely written on 27 February 1938, Chamberlain wrote that his letter to Ivy had had a "magical" effect, convincing Mussolini and Ciano both of the Prime Minister's sincerity. NC 2/24A, Diary entry, 19 February 1938.

much greater urgency in pushing for talks than the reticent Ciano. The need to counter-balance Germany's moves towards Austria pushed Ciano to speak to Mussolini regarding the Anglo-Italian conversations. After securing Mussolini's approval, Ciano cabled Grandi to say that he considered all of the issues between the two countries initially explored. With the exception of the withdrawal of volunteers and the recognition of belligerency rights for Franco in Spain, currently under consideration through the non-intervention process, Ciano was ready to open negotiations on Eden's already proposed conditions.³³ He also informed Perth of his orders to Grandi, referring obliquely to "certain future happenings."³⁴ The following day, Ciano spelled out the reasons for his new urgency. German plans for the Anschluss were well in hand, he wrote to Grandi, and could occur at any time. When the Germans eventually would act, its massive population on Italy's northern border would potentially foreclose the option of dealing with Great Britain. In that eventuality, world opinion might see an Italian rapprochement with Britain as "going to Canossa" under German pressure. "It is not that the Duce is more anxious today than yesterday to seize the hand of the English," Ciano wrote, but after the Anschluss, "we would have to orient our policy definitively in a clear, open, immutable sense of hostility to the Western Powers." In short, the proposed agreement with Britain was a tactical device to secure manoeuvring room and to resist the increasing tide of German strength within the bounds of the Axis partnership. Securing Britain's recognition of Italy's

³³ ASMAE, GAB 29, UC 89, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Ciano to Grandi, 15 February 1938.

Ethiopian conquest was a goal in its own right; any Anglo-Italian agreement would not reorient Italian policy away from the Axis or from its expansionist aims.³⁵ At the same time as Ciano urged Grandi to open formal conversations, he openly considered with Alberto Pariani, the armed forces Chief of Staff, the inevitability of war with the Western democracies. This campaign would ostensibly occur in the spring of 1939, and would include a lightning war against Egypt, an attack against the British fleet, and an invasion of France. Ciano suggested that staff talks with the Germans would help to realise this possible outcome.³⁶

Hilter's ultimatum to Austria had also increased Chamberlain's urgency to open negotiations for an Anglo-Italian Accord. Chamberlain, and European diplomats generally, believed that this arrangement was the only possible hope for Italy, and by extension the other powers, to preserve Austrian independence.³⁷ Accordingly, Chamberlain arranged through Ball and Dingli to hold, at long last, the face-to-face meeting between the Prime Minister and Grandi. Eden resisted this move, arguing that he had not been able to clarify the Italian position regarding Spain. Further, he did not like "'now or never' threats." Chamberlain reacted angrily, accusing Eden of missing "chance after chance" to secure an

³⁴ Perth understood that Ciano referred to the possibility of an imminent Anschluss. FO 371 22403, R1441/23/22, Perth to Eden, 17 February 1938.

³⁵ ASMAE, UC 89 Ciano to Grandi, 16 February 1938.

³⁶ *CHD*, 14 February 1938, pp. 74-5.

³⁷ See, for example, Perth's report on the views of diplomats in Rome: PREM 1/276, Perth to Eden, 16 February 1938; and FO 371 22403, R1550/23/22, Ingram Minute, 19 February 1938.

agreement with Italy. Still, Eden refused to commit to negotiations “until we have time to go into all of the implications.” Eden summoned Grandi, but the Ambassador demurred, waiting for the hoped-for meeting where the Prime Minister would also be present. Chamberlain intervened through his secret channel, and finally arranged a three-party meeting for the morning of 18 February 1938.³⁸

This momentous discussion met certain of its participants’ expectations. In Grandi’s lengthy, almost gleeful report, he wrote to Ciano of his personal triumph. Chamberlain had begun by pushing hard to determine the Italian government’s attitude toward events in Austria. Grandi refused to be drawn, as per Ciano’s instructions. To Chamberlain’s charge that Mussolini and Hitler had had a secret agreement regarding Austria, Grandi counter-attacked. The Anglo-French sanctions policy had ruptured the Stresa Front and had made Mussolini’s policy of defending Austria much more difficult, but Mussolini had not as yet made any agreement with Germany. In the future, however, the Duce’s attitude would depend on that of His Majesty’s Government. British hostility to Italy had prevented any agreement that would have allowed Mussolini greater latitude in defending Austrian independence. Only the immediate initiation of negotiations in Rome leading to British recognition of the Italian empire could ensure that Italy did not throw itself into Hitler’s embrace. This discourse emphasised the division between Eden and Chamberlain. The Foreign Secretary replied that, in current conditions, Britain could not

³⁸ ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/2, Summary of Adrain Dingli’s Action, n.d.. UC 89, Grandi to Ciano, 19 February 1938. Avon, AP 20/1/18, Diary entry, 17 February 1938. PREM 1/276, Eden to

undertake any negotiations that would lead to recognition of Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia. After Grandi gave a long discourse complaining of British hostility toward Italy in Spain, Chamberlain intervened. He was fired by the pressing need to reach accommodation with one of Britain's potential enemies in order to remove some of the strategic and economic pressure owing to the fascist challenge. Accordingly, he contradicted Eden, and declared that Britain was ready to begin negotiations that would include formal British recognition of the Empire, plus a general accord between Italy and Great Britain. The morning conversation finished with Eden demanding an *a priori quid pro quo* in Spain; Mussolini would have to agree to a withdrawal program under the auspices of the non-intervention committee. Chamberlain notably failed to pick up on Eden's proposal. With that, the talks broke off for lunch and consultations between Chamberlain and his Foreign Minister.³⁹

The talks resumed 3:00 p.m. that afternoon between Chamberlain and Grandi, with Eden's absence signalling to Grandi the growing chasm between the two British Ministers. According to Grandi's narrative, Chamberlain openly contradicted his Foreign Minister's view on withdrawal of volunteers of that morning. Chamberlain wanted an immediate declaration that talks would begin without preconditions, but that Italy would have to be prepared to address the withdrawal of volunteers during any negotiations – an important

Chamberlain, 18 February 1938.

³⁹ ASMAE, UC 89 Grandi to Ciano, 19 February 1938. The British record, which Eden prepared, indicated none of the divisiveness that Grandi portrayed. For the published record, see *DBFP, II, XLX*, #573, Ingram to Perth, 21 February 1938, pp. 946-51.

caveat that would allow conversations to begin in the immediate future. Grandi rejected this sally, arguing that his government could not accept this plan owing to the taint of Soviet and French membership of the non-intervention committee. If that point represented British policy, then Mussolini would think that Chamberlain had little interest in reaching an accord. At that stage, the meeting broke up, with the essential question of the re-patriation of Italian volunteers as the only significant outstanding question, though the location of the negotiations was still a side issue. Chamberlain arranged to meet Grandi three days hence to give the Cabinet's formal reply. Grandi characterised Chamberlain's and Eden's behaviour in the morning as "two enemies" with a "combative attitude." Afterward, Grandi met Ball in a taxi, and Ball conveyed Chamberlain's personal thanks for the meeting. In addition, Chamberlain sent a message to Grandi through Ball and Dingli asking the Italian Ambassador to try to ensure that his government meet Chamberlain's requirements as much as possible during the negotiations.⁴⁰

Eden and Chamberlain continued their disagreement at a Cabinet meeting the next day, held on a Saturday in a highly unusual break with tradition. The two British protagonists laid out their differences for the Cabinet. Chamberlain argued that the Cabinet's general policy called for better relations with both Italy and Germany, while in fact relations with both countries appeared to be worsening. Military weakness and the burden of re-armament compelled an agreement with Italy. Mussolini distrusted British re-

⁴⁰ ASMAE, UC 89 Grandi to Ciano, 19 February 1938. *DBFP, II, XIX, #573*, Ingram to Perth, 21 February 1938, pp. 946-51. ASMAE, Carte Grandi, B. 40, fasc. 93/2, Summary of Adrain Dingli's

armament, but Hitler's recent coup in Austria must have annoyed Mussolini, who was looking to end his relative isolation. Eden disagreed with this appreciation. He wanted proof of Mussolini's change of heart, if it had occurred at all, for Eden did not think that it had. Mussolini had replied to sanctions with the declaration of the Rome-Berlin Axis, the Gentlemen's Agreement with the dispatch of troops to Spain, and, Eden suspected, had already cut a deal with Hitler over Austria. Grandi's recent moves represented little more than blackmail. In this situation, Eden argued, granting *de jure* recognition of the Italian Empire represented surrender, and he would not do so without prior, substantive gestures of good will. With only minor exceptions, the Cabinet supported Chamberlain's view, even to the point of opening negotiations without receiving assurances from Grandi regarding the necessity for eventual withdrawal of volunteers. Eden said that he would not be able to carry forward that policy, and suggested that the Cabinet find another Foreign Minister to do so. With that ultimatum, the Cabinet adjourned until 3:00 p.m. on Sunday.⁴¹

Action, n.d..

⁴¹ CAB 23/92 6(38), 19 February 1938, 7(38) & 8(38), 20 February 1938, plus Hankey Minute of Meeting of Ministers, 20 February 1938. Avon, AP 20/6/31, Elizabeth Scott to Eden, notes of 19 February 1938 Cabinet meeting, 27 July 1972. AP 13/1/64G, Notes in Cabinet, 19 February 1938. NC 2/24A, Diary entry, 19 February 1938. For more on Eden's resignation, see: David Carlton, *Anthony Eden: a biography*. London: A. Lane, 1981; A.R. Peters, *Anthony Eden at the Foreign Office, 1931-1938*. New York: St. Martin's, 1986.

In the meantime, Grandi sent his report of the previous day's meeting to Ciano, and sparked both considerable elation and some panic in the Italian Foreign Minister and in Mussolini himself. Perth had called on Ciano the same day to protest forcefully Italian border violations in East Africa. At the end of December 1937, Captain R.C.R. Whalley had discovered an Italian garrison at Kangilamoru, some twenty-five miles across the Sudanese border. The Italian Officer in charge, Captain Vigna, consulted his superiors, only to receive orders prohibiting his withdrawal. Similarly, an Italian garrison had violated the Kenyan border.⁴² In light of Grandi's news, Ciano believed that Perth's strong protest, normally handled at a lower level, signalled Eden's desperate attempt to derail conversations. Ciano concluded, therefore, that Chamberlain had been victorious in the internecine struggle. Grandi's report confirmed that view.

With victory in sight, however, Mussolini and Ciano lost their nerve. News of Eden's resignation during the Cabinet meetings on 20 February sparked fears that the situation might lead to war. Grandi's previous misrepresentations of Eden's power and ambitions within the Cabinet misled his superiors; Ciano believed that Eden could both form a Cabinet and lead a crusade against the dictators. Accordingly, he decided to support Chamberlain as much as possible in order to prevent the formation of a hostile Cabinet. Ciano dampened the gloating in the Fascist press at Eden's downfall. More importantly, he granted a major concession to Chamberlain. In a telephone call to London during the night of 20-21 February, Ciano instructed Grandi to concede Chamberlain's

⁴² ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 19 February 1938.

demands regarding the necessity for negotiating the withdrawal of volunteers from Spain as part of the implementation of any agreement. This seemingly minor change, an unnecessary effort to prop up Chamberlain's position in Cabinet, eventually would lead to the several months delay in entrance into force of the resulting Easter Accords.⁴³

At long last, on 21 February, the parties agreed on the opening of negotiations. Grandi met Chamberlain to deliver Ciano's concession regarding the acceptance of the principle of the withdrawal of Italian volunteers. Chamberlain insisted that this point was an essential aspect of any agreement. He would make any agreement contingent not only on withdrawal of Italian volunteers, but also on the basis that Mussolini would dispatch no more troops. With that issue settled, Grandi and Chamberlain agreed that they would announce the opening of negotiations. Grandi assured Chamberlain that British policy would give Mussolini much greater leverage in dealing with Germany over the Austrian question, and submitted his government's formal approval of negotiations at 4:00 that afternoon.⁴⁴

The tortuous road to the opening of conversations demonstrates the serious gulf between Italian and British aims. Chamberlain hoped that an eventual Anglo-Italian

⁴³ *CHD*, 19-21 February, pp. 77-9. ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Grandi to Ciano, 21 February 1938. PREM 1/360, Grandi to Chamberlain, 21 February 1938. FO 371 22403, R1610/23/22, Chamberlain conversation with the Italian Ambassador, 21 February 1938.

⁴⁴ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Grandi to Ciano, 21 February 1938. PREM 1/360, Grandi to Chamberlain, 21 February 1938. FO 371 22403, R1610/23/22, Chamberlain conversation with the Italian Ambassador, 21 February 1938.

agreement could bolster Mussolini's stand against the Anschluss, and could perhaps wean Italy from its tight relations with its German Axis partner. Against a variety of issues, including Italy's large Libyan garrison, Italian involvement in Spain, anti-British propaganda, and Italian moves in the Middle East, Britain had only one arrow in its proverbial quiver – *de jure* recognition of Mussolini's Ethiopian conquest. Once given, the Cabinet could not retract this concession. Still, facing the constellation of Italy, Germany, and Japan, the Chamberlain government hoped to be able to separate at least one of these potential enemies. The proof of Mussolini's sincere desire for Anglo-Italian amity would come in his faithfulness to the intentions declared during the manoeuvring to secure negotiations. If he resisted the Anschluss, ceased anti-British propaganda, decreased the Libyan garrison, lessened his effort in Spain, and respected the Mediterranean *status quo ante*, then one could reasonably suppose that Mussolini desired only parity with Britain and to use Italy's position between Germany and Britain as the '*peso determinante*' – the decisive weight. Unfortunately, a series of other issues concurrent with and following these diplomatic preparations for negotiations betrayed Mussolini's real intentions.

Even while negotiating the commencement of talks with Britain, however, Mussolini and Ciano continued to work against British interests in the Far East, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean. Ciano's dealings with a shipment of armoured cars to his former Chinese Nationalist associates provide one tragicomic example of Italian enmity toward Britain. Given his rapid and unceremonious rupturing of relations with the Chinese Nationalist government during 1937, Ciano found himself in a potentially embarrassing position. The *Ischia*, an Italian registered ship, was carrying fifty Italian armoured cars

bound for the Chinese Nationalist army. Ciano gave its position to the Japanese government so that it could intercept the shipment, preventing the Italian government from delivering arms to be used against its putative ally. The Japanese military, fearing international complications from this sort of piracy, demurred. Ciano noted that Mussolini, who intended “to make of the Japanese military allies against Great Britain,” would not contemplate the presumed affront of arming Japan’s enemy, and demanded that his Foreign Minister prevent the *Ischia*’s arrival. Mussolini approved of Ciano’s plan simply to have the ship run aground on the island of Hainan, but the *Ischia*’s owners protested, wisely citing the potential blow to the prestige of Italian seamanship. Faced with the Japanese refusal to board or to sink the *Ischia*, and having received Japanese permission to land the arms shipment, Ciano had to content himself with the thought that fifty armoured cars would hardly turn the tide of battle. The next day, Ciano dispatched the Marchese Giacomo Paulucci de Carboli to Japan as the head of the Fascist Party’s Mission in Tokyo. Ciano thought that Paulucci, a staunch opponent of the League of Nations and an Anglophobe, would get on well with like-minded Japanese leaders.⁴⁵

In a more serious vein, Ciano held a dinner at the Villa Madama to honour Baron Okura, the Japanese Military Attaché in Rome. Ciano spoke of the common bond between the Japanese military and the Italian government. Both countries resented British tutelage and both hoped for eventual gains at the expense of the British empire. Accordingly, Ciano thought the time opportune to sign a bilateral Italo-Japanese agreement covering

⁴⁵ *CHD*, 1-4 January 1938, pp. 57-60.

benevolent neutrality in time of war and a tighter co-operation between the two countries. Ciano, citing the lesser enthusiasm of the Gaimushō to European entanglements, hoped to work through the Japanese military to achieve this goal. Okura refused to be drawn on this informal proposal, as he had no authority to pursue it. Eventually, after it circulated through Japan's diplomatic corps in Europe, the Japanese Ambassador in Berlin submitted this démarche to his government, and it later formed the basis for the newly shuffled Konoe Cabinet's response to Italy in May.⁴⁶

Mussolini's policy in the Middle East also threatened British interests. Early in January, Ciano dispatched Count Serafino Mazzolini as the Italian Minister to the nominally independent government of Egypt. Mazzolini's duty was to study ways to use the Italian community in Egypt in the event of war with Great Britain. Ciano wanted Mazzolini to prepare groups to foment rebellion and to prepare to carry out military sabotage in the Suez Canal zone. Fearing possible British interception of cables from Egypt, Ciano wanted Mazzolini to report only in person. Obviously, if the British intelligence services learned of this hostile mission, it could rupture Anglo-Italian relations.⁴⁷ Simultaneously, the Italian mission in Sanaa in Yemen, allegedly there to improve Yemeni sanitation, negotiated with anti-British local forces led by Sheik Ali el Hamdani for a major shipment of weapons, including four batteries of medium artillery and 10,000 rifles. This shipment was part of the mission's objective of "orienting and

⁴⁶ Ferretti, pp. 213-4.

⁴⁷ *CHD*, 3 January 1938, pp. 58-9.

developing Yemeni internal politics” toward a tighter association with Italy. Ciano hoped that, if successful, the Italian mission might be able to create an Italian protectorate or friendly government. This association would both undermine the British position with Ibn Saud in the Arabian peninsula to the North and establish Italian bases on both sides of the Red Sea, thus allowing Italy to dominate one exit of the Suez Canal. This mission represented a potentially serious threat to British imperial communications.⁴⁸

Finally, Mussolini’s forces pursued victory in Spain with a reckless disregard for British concerns. As the new year began, Italian planes participated in the bombing of Barcelona, which had little aim other than terrorising the civilian population.⁴⁹ Italian planes based in Majorca continued to bomb neutral shipping, and an unidentified submarine torpedoed the *Endymion*, a British registered vessel.⁵⁰ The land campaign went less well. Spanish government forces had counter-attacked near Teruel, forcing Franco’s army to retreat. The situation worried Berti, the Italian commander in Spain, as well as Ciano. This successful attack appeared to show superior morale and generalship on the part of the Red forces. Mussolini remained sanguine, however, and thought that this setback was merely temporary.⁵¹ The success of the counter-attack did highlight the need

⁴⁸ NA, T586, roll 412, f004966-7, Ciano to Ministero dell’Africa Italiana, 17 February 1938. See also Chapter 3, p. 19.

⁴⁹ *CHD*, 1 January 1938, pp. 57-8.

⁵⁰ ASMAE, US 2, *Questione Spagnola dal marzo 1937 al febbraio 1938*, 31 January 1938 to 6 February 1938.

⁵¹ ASMAE, US 2, *Pariani Promemoria*, 14 January 1938. *CHD*, 14 January 1938, pp. 64-5.

for a continued effort on the part of Italian troops. It would not be advisable in the short run to lessen the Italian commitment. Furthermore, the need for more effective command structure led to tight diplomatic co-operation between the German and Italian governments.⁵² Though the Red forces were unable to exploit their victory, Mussolini sent a dispatch to Franco complaining that Teruel had prevented the Nationalist side from carrying forward their planned offensive. If Franco planned to renew the offensive, then Mussolini would only be too happy to commit his forces. If Franco maintained a dilatory tempo, then the Duce would have to consider withdrawing some of his volunteers. Mussolini hoped that this threat would encourage Franco to quicken the pace of the war.⁵³

As the diplomatic intrigue regarding the Anglo-Italian negotiations reached its height, Mussolini continued to push for a greater intensification of the Spanish Civil War. In the first half of February, Franco re-commenced his offensive toward Teruel, and ended any serious threat of a Red breakthrough. Franco replied to Mussolini's earlier letter with a litany of excuses for the delays in his offensive. He wrote that he was in accord with Mussolini's ideas for greater dynamism in the attack, and asked for new shipments of anti-tank guns, machine-guns, and artillery to support this effort.⁵⁴ Ciano replied on Mussolini's behalf, promising to fulfil some of Franco's arms requests. He also suggested that the Duce was considering the withdrawal of some troops from Spain. This action,

⁵² ASMAE, US 2, Pariani Promemoria, 14 January 1938. ASMAE, UC 46, Magistrati to Ciano, 3, 5, 8 January 1938.

⁵³ ASMAE, UC 46, Mussolini to Franco, 2 February 1938.

⁵⁴ ASMAE, UC 46, Franco to il Duce, 16 February 1938.

Ciano argued, was independent of any scheme under the auspices of the non-intervention committee, but he thought that it would have useful repercussions in the negotiations with Great Britain.⁵⁵

With Eden's resignation on 20 February, combined with Hitler's recent truculent speeches, Mussolini once more urged Franco to seize the initiative. The political left throughout Europe was in a panic, Mussolini argued, and the time was ripe for a fatal strike against the Red forces. Furthermore, the Duce insisted that Franco make greater use of Italian forces in delivering a knockout blow; he could not stand to his Italian heroes sit idle.⁵⁶ Il Caudillo replied through Count Guido Viola, the Italian Ambassador in Salamanca, with an account designed to smooth Mussolini's ruffled feathers. Franco had merely kept the Italian *Corpo Truppe Volontarie* as a strategic reserve to prevent any Red attack on the Madrid front. He did not want to squander these troops on insignificant battles; he preferred to save them for vital attacks. Franco also wrote that he understood the current opportunity, and that he had called up a new class of recruits for training.⁵⁷ Still, Mussolini chafed at the slow progress in Spain, and felt humiliated by the inertia of Italian forces there. In a fit of pique, he even suggested to Ciano that he withdraw all of the Italian ground forces. In the meantime, he ordered the *Regia Aeronautica* on the Balearics to take part in every action in order to cover up the passivity of the *C.T.V.*⁵⁸

⁵⁵ ASMAE, UC 46, Ciano to Viola, 20 February 1938.

⁵⁶ ASMAE, UC 46, Mussolini to Franco, 22 February 1938. *CHD*, 22, 23 February 1938, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁷ ASMAE, UC 46, Viola to Ciano, 24 February 1938.

⁵⁸ ASMAE, UC 46 Ciano to Viola, 26 February 1938, *CHD*, 26 February 1938, p. 81.

While one might allow that Mussolini's desire for a quick end to the war in Spain would help to restore a measure of international stability, he certainly would accept only victory on his terms – a victory that he assumed would tilt the balance of power away from Great Britain and toward Italy. Combined with his moves in the Middle and Far East, his commitment to a genuine rapprochement with the Chamberlain government was severely circumscribed. As Lord Perth met Ciano in Rome before returning to London to receive instructions for the imminent negotiations, Ciano already began to cavil regarding his promises of the previous weekend. Given the ease with which Chamberlain had subdued Eden in their struggle within the Cabinet, Ciano no longer meant to uphold his pledge regarding the withdrawal of volunteers. He told Perth that the issue should not be a part of the discussions in Rome. Instead, the non-intervention committee should work to resolve the question of volunteers. Otherwise, the two diplomats only vaguely explored the possible scope of the negotiations that would resume with Perth's return the following week.⁵⁹

At long last, the formal negotiations commenced in Rome on 8 March. Perth carried with him not only his government's instructions but also a message from Viscount Halifax, the new Foreign Secretary, to Ciano. This personal letter expressed Halifax's hopes for renewed Anglo-Italian friendship. Perth's extensive agenda for the talks, however, indicated how far estranged the two powers had become. The thorniest issue

⁵⁹ FO 371 22403, R1701/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 22 February. For the published version of the Italian record, see *CDP*, conversation with the British Ambassador, s.d., pp. 186-7.

was Spain. Chamberlain had recently made an official declaration in the House of Commons linking the *de jure* recognition of the Italian empire to the “substantial withdrawal” of Italian volunteers. Ciano protested that this plan was different from what had been agreed in London. He had accepted only the declared British withdrawal formula, he argued, and would not base the entire agreement on meeting any set conditions. Meeting those conditions was also not entirely under his control; all parties would have to work through the non-intervention committee. He placed three questions to Perth on this issue. First, what precisely did the British government mean by concrete progress regarding the withdrawal of volunteers? Second, what would happen if an agreement preceded the solution of the Spanish problem? Third, when and how would the British government raise the issue of *de jure* recognition at the League of Nations? Perth replied that he would have to seek clarification of the first question. To the second, he suggested that any agreement would simply be suspended until a satisfactory solution could be found. Finally, the British government would deal with the question of recognition at the next League meeting in May.⁶⁰ These conditions perturbed Ciano; they would require a considerable period of good behaviour in Italian foreign policy before the parties could implement any agreement, and therefore, would tie his hands to a far greater extent than he had previously supposed.

⁶⁰ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 8 March 1938. See also *CDP*, Conversation with the British Ambassador, s.d., pp. 187-93.

In addition to these pressing issues, Perth carried a long list of desiderata that indicated the extent of Italian provocations. The two parties would confirm their Gentlemen's agreement of the previous January. Ciano had no objection to this soporific measure. He did object, however, to Perth's request that other Mediterranean Powers could announce their adherence to points four and five of the Gentlemen's agreement of the previous January, but promised that he would consult Mussolini. In practice, of course, Ciano was unalterably opposed to allowing countries such as France or Greece to associate themselves with an Anglo-Italian understanding. More importantly, Perth heavily emphasised one of the Cabinet's cardinal goals; Mussolini would have to reduce his garrison in Libya. He also called for the cessation of action by Italian agents in Egypt. He further wanted an exception made regarding the *status quo* provisions of any agreement to allow changes in the administration of both Palestine and Syria. He expected Ciano to repeat past Italian assurances on maintaining the *status quo ante* in Arabia. There were some other relatively minor matters. On all of the serious issues at stake, Ciano displayed the utmost reserve.⁶¹ This laundry list of British government demands underlined the vast gulf between Britain and Italy in their Mediterranean dealings. For British strategic concerns in the long term, the questions of Italy's Libyan garrison and its intrigues in the Red Sea represented the most important of these conditions.⁶²

⁶¹ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 8 March 1938.

⁶² FO 37121938, J112/5/16, Lampson (Cairo) to Halifax, 7 March 1938; Halifax to Lampson, 31 March 1938.

On 12 March, Ciano repeated his protests against British plans to subordinate any Anglo-Italian agreement to the issue of the withdrawal of Italian volunteers and to the workings of the non-intervention committee. Perth agreed, and replied that his government was currently exploring that very issue. Ciano wanted to know what the British term 'substantial progress' would mean. Perth, in the absence of official instructions, had to say that he would provide an explanation as soon as possible.⁶³ On 15 March, Perth had three major items on his agenda. The British government wanted the removal of all Italian forces from the Balearic islands. Ciano replied disingenuously that Italy had no ground forces on the islands, requiring Perth to specify that he meant the Italian air forces there. Ciano refused to consider the request, as it had appeared neither in the non-intervention committee nor its proposal for withdrawal of volunteers. Perth dropped the subject. Second, both parties agreed to confirm the Gentlemen's agreement, and to drop any mention of asking other parties to associate themselves with any declarations regarding maintaining the *status quo*. Third, and most importantly, Perth asked the Italian government to withdraw one of the two Italian Corps comprising the Libyan garrison. Ciano demurred, citing the need to consult the Duce.⁶⁴ These two meetings established the essential matters for negotiation. The British government aimed to reduce Italian forces in Libya and to lessen the impact of Italy's intervention in Spain.

⁶³ FO 371 22406, R2408 and 2514/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 12 March 1938. *CDP*, Conversation with the British Ambassador, 12 March 1938.

⁶⁴ FO 371 22406, R2685 and 2733/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 15 March 1938. *CDP*, Conversation with the British Ambassador, 16 March 1938.

On the Italian side, Ciano wanted to make as few commitments as possible in order to secure British recognition of the Italian empire.

As the weeks passed, Perth and Ciano gradually removed these sticking points, and an agreement began to cohere. Gradually, Mussolini made minor concessions in the negotiations. He agreed to reduce the Libyan garrison, removing the substantial part of one of the two European Corps, but would make only a symbolic withdrawal of some 3,000 to 4,000 men during the negotiations. The agreement would enter into force only after 'substantial progress' in Spain, and the British promise to recognise the Italian empire would be tied to that progress through an official exchange of letters. The British Foreign Secretary would, however, open the possibility of other countries recognising the Italian conquest by placing the issue before the League of Nations Council in early May. Italy would cease its propaganda in the Middle East through its Radio Bari broadcasts. Mussolini and Ciano refused to compromise on the evacuation of the Balearics, on British attempts to have Franco bound by the declaration on the maintenance of the Mediterranean *status quo*, and on any association of France with the agreements. Perth and Ciano signed the agreement on Easter Sunday, 16 April 1938, coincidentally Halifax's birthday.⁶⁵ Mussolini achieved his primary goal, British *de jure* recognition of his conquest

⁶⁵ Owing to the nature of Italian record keeping, one can best follow the minutiae of the negotiations through the detailed British records. FO 371 22406, 22407, 22408, *passim*, Perth to Halifax, various dates, 19 March to 9 April 1938. See also, however: *CHD*, 23, 26-9 March 1938, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10 13, 14 April 1938, pp. 93-102; and ASMAE, UC 84, *passim*. For the British Foreign Office debate on the importance of tying the entrance into force of the accord to specific Italian performance, see FO 371

of Ethiopia, though he had to accept Ciano's earlier concession that this event would not occur until after the good-faith withdrawal of some Italian volunteers. Ciano gloated that Mussolini had faced down the powerful British empire, and forced it to accept the parity of Italy as a Mediterranean Power. For him, the Easter Accord signalled the real end of the Ethiopian war.⁶⁶ As for Chamberlain's hopes that he could remove Italy from the list of potential enemies, that would depend on Mussolini's willingness to honour the spirit and substance of the agreement.

As the main points of the Easter Accord were being settled near the end of March 1938, however, Mussolini gave a bellicose speech in Rome to the rubber-stamp Senate. He trumpeted many of the major themes of his ideological fixations. Fate had blessed Italy with strong natural defensive boundaries and profound demographic strength. The metropolitan population in Italy exceeded 44 million in 1938, and would grow to more than 50 million within ten years. Demographic power, Mussolini emphasised, underlay

22640, W3710/83/41, Perth to Halifax, 22 March 1938, Cadogan Minute, 23 March 1938, Halifax to Perth, 25 March 1938. For Italian assurances that this delay would not prejudice relations, see, for example, FO 371 22407, R3102/23/22, Halifax to Perth, 22 March 1938, reporting a conversation between Grandi and the British Foreign Secretary. For Mussolini's letter thanking Perth and Chamberlain for their efforts to reach the accord, see *OO, XXIX*, Mussolini to Chamberlain, 17 April 1938, p. 411. For Chamberlain's views, see NC 18/1/1047, Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 16 April 1938.

⁶⁶ See for example, *CHD*, 13, 14 April 1938, pp. 100-1. Though, of course, Italian troops would continue to fight an unwinnable battle to establish occupation of the entire country. Brian R. Sullivan, "The Italian-Ethiopian War, October 1935–November 1941: Causes, Conduct, and Consequences," in A. Hamish Ion (ed.), *Great Powers and Little Wars: The Limits of Power*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993, pp. 167-201.

military power. It was a simplistic equation; without men one could create no battalions, but with many men, one could create great armies. Mussolini spoke of mobilising 8 million soldiers, of whom 5 million would be front-line material. Accordingly, the Duce dismissed claims from foreigners that his wars in Africa and Spain had depleted Italy's military strength. Instead, it had forged battle-ready veterans, "hundreds of thousands who had marched, fought, and suffered while making war." Furthermore, infantry would always be the 'queen of battle,' as mechanisation could only go so far. Finally, the Duce emphasized the completion and then current construction of modern battleships and submarines as defining Italian naval power. Construction of airplanes, he said, continued at a high rate. Finally, Mussolini spoke of the dynamic military consciousness that he was inculcating in the Italian people. Even allowing for elements of public relations in this speech, Mussolini did seem to believe his own rhetoric, as it was in complete accord with his longstanding beliefs. Mussolini believed that he was preparing Italy for the decisive battles to come.⁶⁷

Despite his bombastic rhetoric, Mussolini's closest flirtation with restoring less fractious relations with France occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Easter Accord. Throughout the negotiations with Britain, Mussolini and Ciano had consistently rejected any French association with those discussions.⁶⁸ Successive French Cabinets had tried to avoid strictly bilateral Anglo-Italian talks, concluding for the most part correctly that the British government would not take into account French security concerns. Halifax's curt

⁶⁷ *OO*, XXIX, *Discorso al Senato*, 30 March 1939, pp. 74-82.

response rejecting an earlier démarche indicated that the discussions aimed only at an Anglo-Italian understanding; the French government would have to look after its own concerns.⁶⁹ In the first week of March, French Foreign Minister Delbos tried again. He prepared a list of French strategic and diplomatic concerns, including Tunis, the Italian occupation of the Balearic Islands, Corsica, and the *status quo* in the Mediterranean. He gave these to the British Ambassador, and said that he hoped Halifax would agree that they would be discussed *à trois*, with France joining the ongoing bilateral negotiations. Perth cabled from Rome that Mussolini would undoubtedly refuse this proposal and that it would wreck any chance of a successful agreement. Halifax sent another dismissive suggestion that the French government approach Ciano directly.⁷⁰ Despite French overtures to Italy, Mussolini and Ciano refused to include France in direct negotiations.⁷¹ Privately, Ciano emphasised that the Anglo-Italian negotiations “were destined to accentuate French isolation and in consequence to weaken all of the system or systems of

⁶⁸ See notes 61-2 and 65-6 in Chapter 3 for the Italian refusal of French participation at the opening of the tortuous road to the Easter Accord in 1937.

⁶⁹ See, for example, FO 371 22402, R852/23/22, Cranborne to Foreign Office, 28 January 1938; 22403, R1696/23/22, Phipps to Halifax, 24 February 1938, Halifax to Phipps, 23 February 1938.

⁷⁰ FO 371 22405, R2117/23/22, Phipps to Halifax, 5 March 1938. FO 371 22405, R2188/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 7 March 1938, Halifax to Phipps, 10 March 1938.

⁷¹ ASMAE, SAP – Francia, B. 33, Prunas to Ciano, initialled by Mussolini, 2 March 1938.

a collective character in which France had placed its hopes.” Naturally, given this objective, he continued to rule out of hand any French participation in the negotiations.⁷²

Still, despite Mussolini’s anti-French animus, there were some improvements in Franco-Italian relations in April. A lengthy set of economic negotiations reached fruition in the spring. The major issue at stake was a clearing exchange agreement that France and Italy had reached in 1936. Trade between the two countries had been balanced through the clearing exchange. The terms represented a small concession on the part of the French government, as they increased Italian exports, thus allowing Italy to pay part of its commercial debt to France. But the agreement limited over-all Italian exports, for they had to pass through the strict controls of the clearing system. During the new round of negotiations, Mussolini and Ciano demanded that France cancel the clearing exchange. The new accord, signed in April 1938, represented another set of French concessions. It abolished the clearing system as of 1939, allowed an immediate increase of Italian exports to France, and arranged for a percentage of the new trade to go to debt repayment, while permitting new Italian purchases of French goods. The agreement annoyed French business leaders who disliked its limits on their investment in Italy. Nevertheless, the Popular Front government thought that these concessions could lead to a Franco-Italian

⁷² ASMAE, UC 4, Ciano to Attolico, 17 March 1938, GAB 29, Ciano to Attolico, 3 April 1938. The short-lived Blum Cabinet re-opened the Pyrenees frontier on 17 March 1938, which did little to endear France to Mussolini and Ciano. Martin Thomas, *Britain, France, and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era*. Oxford: Berg, 1996, p. 220.

rapprochement.⁷³ Ciano recognized the importance of this French concession, but ensured that the communiqué would not convey “any note of exaggerated political optimism.”⁷⁴

As the economic negotiations continued in the first part of April, the new Blum Cabinet, with Joseph Paul-Boncour as its Foreign Minister, also decided to approach Italy for permission to join the Anglo-Italian discussions. Paul-Boncour spoke to Renato Prunas, the Chargé d’Affaires at the Italian Embassy in Paris on 8 and 9 April. The French Foreign Minister wanted to repair the breach in France’s relations with Italy. Specifically, he hoped to send a mission to Rome in order to participate in the negotiations between Perth and Ciano. Paul-Boncour said that he hoped to discuss several questions, including the eventual end of Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War, Djibuti, and the Libyan garrison. Prunas, having already received instructions from Ciano on this point, put forward several roadblocks, and said that he replied to this French initiative with “palpable distance and coldness.”⁷⁵

On 10 April, the Popular Front era ended with Blum’s resignation, and Edouard Daladier became Prime Minister with Georges Bonnet as his Foreign Minister. Bonnet had long supported friendly relations with Mussolini’s Italy, and continued to work to develop Paul-Boncour’s ideas. On 15 April, he instructed Jules Blondel, the Chargé d’Affaires in

⁷³ Gordon Dutter, “Doing Business with the Fascists: French Economic Relations under the Popular Front Government.” *French History*. 4.2 (June 1990), pp. 199-223.

⁷⁴ *CHD*, 14 April 1938, pp. 100-1.

⁷⁵ ASMAE, SAP – Francia, B. 33, Prunas to Ciano, 7 April 1938, 9 April 1938 x2. In the second dispatch on 9 April, Prunas referred directly to these instructions, which did not appear in this file.

Rome, to approach Ciano with an official request for negotiations to lead to France's joining the Anglo-Italian accord.⁷⁶ Blondel saw Ciano the next day to carry out his instructions.⁷⁷ Ciano thought that this move represented French blackmail; either Italy would have to negotiate or France would scuttle British efforts at the League of Nations to achieve *de jure* recognition of the empire. Nevertheless, he agreed to place this démarche before Mussolini. Mussolini agreed, but on strictly limited terms. As Ciano noted in his diary, the Duce wanted to receive the French terms, but would not allow any discussions to weaken the Axis. Any agreement would have to wait at least until after Hitler's visit to Rome in early May. Further, any Franco-Italian discussions would send an unmistakable message that the Spanish republican government was thoroughly isolated.⁷⁸

Ciano was cordial to Blondel. The French Chargé d'Affaires gave Ciano the list of French desiderata on 22 April. This twelve-point memorandum contained several rather minor issues: declarations on the maintenance of the *status quo*, the Libya garrison, the French mandate in Syria, cessation of propaganda, Italian adherence to the 1936 Mediterranean Naval Treaty, rights in Ethiopia and Somalia, the Djibuti railroad, and other issues left over from the Mussolini-Laval accords of 1935. An Italian promise regarding Italian disinterest in Spanish territory and the eventual withdrawal of volunteers and a discussion of relative rights in Tunisia based on the 1935 accord represented the two most important elements of this proposal. Ciano was somewhat encouraging to Blondel, but

⁷⁶ DDF, II, 9, #183, Bonnet to Blondel and Cambon (London), 15 April 1938, pp. 378-9.

⁷⁷ ASMAE, UC 61, Promemoria consegnato da Blondel il 16 aprile 1938.

said that any further discussion would have to wait until after Hitler's visit. Without Ciano's knowledge, however, Mussolini had categorically rejected the fundamental elements of the French proposal. He would not give any similar guarantee to France as he had to Great Britain regarding Spain nor would he negotiate the Tunisian question on the basis of the French proposals. Given the Duce's reaction, there was no possibility of reaching agreement on the substance of the outstanding issues.⁷⁹ Despite Mussolini's rejection of a genuine rapprochement, Ciano continued the negotiations with Blondel until after Hitler's visit in early May, encouraging French statesmen's hopes for a pact.⁸⁰

Why, then, did Mussolini continue these hopeless discussions with his longstanding *bête noire* - the French government? The answer lies in the state of Italo-German relations in the wake of the Anschluss. In early April, Ciano had mentioned to Mussolini the need to quiet irredentism amongst ethnic Germans in the South Tyrol. He cited agitation calling for the frontier to move southward at Italy's expense. In Ciano's view, such talk could

⁷⁸ *CHD*, 16, 19 April 1938, pp. 101-2, 103-4.

⁷⁹ ASMAE, UC 61, Promemoria consegnato da Blondel il 22 aprile 1938. Mussolini circled and heavily marked the sections on Spain and Tunisia on this copy. In a later copy, he scrawled an emphatic "no" in the margins regarding the points on Spain and adherence to the Naval Treaty. Promemoria consegnato da Blondel 2 maggio 1938. *CHD*, 22 April 1938, p. 105.

⁸⁰ Even Ciano continued to hope for an agreement in the first two weeks of May. On 2 May, he noted that he would "shortly" be making a pact with France. As late as 12 May, Ciano believed that an agreement with France would help to facilitate *de jure* recognition of the empire. Mussolini overruled his subordinate, finally informing Ciano of his objections. *CHD*, 2, 12 May 1938, pp. 111-2, 115.

“blow the Axis sky high.” He even raised the possibility of a population exchange. Despite repeated assurances by German diplomats that Hitler did not support this irredentism, unrest did not diminish. On 16 April, demonstrations at Lasa included the use of firearms. Neither Mussolini nor Ciano could tolerate these demonstrations. Ciano urged Mussolini to send a sharp note to Göring, and he also sought active intervention from the German government to quell the unrest. Magistrati saw Göring, but the latter did not fully seize the extremity of Italian anger. His vague response satisfied neither Mussolini nor Ciano. Mussolini was prepared to go a long way to make concessions on language and culture to assuage ethnic German anger, but would not consider territorial revision. At the height of the dispute, Mussolini lamented that German actions “will compel me to swallow the bitterest pill of my life. I mean the French pill.”⁸¹ By the time Hitler visited Italy on 5 May, there had been no definitive solution to this pressing issue.

Despite the potential seriousness of South Tyrolese irredentism, there was no substantive break in Italo-German relations prior to Hitler’s visit. Ciano drafted a clumsy friendship pact, which he called an alliance, that Mussolini approved. Ciano expected that his anodyne phrases would tighten the Axis partnership without preventing the entrance into force of the Anglo-Italian agreement, which would finally grant official British recognition of Mussolini’s Ethiopian conquest.⁸² When Hitler and his entourage arrived,

⁸¹ Quoted in *CHD*, 23 April 1938, p. 105-6. *CHD*, 3, 17, 18, 24 April 1938, p. 96, 102-3, 105-6. ASMAE, UC 90, Attolico to Ciano, 21 April 1938. For more information, see Toscano, *Alto-Adige-South Tyrol*, pp. 37-41, and Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, 304-8.

⁸² *CHD*, 1 May 1938, p.111.

however, Ciano was somewhat surprised to receive a proposal for a full-blown alliance from von Ribbentrop.⁸³ There is no convincing evidence to indicate whether or not Hitler knew of his Foreign Minister's alliance proposal, as Hitler apparently did not mention it to Mussolini or Ciano. The German Foreign Minister did not push his proposal very hard in the face of Ciano's reticence. Hitler, however, was certainly accommodating on the major issue of Italian concern. At a major speech at a 7 May banquet at the Palazzo Venezia, he declared in clear terms the permanent inviolability of the natural frontier on the Brenner. In discussions with the Duce, Hitler promised to rein in South Tyrolean irredentism, while Mussolini undertook to give greater cultural and linguistic rights to that minority. As for the respective 'alliance' proposals, Ciano resisted tying Italy to a formal agreement that could foreclose future British recognition of the Ethiopian conquest if it became public, while German diplomats considered Ciano's hastily prepared friendship pact a harsher rebuff than either Ciano or Mussolini would ever have intended. Still, despite respective Italian and German differences over the exact nature of the Axis relationship, Hitler's visit was a great success. He allayed Mussolini's fears about the Alto Adige and the Brenner frontier, and was tentatively able to explore the Italian attitude toward Germany's interest

⁸³ For a discussion and the text of von Ribbentrop's plans, see Donald Cameron Watt, "An Earlier Model for the Pact of Steel: The Draft Treaties Exchanged between Germany and Italy during Hitler's visit to Rome in May 1938." *International Affairs*. 3.2 (April 1957), pp. 185-97.

in action against Czechoslovakia. As Hitler left Italy, Mussolini told him, "Henceforth no force will be able to separate us."⁸⁴

As Hitler's visit ended, therefore, Mussolini faced a clear choice. On one hand, he had a recently signed agreement with Great Britain, and knew from Grandi and intelligence reports that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain desperately desired strong relations with Italy. The French government had also requested a pact analogous to the Anglo-Italian accord, although Mussolini had not yet explored the cost of reaching an agreement with the Daladier Cabinet. The path was clear for Mussolini to restore relations with the West at any of several levels up to and including restoring the Stresa Front. On the other hand, Adolf Hitler's Germany sought an alliance that would formalise the Axis, though leaving some room for adventures by each individual country. In short, if Mussolini ever intended to play the role of the 'decisive weight,' the arbiter of European affairs between Nazi Germany and the Western democracies, then conditions could hardly have been better. Suitors approached from both sides; which path would the Duce choose?

Mussolini made his answer to this question clear in the immediate aftermath of Hitler's visit. Since the end of March, Ciano had been considering annexing Albania. The Anschluss, while disquieting for Italy, also threatened Yugoslavia. He mused that Stoyadinović's need for Italian friendship might mean that the Yugoslavian Prime Minister

⁸⁴ Quoted in *CHD*, 9 May 1938, pp. 112. *CHD*, 3-9 May 1938, pp. 112-4. See also, Toscano, Alto-Adige-Sud Tyrol, p 41; *idem*, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967,

would be prepared to sacrifice Albania's independence in order to secure an Italo-Yugoslav alliance. Mussolini later agreed, saying that he was prepared to face a war, "as long as we get Albania."⁸⁵ Ciano's tour of Albania, preceding Hitler's visit to Italy, had represented a kind of reconnaissance mission; Mussolini and Ciano needed better information to determine whether or not their project was desirable or feasible. Upon his return, Ciano submitted a report that encouraged Mussolini's expansionist desire. Albania had excellent agricultural potential, Ciano wrote, and had very extensive deposits of coal, though no one had yet completed a full list of Albania's potential mineral wealth. On the strategic side, there were several advantages. In the wake of the Anschluss, German economic, cultural and political tentacles would reach into the former Austrian sphere of influence. A firm warning from Italy and subsequent annexation of Albania would prevent any further German penetration there. In addition, Italian control of Albania would turn the Adriatic Sea into an Italian lake. The *Regia Marina* would be able to divert resources there to bring greater pressure on the British and French navies. Finally, annexation of Albania would bring serious pressure to bear on the Yugoslav government, perhaps increasing its reliance on Italy. King Zog's army was entirely ineffective, so Italian forces would easily overcome it. In short, Ciano heartily recommended annexation, drawing

p. 10-23; Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, pp. 308-9.

⁸⁵ Quoted in *CHD*, 30 April 1938, p. 107. *CHD*, 26 March 1938, p. 94.

parallels between modern Italy and the days of the Cæsars. Significantly, Mussolini heavily marked several passages where Ciano wrote in favour of annexation.⁸⁶

On 10 May, Mussolini and Ciano discussed the report. Mussolini agreed wholeheartedly with its conclusions. He thought that May 1939 would be the most opportune timing, allowing one year for diplomatic and military preparations. Most importantly, Great Britain and France would undoubtedly disapprove of Italian annexation plans, so Mussolini would first need to secure a pact with Germany. Though vitally necessary in order to provide the necessary diplomatic and military cover for Italy's expansion, that pact, of course, would have to wait until after British *de jure* recognition of the Italian empire went into effect.⁸⁷ Mussolini's cavalier disregard for maintenance of the Mediterranean *status quo* indicates that his pledged word in the Easter Accord counted for nothing in the Duce's mind.

Ciano implemented the first stages of Italian planning immediately. He spoke to Francesco Jacomoni, the Italian Minister in Tirana, regarding public works projects, charities, economic development, sporting events, and political organisations that would raise the Italian profile in Albania and prepare the ground for the take-over. Mussolini directed Ciano to give a stern hands-off warning to the German government, which Ciano did later in May. In May and June, Jacomoni commenced this plan, spending money on roads, sports exchanges, theatre, radio, cinema, and a sports stadium. The Fascist

⁸⁶ ASMAE, UC 55, UC 90, Appunto per il Duce: Viaggio in Albania, 2 May 1938.

⁸⁷ CHD, 10 May 1938, p. 114.

government sent a stream of 'advisors' to work in the fields of industry, commerce, and aviation. Ciano also dispatched Fascist Senator Natale Prampolini to work on plans for land reclamation, one of Mussolini's pet ideas. In May and June, therefore, Mussolini and his underlings had set in train the annexation of Albania that occurred in 1939. As little as a month after signing the Anglo-Italian agreement, Mussolini planned to violate its central tenet in order to carry out his plans for expansion.⁸⁸

Similarly, the Duce ruptured Italy's relations with France in the immediate aftermath of Hitler's visit. He finally corrected Ciano's belief that Italy would sign a Franco-Italian accord. Mussolini would not consider the fundamental elements of the French proposals, despite their similarity to those in the Easter Accord. He had held out the possibility of such an accord long enough, however, so that French politicians had supported British moves at the League of Nations to allow individual League members to grant *de jure* recognition of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia. Consequently, the Duce no longer needed to consort with his Gallic enemy. After Bonnet and Halifax opened the door for League members to grant *de jure* recognition of the Italian Empire on 12 May, he quickly cast aside any thought of even a surface appearance of a rapprochement with France. Despite Mussolini's transparent intransigence, Ciano typically blamed the Quai d'Orsay for frustrating his recent moves. On their way to Genoa, where Mussolini would

⁸⁸ *CHD*, 10, 17, 19 May 1938, 13, 18, 21, 18 June 1938, pp. 114, 117, 117-8, 127, 128, 129, 132. *ASMAE*, UC 55, Jacomoni to Ciano, 6 June 1936. *Appunto del M. Jacomoni: Questione Urgenti*, n.d. (internal evidence suggests mid-June 1938), *Jacomoni Appunto sulla situazione dell'Albania*, 13 June 1938.

make a major speech on 14 May, the Duce was increasingly anti-French. He told Ciano that France was “a nation ruined by alcohol, syphilis, and journalism.”⁸⁹ At Genoa, Mussolini departed from his prepared text and delivered a bellicose anti-French speech. The Anglo-French sanctions policy had rendered the Stresa Front forever “dead and buried.” Though conversations with France continued, Mussolini thought that they would not likely be successful, as in Spain France had ranged itself on the opposite side of the barricade to Fascist Italy. Significantly, Mussolini gave markedly better treatment to Britain, signalling a return to attempts to split the Western democracies.⁹⁰ Mussolini’s distaste for all things French deepened over the remainder of May. According to Renato Prunas, the Italian Chargé d’Affaires in Paris, French Foreign Minister Bonnet gave every indication that he would be willing to make major sacrifices in order to reach a rapprochement with Italy. Bonnet was markedly decreasing French aid to the Barcelona government, putting the final nail in the coffin of Republican hopes for stalemate, never mind victory.⁹¹ Despite Bonnet’s efforts to normalise relations, Mussolini decided to intensify a propaganda barrage against France. He wanted the Fascist Party to create “a wave of Gallophobia in order to liberate the Italians from their last remaining slavery and servility towards Paris.” As the Duce launched his campaign, Ciano mused about seizing

⁸⁹ Quoted in *CHD*, 13 May 1938, p. 115-6. *CHD*, 12 May 1938, p. 115.

⁹⁰ *OO*, XXIX, Il Discorso di Genova, 14 May 1938, pp. 99-102.

⁹¹ ASMAE, UC 61, Colloquio Prunas-Bonnet, Prunas to Ciano, 23 May 1938.

Corsica from France.⁹² In short, Mussolini spurned French advances to improve relations and instead deliberately provoked a breakdown in negotiations and the worsening of Franco-Italian relations.⁹³

Ciano also rejected British suggestions that Italy reach a rapprochement with France. Having concluded their own agreement, British officials no longer feared that French talks might create difficulties for the Anglo-Italian negotiations. Ciano made it clear, however, that Italy precluded any similar agreement with France. He informed Perth that Mussolini's Genoa speech signalled a clear distinction in Italy's attitude toward

⁹² Quoted in *CHD*, 3 June 1938, pp. 124-5. *CHD*, 17, 19, 20, 24, 30 May 1938, pp. 117, 117-8, 118, 120-1, 122-3, 6 June 1938, pp. 125-6.

⁹³ Quartararo blamed clumsy French diplomacy for the failure of the Franco-Italian discussions. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, pp. 395-7. In her view, Rome actually initiated these approaches. Mussolini, she argued, intended to create "a solid Anglo-French-Italian front against Germany." This move would restore Italy's position as the "decisive weight." For Quartararo, only the extensive and extreme list of French desiderata prevented any progress and provoked Mussolini's backlash. Ciano directly contradicted this view in the following diary entries. *CHD*, 10-14 May 1938, pp. 114-6. Significantly, Quartararo cited only French sources indicating their hopes for a possible rapprochement. In short, she provided no direct evidence of any sort to bolster her strained conclusion. William Shorrock also over-emphasised the possibility of a genuine Franco-Italian rapprochement. He blamed Léger-Saint-Léger, the French Secretary-General at the Foreign Ministry, who distrusted any of Mussolini's promises, for almost deliberately sabotaging any discussions, p. 227. The extensive list of proposals had no bearing on Mussolini's refusal to reach an accord with France. He rejected the core aspect of the French approach – the Spanish question. Tellingly, Shorrock, too, relied on French sources.

France and Great Britain respectively. He cited continuing French support for Republican Spain, plus supposedly unreasonable French requests during the abortive negotiations as preventing any rapprochement.⁹⁴ French officials believed that Mussolini's and Ciano's actions had become transparent. Mussolini had merely held out the possibility of a Franco-Italian accord until after France had supported British management of the recognition issue at the League of Nations. Once Halifax and Bonnet had removed the League prohibition against *de jure* recognition of the Ethiopian conquest on 12 May, Mussolini had deliberately sabotaged relations with France. Ambassador Phipps reported that Alexis Léger- St. Léger, the Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay, had implemented a policy of appearing as reasonable and tractable as possible to Italy. Léger had little doubt that Italy would not respond positively, but he expected that Mussolini's intransigence would show that he aimed to split France from Great Britain. Foreign Minister Bonnet also spoke along these lines; he had worked hard to achieve a rapprochement with Italy, but had faced frequent rebuffs. As a last ditch effort to show French goodwill, the Daladier government decided to close the frontier with Spain, cutting off the Barcelona government from its supply lifeline.⁹⁵ The French government officially closed the frontier to personnel

⁹⁴ ASMAE, UC 61, also UC 84, Ciano appunto per il Duce, 18 May 1938. *CHD*, 18 May 1938, p. 117. ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 3 June 1938. See also, *CDP*, Conversation with the British Ambassador, s.d., and *CHD*, s.d., p. 124-5.

⁹⁵ FO 371 22427, R5705/240/22, Phipps to Halifax, 16 June 1936. See also Phipps's recognition of Mussolini's strategy, R5738/240/22, 21 June 1938. Cadogan displayed his lack of sensitivity for French

and military shipments on 13 April, but despite this removal of the self-declared Italian objection to better Franco-Italian relations, Bonnet and Léger were unable to make any headway. Despite repeated British attempts to start stalled Franco-Italian talks, Ciano refused to discuss substantive issues with France until after the Chamberlain Cabinet first ratified the Easter Accord. When Perth strongly urged Ciano to open talks with France, for example, he indicated French willingness to make concessions, but Ciano categorically refused to follow up this démarche.⁹⁶

While Italy's relations with Germany, Great Britain and France dominated Italian foreign policy during April, May, and June, other issues were also important. In early March, while the negotiations with Perth were underway, Mussolini had reassured Franco that those discussions would not affect his commitment to Franco's victory. He would not withdraw any troops until Nationalist victory was assured, and would continue Italian support at the highest level consistent with economic and international restraints, despite any promises given to the British government.⁹⁷ Nationalist successes in first halting the Red attack near Teruel and the eventual re-occupation of that city temporarily restored Mussolini's equanimity, as did Franco's commitment of the *C.T.V.* in the Aragon campaign. Ciano believed that victory could be imminent. At the same time, however, he

concerns, writing that refereeing this Franco-Italian dispute was "like trying to keep the peace between two operatic stars." R5705/240/22, Cadogan Minute, 24 June 1938.

⁹⁶ ASMAE, UC 61, Ciano appunto per il Duce, 28 June 1938, US 229, Prunas to Ciano, 18, 22 June 1936. FO 371 22412, R5586/23/22, Halifax Memorandum of conversation with Grandi, 17 June 1936.

⁹⁷ ASMAE, UC 46, Mussolini to Franco, 5 March 1938.

cited unnamed sources that suggested that Britain and France both intended to send men and matériel to aid the Republican side. Ciano did not think these rumours true, but if they were, then Italy would dispatch large scale units in an “open manner” to battle against the Western democracies.⁹⁸ Even though Blondel categorically denied that any French intervention would occur, Ciano did not want a premature war with France, so he arranged with the German government to create a buffer zone of fifty miles from the French border which neither Italian nor German troops would violate. Given the current nature of operations, however, it would be some time before Franco could ensure that the *C.T.V.* would operate solely outside the buffer zone.⁹⁹

Nationalist advances intensified in the first half of April. Mussolini and Ciano hoped that this campaign could decisively rout Red resistance. Mussolini ignored Franco’s wishes to avoid the bombing of civilian areas, and ordered renewed terror bombing of

⁹⁸ ASMAE, UC 46, Ciano to Attolico, 16, 19 March 1938. *CHD*, 16 March 1938, pp. 89-90. See also, *DGFP, D, III, #547*, von Ribbentrop Memorandum for the Führer, 17 March 1938, pp. 621-2. Ambassador Phipps provided one hint of a possible source for these rumours. He wrote that his Dutch colleague had asked French General Pétain whether or not France intended to dispatch two French divisions to Spain. Pétain allegedly indicated that it would do so. But Phipps believed that General Staff Officers had threatened to resign in that case, thus preventing Paul-Boncour from acting. FO 371, W4579/83/41, Phipps to Halifax, 7 April 1938. See also W3971 and W3424 in the same file, both Phipps to Halifax, 25 and 16 March 1938 respectively.

⁹⁹ ASMAE, US 229, Ciano to Grandi, Prunas, Attolico, Viola, 4 April 1938, US 225, Attolico to Ciano, 25 March 1938, Magistrati to Ciano, 31 March 1938, Ciano to Attolico, 30 March 1938, 1 April 1938, Viola to Ciano, 8 April 1938, Ciano to Viola, 12 April 1938.

cities. On 9 April, Ciano dispatched 300 officers to reinforce the *C.T.V.*, as he admitted, “in defiance of all agreements.” Ciano gloated that his negotiations with England and the prospective talks with France had isolated the Barcelona government.¹⁰⁰ In the last week of April, Ciano tried to determine the level of French support for the Republican forces. He had conflicting reports that supplies were either increasing or diminishing. It was important to know which, as the “duration of the war depends on the measure of reinforcement that the Reds receive from France.”¹⁰¹ As Daladier and Bonnet assumed control in April, French supplies to Spain began to dwindle. By the end of April, Mussolini vacillated regarding the continued presence and use of Italian volunteers in Spain. He wanted at least some to remain as evidence of Fascist Italy’s commitment to Franco, but wanted them held only as a reserve. He thought that a non-intervention agreement would allow him to repatriate some troops, allowing the entrance into force of the Easter Accord. Two weeks later, however, after Hitler’s visit, he wanted the *C.T.V.* to take part in new offensives.¹⁰² By mid-May, the Duce looked forward to an imminent attack that he hoped would finally end the civil war.

Also in mid-May, the Hungarian government sought to clarify the nature of Italian policy in the Balkans. Frédéric de Villani, the Hungarian Minister in Rome, told Ciano that the Horthy regime wanted to sign a secret pact with Italy that would provide for some

¹⁰⁰ *CHD*, 2, 5, 6, 8, 9, 15 April 1938, pp. 96, 97, 97-8, 99, 99, 101.

¹⁰¹ *ASMAE*, US 231, Ciano to the Consuls General of Marseilles and Toulouse, 23 April 1938, US 233, Ciano to Grandi 30 April 1938.

¹⁰² *CHD*, 30 April 1938, p. 107, 13 May 1938, pp. 115-6.

element of consultation plus an Italian guarantee in the event of unprovoked Yugoslav aggression against Hungary. Ciano resisted this proposal, musing that supposedly 'secret' pacts could often become public at inconvenient times. Mussolini too was sceptical. He wanted an *a priori* Hungarian withdrawal from the League of Nations before he would consider any agreement. Still, Mussolini allowed that, in the event of an unprovoked offensive by Belgrade, however unlikely that may have been, then Italy would invade Yugoslavia. If the Hungarian government attacked Czechoslovakia along with Germany, then Mussolini would disinterest himself. Ciano informed Villani of the Duce's response, and emphasised Mussolini's insistence that Hungary leave the League of Nations. Further, he suggested that Hungary attempt to reach a rapprochement with Rumania in order to ensure the isolation of France and Czechoslovakia in the Balkans. Both Mussolini and Ciano hoped to splinter the Little Entente.¹⁰³

While Mussolini tilted Italian policy further toward the Axis and away from the West, the first indications of Hitler's plans to destroy Czechoslovakia took shape. Mussolini's initial part in the destruction of Czechoslovakia was entirely unwitting. In April, as Hitler had plotted against Czechoslovakia, he indicated to his aides that Italian support was essential. It was possible that the victory in Ethiopia and the likely eventual one in Spain had either drained Italy or satisfied Mussolini's ambitions. If that were so, then Germany would not have the strategic and military strength to attack Czechoslovakia. If, however, Mussolini's aims were more ambitious, then he would

¹⁰³ *CHD*, 16, 17, 20, 23, 24 May 1938, p. 116-6, 117, 118, 120, 131.

require German acquiescence and support to proceed in the face of likely British and French opposition. If Hitler were able to exploit Mussolini's ambitious nature, then Italy would become more tightly tied to German coat tails. In an attack on Czechoslovakia, the threat of Italian intervention, Hitler believed, would deter France from entering a war in defence of Prague. Even if the French government did declare war, however, Hitler believed that the Italian presence on the Alpine frontier, combined with Italian naval and land threats against France's North African colonies would relieve enough pressure to allow the *Wehrmacht* the time necessary to regroup after its inevitable victory over Czechoslovakia. Given this set of circumstances, Hitler thought that an Italo-German alliance was an essential element of Germany's political and military strategy. After his visit to Italy in May and his initial probing there, Hitler convinced himself that Mussolini's aggressive nature and expansionistic goals would mean that Italy would fall in line with his plans for Czech destruction.¹⁰⁴

Mussolini was not unwilling to fill the role in which Hitler had cast him. In the latter half of May, rumours of German aggression abounded. The Czechoslovak army mobilised, and Mussolini offered Hitler his unqualified support. Italy had no direct interest in the issue, but Mussolini declared solemnly to Ciano that Italy would "immediately enter

¹⁰⁴ DGFP, D, II, #32, date unknown, Notes made by the Führer's Adjutant (Schmundt) on Observations made by the Führer on the Contemporary Strategic Situation, pp. 238-9. Based on internal evidence, Schmunt likely made this note sometime in April. For more on the likely date and the context in which Schmunt wrote this document, see Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, pp. 337-40.

the struggle by the side of the Germans” in the event of war.¹⁰⁵ Ciano informed the German government that Italy would support its Axis partner whatever its plans, and he offered to issue a public communiqué to that effect. The following day, he asked to be informed of Hitler’s exact plans. Mussolini did not care whether Hitler planned to destroy Czechoslovakia or simply to achieve regional autonomy for the Sudeten Germans. He merely wanted to concert Italian aims with those of Germany to avoid working at cross-purposes. If the German government wanted an Italian semi-official “Informazione Diplomatica” issued, then the Mussolini and Ciano would need to know how to couch their support. The crisis died down without further incident, however, and Hitler declined the Italian offer of an official statement. The German Ambassador, von Mackensen, misled Ciano about the true and aggressive nature of German policy; he said that the Führer sought only concessions regarding local autonomy for Sudeten Germans. Thus mollified, Ciano temporarily ceased his probing to determine Hitler’s intentions. Mussolini’s display of Italian support, however, encouraged Hitler’s belief about Italian loyalty to the cause of Czechoslovakia’s destruction.¹⁰⁶ It also reflected Mussolini’s readiness to overturn the European *status quo* as well as the Mediterranean one.

¹⁰⁵ *CHD*, 26 May 1938, p. 121.

¹⁰⁶ *DGFP*, *D*, II, #220, von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 29 May 1938, pp. 356-7; #229, 1 June 1938, p. 373. *CHD*, 27, 28, 31 May 1938, 121-3. British Intelligence information suggested that, during the meetings at the beginning of May, Mussolini had given Hitler virtual *carte blanche* in dealing with Czechoslovakia, provided that Hitler handled the matter without a general European war. FO 371, R5700/43/22, Perth to Jebb, 16 June 1938, entire.

Mussolini's forward policy in Spain also indicated his lack of commitment to the principles of the Anglo-Italian agreement. Shortly before the May crisis of the possible German coup against Czechoslovakia, Halifax had summoned Grandi to protest the dispatch of six new Italian planes to Palma. Members of the British Navy had seen their arrival, so there was little use for Grandi to deny this violation of Mussolini's promises. Instead, Grandi cited French violations of the non-intervention agreement as a pretext for this Italian shipment. Halifax took note of Grandi's objections, saying that prior French violations meant that the British government was making only an unofficial protest. Nonetheless, Halifax insisted that such obvious Italian violations created difficulty for Chamberlain and the Cabinet both with the public at large and within parliament. Grandi received this information with ill grace, blaming the French government for trying to scuttle the Easter Accord through its continued support for the Barcelona government.¹⁰⁷

Since February, however, Mussolini had become far less concerned with Chamberlain's difficulties. Mussolini's Genoa speech and his obvious violations of the non-intervention agreement had given Anthony Eden powerful ammunition to attack Chamberlain. Although Mussolini thought that Eden's return to power would no longer

¹⁰⁷ ASMAE, US 231, Grandi to Ciano, 18 May 1938. This shipment of Italian aircraft stemmed in part from attempts to meet Franco's previous request for reinforcement of Nationalist airpower. US 20, Ciano to Ministero Aeronautica, 18 March 1938. On French supplies to Spain during April 1938, see US 231, Pietromarchi to Ministero di Guerra, Servizio Informazione Militare, Attolico, Grandi, Viola, 23 May 1938. See also US 232, Viola Appunto, 25 May 1938, on French resupply of a Red Brigade (72nd brigade of the 43rd division) isolated against the French border.

threaten Italy, Chamberlain was the lesser of two evils, and he ordered Ciano to placate the British Prime Minister and to smooth any feathers that the Genoa speech might have ruffled. Ciano's speech in Milan on 2 June did publicly smooth over some of the cracks in Anglo-Italian relations, though it did nothing substantive to change Italian policy.¹⁰⁸

The next day, Perth met Ciano to thank him for his speech but also to protest Italian participation in the bombing of civilian populations in Spain. The British Ambassador cited previous Italian intervention with Franco in preventing Nationalist raids on Barcelona. Considering that Mussolini had ordered these terror-bombing campaigns, Ciano knew that he had to reject Perth's request. Once more, he blamed the excesses on France's reinforcement of the Republican side, though he allowed that he would consult with Mussolini. More importantly, Ciano told Perth that Mussolini had given explicit instructions to draw Perth's attention to the need for immediate implementation of the Easter Accord. Disingenuously, Ciano said that Italy had fulfilled all of its pledges, citing the withdrawal of some 8,000 troops from Libya, the cessation of anti-British propaganda, and the Italian acceptance of new proposals for the eventual withdrawal of volunteers from Spain. The eventual withdrawal of troops was tied to the workings of the non-intervention committee, and Italy could not hasten its work; therefore, Ciano argued, Italy had met its obligations.¹⁰⁹ Perth replied that he personally accepted Ciano's view, and

¹⁰⁸ ASMAE, UC 61, also UC 84, Ciano appunto per il Duce, 18 May 1938. *CHD*, 20, 24 May 1938, pp. 118, 120-1.

¹⁰⁹ For the Italian acceptance of the British sponsored plan, which was to trade eventual proportional withdrawal of volunteers for granting of belligerency rights to Franco's Nationalist army in Spain, see

hoped that the Cabinet would implement the agreement. Perth relayed Ciano's words to the Foreign Office, amazingly adding that Italy had behaved with "scrupulous honesty towards us."¹¹⁰ The same day, however, Mussolini betrayed the real face of Italy's alleged commitment to the Easter Accord. He decided to send 2,000 troops to Spain. To try to avoid detection, these soldiers would travel in small groups and would wear mufti. Six days later, Mussolini decided to increase the number of reinforcements to 4,000 during June and July.¹¹¹

British failure to implement the Easter Accord on demand, combined with the Chamberlain government's continued association with France, brought Mussolini's patience to an end. On 20 June, Perth carried the Chamberlain government's reply to Ciano's demands of 3 June. In order to settle the Spanish imbroglio and allow the entrance into force of the Easter Accord, the Cabinet suggested three possible solutions: execution of the non-intervention committee plan, unilateral withdrawal of Italian volunteers, or a

ASMAE, US 6, Ciano to Grandi, 21 May 1938, Ciano to Attolico, 25 May 1938, Grandi to Ciano, 1 June 1938; US 7, Grandi to Ciano, 27, 31 May 1938. For British estimates on the partial withdrawal of Italy's garrison in Libya, see FO 371 22430, R4738/263/22, Consul in Tripoli to Halifax, plus Nichols and Halifax minutes, 9, 13, 16 May 1938 respectively.

¹¹⁰ ASMAE, UC 84, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 3 June 1938. See also, *CDP*, Conversation with the British Ambassador, s.d., and *CHD*, s.d., p. 124-5. For Perth's views of the meeting, see FO 371 22412, R5297/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 3, 4 June 1938. For Perth's credulity in the face of Ciano's disinformation, see FO 371 22412, R5343/23/22, Perth to Ingram, 4 June 1938.

¹¹¹ *CHD*, 3, 9 June 1938, pp. 124-5, 126-7. See also, *DGFP*, D, III, #599, von Mackensen to the Foreign Ministry, 9 June 1938, pp. 683-4.

cease fire between Franco's Nationalists and the Barcelona government. Mussolini directed Ciano to reject these proposals. Franco had established a clear superiority over the Red forces, and, combined with Daladier's closing of the Pyrenees frontier, a Nationalist victory seemed assured. Mussolini would not throw away his hard earned military and propaganda victory. In rejecting this initiative, Ciano told Perth that Mussolini would not stop until the final defeat of communism in Spain. Mussolini confirmed Ciano's language; the Foreign Minister had noted in his diary that Mussolini "absolutely refuses to compromise – we shall not modify our policy towards Franco in the smallest degree and the agreement with London shall come into force when God pleases. If indeed it ever will."¹¹²

Similarly, the Duce expressed his impatience with British protests over the bombing of British shipping. In the last week of June, Chamberlain used the secret channel to convey the difficult position in which such attacks placed him. Chamberlain directed Sir Joseph Ball to contact Grandi, informing the Italian Ambassador that the continuing attacks by Italian planes flown by Italian pilots could lead to a schism in the Conservative Party. Chamberlain could not continue to defend the Easter Accord in the face of such wilful Italian assaults. Ball pleaded with Grandi to intercede to stop the attacks. Grandi, typically faithful to the idea of Anglo-Italian amity, tried to do so.¹¹³ Simultaneously, Halifax worked through normal diplomatic channels to try to achieve the same goal. Perth

¹¹² Quoted in *CHD*, 22 June 1938, p. 129. ASMAE, UC 85, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 20 June 1938. See also US 225, Ciano to Attolico, 6 June 1938.

called on Ciano on 28 June to protest both the attacks and the triumphalism of the Italian press that exalted the supposedly glorious deeds of Italian pilots. Ciano claimed falsely that such attacks were under local control, and that, in any event, ships in port were fair game for Nationalist pilots.¹¹⁴ Ciano informed Mussolini of the damage that these attacks were causing to Anglo-Italian relations, but Grandi's and Perth's intercessions sparked Mussolini's ire. He refused to stop the bombing campaign, and was annoyed at these signs of British pressure. He contemplated refusing Perth access to the Palazzo Chigi. Mussolini declared that he did not care if these attacks led to Chamberlain's ouster; he would simply deal with any successor.¹¹⁵

He prepared a diplomatically offensive memorandum that would reject categorically recent British proposals. He refused to consider a unilateral withdrawal of volunteers from Spain, even though that would allow the entrance into force of the Easter Accord. Despite the inevitable delay in its implementation, he declared that he would not resume negotiations with France until after the Easter Accord went into effect. He would not consider any possibility of a peace settlement in Spain. Ciano had to intercede with the Duce to change the wording of the draft. Mussolini had repeatedly used the word 'absurd' to indicate British policies. Though Ciano still valued good Anglo-Italian relations, his chief did not. Mussolini insisted that until the Chamberlain Cabinet implemented the

¹¹³ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 26, Grandi to Ciano, 25, 26 June 1938.

¹¹⁴ ASMAE, UC 61, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 26, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 28 June 1938.

¹¹⁵ *CHD*, 20-1, 28-9 June 1938, pp. 129-30, 132-3.

agreement, he would preserve complete freedom of action. In particular, he would continue to send reinforcements to Spain - he sent 600 artillerymen on 1 July - and he would suspend his withdrawal of the second corps of the Libyan garrison. Ciano concluded that Mussolini was deliberately precipitating an "almost inevitable" crisis in relations with Britain.¹¹⁶

Ciano faithfully followed Mussolini's wishes at a meeting with Perth on 2 July. Until the accord was implemented, Ciano stated, Mussolini would stop withdrawal of the Libyan garrison and would retain complete freedom of action. Ciano also threatened to publish documents exchanged at the last meeting with Perth before the signing of the accord. The publication of these documents, which both parties had intended to be kept secret, would unavoidably enrage both British public opinion and the French government. Perth replied that his government had fulfilled its obligations to that point, especially regarding the League of Nations and the recognition issue. Furthermore, Mussolini had pledged to withdraw the Libyan garrison at the time the accord was signed. To renege on that commitment would violate his word. The essence of Perth's reply was that Mussolini's reaction put in doubt eventual implementation of the accord.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ For an extracted copy of this memorandum, see ASMAE, UC 61, Estratto del pro-memoria redatto del Duce e consegnato da S.E. il ministro a Lord Perth in occasione del 2 luglio 1938. *CHD*, 27-31 June 1938, 1 July 1938, pp. 131-4.

¹¹⁷ ASMAE, UC 85, Colloquio con l'ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 2 July 1938, UC 61, Estratto del pro-memoria redatto del Duce e consegnato da S.E. il ministro a Lord Perth in occasione del 2 luglio 1938. Copies of both Ciano's account of the meeting and the memorandum for Perth exist in US 231. For

After the meeting, Perth sought instructions. He ascribed Mussolini's outrageous behaviour to a possible fit of temper or, alternatively, to his need to implement the accord in order to restore breathing room within the Axis. Bizarrely, he suggested that the Foreign Office secure an official request from the French government for the implementation of the accord. This manoeuvre would allow the Cabinet to ignore the provision of the withdrawal of Italian volunteers. Perth expected that once implemented, the Anglo-Italian agreement would push Mussolini to reach a similar agreement with France. This rationale strained credulity, and not surprisingly several members of the Foreign Office dismissed it; they thought that Mussolini's action aimed to split Britain from France through rather transparent blackmail.¹¹⁸ Given this consensus, Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Undersecretary at the Foreign Office, prepared a strong rejection of Mussolini's demands. He instructed Perth to say that His Majesty's Government regretted the delay caused by the question of the withdrawal of volunteers, but it would not relax the Cabinet's policy. After all, the accord that Ciano had signed expressly included that central element. He wanted Perth to inform Ciano that Mussolini's decision not to negotiate with France was a blow; if the Easter Accord entered into force while Franco-Italian relations were bad, then it would appear that Mussolini merely aimed to

Perth's account, see FO 371 22413, R5663/23/22, R5978/23/22, R5979/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 2 July 1938.

¹¹⁸ FO 371 22413, R6020/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 5 July 1938, R6171/23/22, Perth to Ingram, 8 July 1938, Ingram and Strang Minutes, 12 July 1938, Sargent Minute, 14 July 1938, R6186/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 8 July 1938.

drive a wedge between the two Western democracies. Finally, Cadogan said that publication of documents including confidential information and reinforcement of Libya would be “unfortunate.” This term was thinly veiled diplomatic language that such action would scupper the Easter Accords.¹¹⁹ In short, Halifax and his Foreign Office staff completely rejected Mussolini’s ill-mannered blackmail. Perth followed his instruction on 11 July. Ciano was relatively quiet during this meeting, and merely accepted Perth’s reply, despite its failure to kow-tow in the face of Mussolini’s bluster. Mussolini was clearly unhappy with the British reaction, but he could do little other than to await further developments in Spain.¹²⁰ Still, his failure to intimidate Chamberlain combined with foreign reactions to Mussolini’s racial policies raised his ire; “I will do anything I can to sever relations with France and England – nothing can come from that quarter except putridity [*pourriture*].”¹²¹ The major result of this flurry was to signal the failure of Chamberlain’s hopes of a genuine rapprochement. In the affair’s immediate aftermath, the Chiefs of Staff noted gloomily that they still had to rank Italy among Britain’s potential enemies.¹²²

¹¹⁹ FO 371 22413, R5979/23/22, Cadogan to Perth, 8 July 1938, Halifax to Perth, 9 July 1938. See also PREM 1/276, Halifax to Perth, 9 July 1938.

¹²⁰ ASMAE, UC 85, UC 61, US 231, Colloquio con l’ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna, 11 July 1938. *CHD*, 12 July 1938, pp. 135-6.

¹²¹ Quoted in *CHD*, 17 July 1928, pp. 137-8.

¹²² FO 371 22438, R6795/899/22, C.I.D. Paper 475-C, 20 July 1938.

While Mussolini's provocations damaged Italy's relations with Britain, Ciano worked to solidify Italy's relations in the Balkans and the Far East. In mid-April, Bosko Crstić, the Yugoslav Minister in Rome, had informed Ciano of Prime Minister Stoyadinović's attitude in the event of a German attack against Czechoslovakia. Stoyadinović intended to harmonise Yugoslav policy with that of Italy. Despite his country's obligations as a member of the Little Entente, Stoyadinović had little stomach for military action, particularly if that meant fighting on the side of France against the Axis. During an official visit to Venice in mid-June, Stoyadinović confirmed this attitude. He would not resist any German moves, though he certainly did not want to see the Reich adding another three million citizens to the dominant power in Europe. He was more concerned, however, that Hungary might seize the initiative in an attack. That aggression, Stoyadinović argued, would oblige him to uphold his commitment to defend Czechoslovakia. Ciano assured his guest that Hungary had no intention of provoking any crisis. Despite his promised acquiescence in the event of German moves against Czechoslovakia, Stoyadinović feared German domination of the Balkans. Though both Italy and Yugoslavia needed friendly relations with Germany, he hoped to be able to rely on a close partnership with Italy to resist German economic and political might. Ciano's account of the conversation painted a picture of almost fawning servility on Stoyadinović's part. The Prime Minister said that his relationship with Mussolini's Italy

Stoyadinović's part. The Prime Minister said that his relationship with Mussolini's Italy was tighter than a mere alliance, and that he expected his policy to conform to that of Italy.¹²⁴ Mussolini's and Ciano's efforts to earn Yugoslavia's trust had apparently paid off.

One month later, Mussolini received a Hungarian delegation that included Béla Imrédy, the Prime Minister, and Kálmán de Kánya, the Foreign Minister. After brief discussions on internal politics and economic ties, de Kánya raised the Czechoslovak question. It had become obvious, he said, that Hitler would force a solution sometime in the near future. Hungary would never initiate hostilities, but would instead join the conflict after it had begun. Hungarian diplomats would soon try to determine the Yugoslav attitude toward this issue. In the meantime, however, de Kánya hoped to receive an Italian guarantee against a possible Yugoslav attack. Without such a guarantee, Hungary would be unable to press forward its claims. Ciano informed de Kánya and Imrédy of Stoyadinović's assurances of the preceding month; as long as Hungary did not carry out a unilateral attack, then Yugoslavia would stand aside. Though both Hungarian statesmen distrusted Stoyadinović's word, Mussolini and Ciano believed that they had squared matters; Yugoslavia would leave its Czechoslovak Little Entente partner to its fate. Accordingly, Mussolini urged his guests to act decisively when the time came. He also informed de Kánya and Imrédy that he was willing to risk war in support of Hitler's plans, including the possibility of war with France. The Hungarian visit disappointed Mussolini;

¹²⁴ ASMAE, UC 49, Ciano Appunto per il Duce, 18 June 1938. *CHD*, 15 April 1938, 16-8 June 1938, pp. 101, 128-9. For the published version, see *CDP*, Conversation with the Yugoslav Prime Minister,

he thought Imrédy the ruler of a moribund regime, and de Kánya a relic of Habsburg vintage.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, joint Italo-Hungarian military discussions later in July showed more promise. Jenő Rátz, the Hungarian Minister of Defence, discussed potential strategy in the potential conflict over Czechoslovakia as well as Italian arms shipments.¹²⁶ Mussolini and Ciano had helped to prepare the way for a German attack on Czechoslovakia, and had been able to weaken France by splitting that country's Little Entente allies.

A new démarche from Japan represented the other important development in Italian foreign policy during the early summer of 1938. As far back as March, Mussolini had tried to tighten the relationship between the two anti-Comintern signatories. He had dispatched a letter to Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, citing the common aspirations of the two countries that had bound them in a pact against "the dissolute ideologies which infect the sacred patrimony of humanity."¹²⁷ On a more serious vein, his Fascist Party mission to Japan under Paulucci de Carboli sought to develop Italo-Japanese political and economic ties. During April, both Mussolini and Ciano had rejected any kind of concrete

Stoyadinovich, 18 June 1938.

¹²⁵ ASMAE, UC 49, 85, Colloquio a Palazzo Venezia tra Il Duce, Ciano, Imrédy e de Kánya, 18 July 1938. *CHD*, 17-20 July 1938, pp. 137-8.

¹²⁶ ASMAE, UC 58, Conversazioni militari italo-hungarese, 25, 26, 27 July 1938 (document dated 30 July 1938).

¹²⁷ *OO*, XXIX, Mussolini to Prince Fumimaro Konoe (Mussolini used the standard European ordering of names rather than the Japanese system), 19 March 1938, p. 410.

negotiations.¹²⁷ Opposition from the Gaimushō and elements within the Byzantine Japanese government also had blocked any substantive development, but on 31 May, the Japanese Military Attaché in Rome approached Ciano to suggest the signing of a secret pact. Ugaki Kazunari, the newly appointed Japanese Foreign Minister, was more sympathetic to the West and hoping to achieve some compromise settlement of the war in China. He hoped to create an Italo-German-Japanese political bloc in order to put pressure on Britain and the Soviet Union to modify their support for China. At the same time, Konoe appointed Lt. Gen. Itagaki Seishiro as War Minister. Itagaki believed that Japanese military successes would reduce Anglo-American and Soviet influences in China, and that German and Italian support would help to achieve this goal.¹²⁸ Ciano naturally was receptive to these views, noting that “one sees from the historical point of view that Italy and Japan will have to march side by side for a long time.” Mussolini echoed his subordinate’s view; he no longer seemed to fear offending British sensibilities. On 6 June, Ciano arranged with Admiral Cavagnari, the Undersecretary for the Navy, to send a mission headed by Admiral De Courten to Japan. Ciano needed a representative to arrange the military pact that would inevitably accompany any political agreement. The same day, he instructed Ambassador Auriti to proceed with plans for a secret protocol to contain three clauses: benevolent neutrality in the event that either party was at war, political

¹²⁷ ASMAE, UC 53, Ciano to Auriti, 9 April 1938.

¹²⁸ For solid and brief coverage of Japanese politics and strategy see Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*. London: Longmans, 1987; Toscano, *Origins of the Pact of Steel*.

consultations, and military and technical co-operation. These discussions proceeded sporadically, however, as members of the Japanese Navy and the Gaimushō feared alienating Great Britain and its naval power, and did not want to become involved in a European war over Czechoslovakia. By July, the preliminary stage had been set for the continuing evolution of the negotiations that would proceed later in the year.¹²⁹ Mussolini continued to try to recruit potential allies for a confrontation with Britain and France.

Mussolini's overtures to Japan did not conceal the fact the Axis and European affairs were the central considerations of his foreign policy during the summer of 1938. Although the Duce had resisted signing an open alliance at his meeting with Hitler in May, diplomats from both countries conducted sporadic talks to determine a possible pact that would accurately indicate the virtual alliance that existed between Italy and Germany. At the end of June, von Ribbentrop, on his own initiative, proposed a military alliance. Mussolini and Ciano were no longer opposed, as relations with Britain were so poor that Mussolini had temporarily lost hope of the implementation of the Anglo-Italian agreement. Mussolini wanted von Ribbentrop and Ciano to meet at Como to discuss the matter, but at the same time, the Duce thought that he needed time to prepare Italian public opinion for a German alliance. The German Foreign Minister sent his intermediary, the Prince of Hesse, to Italy in early July. Although the Prince carried a message that von Ribbentrop was anxious for an alliance, he preferred to have Ciano come to the Nuremberg Party rally in

¹²⁹ ASMAE, UC 53, Ciano to Auriti, 6 June 1936, Auriti to Ciano, 24 June 1938. *CHD*, 31 May 1938, 1, 6, 21 June 1938, pp. 123, 124, 125-6, 129. See also Ferretti, *Il Giappone e la politica estera italiana*,

September rather than to visit Como for what would be a lower profile meeting. Ciano did not want to go to Nuremberg, however, as Mussolini had recovered some hope for British implementation of the Easter Accord, and that required a delay in signing an open alliance with Germany until after official recognition of the Ethiopian conquest.¹³⁰ Though these exploratory conversations had not reached fruition by the end of July, Mussolini still felt able to give an open commitment of support for German aspirations in Czechoslovakia. In the context of anxious international concern over German pressure on the Beneš government, Attolico, the Italian Ambassador in Berlin, informed German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop that the Duce would “support German policy to the full.” If France were to mobilize, then so would Italy. If France attacked Germany, then Italy would attack France. In Mussolini’s eyes, “Germany and Italy were so closely linked together that their relationship was tantamount to an alliance.” Mussolini hinted at the possible conclusion of a formal agreement, containing the usual soporifics of eternal friendship, but more importantly, including staff conversations and mutual declarations of diplomatic and military support in the case of outside interference.¹³¹

During June and July, therefore, Mussolini’s attempted blackmail of Great Britain had poisoned relations between those two countries. He had failed to secure implementation of the Easter Accord, and had also failed to split Britain and France.

1935-41, pp. 213-8.

¹³⁰ *CHD*, 27 June 1938, 2, 11, 15, 17, July 1938, pp. 131-2, 134, 135, 136-7, 138-9. For further discussion, see Toscano, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel*, pp. 27-39.

¹³¹ *DGFP*, D, II, #334, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 4 August 1938, PP. 533-4.

Mussolini's contempt for the French government had ruptured relations with that country. He had alienated himself and Italy from the Western democracies. At the same time, Mussolini had cleared the way in the Balkans for an eventual German attack on Czechoslovakia, and, to varying degrees, had brought both Yugoslavia and Hungary into the Italian camp. Ciano's 1937 volte face in jettisoning Italian support for Nationalist China had begun to pay off, and Mussolini looked forward to a possible anti-British military and political pact with Japan. He also contemplated a stronger public declaration of Axis solidarity, including the possibility of a formal alliance. Mussolini and Ciano had essentially prepared the ground for a possible three-way alliance against the West, and Mussolini had given virtual carte blanche to Germany in its efforts to destroy Czechoslovakia. The Chamberlain Cabinet's refusal to implement the Easter Accord represented the only snag in these plans. Mussolini still had a vague hope of achieving formal British recognition of his conquest of Ethiopia. But Mussolini's reliance on Germany and his estrangement from the West had grown substantially over the first months of 1938.

Chapter 5: From Munich to the March to the Oceans

In addition to his increasing radicalization of Italian foreign policy, Mussolini had also undertaken steps to radicalize domestic mores and attitudes. In April 1938, Mussolini had directed the Council of Ministers to create the Institute for Human Reclamation and the Development [*Ortogenesi*] of Race. He wanted this institute to study the demographic potential of the nation, plus the psychological and physical development of races. He planned to develop Italians' harmony of body and spirit and to correct their imperfections and anomalies. In addition, he directed the members of the institute to study racial questions, especially the question of biological determination. At the same time, he ordered the Council to pass a decree law expediting the settlement of 1,800 Italian families in Libya by the end of October. It encouraged the settlers to begin land redistribution along European lines and to establish small businesses.¹

In July, he renewed his racist and anti-Jewish tirades. He spoke to Ciano of his plans for a third wave to transform the Italian people that the Duce would launch in October. He would institute concentration camps to allow for stricter treatment of those members of the bourgeoisie who still looked toward London and Paris for cultural and political inspiration. The campaign would begin with "a bonfire of Jewish, Masonic, and pro-French literature," and would include a ban on publication of Jewish writers. His

¹ OO, XXX, 400^a Riunione dei Consiglio dei Ministri, 23 April 1938.

goal, he explained, was to make the Italian populace “hard, relentless, and hateful – in fact, masters.”² A few days later, a group of ‘scholars,’ allegedly under the aegis of the Ministero della Cultura Popolare, issued a statement on the ‘racial’ question. Mussolini confided to Ciano that he had written most of it himself. Similarly, Achille Starace issued a series of anti-Semitic screeds that Mussolini also claimed as his own. Mussolini’s central idea in this campaign was to create a racial consciousness in the Italian people. He feared that their lack of racial preparedness underlay the problems of revolts against Italian suzerainty in the Amhara; in the Duce’s mind, Italians were as yet too weak to rule with an iron fist. Accordingly, the supposed scholars’ statement claimed that a “pure Italian race” existed, of Aryan stock, which held the patrimony of the great Italian nation. Jews, who were by definition of non-European origin, emphatically did not belong to the Italian race-nation. Miscegenation between Italians and non-Europeans threatened the purity of Italian blood; the new reality of racial consciousness would have to end this hybridization of the Italian race. Italian newspapers and Fascist Party orders disseminated this campaign.³

At the beginning of August, Mussolini took initial steps in the persecution of Jews. A 1 August decree prohibited Jewish students from attending school for the 1938-9 scholastic year. A few days later, Mussolini issued “Informazione Diplomatica #18” on

² Quoted in *CHD*, 10 July 1938, pp. 134-5.

³ *CHD*, 14, 15, 17, 24, 26, 30 July 1938, pp. 136, 137, 137-8, 140, 140, 141. See also British reports summarising this racial barrage in FO 371 22442, R6343/6343/22, R6523/6343/22, R6615/6343/22, Perth to Halifax, 16, 22 27 July 1938.

the racial issue. He argued speciously that his racial policy dated from 1919 and the formation of fascism. The conquest of the empire had brought the racial problem to the forefront. Eventually, Italy would send millions of men to Libya and Ethiopia, and these men would need an appropriate “omnipresent racial consciousness.” Otherwise, they would create a “bastard race, neither European nor African,” which would “foment disintegration and revolt.” In Italy itself, Mussolini cited the need for discriminatory measures against Jews. Jews maintained their racial solidarity and, owing to their internationalist impulses, their refusal to recognize state borders. Given the paramount position of the state in Mussolini’s *mentalité*, he thought that their outlook alienated Jews from the Italian race. Hence, in Mussolini’s eyes, there was an historical “equation” between the corruption of “Judaism, bolshevism, and masonism.” Only those Jews who renounced their religion and its internationalist connections or otherwise proved their loyalty to fascism could hope to become accepted in the Fascist state.⁴ In keeping with this public statement for the international community, Mussolini privately told Ciano to recall all Jews serving in the diplomatic corps. It was inappropriate for Jews to represent the Italian people.⁵ Mussolini’s racial consciousness highlighted the nature of his challenge to the West. Although his anti-Semitism and racism had a different nature than did Hitler’s, it was clear that Mussolini sought to align the policies of the two fascist regimes more closely. Furthermore, Mussolini’s expansionistic designs underlay his

⁴ OO, XXIX, “Informazione Diplomatica #18”, *Popolo d’Italia*, 6 August 1938, pp. 497-8. See also FO 371 22442, R6832/6343/22, Charles to Halifax, 6 August 1938.

⁵ CHD, 8 August 1938, p. 141.

discriminatory initiatives in the empire. He believed that if he could harden the Italian race, then his military would have the *élan vital* to defeat the Western democracies.

Despite Mussolini's increasing extremism in domestic policy and his annoyance with Britain, however, he still hoped to secure British recognition of his victory in Ethiopia. Accordingly, on 26 July 1938, when Chamberlain made a statement on Spain to the House of Commons that the accord would be implemented only after "Spain ceased to be a menace to the peace of Europe," Ciano ordered Guido Crolla, the London Embassy's Chargé d'Affaires, to determine Chamberlain's precise meaning. Ciano wanted to know if the Prime Minister meant that withdrawal of volunteers was a sufficient condition to allow the Anglo-Italian agreement's implementation, or if he had raised an additional barrier.⁶ Crolla tried to see Chamberlain, but the Prime Minister was at his weekend retreat at Chequers, so Halifax informed Crolla that there had in fact been no change in British policy. However, given the previous condition of the non-intervention proposal, Halifax explained, the Cabinet's condition on withdrawal technically meant that implementation could not occur until the withdrawal of the last Italian volunteer. In order to establish a more reasonable condition, he said that he would accept substantial withdrawal as had been established in the non-intervention committee earlier that year. Upon Chamberlain's return, he confirmed to Crolla that his words to the House had been uttered during the heat of the debate. He slightly amended Halifax's terms, privately indicating that he would accept the "partial or substantial" withdrawal of

⁶ ASMAE, US 231, Ciano to Crolla, 28 July 1938, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Ciano to Crolla, 28 July 1938, Ciano appunto per il Duce, 29 July 1938. *CHD*, 28 August 1938, pp. 140-1.

volunteers as sufficient to implement the agreement. This change represented an important concession; no longer would Mussolini have to retire the entire *C.T.V.* in order to achieve *de jure* recognition.⁷ On instructions, Crolla indicated that Mussolini understood this clarification of British policy.⁸

The same day as Chamberlain informed Crolla of the modification of his policy, however, Halifax finally reached the breaking point in the face of repeated Italian violations of the non-intervention agreement and the terms of the Easter Accord. He observed that the French government had closed its frontier for some seven weeks, and even Franco accepted that the French supply of volunteers and matériel had stopped. Still, Italy continued to send aircraft and men at rates higher than those strictly necessary to replace losses. He argued that Ciano knew of this activity and had not been entirely truthful in speaking to Perth on this issue. These actions, Halifax said, threatened the non-

⁷ ASMAE, US 231, Crolla to Ciano, 29 July 1938, 3 August 1938, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Crolla to Ciano, 3 August 1938. For the British record, see FO 371 22651, W102283/83/41, Sig. Crolla conversation with Viscount Halifax, 29 August 1938, W10285/83/41, Perth to Halifax, 29 July 1938, W10559/83/41, Syers to Royar-Miller, 4 August 1938, PREM 1/276, Perth to Halifax, 29 July 1938, Halifax to Noel-Charles, 5 August 1938. Chamberlain's comment on partial withdrawal did not appear in the British record, nor did Mussolini behave as if he had learned of it. There is no hard evidence to suggest why Mussolini failed to clarify this point at the time. On speculation only, it is possible that he did not want to force the issue, as Halifax had indicated a slightly different attitude, and there was little point in creating a breach over questions of numbers when the eventual withdrawal of volunteers was still at some unspecified time in the future.

⁸ ASMAE, US 231, Anfuso to Crolla, 6 August 1938. PREM 1/276, Crolla to Chamberlain, 10 August 1938.

intervention agreement and, more significantly, implementation of the Easter Accord. Finally, the Foreign Secretary warned that continued Italian violation of its commitments could provoke the French government to re-open the frontier, with the result of extending the war.⁹ Having consulted with Mussolini, Ciano rejected this warning. At a meeting with Perth on 20 August, he replied that no one denied that Italian forces fought in Spain. They needed replacements of men and matériel. The *C.T.V.* could not fight armed only with olive branches. He cited alleged French arms shipments as creating the need for continued Italian ones, and denied that he had sent any new troops. Ciano knew that London would recognize the transparency of his deceit, but there was little that he could do in the face of the objective evidence but to issue denials. He also realized that his evasions would hardly help Italy's relations with Great Britain. Though Mussolini did want to receive the benefit of recognition from the Easter Accord, he certainly did not intend to adhere to its conditions.¹⁰ Halifax limited himself to ordering Perth to indicate the British government's disbelief, as it had compelling evidence that disproved Ciano's claims.¹¹

During August, however, Mussolini did begin to implement changes that would meet British government conditions. Franco had established a clear superiority of forces,

⁹ ASMAE, SAP – G.B., B. 24, US 231, Crolla to Ciano, 6 August 1938, pro-memoria, n.d., seen by Mussolini.

¹⁰ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, UC 85, US 231, Ciano Appunto per il Duce, 20 August 1938. For the published version, see *CDP*, Conversation with the British Chargé d'Affaires, 20 August 1938, pp. 230-1. *CHD*, 19, 20 August 1938, pp. 144-5.

¹¹ ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, 30 August 1938.

but a Republican counter-offensive had derailed his attacks toward Valencia, thus creating a renewed stalemate. Mussolini once more despaired of immediate victory, and decided to break the stalemate. In a meeting with General Francesco Berti, the Commander of the *C.T.V.*, Mussolini said that his actions would depend on Franco. If the Caudillo was prepared to release Italian volunteers, then Mussolini would withdraw them, though he would not subjugate his heroes to the “humiliating formalities” of the non-intervention protocols; he would withdraw his heroes with honour. If, however, Franco wanted Italian troops to remain, then Mussolini would dispatch 10,000 replacements and reinforcements. He wanted Franco to use the *C.T.V.* rather to keep it idle. If, in response, France re-opened the frontier, he would commit one or more divisions as necessary.¹² In short, Mussolini was prepared to shred the Anglo-Italian agreement in order to achieve his victory.

Berti took Mussolini’s proposal to Franco. The Caudillo did not want to receive new divisions, which would serve both to provoke France and to shift some of the glory of victory from Spanish Nationalist shoulders to Italian ones. He said that he would, however, accept replacements. After a long discussion on 21 August, Mussolini decided to reduce the over-all number of troops in Spain. He would concentrate the 23rd March and Littorio divisions into a nine-battalion division, composed of the best of the remaining troops, and withdraw the others. He would also leave in place the combined Italo-Spanish Arrow division and his specialist troops and aircraft. This plan would allow him to repatriate between 10,000 and 15,000 troops. This “substantial and unilateral”

¹² *CHD*, 12 August 1938, p. 143.

withdrawal of volunteers, he argued, would place Britain in a difficult position. Either the Chamberlain Cabinet would have to implement the Easter Accord or renounce it. If the Cabinet let it lapse, then Mussolini, freed from the need to account in any way for British sympathies, would immediately sign a military alliance with Germany.¹³

In the last week of August, Ambassador Viola cabled from Spain that Republican forces had regained the initiative, and their morale was increasing while that of the Nationalist troops declined. Viola suggested withdrawing all of the Italian infantry, despite Franco's preference for retaining one division. Mussolini fulminated that Franco had let another opportunity for victory slip through his hands.¹⁴ He concurred with Viola's suggestion, since he had learned that it could take up to five months to re-organize the *C.T.V.* into one division; he therefore decided to repatriate all Italian infantry unless Franco objected strenuously. This decision did not please Franco, but he could do nothing except express his displeasure and seek to postpone any withdrawal. Mussolini, stung by Franco's apparent impression that the Duce was letting down the Nationalist side, decided to return to his original decision; he would leave one Italian division in place. Franco concurred, and Berti implemented the Duce's orders. With this decision made, Mussolini announced to Ciano that Italy would march with Franco to the end.¹⁵ With the withdrawal of some 10,000 infantry determined, Ciano dispatched a note to

¹³ ASMAE, UC 46, 20 August 1938, Berti to Rome, il Duce to Berti, s.d.. *CHD*, 21 August 1938, p. 145.

¹⁴ ASMAE, UC 46, Franco nota per l'ambasciatore d'Italia, 23 August 1938. *CHD*, 14, 26, 29, 31 August 1938, pp. 146-7, 147-8, 148, 149.

London to determine Chamberlain's exact policy. He requested a precise definition of the term 'substantial withdrawal' in order to implement the agreement.¹⁶ This question landed in the midst of the increasing tension surrounding the Czechoslovak crisis, and sparked strong differences of opinion in the Foreign Office officials. In the face of conflicting estimates of Mussolini's fealty to the Axis, the British government gave no immediate reply, and in the interim, German pressure on Czechoslovakia eventually overtook Ciano's démarche.¹⁷

In the meantime, while Mussolini and Ciano contemplated the necessary withdrawal to implement the Easter Accord, however, they continued to carry out a policy hostile to the West. At the end of July and in early August, the French government made attempts to reinvigorate the failed conversations with Ciano. According to Renato Prunas, the Chargé d'Affaires in the Paris Embassy, a "friend of Foreign Minister Bonnet" insistently asked why the talks had broken down. This unnamed envoy assured

¹⁵ ASMAE, UC 46, Mussolini to Berti, 3, 7, 8, 9 September 1938, Berti to Mussolini, 6, 8 September 1938. *CHD*, 2, 3, 7, 9, 11 September 1938, pp. 149-50, 150, 152-3, 153, 154.

¹⁶ ASMAE, GAB 30, Ciano to London, n.d.. Internal evidence suggests that Ciano sent this telegram in the first week of September.

¹⁷ FO 371 22413, R7543/23/22, Cadogan Minutes, 7, 12 September 1938, Roberts Minute, 12 September 1938, R7671/23/22, Noble Memorandum and Ingram and Cadogan Minutes, all 13 September 1938, R7672/23/22, Ingram Minute, 14 September 1938, Cadogan Minute, s.d., Halifax to Noel-Charles, 15 September 1938, plus minutes of 15 and 16 September 1938 Foreign Office meetings. The outcome of these meetings was that the Cabinet would have to determine whether or not to respond to Ciano's request. FO

Prunas that Bonnet was very anxious to make concessions in order to win Italian approval. Bonnet resorted to this unofficial *démarche* because he could not risk a formal Italian rejection of his approaches. If French journalists learned of an Italian rebuff, it would seriously embarrass the Daladier Cabinet, and perhaps even provoke a political crisis. But, Bonnet would be willing to proceed through normal channels if the Duce wanted to renew contact.¹⁸ A few days later, Jules Blondel, the French Chargé in Rome, made a similar approach to Ciano, who had been away from his post owing to illness. Ciano responded non-committally; Mussolini had no interest in a rapprochement with France.¹⁹

Similarly, Mussolini and Ciano worked against British interests in the Red Sea while at the same time they sought implementation of the accord that was to prevent such actions. In February 1938, the Italian mission to Yemen had requested shipments of arms and ammunition. At that time, the Ministry of War had denied permission, as the wars in Ethiopia and Spain had significantly depleted its own stocks. General Pariani, the Italian Army Chief of Staff, however, thought that it would be wise to send a shipment for political and strategic reasons. Significant Italian presence in Yemen would apply pressure to British imperial communications, as Italy could potentially create land, air,

371 22414, R7673/23/22, Ingram Minute, 14 September 1938, R7706/23/22, Halifax to Perth, 18 September 1938.

¹⁸ ASMAE, SAP – Francia, B. 33, Prunas to Ciano, 30 July 1938.

¹⁹ *CHD*, 9 August 1938, p. 142.

and naval bases astride Britain's imperial communications through the Suez Canal.²⁰ In August, Ciano returned to this earlier proposal, and decided to send four batteries of artillery, two anti-aircraft weapons, 10,000 rifles, plus ammunition and other supplies. In the context of the weakly armed Arabian Peninsula, these weapons represented a significant contribution to Yemeni strength. In addition, Ciano dispatched military advisors to train Yemeni troops.²¹ This shipment represented a direct violation of Mussolini's pledges in the Easter Accord, and Mussolini's policy in the Yemen aimed to strike directly at British interests.

Most importantly, of course, Mussolini worked against Western interests in his support for German claims against Czechoslovakia. In August, Italian sources began reporting that Hitler was preparing to destroy Czechoslovakia. Admiral Canaris, the German intelligence chief, informed Efsio Marras, the Italian Military Attaché in Berlin, that German military leaders opposed any attack. Hitler believed that any war could be contained to Central Europe, but Canaris thought that reasoning faulty. France would surely defend Czechoslovakia, and Germany would be isolated save for Italian support. Canaris hoped that Mussolini would intervene with Hitler in order to prevent any attack.²² Apparently Canaris was unaware that Mussolini had already offered Italian support for a German attack. Colonel Badini, the Assistant Military Attaché, echoed some of Canaris's

²⁰ NA, T586, roll 412, f004955, Ciano to Ministero di Africa Italiana, 7 April 1938.

²¹ ASMAE, SAP –Yemen, B. 16, Pariani to Ciano, 9 April 1938, Ciano to Passera, 22 August 1938, Bastianini to Passera, 22 September 1938, signature illegible to Passera, 24 September 1938.

²² ASMAE, UC 5, Attolico to Rome, 9 August 1938.

information. His sources suggested that the German General Staff were convinced Hitler would invade Czechoslovakia at the end of September.²³

These intelligence reports had a common message, but Ciano hoped to receive more concrete information from the German government. He ordered Attolico to approach von Ribbentrop to determine German aims. Ciano wanted Attolico to say that Italy needed to know German intentions in order to enable “us to take measures in time on our Western frontier.” Ciano expected that this “communication will have a considerable effect on the Germans as it indicates just how far we are prepared to go.” Ciano noted that Mussolini had decided on action. If Hitler’s war was not contained and France entered the fray, then there would be no alternative but for Italy “to fall in beside Germany immediately, with all our resources.”²⁴ Attolico spoke to von Ribbentrop, but the German Foreign Minister was non-committal at first, and Mussolini directed Ciano and Attolico to try again.²⁵ This repeated probing had the unintentional effect in Berlin of indicating that Italy was somewhat lukewarm about war over Czechoslovakia.²⁶ Significantly, Ambassador Attolico did not share Mussolini’s readiness to enter a war. He

²³ ASAME, UC 5, Attolico to Rome, 18 August 1938. See also, for example, US 225, Berti to Ministero di Guerra, 11 August 1938, and *CHD*, 19 August 1938, pp. 144-5.

²⁴ *CHD*, 20 August 1938, p. 145.

²⁵ *DGFP*, D, II, #401, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 27 August 1938, p. 651. *CHD*, 26, 30 August 1938, pp. 147-6, 148-9.

²⁶ Weinberg, *Starting World War II*, p. 413. *DGFP*, D, II, #384, #401, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 23, 27 August 1938, pp. 611-2, p. 651; #409, #414, von Weizsäcker Memorandum, 30, 31 August 1938, pp. 662-3, 670.

went so far as to suggest a mild criticism of Mussolini's policy. It was essential, Attolico argued, for Mussolini to clear the air. Attolico thought, mistakenly, that the lack of information from Germany, combined with insufficient Italian vigour in determining German aims, had created the impression that Italy was fully behind any German action. Attolico said that this erroneous policy could involve Italy in war along the lines of the Great War. Further, he suggested that the *Kriegsmarine* was too weak to contain substantial elements of the Royal Navy, so the full weight of British seapower would fall on Italian forces. Mussolini, of course, did not share Attolico's view. Still, although for different reasons, both Mussolini and Attolico wanted to know Hitler's precise intentions and his expectations of Italy.²⁷

On 1 September, Attolico was able to deliver Ciano's letter that said that Italy "was prepared to take measures of a military character." The German Foreign Minister, given a further indication of Italian support, was more forthcoming. He repeatedly declared that Hitler intended to destroy Czechoslovakia through an invasion, but that the attack would not occur for a month.²⁸ Despite the clarity of von Ribbentrop's statements, however, Ciano refused to believe his Ambassador's report. Attolico's lack of enthusiasm for war clouded Ciano's judgement. Over the following week, Ciano still hoped for a clearer indication from Germany of Hitler's plans. Eventually, the Prince of Hesse carried a message from the Führer to Ciano. After thanking the Italians for their support,

²⁷ ASMAE, UC 5, Attolico to Mussolini, 30, 31 August 1938. Mussolini heavily emphasised the section in the 31 August report on German and British naval considerations.

²⁸ ASMAE, UC 5, Ciano to Attolico, 1 September 1938.

however, Hesse misled Ciano about Hitler's intentions, stating that Hitler would attack Czechoslovakia only if provoked. On the other hand, Attolico continued to provide accurate information from Berlin that Mussolini and Ciano continued to discount.²⁹

At the Nuremberg rallies on 10 September, Field Marshall Göring suggested a meeting between the leaders of both countries to occur sometime between 10 and 25 September. Attolico suggested that there would be lower expectations of this meeting if General Pariani represented the Italian government instead of Mussolini or Ciano, and Mussolini accepted this reasoning. He apparently failed at that time to understand the real implications of Göring's suggestion. Hitler wanted to arrange the details of Italian military and diplomatic action. Ciano recognized the importance of this proposal in light of the pervasive atmosphere of war, but Mussolini seemed unconcerned, preferring to take his already scheduled tour of the Northern provinces.³⁰

Even though Mussolini did not yet grasp Hitler's intentions, he gave strong public diplomatic support for German revisionism. On 9 September, Mussolini had issued "Informazione Diplomatica #19." This document indicated Italy's complete solidarity with the Axis, declaring that Italy was ready for any eventuality. Mussolini supported Sudeten German leader Konrad Henlein's Karlsbad programme, calling for a plebiscite that could lead to extensive Czechoslovak territorial concessions to Germany. Finally, Mussolini denounced the pernicious French leftist Pierre Cot and the evil of Soviet

²⁹ ASMAE, UC 5, Attolico to Ciano, 9 September 1938. *CHD*, 2, 5-7 September 1938, pp. 148-9, 151-3.

³⁰ ASMAE, UC 5, 2x Attolico to Ciano, 10 September 1938. *CHD*, 12, 13 September 1938, pp. 154-5.

bolshevism that contaminated the Prague government.³¹ In “Informazione Diplomatica #20,” released on 14 September after consultation with Berlin, Mussolini condemned Czechoslovakia, the “paradoxical creature of the diplomacy of Versailles.” He empathized with the array of ethnic groups subordinated by Czech domination. He declared that there were two possible solutions: Sudeten German self-determination or war.³² The next day, Mussolini published his “Letter to Runciman,” the British mediator between the Czech government and its minorities. Mussolini returned to a pet theme; Czechoslovakia was not a true state based on racial homogeneity. It was instead an “artificial state” of diverse races and centrifugal forces. Mussolini demanded a plebiscite not only for Sudeten Germans, but also for all subject nationalities. Bohemia, the Duce wrote, should be reduced to the ethnic “borders traced by God.”³³ As of that date, Mussolini’s public demands far outstripped those of Hitler.

Mussolini’s triumphalist promotion of German demands helped to escalate war tension. Similarly, Ciano indicated to various diplomats in Rome that Italy would likely fight alongside Germany, though he left some room for doubt. Ciano gave an unequivocal declaration to von Mackensen that Italy would remain at Germany’s side in any eventuality. He suggested that Hitler give a clearer indication of German policy so that Mussolini could better co-ordinate his policy with Hitler’s. Most importantly, Mussolini planned to make a major speech at Trieste on 18 September. What would

³¹ *OO, XXIX*, “Informazione Diplomatica #19,” *Popolo d’Italia*, 9 September 1938, pp. 488-9.

³² *OO, XXIX*, Informazione #20,” *Popolo d’Italia*, 14 September 1938, pp. 499-500.

³³ *OO, XXIX*, “Lettera a Runciman,” *Popolo d’Italia*, 15 September 1938, pp. 141-3.

Hitler like Mussolini to say?³⁴ Mussolini confirmed to Ciano that a military solution to German claims would be necessary, and the Duce declared his policy. If Great Britain did not go to war, then Mussolini would remain neutral. If Great Britain did declare war, making the struggle an ideological battle between democracy and fascism, then Mussolini would fight. He left unsaid that this policy would give every possible latitude for the British government to avoid supporting its fellow democratic regime in France.³⁵

At Trieste, Mussolini continued to heighten European tension in support of German demands. He said that Italians would not shirk their duty, but would shoulder it in full; the Axis, which Mussolini claimed included Poland and Hungary, was absolutely solid. The only peaceful solution would require a plebiscite for all national groups in Czechoslovakia. Once more, Mussolini's public demands were more extreme than Hitler's. Mussolini accused Moscow of trying to involve Britain in an unnecessary war. Mussolini wanted Neville Chamberlain to declare that if President Beneš resisted a plebiscite, then Britain would disinterest itself. In that case, the Duce argued, no other countries would resort to war. In the meantime, though, any delay could ignite a war. Mussolini said that he foresaw a peaceful solution, but that if war came, it would be limited to Southcentral Europe.³⁶ In his continuing tour of the Northeast, Mussolini's speeches became increasingly bellicose. On 20 September, he tried to whip Italians into a

³⁴ *DGFP, D, II*, #494, von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 15 September 1938, pp. 804-5, #495, Wörmann Minute, 16 September 1983, p. 806.

³⁵ *CHD*, 17 September 1938, p. 157.

³⁶ *OO, XXIX*, Discorso di Trieste, 18 September 1938, pp. 144-7.

war fever. Fascism was committed to battle, and peace was not sufficient to balance Italian sacrifices during the Great War. Mussolini trumpeted that Italy had taken Libya and Ethiopia, overturned the old diplomatic order, and was strong in the air and on the sea and land, and powerful in spirit. A cold-blooded, hardened warrior caste led the military, tempered by twenty years of battle and revolution, and Mussolini had created an “Italy hardened, Italy strong-willed, Italy warlike.” Mussolini declared that “Italy today is a people on the fiery march.”³⁷ Three days later, Mussolini denounced his French enemies across the Alps for clinging to a dead ideology. “They don’t understand us and are too stupid to be dangerous.”³⁸ Mussolini’s truculent, bellicose speeches signalled both his loyalty to his Axis partner and his reckless disregard for any moderation of the war fever, or fears, that pervaded Europe. As Chamberlain met Hitler at Bad Godesberg on 22 September, Attolico informed the Foreign Ministry that the Prince of Hesse would carry an important message from Hitler to Mussolini. In the meantime, Chamberlain failed to dissuade Hitler, Czechoslovak, French, and British forces began to mobilize, and Ciano learned from Attolico that Hitler demanded cession of territory to begin 1 October.³⁹

While Mussolini helped to whip up war hysteria, Ciano worked to further German aims in the Balkans. He encouraged the Hungarian and Polish claims against Czechoslovakia. At the end of August, Miklós Horthy, the Hungarian regent, had visited Berlin for high level talks with Adolf Hitler. Hungarian diplomats had recently finished

³⁷ OO, XXIX, Al Popolo di Udine, 20 September 1938, *Popolo d'Italia*, 21 September 1938, pp. 152-3.

³⁸ OO, XXIX, Al popolo di Belluno, 24 September 1938, *Popolo d'Italia*, 25 September 1938, pp. 159-60.

³⁹ ASMAE, UC 89, Attolico to Ciano, 23 September 1938.

negotiating the Bled agreement, signed on 23 August. This arrangement, concluded with members of the Little Entente, exchanged concessions allowing Hungarian rearmament and minority rights in Little Entente countries for a Hungarian renunciation of the use of force. This last compromise ran directly counter to Hitler's expectations of the role that Hungary would play in his plans to liquidate Czechoslovakia. In a meeting with the Führer, Jenő Rátz, the Hungarian Defence Minister, stated in clear terms that Hungary could carry out no offensive operations, as its military was woefully unprepared after years of restrictions under the Trianon Treaty; it could play no aggressive role. The Hungarian delegation further insisted that a German attack would certainly provoke a general war that would have potentially catastrophic results for Hungary.⁴⁰ Prime Minister Béla Imrédy and de Kánya shared these sentiments with Attolico, adding that Hungary would take no action until absolutely certain of Yugoslav neutrality.⁴¹ Yet, as the crisis escalated at the end of September, Ciano sought to keep Hungarian and even Polish claims to the forefront. In order to ensure Yugoslav neutrality, Mussolini supported Hungary's plans to take no military action until after a German attack. He insisted, however, that Hungarian demands form a central part of any settlement, and that the Hungarian government should provoke ethnic confrontations to keep its claims at the forefront. Ciano made the need for an integral solution for all of the subject minorities

⁴⁰ For more detailed coverage on this state visit, see Thomas L. Sakmyster, "The Hungarian State Visit to Germany of August 1938: Some new Evidence on Hungary's Pre-Munich Policy." *Canadian Slavic Studies*. 3.4 (Winter 1969) 677-91.

⁴¹ ASMAE, UC 58, Attolico to Ciano, 27 August 1938.

clear in a meeting with the British Ambassador.⁴² Even more seriously, faced with rumours of potential Soviet air support for Czechoslovakia, Mussolini agreed to dispatch Italian fighters to Hungarian airfields near Miskolo. Italian airmen wearing Hungarian uniforms would pilot these planes. This action could potentially have led to direct Italo-Soviet confrontation in the skies above Budapest.⁴³ Mussolini and Ciano once again had taken actions that could seriously inflame the imminent crisis.

On 23 September, amid reports that Hitler could attack as soon as the next day, Ciano informed von Mackensen that Italian military preparations had been completed. This statement was certainly not true, but could only give the impression of continued Italian support for German military action.⁴⁴ The next day, Ciano received confirmation that Hitler had fixed the date of 1 October for the cession of territory. Attolico cabled that General Keitel, the Chief of German Armed Forces High Command, had informed Italy's Military Attaché that if Czechoslovak concessions were not forthcoming, then Germany would quickly crush the Czech army.⁴⁵ On 25 September, Hesse arrived with Hitler's message of vague appreciation for Italian support. While Hesse and Ciano drove to meet the Duce at Schio, Ciano repeated Mussolini's prior decision that Italy would enter the war immediately after Britain did. Hesse gave Ciano the rather stale news that Hitler

⁴² ASMAE, UC 5, Appunto per il Duce, 22 September 1938. See also, *CDP*, 22 September 1938, 234-5. *CHD*, 19, 20, 22 September 1938, pp. 158, 158-9, 159-60.

⁴³ ASMAE, UC 58, Reparti dell'Aeronautica Italiana in Ungheria, 24 September 1938.

⁴⁴ *DGFP*, D, II, #577, von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 23 September 1938, p. 894. *CHD*, 23 September 1938, p. 160.

⁴⁵ ASMAE, UC 5, Attolico to Ciano, 24 September 1938.

would seek to invade Czechoslovakia by 1 October. Mussolini thought that the Western democracies would not march to war, but if they did, then Mussolini confirmed Ciano's earlier words; Italy would enter the war immediately after Britain did. He made this promise conditional on British entry, Mussolini said, only in order to avoid giving the British government a pretext for war.⁴⁶

Upon Ciano's return to Rome the next day, he and Admiral Cavagnari went to the Ministero della Marina to discuss Italy's war potential with the General Staff. The navy would have a tough task defending against the combined Anglo-French navies, so Japanese participation in the war would be essential to divert the Royal Navy, but Japanese support, of course, was not forthcoming. Mussolini later decided on a more thorough mobilization; he would send reinforcements to Libya, which would be the only possible theatre of offensive operations for the *Regio Esercito*. General Pariani spoke idly of the need for a lightning war, and thought that Italy should use poison gas. On 27 September, Mussolini ordered the Undersecretaries of the Air, Navy and War Ministries to mobilize enough troops to defend the Alpine frontier in the event of an initial French attack. Mussolini was unsure whether Britain and France would declare war, and if they did, what their tactics would be. He hoped that Germany and Italy could avoid a major war. In any event, he thought it wise for Ciano and Italian Generals to meet their German counterparts to determine Axis war strategy. This meeting, which Hitler had approved, would occur at Munich on 29 September 1938. In the meantime, Hitler advanced the

⁴⁶ *CHD*, 25 September 1938, pp. 161-2.

deadline for his ultimatum to 2:00 p.m. on 28 September. As night fell on 27 September, both Mussolini and Ciano thought that war was imminent the following day.⁴⁷

Why did Mussolini rush to the barricades to commit Italy to battle, especially when Italy had no fundamental interests at stake? In part, Mussolini simply detested Czechoslovakia; it was a “mongrel state,” a creation of Versailles diplomacy, representing the worst elements of multi-ethnic bourgeois democracy and French international diplomacy. A charter member of the Little Entente, Czechoslovakia resisted Hungarian revisionism, long one of the Duce’s goals. Czech military and political ties to France extended French influence into the Danube valley, and interfered with Italian efforts to develop its competing interests there. Germany’s liquidation of Czechoslovakia would allow Italy some greater freedom in extending its own influence in the Balkans, though at the cost of increased German competition. In addition, President Beneš supported precisely the kind of internationalism that Mussolini despised. More directly, Czechoslovakia had supported the League in its sanctions policy against Italy, with Beneš chairing the meeting where sanctions had been imposed.⁴⁸ Czechoslovakia had also annoyed Mussolini through its support for Ethiopian rebels. Italian intelligence agents had reported that a French ship under Greek flags carried Czech arms to French Somalia. From there, the arms shipment travelled across the Djibouti frontier and into rebel

⁴⁷ *CHD*, 25-7 September, pp. 162–3.

⁴⁸ For more detail on Mussolini’s relations with Czechoslovakia, see Francesco Leoncini, “Italia e Cecoslovakia, 1919-1939.” *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*. 45 (1979), pp. 357-72.

hands.⁴⁹ Ciano had protested in the strongest terms, suggesting to his Minister in Prague that the Czechs should keep their rifles there, as “it could be that they will need them shortly!”⁵⁰ Mussolini’s contempt for bourgeois democratic states meant that he would revel in its destruction.

In addition, Mussolini needed to extend support to Germany in order to secure reciprocal German support for his own plans in Albania. Part of the Duce’s strategic calculations for his annexation project required German intimidation of Yugoslavia, France and Britain. His repeated indications of Italian fealty to the Axis and to revisionism, he hoped, would strengthen the Axis and ensure that he would be able to face down the West in Albania and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. In the context of Mussolini’s beliefs about the decadence and demographic weakness of France and Britain, he thought that his virtual *carte blanche* to Hitler’s planned war carried little risk. Recent information indicated that in Britain almost one-quarter of the population was over the age of fifty; for Mussolini, that lack of vitality meant that Britain’s imperial splendour was inevitably fading. The Duce had heavily underlined a section of a British peer’s comments on British birth and death rates where the writer forecast a population decline from 40,000,000 to 4,000,000 in a hundred years if current trends continued.⁵¹ Mussolini assumed until very late in September that this demographic problem and the

⁴⁹ NA, T586, roll 412: f004932, Addis Abeba to Ministero dell’Africa Italiana, 9 April 1938; f004932, Lt. Col. Valfrè di Bonzo (Prague) to Servizio Informazione Militare, 4 February 1938.

⁵⁰ GAB 29, Ciano to Prague, 10 April 1938.

weakness shown by Chamberlain's visits to Berchtesgaden and Bad Godesberg meant that Britain would not go to war. After both Britain and France began mobilizing, however, he needed to reconsider his support in light of the very bleak strategic situation.

The *Wehrmacht*, naturally, would be tied down in the campaign against Czechoslovakia. It would leave only token forces in the West to face the French army. These deployments would mean that both Britain and France could employ their ground forces almost exclusively against Italy in the initial stages of the war. Similarly, the combined Anglo-French navies could concentrate in the Mediterranean basin. Far from driving a wedge between Britain and France, as Mussolini had tried to do over the last two years, the Czechoslovak crisis appeared to be solidifying an alliance. Accordingly, the Italian armed forces would be on the defensive in every potential theatre of war, without significant German or Japanese support.⁵² Apparent Anglo-French cohesion suggested strongly that Mussolini avoid war at the end of September 1938.

Similarly, the situation in Spain also indicated that Mussolini rein in his war fever. In the atmosphere of impending war in the last week of September, Franco faced a difficult choice. The Spanish Republican government staked its last chance for survival on a general war over Czechoslovakia. If France and Britain went to war, then the Negrin

⁵¹ *OO, XXIX, Popolo d'Italia*, 30 January 1938, pp. 51-2. ASMAE, SAP – Gran Bretagna, B. 24, Crolla to Ciano, 17 August 1938.

⁵² ASMAE, UC 5, Attolico to Mussolini, 30, 31 August 1938. For the difficulty of offensive action for the *Regio Esercito*, see Brian R. Sullivan, "The Italian Armed Forces, 1918-1940," in Alan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (eds.), *Military Effectiveness: Volume II, The Interwar Period* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 169-70, 182-3.

government planned to declare war immediately on Germany and Italy. Since the international community recognized the Negrin regime as the legitimate government of Spain, both Britain and France presumably would be obliged to accept Republican Spain as an ally. Franco feared that these circumstances could lead to a French occupation of Spanish Morocco, the Balearics, and even Catalonia. Franco learned from his intelligence sources, however, that if he remained neutral in this potential wider conflict, then neither Britain nor France would intervene.⁵³ Further, in the case of a general war, Nationalist Spain could count on no significant support from its Axis associates. Not surprisingly, therefore, Franco declared to the representatives of the Western democracies that he would remain neutral in the imminent conflict.⁵⁴ Franco's decision initially disgusted Ciano. He wrote that Italy's war dead would "turn in their graves." He briefly considered ordering the evacuation of the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie*. After Mussolini and Ciano discussed the matter on 26 September, however, they decided that Franco's neutrality was both inevitable and reasonable, and that they would leave the *C.T.V.* in place.⁵⁵

Mussolini's Spanish imbroglio, therefore, also suggested that the Duce draw back from going to war. Despite his pessimism regarding Franco's chances for immediate

⁵³ ASMAE, US 229, Viola to Ciano, 17 September 1938. This telegram reported an official communiqué from the Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs, noting that the French government would occupy Catalonia and Spanish Morocco in the event of war.

⁵⁴ ASMAE, US 226, Attolico to Ciano, 26 September 1938. See also *DGFP, D, III*, #665, Johannes Bernhardt Memorandum, 26 September 1938, p. 748; #666, von Stohrer to the Foreign Ministry, 28 September 1938, pp. 749-50.

⁵⁵ *CHD*, 26 September 1938, pp. 162-3.

victory, the balance of forces in Spain suggested that, eventually, Franco would win. Nationalist troops outnumbered the Republic's by nearly a two to one margin, and Italian and German support gave Franco's army a clear technical advantage. At the time of Munich, Italy still had more than 40,000 men in Spain, plus roughly one hundred light tanks, 600 artillery pieces, and 250 planes. Italy had spent almost six billion lire (over sixty million pounds sterling at the official exchange rate). Over the course of the war, Italy had sent more than 700 aircraft.⁵⁶ Mussolini could not expect to recoup this extraordinary commitment in money, men, and arms unless and until Franco achieved final victory. A premature Italian war with France over Czechoslovakia threatened that victory. The Daladier Cabinet potentially could take a series of steps, from re-opening the frontier to volunteers and matériel to an outright invasion of Spain to defeat Franco and his Axis allies. Given Italy's bloody, expensive, and lengthy intervention, it made little sense to risk this catastrophic defeat, especially when a peaceful settlement of the Czechoslovak crisis would doom the Republican government. If Mussolini avoided war, he could maintain the hope that Italy could save its army in Spain, recoup its investment, and eventually establish a strong ally hostile to France on the Pyrenees frontier.

Italy's complicated relationship with Japan was the final issue that drew Mussolini back from the brink of war. As the Munich crisis reached its height during the last half of September, Mussolini learned that the Japanese government had decided to proceed with either a tripartite alliance or a bilateral alliance with Italy. Within a few

⁵⁶ ASMAE, US 1, Final Report of the Ufficio Spagna, 1939, no date. See also Coverdale, pp. 367-8, 392-3.

weeks, Italy could expect to sign some manner of formal military alliance.⁵⁷ Despite the prospects of achieving this foreign policy coup, however, Mussolini could count on no meaningful Japanese military support against the British Empire in the event of war over Czechoslovakia. Only if he were able to avoid a general European conflict could he secure Japan as an ally in the eventual campaign against the Western democracies. For Mussolini, it made little sense to cast aside this major diplomatic and strategic advantage in order to fight a war in 1938 in which Italy held no direct interest. This complex arrangement of considerations suggested that Italian participation in a war over Czechoslovakia carried the risk of catastrophic defeat in both the political and strategic arenas. It is not surprising that, even given Mussolini's profound desire for a confrontation with the Western democracies, he chose not to go to war in September 1938.

On 28 September, as is well known, Mussolini received official *démarches* from both the British and American governments asking him to intercede with Hitler to postpone his ultimatum.⁵⁸ Perth met Ciano at 10:00 that morning to present

⁵⁷ ASMAE, UC 53, Auriti to Ciano, 15, 26, 29 September 1938. See also Toscano, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel*, pp. 41-2.

⁵⁸ For more on these parallel proposals, see, among others, Weinberg, 444-5, especially notes 308 and 311. Quartararo argues that Grandi was entirely responsible for Chamberlain's initiative, but her evidence is thin. According to British records, it is *possible* that Grandi spoke to Chamberlain at an "opportune time." If Grandi did so, no compelling evidence apparently exists of that *démarche*. Rosario Quartararo, "Inghiltera e Italia. Dal Patto di Pasqua a Monaco." *Storia Contemporanea*. VII.4 (December 1976), 640;

Chamberlain's official request for Mussolini's intercession. Typically, Ciano interceded with Perth to squelch a rumoured French proposal along the same lines. He argued that any French association with attempts to save the peace would doom the initiative.⁵⁹ Ciano hurriedly travelled from the Palazzo Chigi to meet the Duce at the Palazzo Venezia. At 11:00, Mussolini seized this opportunity to prevent an immediate war, and telephoned Attolico in Berlin. Attolico's instructions read: "Go immediately to the Führer, and, on the premise that in any case I will be at his side, tell him that I suggest a postponement of twenty-four hours in the initiation of hostilities." Having thus once more committed Italy to war at Hitler's discretion, Mussolini hoped that Hitler would accept Chamberlain's proposal for a four Power conference to arrange the cession of Czech territory. Hitler accepted Mussolini's proposal, provided that the Duce would attend the meeting personally. Mussolini confided to Ciano, "As you see ... I am only moderately happy, because though perhaps at a heavy price, we could have liquidated France and Great Britain for ever. We now have overwhelming proof of this." On their way to Munich, Mussolini condemned British policy. In the Duce's view,

In a country where animals are adored to the point of making cemeteries and hospitals and houses for them, and legacies are bequeathed to parrots, you can be sure that decadence has set in. Besides other reasons apart, it is also a result of the composition of the English people. Four million surplus women. Four million sexually unsatisfied women, artificially creating a host of problems

Roma tra Londra e Berlino, 399. The first British dispatch to Perth to ask for Mussolini's intercession left London on the evening of 27 September.

⁵⁹ *CHD*, 28 September 1938, 165-6.

in order to excite or appease their senses. Not being able to embrace one man, they embrace humanity.⁶⁰

Mussolini's churlishness aside, his fondness for population demographics suggests that he genuinely believed that this rubbish passed for serious analysis.

Ciano and Mussolini met Hitler at the frontier. The discussion centred on Hitler's desire to dismantle Czechoslovakia in order to free up divisions for a future campaign against France. The Führer told Ciano that "the time will come in which together we will have to battle against the Western Powers. Better that this occur while il Duce and I are at the head of our two countries, young and full of energy, and while we have the more powerful armies." Mussolini supported Hitler's demand that the Czechs be prohibited from attending the conference.⁶¹ Senior German Foreign Office officials had prepared a draft text of an agreement, which Hitler had approved. Attolico obtained a copy of the draft through unusual channels, and gave it to Mussolini. The Duce presented it at the conference as if it were an Italian proposal and it formed the agenda for the Munich conference.⁶²

⁶⁰ Quoted in *CHD*, 28 September 1938, pp. 165-6. ASMAE, UC 89, Cronica della giornate 28, 29, 30 settembre 1938. See also, *OO*, *XXIX*, Prima telefonata ad Attolico, 28 September 1938, 165, Seconda telefonata ad Attolico, s.d., 165.

⁶¹ ASMAE, UC 89, Cronica della giornate, 28, 29, 30 September 1938. *CHD*, 29-30 September 1938, pp. 166-8. Ciano's Diary contains a slightly shorter and different version of Hitler's words than the original record.

⁶² For more on this process, see: ASMAE, UC 5, Attolico to Ciano, 4 October 1938; *DGFP*, *D*, *II*, #670, 1005n10.

At the conference itself, Mussolini pushed forward Polish and Hungarian claims, though the other participants showed little interest in dealing with these demands, and he supported Hitler's views on the need for a quick solution. Ciano noted that the Duce also snubbed Neville Chamberlain when he tried to extend his thanks for Mussolini's intercession with Hitler. Mussolini refused to meet privately with the Prime Minister, as the Duce did not want to offend Hitler, and he also thought that protocol would require a similar meeting with Daladier, which Mussolini refused to contemplate. Instead, he invited Chamberlain to Rome. While Mussolini's relations with Hitler were very cordial, the Duce still refused to negotiate alliance terms with von Ribbentrop, as the time was still not ripe.⁶³ As he returned to Rome, Italian crowds en route cheered Mussolini as the saviour of European peace, but he resented this display of Italians' lack of martial vigour; he wanted to be feared for his military victories, not lauded for his peacemaking.⁶⁴

With the Czech crisis resolved peacefully and to the advantage of the Axis, Mussolini and Ciano returned to their medium-term goal of the implementation of the Easter Accord. Mussolini had told Chamberlain at Munich that Italy would shortly withdraw 10,000 volunteers from Spain, and had given a polite but non-committal

⁶³ ASMAE, UC 89, Cronica della giornate, 28, 29, 30 September 1938. *CHD*, 29-30 September 1938, pp. 166-8. Note that Chamberlain, in contrast to Ciano's diary, described Mussolini's attitude as friendly. NC 18/1/1070, Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 2 October 1938.

⁶⁴ Alan Cassels, "Fascist Italy and Mediation in the Munich and Danzig Crises (September 1938 and August 1939)," in Alessandro Migliazza e Enrico Decleva (a cura di), *Diplomazia e storia delle relazioni internazionali*. Milano: Giuffrè Editore, 1991, pp. 433, 433n23.

hearing to Chamberlain's proposal of a four-power pact regarding Spain.⁶⁵ Back in Rome, Ciano summoned Perth, and told the British Ambassador that, as communism appeared to be in retreat in Spain, Mussolini had decided to withdraw 10,000 volunteers. Typically, he paired this news with a veiled threat that if the British Cabinet did not implement the Anglo-Italian accord by the time of the Fascist Grand Council meeting a few days later, then Italy would choose to "take up a different line." Perth understood that Ciano meant signing a military alliance with Germany. Furthermore, Mussolini ruled out any consideration of a renewed pact of four until the agreement entered into force.⁶⁶ Perth reserved his response until he could consult his government. The next day, he returned and questioned subtly the sincerity of Mussolini's commitment. Perth asked Ciano whether or not Mussolini would promise not to send any more soldiers, pilots, or airplanes to Spain. Ciano replied that Mussolini would certainly not bind his hands regarding the possible future need for reinforcing Italian ground forces. Ciano cited the British diplomatic note of 20 June 1938, arguing that Italy had met the specified conditions. In short, Mussolini and Ciano had rendered the entire withdrawal of volunteers a largely moot point; the British Cabinet could not expect the Italian government to observe any of its past, largely unfulfilled promises regarding non-intervention in Spain.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ NC 18/1/1070, Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 2 October 1938.

⁶⁶ FO 371 22414, R7949/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 3 October 1938. See also FO 371 22414, R7941/23/22, same to same, 4 October 1938. *CHD*, 2, 3 October 1938, pp. 172-3.

⁶⁷ *CHD*, 4 October 1938, pp. 173. FO 371 22414, R7941/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 4 October 1938.

Despite the apparent hollowness of Mussolini's commitment to the principles of the Easter Accord, Perth argued that its implementation was of vital importance. He believed that if the accord were implemented, then Mussolini would work towards general pacification of European tension. If not, however, Mussolini might opt for a military alliance with Germany. Perth believed that the Duce clearly preferred to conclude the pact with Great Britain.⁶⁸ Perth's assessment reflected views within the Foreign Office and Westminster. On one hand, by formally recognizing the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, the accord could restore Mussolini's freedom of manoeuvre within the Axis and reduce the constant pressure he presumably faced from Berlin. It would bind Mussolini to limit his anti-British intrigues in the Middle East and would further the spirit of reconciliation begun at Munich. It would also serve as a kind of reward for Mussolini's behaviour at Munich. On the other hand, the accord's implementation would give evidence of British weakness in the face of Mussolini's thinly veiled threats, and would alarm the French government and leftist opinion within Britain. After an internal debate, Halifax cabled Perth that the Cabinet would eventually implement the accord, as the potential benefits outweighed the presumed risks. Nevertheless, Halifax sought guarantees from the Duce that no more Italian volunteers would reach Spain. Nor would he meet Mussolini's hurried timetable; the decision would have to be taken up in Cabinet and Parliament, and would not occur before the beginning of November.⁶⁹ Perth

⁶⁸ FO 371 22414, R7950/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 4 October 1938.

⁶⁹ FO 371 22414, R7966/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 4 October 1938, Halifax to Perth, 5 October 1938, CAB 231(38).

delivered this verdict, and Mussolini's initial response was to reject this delay out of hand, but he eventually agreed, especially as he had no intention of granting any concessions limiting the future dispatch of volunteers to Spain. Perth's words satisfied Ciano that the Cabinet would implement the accord some time in November, and over the following week, the Italian Foreign Minister refused all British requests for assurances regarding an embargo on future shipments of planes, pilots, or ground forces.⁷⁰ Mussolini had rendered any hopes that the accord would lead to a genuine Anglo-Italian rapprochement almost fanciful. Significantly, he had managed at long last to arrange an Anglo-Italian condominium that excluded French participation.

In the same vein, Mussolini's anti-French leanings led him to reject Daladier's and Bonnet's diplomatic attempts to reach a parallel rapprochement. On 4 October 1938, Renato Prunas, the Chargé d'Affaires in Paris, cabled that the Daladier government had decided to send an ambassador to Rome.⁷¹ After consulting Rome, Bonnet decided to shift André François-Poncet from Berlin to Rome, and to carry out a wide-ranging shuffle of the French diplomatic corps. Daladier indicated to Prunas that these moves signalled a strong French desire to improve relations with Italy. Mussolini and Ciano were largely unmoved, though they were pleased that the French government had capitulated to Italy's

⁷⁰ *CHD*, 5-7 October 1938, pp. 174-5. FO 371 22414, R8037/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 6 October 1938, Cadogan Minute, 7 October 1938, R8084/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 7 October 1938, Halifax to Perth, 12 October 1938, R8300/23/22, Perth to Halifax, 15 October 1938, Cadogan Minute 19 October 1938. See also NC 18/1/1071, Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 9 October 1938.

⁷¹ ASMAE, UC 61, Prunas to Ciano, 4 October 1938, *DDF*, II, 11, #521, Blondel to Bonnet, pp. 760-2. *CHD*, 3 October 1938, pp. 172-3.

demands for recognition of the empire, especially without having to grant any quid pro quo.⁷²

After Ciano eventually gave his approval of François-Poncet's appointment, Daladier tried to follow this opening through a semi-official source – Anatole De Monzie, the Italophile Minister of Public Works. De Monzie had an extensive conversation with Prunas, stating that Daladier would be happy to meet with Mussolini at a time and place of the latter's choosing. Daladier would potentially be prepared to offer concessions, but would have to know of Mussolini's requests in advance. De Monzie said that Daladier hoped for “a decisive and rapid improvement of Italo-French relations.” Mussolini scrawled a flat rejection [*niente*] in the margin of Prunas's report, and Ciano ordered Prunas to let the démarche lie.⁷³ Instead, Mussolini said a few days later that “an insurmountable abyss must be dug between us and them.”⁷⁴ In a speech to the National Council of the Fascist Party, Mussolini trumpeted that Fascism would have to destroy the bourgeois spirit. As the Italian bourgeoisie still looked to Britain and France for inspiration, the Axis would have to destroy those pluto-democratic powers in order to end this domestic infestation. The combined demographic power of Germany and Italy gave the Axis a decisive superiority over the decadent French people, and therefore the Duce

⁷² ASMAE, SAP- Francia, B. 33, 12 October 1938. *CHD*, 4 October 1938, p. 173.

⁷³ ASMAE, UC 61, SAP – Francia, B.33, Prunas to Ciano, 19 October 1938, UC 61, Ciano to Prunas, 23 October 1938.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *CHD*, 31 October 1938, p. 187.

did not fear war with France.⁷⁵ Mussolini's temporary accord with Great Britain clearly did not extend to France, and had little effect on his long-term goals.

Mussolini also did not hesitate to violate any post-Munich spirit of international reconciliation in his Balkan policy. In early October, Ciano resisted Hungarian requests for Italian support against the rump Czechoslovak state. He believed that Italy had more in common with the quasi-fascist Stoyadinović regime than with the old-school Hungarian leaders. Further, he thought that Hungarian policy traditionally leaned towards Germany rather than Italy, and that von Ribbentrop could use Hungarian demands against Czechoslovakia as a stalking horse for extending German influence toward the Adriatic Sea. Ciano convinced Mussolini that Yugoslavia was the more important client. Still, Ciano promised that if the Czech government attacked Budapest, then Italy would dispatch the already mustered 100 planes that Italy had offered before Munich.⁷⁶ Still, Mussolini could not abandon entirely his public support for Hungarian revisionism; on 4 October, he issued an "Informazione Diplomatica" calling for direct negotiations between Prague and Budapest in order to remove one million ethnic Magyars from Czech rule.⁷⁷

The following week, Mussolini decided to push Hungarian claims more strongly. Lieutenant-Colonel Szabó, the Hungarian Military Attaché in Rome, had told the Duce of Hungarian plans to begin mobilizing on the Slovak frontier on 13 October. Mussolini directed Ciano to put pressure on the new Prague government to cede all territory with a

⁷⁵ *OO, XXIX*, Al Consiglio Nazionale del P.N.F., 25 October 1938, pp. 185-96.

⁷⁶ *CHD*, 3-5 October 1938, pp. 172-4.

⁷⁷ *OO, XXIX*, Informazione Diplomatica #21, 4 October 1938, pp. 500.

majority Magyar population, and to press for a joint Hungarian-Polish border in the sub-Carpathian Ukraine. Negotiations broke down between Hungarian and Czech diplomats on 14 October, and war appeared imminent. Mussolini and Ciano met with Foreign Minister de Kánya and Count Istvan Csáky, Chef de Cabinet of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry. Csáky and de Kánya wanted a conference to arbitrate a territorial award to Hungary. In a telephone call to von Ribbentrop, however, Ciano could not overcome the German Foreign Minister's opposition to Hungarian demands. After Hungary's failure to participate in Hitler's planned war at the end of September, the Führer preferred to support his new Slovak client state rather than the allegedly treacherous Hungarians. In the face of German opposition, the Hungarian government backed down, leaving Ciano to complain bitterly about Germany having overridden Italian concerns. Although both Mussolini and Ciano bridled at the German actions, Mussolini temporarily changed his policy to match Germany's.⁷⁸

On 20 October, von Ribbentrop phoned Ciano to say that he had arranged a territorial plan with representatives from Slovakia and Ruthenia. The German Foreign Minister wanted Ciano to recommend its acceptance to de Kánya. Significantly, von Ribbentrop would not provide details, and Ciano suspected a German betrayal of Hungarian interests. Accordingly, Mussolini refused to bring pressure against Budapest. Ciano's suspicions were justified; von Ribbentrop proposed to remove five towns from

⁷⁸ ASMAE, GAB 29, Ciano to Grandi, Attolico, Prunas, 14 October 1938, *CHD*, 8, 10, 12-15 October 1938, pp. 175, 175-6, 176-8. *DGFP*, D, IV, #60, Attolico Communiqué, 14 October 1938, pp. 68-9, #64, Attolico Communiqué, 14 October 1938, pp. 78-9.

the Hungarian list of demands. Though de Kánya would compromise on part of these desiderata, he again requested formal arbitration by both Italy and Germany. Once again, von Ribbentrop rejected this idea. Tension between Hungary and Germany had reached an acute stage. Ciano and Mussolini rudely debated von Ribbentrop's failings, including the Duce's description of von Ribbentrop's tiny brain. Nonetheless, despite the German Foreign Minister's dictatorial actions, Mussolini would not fully support Hungarian demands in the face of German opposition.⁷⁹

The German Foreign Minister arrived in Italy for a meeting at the Palazzo Venezia on 27 October. Mussolini and von Ribbentrop decided that Italy and Germany would serve as arbiters of the territorial dispute between the semi-autonomous Slovak government and Hungary. Over the following week, German and Italian delegations in Vienna pushed their respective clients' positions in often frank and disputatious discussions. Ciano argued that the arbitration award would underline the extent to which Anglo-French influence in the region had collapsed. Ciano was able to induce the German representatives, including a petulant von Ribbentrop and Hermann Göring, to accept a compromise slightly favourable to the Hungarian side. The Vienna Award settled a frontier that included the towns of Kassa, Ungvar, and Munkacs, plus some other disputed territories in Hungary. Ciano crowed that the unpreparedness of the German delegation allowed him greater freedom of movement than he had expected. The

⁷⁹ ASMAE, GAB 27, Ciano Appunto (recording telephone call with von Ribbentrop), 22 October 1938, Appunto per il Duce, 23 October 1938. *CHD*, 20-24 October 1938, p. 180-3. *DGFP*, D, IV, #80, Altenburg Memorandum, 21 October 1938, pp. 98-9.

frontier drawn in Vienna pleased the Hungarian government, and earned Ciano considerable prestige for his intercession in the face of German hostility to Hungarian aims.⁸⁰

The Vienna Award, however, did not finally settle Hungarian revisionism. On 11 November, Minister Villani told Ciano that ethnic unrest in Ruthenia would require Hungarian military action to unite the territory with Hungary. Ciano cautioned against any such move. He thought that Hitler would surely oppose it, and Italy could find itself in the position of having to require Hungary to honour its acceptance of the Vienna award. The Hungarian government was unmoved by this advice, and Villani returned a week later to re-emphasize the need for military action within twenty-four hours. Ciano repeated his objections; he refused to give any indication to Germany that Italy was playing a double game. He insisted that Hungary abide by the terms arranged in Vienna. Ciano appeared to sense no real impending crisis, and left for a hunting holiday near Turin. In Ciano's absence, Hungarian Military Attaché Lieutenant-Colonel Makó Laszló saw Mussolini to secure the Duce's support for Hungarian military action.⁸¹ Laszló misled the Duce, declaring that the German government had already authorized

⁸⁰ ASMAE, UC 89, Vinci to Ciano, 5, 7, 8 November 1938. *CHD*, 18-31 October 1938, 2-4 November 1938, pp. 185-90. *DGFP*, *D*, IV, #99, Memorandum on the Conference of the Four Foreign Ministers in the Belvedere Palace on November 2, 1938, pp. 118-27.

⁸¹ Ciano recorded in his diary that Lieutenant-Colonel Vitez Szabó made the démarche. Mussolini's memorandum indicated differently. Attolico's report to the German Foreign Minister also mentioned Szabó's name. ASMAE, UC 58, Mussolini promemoria, 19 November 1938. *CHD*, 20 October 1938, pp. 196-7. *DGFP*, *D*, IV, #129, Mussolini to Attolico, 20 November 1938, p. 157.

Hungary's punitive action, when in fact Berlin had informed the Imrédy government in direct terms to observe the terms of the Vienna award. In addition to offering his diplomatic support, Mussolini arranged to dispatch ninety-six fighter planes. Filippo Anfuso, Ciano's *chef de cabinet*, phoned Ciano to indicate that a crisis was brewing. Ciano determined von Ribbentrop's actual attitude, and learned of the extent of the Hungarian deception. Berlin then sent an official communiqué to the Imrédy Cabinet demanding an immediate halt to any plans for invasion. Ciano gave similar instructions to both the Hungarian Minister Villani and to Lt.-Col. Szabó. Ciano tried to cover for the Duce's actions as best he could; he argued that Mussolini had intended these planes for defensive purposes only, and that Italian support was predicated on the belief that Hitler had given his blessing to the Hungarian cause.⁸² In the end, Mussolini's impetuous commitment to war did not cause any lasting damage to Italy, other than embarrassment at the ease with which the Duce had been gulled by Hungarian dishonesty. The Imrédy Cabinet fared less well; it fell on 23 November.

Even in the midst of Italo-German tension over Hungarian claims on Slovakia, Hitler had decided that the time was ripe to sign a tripartite alliance with Japan and Italy.

⁸² ASMAE, UC 58, Mussolini promemoria, 19 November 1938, Mussolini appunto, 20 November 1938, Attolico to Ciano, 20 November 1938, Mussolini to Attolico, 20 November 1938, Vinci to Ciano, 20, 21 November 1938, Ciano to Attolico, 21 November 1938. *CHD*, 11, 18-21 November 1938, pp. 193, 196-7. *DGFP, D, IV*, #128, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 20 November 1938, pp. 156-7 and #131, 21 November 1938, pp. 158-9, #129, Mussolini to Attolico, 20 November 1938, p. 157, #130, Ermannsdorff to von Ribbentrop, 20 November 1938, pp. 157-8, #132, von Ribbentrop to Ermannsdorff, 21 November 1938, p. 159, #133, Ermannsdorff to von Ribbentrop, 21 November 1938, p. 161.

He had dispatched von Ribbentrop to Rome to secure Mussolini's adherence. In a 23 October telephone call to Ciano to announce his mission, von Ribbentrop had kept hidden his real aim, and Ciano had reacted petulantly to what he called von Ribbentrop's "*coups de téléphone*." The German Foreign Minister arrived for a two-day visit on the evening of 27 October. Before his meeting with his German counterpart, Ciano had already learned from the Japanese Military and Naval Attachés of plans for a tripartite alliance roughly analogous to the one von Ribbentrop had presented at Munich.⁸³ Not knowing that his thunder had been stolen, von Ribbentrop presented Hitler's case. The Führer had resisted signing any alliance in the past, because it could have provoked greater Western rearmament and made Chamberlain's and Daladier's positions untenable. Now that the West had awoken to the increasing tide of Axis power, there was no longer any reason to fear those repercussions. Even though both Britain and France were rearming, their weakness at Munich indicated that the Axis had achieved an overwhelming lead in arms production. In addition, von Ribbentrop argued, the initiative for the alliance proposal had come from the Japanese government, indicating that it would be possible to outflank those in the Gaimushō who wanted an Anglo-Japanese accord.⁸⁴ Ciano was in no hurry to agree to this German initiative. Von Ribbentrop's vainglorious and unspecific references

⁸³ Though Ciano saw these alliance proposals as similar, the second called for much tighter and explicit commitments. It appears that Ciano, who did not plan to sign any alliance in the short term, did not pay very close heed to its terms. For an explicit comparison of the two proposals, see Toscano, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel*, pp. 49-52.

⁸⁴ DGFP, D, IV, #400, Schmidt Memorandum, 28 October 1938. CHD, 28 October 1938, pp. 185-6.

to war with unnamed enemies worried the Italian Foreign Minister, and he still hoped to keep the door open to the eventual implementation of the Easter Accord that Perth had indicated would come the following month. Ciano thought that an Italo-German alliance existed already in practice; its conclusion would merely serve to alienate other countries and to make the Axis look even more aggressive.⁸⁵

The next day, the two Foreign Ministers met Mussolini at the Palazzo Venezia. Ciano had already informed Mussolini of his personal stance, and the Duce agreed, though for different reasons. Mussolini wanted more time to guide public opinion on the need for what many Italians, particularly in the senior ranks of the *Regio Esercito*, would see as an unpopular alliance, and he too did not want to foreclose the possibility of the implementation of the Easter Accord. Accordingly, though Mussolini accepted the alliance in principle, he insisted that it should be delayed. During the meeting, von Ribbentrop expounded the Führer's reasons for concluding an alliance, speaking on the same lines as he had indicated to Ciano the previous day. Mussolini agreed that within the next few years a war with Britain and France was inevitable. An "historical trend" had created a "irreparable breach" between the Axis and the Western democracies. Consequently, Mussolini wanted a strictly offensive alliance.

We have no need for a purely defensive alliance. There is no need because no one thinks of attacking the totalitarian States. We want instead to create an alliance to change the map of the world. For this we will need to fix our

⁸⁵ *CHD*, 27-8 October 1938, pp. 184-6.

objectives and our conquests: for our part we know already where we must go.⁸⁶

In the meantime, however, the Duce thought that the existing ideological solidarity and practical arrangements between Germany and Italy meant that the Axis performed as a virtual alliance. The meeting ended with von Ribbentrop's insistence that the Mediterranean would become an Italian Sea, and that Germany would work to that end. Mussolini recognized that he had disappointed his German partner, and he dispatched Ciano that evening to assuage von Ribbentrop's apparent dismay. Ciano emphasized that, despite the Duce's tactical decision for postponement, Italian solidarity to the Axis was absolute. The next morning, Mussolini presented von Ribbentrop with a summary of his reasoning for delaying the signature of a formal alliance.⁸⁷ Despite Mussolini's rebuff of von Ribbentrop's *démarche*, the meetings had shown the essential agreement between the aims of the two fascist powers. Both intended to carry out wars of expansion in the future. The real difference between the two was of tactics and short-term relative power. Mussolini could not yet contemplate victorious war against the combined Anglo-French armies. He needed both to split the Western democracies politically and to modernize his own forces. Though Mussolini's stated domestic reasons for postponing the alliance were

⁸⁶ ASMAE, UC 53, 85, Verbale del colloquio a Palazzo Venezia fra il Duce, von Ribbentrop, e il Ministro Ciano, 28 October 1938.

⁸⁷ ASMAE, UC 53, 85, Verbale del colloquio a Palazzo Venezia fra il Duce, von Ribbentrop, e il Ministro Ciano, 28 October 1938. *DGFP, D, IV, #400*, Schmidt Memorandum, pp. 515-20. CHD, 28-29 October 1938, pp. 185-7.

undoubtedly valid, within a few short weeks he would ignore them entirely in embarking Italy on its path to destruction.

Mussolini's temporary delay did not, however, fundamentally damage Axis solidarity, despite approaches from Great Britain designed to ease strained Anglo-Italian relations. On 7 November, in the aftermath of the Vienna Award, Perth had informed Ciano that his government would finally implement the Easter Accord on 16 November 1938 – some seven months after the initial signing. Ciano had reassured his German partners that Britain's final recognition of Italy's conquest of Ethiopia would not alter German-Italian relations.⁸⁸ After the signing ceremony in Rome, Mussolini complimented his Foreign Minister on his achievement, but dismissed the importance of the Accord. As Ciano recorded Mussolini's attitude, “‘All this is very important,’ he said, ‘but it does not alter our policy. In Europe the Axis remains fundamental. In the Mediterranean we will collaborate with the English as long as we can. France remains outside – our claims on her have now been defined.’” Mussolini had come to regret his invitation to Chamberlain extended at Munich, but at Ciano's behest, reluctantly agreed to accept the idea of a visit in January. The Foreign Minister thought there would a “psychological value” to this Anglo-Italian summit, but did not expect much in the way of practical results.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ *CHD*, 7 November 1938, p. 191. *DGFP*, D, IV, #404, von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 7 November 1938, pp. 522-3. See also #407, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 18 November 1938, pp. 524-5.

⁸⁹ Quoted in *CHD*, 16 November 1938, p. 195.

Despite Chamberlain's moves to secure a rapprochement with Italy, the Duce's long-term plans remained unchanged. With the Anglo-Italian agreement in hand, Mussolini moved to highlight the differences in Italian policy toward the two Western democracies, both domestically and internationally. Internally, Mussolini continued to increase his discriminatory measures against Jews. In early September, Mussolini's rubber-stamp Council of Ministers had passed a set of decree laws stripping citizenship from foreign-born Jews and prohibiting foreign Jews from establishing residence in Italian possessions. Those who chose not to leave within six months would be expelled. The Council also banned Jews from holding professorships at universities and expelled Jewish students from schools. The decree law removed Jews' membership in all academies and associations of arts and sciences, and established a six-week termination date for employment of Jewish teachers.⁹⁰

In October, Mussolini had introduced his plans for a wider ranging set of anti-Semitic laws in a speech to the Fascist Grand Council. He based his harangue on the idea that the development of the Italian Empire required the development of an appropriate racial consciousness. Accordingly, he would ban marriages between Italians and Jews or Italians and members of non-Aryan races, between civil servants and any foreigners, and would pass measures prohibiting the lessening of white prestige in the empire. Jewish internationalism, which was inherently opposed to Fascism, Mussolini thundered, made

⁹⁰ *OO*, *XXIX*, 403^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1 September 1938, pp. 130-5, 404^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2 September 1938, pp. 135-6. *CHD*, 1, 4, 5 September 1938, pp. 149, 150-1, 151.

these measures necessary; “World Judaism – especially after the abolition of Masonry – has been the animator of anti-Fascism in every camp.”⁹¹

In keeping with his ideological convictions, however, Mussolini did somewhat qualify his anti-Semitism. While he defined Jews in part biologically - one was Jewish because of birth and not because one practised the religion - the Duce did allow exceptions. If a given Jew had proven loyalty to the Fascist regime and to the Italian people, then he or she would be exempt from the decree laws' applications. These exceptions applied in several cases: to the families of those who had died in the Great War, Libya, Ethiopia or Spain; to those who had volunteered in the four wars; to the families of those who had fallen or who were wounded in the Fascist cause; those who had joined the Fascist Party during its struggle from 1919-1922 and in the latter half of 1924; and those who had performed acts of exceptional merit recognized through a special commission. A race tribunal considered equivocal cases. In essence, Mussolini divided Jews into simple categories – those who had proven their loyalty to the state and those who by nature of their birth were perforce anti-Fascist and therefore anti-Italian.⁹² The Council of Ministers approved these racialist policies in early November.⁹³ At the same time, it passed Mussolini's “Defence of the Race” laws. Mussolini had told the

⁹¹ NA, T586, r1112, 175^a Riunione Gran Consiglio del Fascismo, 6 October 1938, f074978, For a published version, see *OO, XXIX*, pp. 167-170.

⁹² NA, T586, r1112, 175^a Riunione Gran Consiglio del Fascismo, 6 October 1938, f074978.

⁹³ *OO, XXIX*, 405^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 7 November 1938, pp. 205-7, 406^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 9 November 1938, 407^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 10 November 1938, p. 210.

National Council of the Fascist Party that Italians were of pure Aryan, Mediterranean stock. Despite their racial purity, Italians had not developed their racial consciousness.⁹⁴ Mussolini blamed the continued revolts in the Amhara region of Ethiopia not on his own murderous brutality but rather on this lack of racial and imperial will. The various decree laws created separate zones in the Italian Empire, with a separate “indigenous quarter,” and banned miscegenation, as well as implementing the anti-Semitic discrimination that Mussolini had spelled out in October.⁹⁵ The Duce believed that these racist policies were required in order to create a hardened Italian people who would have the martial vigour necessary to seize and to rule his new empire.

Mussolini’s expansionist dreams continued to lead him toward the German camp. Three initiatives between the Italian and German Axis partners in November highlighted Mussolini’s essential solidarity to the Axis. In early November, despite Mussolini’s refusal of a formal alliance with Germany, General Pariani, the Italian Undersecretary of State for War, continued to push for staff talks aimed at increasing military co-operation between the Axis powers. The rush to co-ordinate policy in the planned but ultimately cancelled meeting of military and diplomatic leaders at Munich clearly demonstrated the need for some form of integrated military planning. German military officials instructed Colonel von Rintelin, their Military Attaché in Rome, to proceed slowly, echoing

⁹⁴ *OO*, XXIX, Al Consiglio Nazionale del P.N.F., 25 October 1938, pp. 185-96.

⁹⁵ *OO*, XXIX, 405^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 7 November 1938, pp. 205-7, 406^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 9 November 1938, 407^a Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri, 10 November 1938, p. 210.

Mussolini's words regarding the alliance: agreement in principle but with a delay in the conclusion of an actual agreement.⁹⁶ More profitably, Ciano signed a cultural agreement with Germany. He noted that this arrangement was more substantial than the usual soporifics; the agreement dealt with educational issues and exchanges of officials. Both parties thought that these ties would help to create greater public acceptance of the Axis domestically, as well as cementing what Ciano called a "a true Axis atmosphere."⁹⁷

Less happily for Mussolini and Ciano, von Ribbentrop also worked toward a Franco-German accord similar to the Anglo-German declaration for future consultation signed at Munich. Mussolini's detestation of France's government had shattered any possibility of rapprochement between the two Latin sisters, so Mussolini could hardly relish the possibility of a German initiative to reach agreement outside the bounds of Axis solidarity. He reconciled himself to the eventuality, directing Attolico in Berlin to intercede with von Ribbentrop to wait until after Chamberlain and Halifax visited Paris later in the month. Mussolini wanted to learn more the clearly the lines of French policy in the aftermath of Munich. On 8 November, Attolico accordingly informed Ernst von Weizsäcker, State Secretary at the Wilhelmstrasse. Later that day, Mussolini directed Attolico to try to ensure that von Ribbentrop followed the extremely loose arrangement of the Anglo-German agreement signed at Munich. German diplomats had already given

⁹⁶ *DGFP, D, IV, #402*, von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 5 November 1938, p. 521; #403, Woermann Memorandum, 7 November 1938, p. 522; #406, von Mackensen Memorandum, 8 November 1938, pp. 523-4.

the French government a document that called for joint consultation, von Weizsäcker informed Attolico, but he said that he would discuss the issue with von Ribbentrop. When informed of Mussolini's views, von Ribbentrop agreed to the requested delay and also to try to water down the clause calling for consultation. The Wilhelmstrasse eventually set the signing ceremony for 6 December, and gave Attolico a copy of the declaration's text.⁹⁷ Despite von Ribbentrop's attempts to assuage Mussolini's concerns, the Duce did not entirely believe that the eventual Franco-German declaration would be the anodyne exercise that it was. Neither Hitler nor von Ribbentrop intended to be bound by promises made to the French government; they issued the declaration only for its propaganda value.

Despite the Franco-German accord that would be signed in Paris and the appearance of a possible split in Axis solidarity, Mussolini continued to reject French overtures for a rapprochement. Before the new French Ambassador André François-Poncet's arrival in Rome, he had tried to indicate the Daladier government's desire to repair the breach with Italy. In a meeting with Renato Prunas, the French Chargé d'Affaires, he suggested that France's recognition of Italy's Ethiopian conquest, which had carried no conditions, indicated the sincere desire of Frenchmen to restore a four-

⁹⁷ Quoted in *CHD*, 17 November 1938, pp. 195-6; 23 November 1938, pp. 197-8. *DGFP, D, IV*, #405, Walter Hewel Memorandum, 8 November 1938, p. 523.

⁹⁸ *DGFP, D, IV*, #348, #349, von Weizsäcker Memorandum, 8 November 1938, pp. 447-8, 448-9; #350 von Weizsäcker to von Welczek (Paris), 8 November 1938, p. 449. #358 von Ribbentrop to von Welczek, 21 November 1938, pp. 458-9, #363, Woermann Memorandum, 25 November 1938, p. 463.

Power collaborative arrangement to put an end to international anarchy.⁹⁹ Unfortunately for the French Ambassador, his mission was doomed to failure, as Mussolini did not share that goal. Shortly before François-Poncet's arrival, Mussolini had told Ciano that he disliked François-Poncet intensely and, more cryptically, that the Duce would "help him break his head."¹⁰⁰ At the same time, the Duce ordered Fascist hierarch Achille Starace to prepare a propaganda campaign agitating for the 'return' of Tunisia and Nice. On 8 November 1938, Mussolini outlined his future plans for France. The plans fell into two categories. The first set was more immediate, and Italy might arrange them through negotiation. Mussolini wanted a condominium arrangement to give Italy virtual exclusivity of rights in the French colony of Tunisia; Ciano later noted that Mussolini wanted Italians to be the only "living force of the white race" in Tunisia. This increase of Italian control would represent a marked change from the negotiated Mussolini-Laval agreement of 1935. Similarly, Mussolini wanted control of the Djibuti railroad, vital for the continued existence and supply of Italian East Africa, and a condominium arrangement for control of the Djibuti port and surrounding areas. Increased representation on the Suez Canal Board and the lowering of tariffs for shipping were the final elements of this first stage of desiderata. In the longer term, and possible only through a victorious war against France, Mussolini wanted to extend Italian territory on its Northwest frontier to the Var River, completing the ring of the Alps, and to control Corsica as a directly ruled Italian province. Obviously, the French government would

⁹⁹ ASMAE, UC 61, SAP – Francia, B. 34, Prunas to Ciano, 5 November 1938.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in *CHD*, 5 November 1938, p. 190.

never voluntarily cede these territories, and the Duce knew that these dreams would eventually lead to war with France. He was not, however, speaking of a precisely determined set of perfect plans; the timing for these adventures would depend on circumstance. It might be one year or ten, but the Duce warned Ciano that “we must never lose sight of this goal.”¹⁰¹

In the short term, however, Mussolini and Ciano concentrated on the first set of demands. Accordingly, Ciano informed Grandi of the demands regarding Tunis, Djibuti, and the Suez Canal. He wanted Grandi to influence the British government toward applying pressure on France to make these concessions.¹⁰² In order to carry out the longer-term preparations, Mussolini wanted the repatriation of Italians living in France or in French protectorates. Both Mussolini and Ciano feared French reprisals against Italians in the foreseeable collision between the two empires, and wanted to ensure that they could be offered appropriate protection in the event of war. In addition, Mussolini hoped that he could score a considerable propaganda coup by repatriating potential soldiers to swell his legions of 8 million bayonets. Mussolini approved offers of pensions and subsidies to those who were willing to repatriate themselves. Despite the eventual outlay of substantial amounts of lire, however, only some 50,000 Italian expatriates would take up the Duce’s offer.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *CHD*, 8 November 1938, pp. 191-2. ASMAE, UC 61, UC 85, Ciano Appunto, 9, 14 November 1938, *CHD*, 5, 8-10, 14 November 1938, p. 190, 191-3, 194.

¹⁰² ASMAE, UC 61, UC 85, Ciano to Grandi, 14 November 1938.

¹⁰³ *CHD*, 10, 14, 17 November 1938. Pp. 192-3, 194, 195-6.

Mussolini and Ciano gave other indications of their disdain for France. In his memoirs, Raffaele Guariglia, the new Italian Ambassador to France, recorded the obligatory meeting with Ciano where traditionally the Foreign Minister would give his Ambassador detailed instructions. In this case, Ciano said that Guariglia should do nothing.¹⁰⁴ Another signal occurred at a meeting on 29 November, when Mussolini rejected outright François-Poncet's overtures for a return to a four-Power pact; the French left, the Duce complained, had already ruined the first four-Power arrangement, and he would not take part in similar plans again. He argued that the Spanish Civil War had poisoned Italian relations with France, and he rudely left behind a speechless François-Poncet.¹⁰⁵

Against this background of anti-French rancour and inchoate war planning, Mussolini spoke to the Fascist Grand Council the same day. Mussolini repeated his plans that he had earlier outlined to Ciano, emphasizing especially the need for Tunisia, Corsica, and an expanded Alpine frontier to secure Italy's position in the Mediterranean. Once Chamberlain and Halifax had finished their visit to Paris at the end of November, Mussolini moved deliberately to try to intimidate the Daladier government. He imagined, largely incorrectly, that the Anglo-French talks had established a virtual alliance between the two countries.¹⁰⁶ In the face of his apparent failure to separate the two powers,

¹⁰⁴ Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi, 1922-1946*. Naples, E.S.I., 1950.

¹⁰⁵ *CHD*, 29 November 1938, pp. 200-1.

¹⁰⁶ ASMAE, US 229, Guariglia to Ciano, 25 November 1938. Guariglia's report that Chamberlain and Halifax had agreed to a much larger British continental commitment and greater military co-operation and

Mussolini launched a two-pronged policy. He directed Ambassador Attolico to inform von Ribbentrop that Italy was ready to sign a military alliance with Germany. Mussolini was able to make this potentially public commitment as the British government had ratified the Easter Accord; the Duce no longer seemed to fear alienating the Chamberlain Cabinet.¹⁰⁷ Attolico did not pursue this suggestion vigorously; he replied that von Ribbentrop was not immediately available. Attolico believed from his own sources that Mussolini was misinformed regarding the supposed Anglo-French alliance. When Mussolini learned that Britain had given little in the way of commitments to France, the immediate impetus for an alliance had passed. With a renewed belief that he could continue to wean Britain from France, Mussolini returned to that campaign.¹⁰⁸ He and an apparently unwitting Ciano carried out a *coup de théâtre* designed to achieve several goals: to intimidate the Daladier government into making concessions, to try once more to separate Britain and France, and to make public the long-range goals of Mussolini's irredentism.

Ciano delivered a major speech to the Fascist Chamber of Deputies on 30 November 1938. He had invited both François-Poncet and Perth to attend, lending a

co-ordination of military production likely helped to create Mussolini's misperceptions. See also Del Balzo (Rome) to Grandi and Attolico, 29 November 1938. For the British record of the talks, see FO 371 22428, R9704/240/22, CAB paper CP269, 24 November 1938. The Foreign Office eventually sent this paper to Rome, where the *Servizio Informazione Militare* almost certainly stole it from the Embassy safe, thus correcting Mussolini's misunderstanding.

¹⁰⁷ ASMAE, UC 6, Ciano to Attolico, 24 November 1938.

¹⁰⁸ ASMAE, UC 6, Attolico to Ciano, 24, 25 November 1938.

darker character to the subsequent events. Ciano's speech, pre-approved by the Duce, consisted of a long ode praising Italian victories in Ethiopia and Spain.¹⁰⁹ Ciano stressed his hopes for an accord with England, albeit one based on "absolute parity," whether "moral, political, or military." When Ciano reached the climax of his oration, he declared the Fascist government's intention "to defend the legitimate interests and aspirations of the Italian people." At that moment, deputies rose to their feet, calling for the annexation of "Tunis, Nice, Corsica, Savoy." Outside, demonstrators paraded through the streets echoing the chant. Mussolini and Ciano refused to intervene to stop the deputies' antics. With François-Poncet and Perth in attendance, such passivity lent an official aura to the obviously prearranged outburst.¹¹⁰ Afterward, Mussolini said to Ciano, "That is the way to pose a problem and to set a people in motion."¹¹¹

Unsurprisingly, this display of Italian irredentism touched off angry reactions in Paris and throughout France. Against a background of anti-Italian demonstrations,

¹⁰⁹ *CHD*, 23, 26 November 1938, pp. 197, 199. Ciano finished the speech on 23 November, and Mussolini gave his approval on 26 November.

¹¹⁰ For a small selection of published accounts, see Shorrock, pp. 240-1, De Felice, *Lo Stato Totalitario*, pp. 559-61, Donatella Bolech Cecchi, *Non bruciare I ponti con Londra e Berlino*. Milano: A. Giuffrè, 1986, pp. 18-21. For one account of the extensive organisation of the demonstration by a member of the Rome University Fascist Organisation, see FO 371 22428, R9745,240/22, Perth to Halifax, 2 December 1938. Ciano noted in his diary that the outburst in the chamber was entirely spontaneous, and he repeated his belief on several subsequent occasions to various diplomats. It seems likely that even the callow Ciano would not have deliberately lied to himself. The most compelling explanation is that Mussolini and the Fascist Party Secretary Achille Starace had arranged the incident without Ciano's knowledge.

Bonnet declared in the French Chamber of Deputies that France would not cede an acre of territory. He summoned Guariglia the next day to protest the demonstrations inside and outside the chamber. The French Foreign Minister particularly noted Mussolini's and Ciano's refusal to quiet the protests. Guariglia reported that the incident had seriously damaged relations with France.¹¹² On instructions, François-Poncet delivered an official protest to Ciano on 2 December. He asked pointedly whether or not the demonstration in the chamber, held in the presence of the Italian head of government, represented official Italian policy? François-Poncet reminded Ciano of the 1935 Mussolini-Laval accords, and asked whether or not Ciano thought that they were still in force. Ciano responded that his speech represented the sole guide to Italian policy, as the demonstration had been spontaneous. Ciano refused to be drawn on the question of the Mussolini-Laval accords, responding only that he would have to review the question. He argued that that agreement rested on a basis of sound mutual relations, which France had violated with its opposition to Italy's Ethiopian war.¹¹³ Pleased by French diplomatic "hysteria," Mussolini and Ciano fleshed out their plans. In their view, the demonstrations meant that Italians would understand that the Axis had specifically Italian objectives – not merely German ones. Fascist Italy would not renounce its longer-term claims against France, even though they would require a major war. Instead, in the near future, Mussolini planned to denounce the 1935 Mussolini-Laval accord and put forward his first round of claims regarding Tunis,

¹¹¹ Quoted in *CHD*, 30 November 1938, pp. 200-1.

¹¹² ASMAE, SAP – Francia, B. 34, Guariglia to Ciano, 1 December 1938.

¹¹³ ASMAE, SAP – Francia, B. 33, UC 85, Ciano to Mussolini, 2 December 1938.

Djibuti, and a share in the Suez Canal. As Mussolini would note a week later, “The time for [hostilities] has not yet come.”¹¹⁴

When von Ribbentrop signed his anodyne accord with France, Mussolini moved to ensure that Western diplomats and statesmen did not interpret the event as showing any cracks in Axis solidarity. He issued an official “Informazione Diplomatica” to publicize his interpretation of the event. Germany, he wrote, had informed and consulted with Italy throughout the negotiations leading to the pact. He himself had received a copy of the text as early as October. In short, Italy approved of the German move. That said,

¹¹⁴ *CHD*, 2 December 1938, pp. 201-2. Writers of the De Felice school have ignored important evidence regarding the nature of Mussolini’s policy and his intentions regarding the 30 November 1938 demonstration. De Felice canvassed three possible explanations. The first was that the Duce aimed to create tension similar to that during the Czech crisis, hoping to prompt a four-power conference to deal with Italian demands. The second was that Mussolini wanted to scupper in advance any possible Franco-German rapprochement when von Ribbentrop visited Paris. De Felice preferred the third explanation - that the events’ organiser Starace, in an “excess of zeal and without knowing Mussolini’s political programme,” had added demands for Savoy and Corsica that his superior had no intention of claiming. De Felice, *Lo Stato Totalitario*, pp. 560-2. This argument breaks down in light of Mussolini’s professed desire to control Corsica, to seize French territory to the Var river line, and his evident satisfaction at the results of the demonstration. It is hair-splitting to argue that because the chants did not specify the precise territory that Mussolini intended to seize from his French enemy that the incident had little significance. Quartararo argued that the events of November 30th did not signify that Mussolini had decided to join the German camp; instead, in her view, they were not inconsistent with il Duce’s “realistic and highly flexible” foreign policy. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, p. 401. This view is sustainable only when one ignores the

however, he trumpeted that Italians did not believe “in perpetual peace or eternal crystallization of special interests or situations.” He emphasized that French policy was hostile to Italian Fascism, and “rife with the residual spirit of Versailles.” He concluded by insisting that French leaders should not delude themselves that they could drive a wedge between Italy and Germany.¹¹⁵

Ciano continued to prepare the ground for the repudiation of the Mussolini-Laval accords, and the Chamberlain Cabinet’s flaccid response unwittingly convinced Mussolini to maintain this policy. On 4 December, Ambassador Perth did request a clarification from Ciano of the demonstrations of 30 November, but he announced the same day that Chamberlain and Halifax had chosen to visit Rome from 11-14 January. Although Chamberlain undoubtedly believed that he could best moderate Mussolini’s behaviour through this type of contact, the announcement did undermine any British criticism of Mussolini’s irrendentist antics.¹¹⁶ More seriously, in response to a question, Chamberlain announced in the House of Commons on 12 December that Great Britain had no specific military obligations to defend France in the event of an Italian attack through any pact or accord. Instead, he asserted weakly that Britain intended to maintain the Mediterranean *status quo ante*. Though Chamberlain worried that Mussolini’s public

evidence of Mussolini’s plan to proceed in two stages and his earlier decision in favour of a tripartite alliance with Berlin and Tokyo.

¹¹⁵ OO, XIX, *Informazione Diplomatica* #25, *Popolo d’Italia*, 9 December 1938, p. 503.

¹¹⁶ FO 371 22428, R9627/240/22, Perth to Halifax, 4 December 1938. NC 18/1/1078, Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 4 December 1938. Chamberlain clearly did not understand Mussolini’s attempt to split the perceived Anglo-French alliance. See also CHD, 3, 4 December 1938, p. 202.

salvos against France could derail renewed appeasement, he assumed that the Italian dictator wanted the Chamberlain-Halifax visit to occur, and would stop short of “any extreme measures.” Chamberlain apparently did not realize, however, the extent to which his lack of support for France encouraged Mussolini’s extremism.¹¹⁷

Mussolini, attempting to widen the apparent gulf between British and French policy, ordered Ciano to denounce the Mussolini-Laval accords. On 17 December, Ciano informed Ambassador François-Poncet that Mussolini considered that the accords were no longer in force. Ciano argued that both sides had not ratified them, and, besides, the accord assumed amicable relations as a pre-condition. Ciano complained that French policy during the Ethiopian crisis had broken that trust. Still, Ciano did not entirely close the door on possible negotiations. He left François-Poncet with vague hints of possible avenues to pursue in order to lessen tension. In doing so, however, Ciano had no realistic agenda in mind. He aimed only to ensure that France could not interfere with Chamberlain’s visit to Rome.¹¹⁸ François-Poncet eventually attempted to show that France had implemented the accord in good faith, but Ciano, unsurprisingly, would not be moved. He called the French attempt a “bland contradiction” of the Italian case. He did not bother to respond.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ NC 18/1/1079, 11 December 1938, Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain

¹¹⁸ ASMAE, UC 61, Ciano to François-Poncet, 17 December 1938. *CHD*, s.d., p. 206.

¹¹⁹ ASMAE, UC 61, SAP – Francia, B. 33, François-Poncet to Ciano, 26 December 1936, *CHD*, s.d., p. 209. Ciano also refused to consider entreaties from Guariglia in Paris about the need to calm virtually unanimous French hostility toward Italy arising from Mussolini’s policy. ASMAE, UC 61, Guariglia to Ciano, 28 December 1938. Had Mussolini merely intended to secure some co-operation regarding Tunisia,

In sharp and striking contrast to Mussolini's tense and duplicitous relations with the West, he continued to tighten his ties with Germany and Japan. Since Munich, Japanese diplomats and soldiers had continued their debate about an alliance with Italy and possibly Germany. The war in China had proceeded well, with Japanese troops capturing ever more territory. At the same time, however, no hope existed for either an immediate victory or a negotiated settlement that would satisfy Japanese territorial demands. Arita Hachirō, newly re-appointed Foreign Minister by Prime Minister Konoe, refused to consider any apparent climb down from Japan's maximalist demands. On 3 November, Konoe declared a "new order for ensuring stability in East Asia." This aim implicitly rejected the so-called Washington system that had regulated Chinese affairs and the status quo in the Pacific region since 1922. It clearly indicated that Japan was bent on diminishing American and British influence in East Asia. Arita further emphasized this aim in a strong response to an American note of protest over Japanese violations of American rights in China. In essence, Arita claimed that the old system of treaties and accepted principles was dead. This challenge to Anglo-American power required support from other revisionist powers – especially Germany and Italy. But while Navy commanders continued to push for an alliance with Italy directed against Great Britain, Army strategists wanted a pact with Germany, primarily directed against the

Djibuti, and the Suez Canal Board, as Quartararo and others have argued (see n105). Mussolini certainly could have directed Ciano toward that goal, but the Duce chose not to do so.

Soviet Union and its intervention both in China and on the borders of Manchukuo.¹²⁰ In mid-November, naval officers approached Giorgio Giorgis, the Italian Naval Attaché, to present a draft Italo-Japanese alliance proposal. The pact considered at least benevolent neutrality in case of war, plus military, political and economic co-operation. The draft also considered possible espionage exchanges, mutual protection of shipping, and even reciprocal ship-building.¹²¹ At the same time, the Gaimushō planned to send a new Ambassador to conclude some kind of pact with the Axis powers.¹²² Mussolini, still not wanting to alienate Great Britain totally, did not immediately follow up on these proposals.

On 15 December, after the demonstration in the Chamber of Deputies and the ensuing rancorous quarrel with France, Mussolini met General Ōshima, the Japanese Ambassador to Berlin, at the Palazzo Venezia. Ōshima was an ardent supporter of a triple alliance. He talked of smashing the Soviet Union into a number of small states, and of evicting Britain from China and from the Pacific region in general. Mussolini, for his

¹²⁰ Iriye, pp. 67-8. For a cogent Italian explanation of the Byzantine Japanese politics, see ASMAE, UC 53, Addetto Navale Tokio a il Sottosegretario di Stato, Ministero della Marina, 10 October 1938. Mussolini heavily marked a passage on the anti-British potential of the Japanese Navy.

¹²¹ The draft proposal does not apparently appear in the Italian files, but a copy does exist in the Gaimushō files for the period. Ferretti, pp. 224-5.

¹²² The Gaimushō dispatched Shiratori Toshio, who many observers thought should have been Foreign Minister in Arita's place. Shiratori was a strong believer in a tripartite alliance, but a realist regarding the difficulties of reaching any accord. ASMAE, UC 53, Addetto Navale Tokio a il Sottosegretario di Stato, Ministero della Marina, 16 November 1938.

part, cautioned that he would not reach a decision until mid-January at the earliest; in effect, the Duce wanted to wait to see what would come of Chamberlain's visit to Rome.¹²³ At the same time, Commander Giorgis, the Naval Attaché in Tokyo, worked towards a separate Italo-Japanese pact.¹²⁴

While Giorgis negotiated with Japanese officials in Tokyo, Italian and German military leaders continued low-level informal discussions on armaments and technical military matters. The discussions proceeded amicably with common understanding of the eventual military confrontation that the fascist states would face. In Mussolini's view, it was necessary to maintain strict co-operation with the German technocrats.¹²⁵ On 23 December, Mussolini decided to strengthen these talks, abandoning Giorgis's separate negotiations, and instead seeking a tripartite alliance, which offered a more powerful range of forces against both France, and eventually, Great Britain.¹²⁶

Mussolini took a short Christmas vacation, and returned to Rome on 31 December. That morning, Ciano met Shiratori Toshio, the new Japanese Ambassador, for the first time in the latter's new post. Ciano found Shiratori to be "outspoken and energetic," and recognized the latter's support for an alliance. Shiratori warned that many senior military and diplomatic leaders in Japan wanted a rapprochement with the West, so that alliance negotiations would not be easy. In the evening, Mussolini summoned Ciano

¹²³ *CHD*, 15 December 1938, p. 205.

¹²⁴ Toscano, *The Origins of the Pact of Steel*, pp. 99-100n63.

¹²⁵ ASMAE, UC 4, Magistrati to Ciano, 17 December 1938. *DGFP*, D, IV, #411, 30 November 1938, General Keitel to von Ribbentrop, pp. 529-32.

to the Palazzo Venezia. Mussolini said that he had decided to proceed with von Ribbentrop's proposal to turn the anti-Comintern Pact into an alliance. He believed that a conflict with France and Britain was becoming increasingly inevitable. He needed to forge the alliance with Germany and Japan, and not only to line up the necessary forces for that conflict. The alliance could intimidate the Chamberlain Cabinet into abandoning France in order to look after the Empire, and therefore further isolating France. Finally, the alliance would provide Mussolini with the diplomatic muscle necessary to ensure the unopposed occupation of Albania. Mussolini thought that it would be best to sign the agreement in the last ten days of January.¹²⁷

Ciano drafted an astonishingly open and honest letter to von Ribbentrop to indicate the Duce's decision. He explained Mussolini's two-tiered claims against France. The first set included the familiar demands for accommodation of Italians living in Tunisia, a free port at Djibuti and the use of the Djibuti-Addis Ababa Railroad, plus Italian participation in the administration of the Suez Canal. Ciano assured von Ribbentrop that Italy would achieve these demands through diplomatic means, though Italy would not take the formal diplomatic initiative. Ciano did not specify the second set of demands, writing that they were "of a historical nature and refer to territory which belongs to Italy geographically, ethnographically, and strategically," which Italy would deal with in "a definitive way." Ciano referred, of course, to Mussolini's earlier stated claims on Corsica and French Alpine territory. He also wrote that Mussolini had changed

¹²⁶ *CHD*, 23 December 1938, p. 208.

¹²⁷ Hugh Gibson (ed.), *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943* [hereafter *CD*], 1 January 1939, p. 3.

his mind regarding an Italo-German alliance owing to an allegedly solid alliance between Britain and France, the warlike tendencies in the French government, and the preparations in the United States to supply the Western democracies with war matériel. Mussolini wanted Italy, Germany, and Japan welded into a system, with Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Rumania within their sphere of influence. Perhaps, most importantly, Ciano wrote that this combination of forces would enable “Germany and Italy to work completely undisturbed for a long period of time.” Ciano also spoke briefly with von Ribbentrop by phone, explaining the Duce’s decision in favour of an alliance. Ciano met with Attolico, who was in Rome, and provided his Ambassador with instructions to carry the letter back to Berlin.¹²⁸

Although Ciano had been more candid than was often the case, some curious elements exist in his letter. Mussolini and Ciano both had to know that no Anglo-French alliance existed, as they had read British dispatches stolen from Britain’s Rome Embassy safe. Further, there was a contradiction between Ciano’s claim that Italy’s sour relations with France did not influence the Duce’s decision and the later statement blaming warlike tendencies in French circles for Mussolini’s decision. More importantly, Ciano’s letter and the subsequent phone call to von Ribbentrop demonstrates both sides’ belief that a tripartite alliance would be easy to arrange, despite Shiratori’s warning. Finally,

¹²⁸ Ciano’s hand-written draft is found in ASMAE, GAB 29, Ciano to von Ribbentrop, 2 January 1938. Copies exist in ASMAE, UC 85 & 71. A published translation appears in *CDP*, pp. 258-9. For a somewhat different published translation, see *DGFP, D, IV*, #421, Ciano to von Ribbentrop, 2 January 1938, pp. 106-9. See also *CD*, 2 January 1938, pp. 3-4.

Mussolini intended to take no further initiative towards reaching his diplomatic claims against France, seemingly preferring to let relations with Paris fester, and although Mussolini needed an eventual war with the West, he did not intend to fight until he had greater chance to prepare. Most significantly, however, was the fact that if von Ribbentrop and Mussolini wanted an alliance directed against Russia and not the Western democracies, then Japan would have been ready to sign immediately; it was only the Axis partners' determination to direct the alliance against Britain and France that eventually prevented the tripartite alliance at that time.

Attolico duly took Ciano's letter to von Ribbentrop, who was naturally pleased by its contents. Attolico, however, slightly exceeded his instructions in presenting the letter. Ciano had spoken of a tentative proposal for repatriation to Germany of South Tyrolese German activists, as well as a change in the Italo-German clearing account, which required Italian payment for a portion of German exports in foreign currency through a clearing account. Though Ciano hoped for some kind of German concessions on these issues, he did not see them as essential conditions of the alliance. Attolico's presentation of the letter implied that these conditions were necessary requirements before Ciano would sign any pact.¹²⁹ Still, von Ribbentrop was willing to make some movement on these issues given the larger questions at stake. He committed himself to repatriate some South Tyrolese Germans immediately, though a larger transfer would have to wait until Germany had conquered further *Lebensraum*. Given the scarcity of foreign currency reserves in both Italy and Germany, the economic question proved more intractable.

¹²⁹ ASMAE, UC 71, Attolico to Ciano, 5 January 1939.

Eventually, after some difficult negotiations, the two sides reached a compromise that called for reductions in Italian payments and the eventual abolition of the clearing system – the major Italian goal – plus a German promise to pursue tighter economic co-ordination.¹³⁰

These minor disputes between partners did not hide the essential agreement of ends between the two regimes. The German Foreign Minister told Attolico that he fully understood Mussolini's position. He promised to respect Italian 'rights' in the Balkans and repeated Hitler's promise that the South Tyrol question was forever settled. He dispatched a draft treaty to Ciano that he hoped would serve as the basis for the tripartite alliance. He also repeated that he expected to sign an alliance quickly, inviting Ciano to Berlin on 28 January 1939. Most significantly, both sides understood that an alliance with Japan was inherently directed against Britain and France. As von Ribbentrop wrote, "Everything you write to me as to the reasons for this decision is accepted here with full comprehension and full agreement." Ciano could hardly understand these words to mean anything other than von Ribbentrop understood Mussolini's territorial aims and the Duce's desire that Germany and Italy should be able to work "undisturbed for a long period of time." Still, Mussolini's qualifications about the timing for an eventual war

¹³⁰ One can best trace the course of the discussions through *DGFP, D, IV*, #414, #418, #419, #420, #428, #429, #431, #432, #433, #436, #437, #438, #442, #445. For the gist of the agreement, see #446, Clodius & von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 3 February 1939, pp. 574-5, and the text of the agreement #451, German-Italian Commercial Agreement, 13 February 1939, pp. 580-2.

with the West did not change the fact he had committed Italy to an alliance with Germany that meant that he could no longer entirely control that decision.¹³¹

Despite the confidence of the two Foreign Ministers that they would sign an alliance that month, there were some indications that the Japanese government was in no rush to sign. In particular, army strategists did not believe that they could confront a wider coalition including Great Britain while Japan was still fighting in China and facing a hostile Soviet Union on the Manchukuo border. Ambassador Shiratori hinted at this lack of political will in a meeting with Ciano in early January. Shiratori, who strongly supported the alliance, warned that Foreign Minister Arita was lukewarm, though his stance would only delay its signing and not prevent it altogether.¹³² General Ōshima in Berlin also warned of the opposition of old school diplomats in the Gaimushō.¹³³ Later in January, a constitutional crisis precipitated a new government in Tokyo, which further called into question the possibility of Japanese adherence to the alliance. Foreign Minister Arita remained in office, and although he was a partisan of a triple alliance, he refused to sign such an agreement if Germany and Italy intended to direct it at any country other than the Soviet Union.¹³⁴ By the last week of January, Ciano and von

¹³¹ ASMAE, UC 71, Attolico to Ciano, 5, 6, 10 January 1939; von Ribbentrop to Ciano, 9 January 1939. See also, *DGFP*, *D*, *IV*, #426, von Ribbentrop to Ciano, 9 January 1939, #427, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 10 January 1939, pp. 550-2, and Enclosure, Ciano to von Ribbentrop. *CD*, 4, 5, 7 January 1939, pp. 5, 6, 7.

¹³² *CD*, 7 January 1939, p. 7.

¹³³ ASMAE, UC 71, Attolico to Ciano, 6, 9 January 1939.

¹³⁴ ASMAE, UC 71, Attolico to Ciano, 21, 25 January 1939.

Ribbentrop knew that it would be impossible to sign any alliance by their hoped-for date of 28 January. In early February, when Mussolini finally understood the depth of opposition to the alliance in Japanese circles, he told Ciano that he would need to sign a bilateral alliance with Germany in order to face down Britain and France.¹³⁵ As the delay lengthened through February, Mussolini began pushing for Italo-German staff talks to begin to co-ordinate Axis military plans against Britain and France.¹³⁶

The attempt to reach an alliance with Germany did not mean that Mussolini planned to lessen Italy's influence in the Balkans. Consequently, he continued his friendly competition with Germany for influence in Budapest. In November, the Hungarian Ambassador in Berlin had approached von Ribbentrop about joining the anti-Comintern Pact. The German Foreign Minister approved of the idea in principle, but thought that Hungary should first prove its loyalty by withdrawing from the League of Nations. He asked Attolico to approach Ciano to determine Mussolini's attitude.¹³⁷ Mussolini and Ciano essentially concurred. When Ciano visited Budapest in December, he sought to subordinate Hungarian policy to that of Italy. In Ciano's view, Prime Minister Imrédy and Foreign Minister Csáky largely agreed to do so. They assured Ciano that Hungary would leave the League of Nations in May, citing as an excuse the issue of treatment of minorities. That decision cleared the way for Hungary's eventual accession

¹³⁵ ASMAE, UC 71, Attolico to Ciano, 6 February 1939. *CD*, 8 February 1939, pp. 24-5.

¹³⁶ DGFP, D, IV, #454, von Weizsäcker Memorandum, 27 February 1939, p. 584; #455 von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 28 February 1939, pp. 584-5; #456, von Weizsäcker to von Mackensen, 5 March 1939, p. 585; #459, von Weizsäcker to von Mackensen, 10 March 1939, p. 588.

to the anti-Comintern Pact. Further, the Hungarians promised to pursue a rapprochement with Yugoslavia. Ciano was pleased to assist in any way possible, as a solid Italo-Yugoslav-Hungarian bloc would strengthen Italian influence and power in the Danube basin. At the same time, however, Ciano walked a diplomatic tightrope; he did not want to alienate Germany, but wanted to develop Italy's sphere of influence at the expense of his future German ally. He promised the Hungarian leaders that Italy would never allow Germany to dominate Hungary.¹³⁸ Ciano returned to the issue of Hungarian accession to the anti-Comintern Pact during the last half of December. He particularly wanted to see a Hungarian declaration by 10 January for "political reasons" – obviously a reference to the Chamberlain-Halifax visit that would start the next day. Csáky promised to make a declaration on 12 January, as Chamberlain and Halifax were in Rome, and subsequently did so.¹³⁹ It is important to note the care that Ciano took to position Italy as Hungary's protector, while at the same time ensuring that he did not damage his relations with Germany, and the lengths he took to intimidate Chamberlain by the timing of the Hungarian announcement to join the anti-Comintern Pact.

While Mussolini threatened Western Europe through his alliance diplomacy, his troops continued to serve in the Spanish Civil War. In a long and bloody campaign along the Ebro River in October, Franco had bled his opponents white, while repeatedly

¹³⁷ *DGFP, D, IV, #408*, von Ribbentrop Memorandum, 28 November 1938, pp. P. 526.

¹³⁸ *CHD, 18*, 19 December 1938, pp. 206-7, 207. *DGFP, D, V, #265, #266*, Ermansdorff (Budapest) to von Ribbentrop, 20 December 1938, p. 355, p. 356.

allowing the opportunity for decisive victory to pass by. After crushing Republican forces during the Ebro offensive, Franco next turned his eyes toward Catalonia, which contained most of the remaining enemy war industry. He had a decisive advantage in men and matériel, with large numbers of Spanish and Italian reserves, plus new shipments of German arms. Still, Franco dithered, postponing the offensive until, after Italian urgings, he relented and scheduled the attack to begin on 23 December. Mussolini and his new Commander of the *C.T.V.*, General Gastone Gambarra, had arranged with Franco that Italian troops would be in the vanguard of the attack. When the offensive began, the *C.T.V.* quickly outpaced the Spanish Nationalists, opening as much as a thirty-mile gap between them. This *guerra celere* both pleased and annoyed Mussolini and Ciano. On one hand, they revelled in the feat of Italian arms; on the other, they railed against Franco's slow pace, and thought that he might allow the chance for victory to slip away yet again. He decided to leave his troops in place, but to indicate to Franco once more the need for an immediate victory. Mussolini also revived the idea of a joint *démarche* with German military officials to appoint a unified commander of troops in Spain. General Keitel rather sharply rebuffed this effort, declaring that Franco was the unified commander and that there could be no other.¹⁴⁰ Mussolini had little choice but to accept this response. As Republican forces crumbled, rumours abounded that France might

¹³⁹ *DGFP, D, V*, #267, #268, von Weizsäcker Memorandum, 28, 30 December 1938; #269, Ermannsdorff to von Ribbentrop, 4 January 1939, p. 359.

intervene. Ciano recklessly informed London and Berlin that if that intervention occurred, then Italy would send new regular divisions to fight French forces in Spain, possibly sparking a European war.¹⁴¹ In the event, French politicians had little intention of carrying out such an intervention in the face of profound opposition within France's military leadership.

In this atmosphere of tension with France, Mussolini again outlined his expectations for future conquests at the expense of his Latin neighbour. The triple alliance with Germany and Japan represented the centrepiece of his foreign policy. He also spoke with Ciano of the need to establish a strong alliance with Franco after the end of the civil war: that alliance and the one with Germany would allow him to settle accounts with France. Mussolini again stated that he had no claims against metropolitan France outside the ring of the Alps, though he would move the frontier to the Var. His plans for Corsica included "autonomy, independence, annexation," and for Tunisia "minority settlement for Italians, autonomy for the Bey, Italian protectorate." In addition, he repeated his intention to claim a free port in Djibuti and control of the Djibuti-Addis Ababa railroad, as well as his intention to annex Albania.¹⁴²

While these negotiations played out, Mussolini's decision in favour of the tripartite alliance did not mean that he entirely breached relations with the Western

¹⁴⁰ *CHD*, 25 November 1938, 23-5, 28, 31 December 1938, pp. 188-9, 208-9, 209, 210. *DGFP*, *D*, *III*, #494, von Mackensen Memorandum, 29 December 1938, pp. 543-4; #495, von Weizsäcker Memorandum, 2 January 1938, pp. 544-5; #497, von Mackensen Memorandum, 5 January 1938, pp. 547-8.

¹⁴¹ *CD*, 5 January 1939, p. 6.

powers. He received Chamberlain's official visit in the middle of January. There was little that Chamberlain and Halifax could do to revive dismal Anglo-Italian relations, as Mussolini had already cast his lot with Hitler. Still, the unknowing British statesmen tried their best to bring the Duce around to their vision of peace. Chamberlain thought that Mussolini might serve as an arbiter with England in settling German grievances, might reach a rapprochement with France, and might even serve a role in bringing about general disarmament. Before this general appeasement would occur, however, Chamberlain believed that Mussolini would have to abandon the kind of theatrics of the 30 November 1938 demonstrations, and return to the classic Italian role of a decisive weight in the European balance of power.¹⁴³ During the visit, Mussolini and Ciano charmed Chamberlain, and the Prime Minister left thinking that he had "achieved all I expected to get and more." His trip, he thought, had "strengthened the chances of peace."¹⁴⁴

The actual conversations, however, were anodyne, and the results fell far short of Chamberlain's lofty ambitions. Mussolini spoke strictly along the lines of a prepared

¹⁴² CD, 8 January 1939, p. 8.

¹⁴³ NC 18/1/1081, Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 8 January 1939. For the official memorandum on British aims for the visit, see FO 371 22417, R10223/23/22, Draft Memorandum for Cabinet, 20 December 1938. For more detail on Chamberlain's aims and actions, see also Paul Stafford, "The Chamberlain-Halifax Visit to Rome: A Reappraisal." *English Historical Review*. 98.1 (1983), pp. 61-100.

¹⁴⁴ NC 18/1/1082, Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 15b January 1939. PREM 1/327, Neville Chamberlain to King George V, 17 January 1939. In this context, Quartararo's claim that Chamberlain left Rome determined to prepare for war against Italy seems particularly farfetched. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, p. 424.

draft. He promised that he had only peaceful intentions and that he would follow the guidelines of the Easter Accord strictly. He said that the Axis represented the fundamental element of his policy, but that the Axis did not have to be exclusive. Mussolini also indicated that he would be prepared to consider arms limitation talks. At the same time, he did not disguise the self-evident rift between Italy and France, asserting that French resistance to his anti-Bolshevik crusade in Spain was the major bone of contention. Obviously, he did not confide his eventual territorial ambitions to Chamberlain. Mussolini refused to consider any application of the latest non-intervention plan for Spain, preferring to wait for Franco's seemingly inevitable victory. Chamberlain, for his part, did not openly dispute Mussolini's language, most of which, of course, was pure deceit. In the second meeting, Chamberlain raised the issue of the vast rate of German rearmament and the rumours of various German coups, hoping that Mussolini could help assuage British concerns. For his part, Mussolini largely defended Germany, arguing that Germans had every right to feel endangered by the Bolshevik peril from the East. The meeting ended with the usual soporifics of mutual good will, and Chamberlain, as he left the country, dispatched a glowing letter thanking Mussolini for the visit.¹⁴⁵

In reality, Mussolini's policy decisions had rendered the meetings useless before they had occurred. Ciano described the conversation as "tired," and he thought that there

¹⁴⁵ ASMAE, UC 61, dichiarazioni à Chamberlain (draft), n.d.; UC 61, 85, Primo colloquio col Signor Chamberlain, 11 January 1939, Secondo colloquio col Signor Chamberlain, 12 January 1939. For the published translation, see *CDP*, Conversation between the Duce and Chamberlain, 11, 12 January 1939, pp. 259-66.

had been little resonance in the desultory talk. Mussolini agreed. Afterward, Ciano recorded the Duce's words; "These men are not made of the same stuff ... as the Francis Drakes and the other magnificent adventurers who created the empire. These, after all, are the tired sons of a long line of rich men and they will lose their empire." Ciano thought that the visit showed the effectiveness of the triple alliance, since "having in our hands such an instrument we could get whatever we want. The British do not want to fight. They try to draw back as slowly as possible, but they do not want to fight." He concluded that the visit had accomplished nothing, and he duly informed von Mackensen of the results.¹⁴⁶ In short, Mussolini did not alter his plans for the triple alliance and eventual war with Britain and France.

¹⁴⁶ CD, 11, 12, 13 January 1939, pp. 9-11. It is difficult to see how historians of the De Felice school such as Rosaria Quartararo can maintain their argument that Mussolini had not cast his lot with the Axis in light of this evidence. In this case, Quartararo argues that, for Mussolini, good relations with England was the fundamental element of his foreign policy, and he hoped to create an Anglo-French-Italian bloc against Germany. In her view, it was only Chamberlain's alleged refusal to moderate French intransigence that pushed Mussolini toward the Axis. Significantly, she argues against the abundant evidence to the contrary that Mussolini decided on an alliance with Germany only after Chamberlain's visit. She did not, however, provide any direct evidence to support her contention regarding Mussolini's intentions. She also ignored the lengthy campaign that Chamberlain conducted from February to June to try to convince Daladier to grant concessions to Italy. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, pp. 413-25. For a similar contention, albeit one that adheres more closely to accurate chronology, see De Felice, *Lo Stato totalitario*, pp. 568-9. These arguments are simply unsustainable given the evidence of Mussolini's wider goals and his determination before Chamberlain's visit to forge a tripartite alliance against France and Great Britain.

Though he expected an eventual war, Mussolini did not want it to occur immediately, and in the latter part of January, the French government offered him a chance to achieve a genuine rapprochement. Daladier and Bonnet decided to send a French banker, Paul Baudouin, to hold discussions with Ciano. Baudouin had negotiated the sale of shares in the Djibuti-Addis Ababa railroad following the Mussolini-Laval accords, and had contacts within the Italian business community. One such contact, Vincenzo Faggioli, met with Baudouin. The evidence differs regarding the impetus for the meeting, with Baudouin's testimony recalling that Faggioli initiated the contact with a telegram in which he suggested that Ciano wanted to clarify Italy's relations with France. The Italian records, including diplomatic traffic and Ciano's diary, imply that the initiative came from the French side, with Baudouin undertaking the mission under Daladier's and Bonnet's direction.¹⁴⁷ Whatever its genesis, the initial Italian reports of the démarche suggested that French leaders adamantly refused to consider territorial concessions, but were willing to consider the three main non-territorial demands that Mussolini and Ciano had hinted at publicly: a condominium arrangement in Tunisia, a free port and partial control over the Djibuti-Addis Ababa railroad, and increased

¹⁴⁷ According to Ciano's diary and the Italian records, the initial contact was made in person in France, not by telegram. Baudouin suggested otherwise. Guariglia reported from Paris that Baudouin and Faggioli had met, suggesting that the French report is perhaps inaccurate, though Guariglia may have been reporting a meeting subsequent to an initial telegram. Similarly, Faggioli said to Ciano that Bonnet and Daladier had charged Baudouin with the mission and had initiated it. For a useful summary of the French evidence, see Shorrock, pp. 252-5. Paul Baudouin, "Un voyage à Rome (février 1939)." *Revue des deux mondes*. (1 May 1962), pp. 69-85. CD, 28 January 1939, pp. 17-18. ASMAE, UC 61, Guariglia to Ciano, 25 January 1939.

representation on the Suez Canal Board. Baudouin eventually met with Ciano on 2 and 3 February and delivered precisely that message. After the first meeting, Ciano assumed that there were two alternatives. The first was to insist on Mussolini's maximalist programme, which would immediately mean war. He advised the Duce to take up the second, which was to take up Baudouin's initiative and postpone Mussolini's territorial claims for a more opportune time. Mussolini agreed, but said that he would not negotiate with a banker – he wanted François-Poncet to make an official request.¹⁴⁸ This decision doomed the French démarche, as no French government could risk such an approach. If it became known to French journalists that a French Cabinet was negotiating concessions after the outrageous Italian display of 30 November, then the government would surely fall. Still, Mussolini and Ciano were not unhappy to await further French moves, as, whatever concessions might appear, they fully intended to attack France to conquer Mussolini's desiderata whenever the time seemed opportune.

While relations with Germany and the West, and to a lesser extent Japan, dominated Italian policy after Munich, Mussolini and Ciano had not abandoned their plans for annexing Albania. During October, Jacomoni had reported from Durazzo that preparations had reached an advanced stage. Land reclamation projects continued to develop, and King Zog protested that Italian control had extended to every aspect of Albanian life. Ciano worried that increasing Albanian recognition of Italian control might

¹⁴⁸ ASMAE, UC 61, Guariglia to Ciano, 25 January 1939. *CD*, 28 January 1939, 2, 3 February 1939, pp. 17-18, 20, 21. For Ciano's quite accurate description of the meeting to von Mackensen, see *DGFP, D, IV*, #447, von Mackensen to von Ribbentrop, 4 February 1939, pp. 575-6.

spark some resistance. He toyed with the idea of assassinating Zog to spark the attack, even meeting once with an unnamed assassin. By 6 December, Italian plans had virtually reached fruition, and Mussolini scheduled the attack for the spring. He boasted to Ciano that he did not fear any reaction from Britain, France or Greece. He was concerned about Yugoslavia, but only insofar as Italy's invasion could push Stoyadinović towards tighter relations with Germany and therefore weakening his friendship with Italy.¹⁴⁹

To try to arrange Yugoslav compliance with Mussolini's plans, Ciano visited Yugoslavia to sound out Stoyadinović regarding the occupation and a possible Italo-Yugoslav partition of Albania. The two met at Belje and shared a hunting expedition. Their 19 January 1939 meeting started with a discussion of internal matters, but Ciano quickly broached the major international issues. Stoyadinović spoke of his plans to make a *de facto* renunciation of the League of Nations; the Yugoslav delegation would leave without fanfare in May and would not return. He also talked of Yugoslav adherence to the anti-Comintern Pact and the possibility of a Yugoslav-Hungarian rapprochement. If Hungary would not bring forward territorial claims, then Stoyadinović thought that he could certainly complete an Italo-Yugoslav-Hungarian bloc in the Danubian basin. Having thus discussed the general lines of Stoyadinović's policy, Ciano turned to the Albanian question. Ciano spoke of King Zog's alleged provocations and the need for Italian action. Ciano assured Stoyadinović that Mussolini would not act without prior

¹⁴⁹ *CHD*, 10, 11, 13, 16, 19, 22, 27 October 1938, 14, 28 November 1938, 1, 3, 5, 6 December 1938, pp. 142, 142, 176-7, 178-9, 179-80, 180, 184-5, 194, 199-200, 201, 202, 202-3, 203. *CD*, 15 January 1939, p. 12.

Yugoslav approval. Stoyadinović, initially uneasy at the mention of Albania, replied that he saw two possible options: replacing Zog or partitioning Albania between Yugoslavia and Italy. Ciano agreed that they would not consider the details at the moment, but would leave it for discussion between special envoys. Ciano finished by recounting the advantages of such a partition for Yugoslavia, including Italian support for an eventual Yugoslav occupation of the Greek territory of Salonika. Ciano understood from this conversation that he had secured Stoyadinović's approval for the Italian annexation of Albania.¹⁵⁰

Ciano also met Prince Paul, the Yugoslav regent two days later. At Stoyadinović's suggestion, Ciano raised the issue of Albania's allegedly intolerable behaviour and the need for Italy to rectify the situation. The Yugoslav Head of State told Ciano that he thought that Yugoslavia already had enough ethnic Albanians, but that he fully supported Stoyadinović. Ciano understood these words to mean that Prince Paul had also acquiesced in an eventual Italian annexation.¹⁵¹ In response to Ciano's visit, however, Prince Paul told Sir Ronald Campbell, the British Ambassador in Belgrade, that he intended to replace Stoyadinović, in part because Prince Paul feared the Italian

¹⁵⁰ ASMAE, UC 85, Resconto del viaggio di S.E. Ciano in Jugoslavia a colloquio con Presidente Stoyadinovitch, 18-23 January 1939. For the published version, see CDP, 267-73.

¹⁵¹ ASMAE, UC 85, Resconto del viaggio di S.E. Ciano in Jugoslavia a colloquio con Presidente Stoyadinovitch, 18-23 January 1939.

annexation of Albania; he thought that an increased Italian presence would in essence create the encirclement of Yugoslavia.¹⁵²

On Ciano's return to Italy, he told a pleased Mussolini of the apparent success of his mission, not knowing how badly it would backfire.¹⁵³ Prince Paul was already uneasy about Stoyadinović's highly risky foreign policy and its association with Italy and Germany. A constitutional crisis also brewed in Yugoslavia, with Croat parliamentarians calling for greater representation in light of their electoral strength in December 1938 elections. Prince Paul negotiated secretly with a delegation led by Stepan Maček, and eventually agreed to the Croat demand to replace Stoyadinović.¹⁵⁴ Mussolini greeted the news of Stoyadinović's fall with regret. He thought that Prince Paul had carried out an anti-fascist coup. Ciano recommended to the Duce that they push forward the plans for the invasion of Albania, and Mussolini agreed, even if it were to be carried in the face of direct Yugoslav opposition. They set the date for Easter week.¹⁵⁵

By the beginning of February 1939, therefore, Mussolini had decided on the main lines of future Italian policy. He made these plans clear in a major policy announcement to the Fascist Grand Council. Mussolini called his speech, "The March to the Sea," and

¹⁵² FO 371 23738, R1080/111/67, Campbell to Halifax, 21 January 1939, R1079/111/67, same-to-same, 19 January 1939. Campbell also warned strongly of the possibility of an Italian coup.

¹⁵³ *CD*, 24 January 1939, p. 15.

¹⁵⁴ For a brief description of the internal crisis, see Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974, pp. 257-8.

¹⁵⁵ *CD*, 5, 6 February 1939, p. 23, 24-5.

announced that it represented “a password to future generations.”¹⁵⁶ One historian has called it “a sort of Mussolinian *Mein Kampf*.”¹⁵⁷ It represents the kind of geopolitical thinking that Mussolini had developed over his adult lifetime, and indicates clearly his intention to create a great Roman Empire in Africa. It is worth quoting a substantial portion of the text.¹⁵⁸

This speech is written down because it must remain in the acts of the Grand Council as it documents the orientation of Italian foreign policy in the short term, the long term, and the very long term. Its premise is the following: states are more or less independent according to their maritime position. Those states that possess ocean coasts or have free access to oceans are independent; states are semi-independent that cannot communicate freely with the ocean or who are closed in internal seas; states are dependent that are absolutely continental or do not have outlets on oceans nor on seas.

Italy belongs to the second category of States. Italy is bathed by a landlocked sea that communicates with the oceans through the Suez Canal. Artificial communication that can easily be blocked with improvised means through the Strait of Gibraltar, dominated by the cannons of G[reat] B[ritain].

Italy therefore does not have free communication with the oceans; Italy therefore is really a prisoner of the Mediterranean and the more populous and powerful Italy becomes the more it will suffer its imprisonment.

The bars of this prison are Corsica, Tunisia, Malta, Cyprus; the sentinals of this prison are Gibraltar and Suez. Corsica is a pistol pointed at the heart of Italy. Tunisia at Sicily; while Malta and Cyprus constitute a threat to our

¹⁵⁶ CD, 4 January 1939, p. 22.

¹⁵⁷ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 39.

¹⁵⁸ NA, T586, 4405, Relazione per il Gran Consiglio, f000039-46. This document represents the text of Mussolini’s speech. A published version exists in *OO, XXXVII*, pp. 151-7, which differs slightly in a couple of places.

entire position in the Central and Western Mediterranean. Greece, Turkey and Egypt are always ready to range themselves with Britain to complete absolutely the political-military encirclement of Italy. Greece, Turkey, and Egypt must be considered virtual enemies of Italy and its expansion. From this situation, the objective geographical rigor of which leaps to one's eyes, and which tormented even before our regime those who saw beyond immediate political expediency, one can draw the following conclusions:

1. The goal of Italian policy which can not and does not have continental objectives of European territory, except Albania, is in the first place to break the bars of the prison.
2. Having broken the bars, Italian policy cannot have other than one watchword: to march to the ocean.

Which ocean? The Indian Ocean, through the Sudan, Libya, and Ethiopia, or the Atlantic through French North Africa.

Whether in the first or second hypothesis, we will find ourselves faced with Franco-English opposition. To face the solution of this problem without having assured support on the continent is absurd. The policy of the Rome-Berlin Axis responds therefore to an historical necessity of fundamental order.

Mussolini went on to assure his listeners that the 30 November 1938 demonstration in the Chamber meant that the Axis had specifically Italian goals as well as German ones. He repeated once more the nature of his claims against France. He would move the frontier to complete the ring of the Alps, but would not take Savoy proper. He would work to control Corsica through three stages: autonomy, independence, and annexation. He would substitute an Italian protectorate over Tunisia for the French one.

Mussolini said that there were three alternative policies. The first would be to await more profitable times, and not push these claims immediately. He rejected this choice, because as a Fascist he could not endure the diplomatic defeat that he would

suffer in the eyes of the world. The second course was to negotiate the immediate questions of the status of Italians in Tunisia, the Djibuti railroad and port, and Suez Canal Board representation. He declared that this solution would not be ideal, though it would satisfy some Italians because it would avoid further complications. The third course would be to present the maximum demands, which would force France either to capitulate or to resort to war. Mussolini contemplated a possible war, one that would consist of air and naval battles more than a ground war, as he believed that the defensive lines in the Alps were too strong for either side to overcome. He was certain of German support for this war. Current conditions were not yet ripe, though, as Italy needed to rearm and to complete Mussolini's plans for autarchy. Accordingly, he planned to delay the war against Britain and France until 1942. That delay would allow him to re-equip the artillery of the *Regio Esercito*, to complete the squadron of eight battleships, to pacify the Empire and to create a army of black soldiers, to further Italian autarchy, to fortify foreign currency reserves through the world exposition in Rome, and to repatriate the largest possible number of Italians from France and the world. These steps, he argued, were necessary before Italy could face war with Britain and France.

The March to the Sea speech established the main lines of Italian policy. Mussolini completely rejected any long-term accommodation with Britain and France. Ultimately, he aimed to shatter their Empires and to establish a new Roman Empire in their place. The Axis was a fundamental element, as he needed German support both to intimidate and eventually to defeat France and Britain. Similarly, he expected that Japan would join a tripartite alliance, increasing the array of forces facing the Western

democracies. Still, he would not exclude the possibility of an interim settlement with France, though any concessions would not ultimately shorten his list of territories to be conquered. Similarly, he would not exclude further attempts to court favour in London, as it would be advantageous to split England from France. He would not, however, postpone plans to annex Albania or to prepare for further aggression; at its heart, he intended to gut the Anglo-Italian Accord of any meaning. He expected the Spanish Civil War to end soon, and expected a grateful Francisco Franco to join the tripartite alliance to complete the encirclement of France. Essentially, Mussolini had deliberately ruptured his ties to the West in favour of an alliance with Germany, and he was prepared to wage war in order to achieve his territorial demands. Though the timing of Mussolini's war would await the development of further events, Mussolini had committed Italy to the fray.

Conclusion

Mussolini's optimistic plans did not, of course, come to pass. Already in January 1939, he had had warnings that the Japanese alliance would not come easily. If he and von Ribbentrop were willing to apply the alliance to the Soviet Union alone, then the Japanese government would sign quickly. Japanese military leaders and Foreign Ministry officials were unwilling to sign an alliance that would apply in the event of war with Great Britain, and that country was the Duce's primary target for the tripartite alliance. In the end, Japanese objections proved insuperable, and Mussolini recognized that he would have to await changed circumstances. In the meantime, though, he placed great pressure on German officials to begin Italo-German staff talks to prepare the ground for military co-operation against France and Britain. Faced with repeated Italian demands, von Ribbentrop eventually acquiesced, although he instructed his generals to ensure that Mussolini's generals did not learn of the planned occupation of Prague. Despite von Ribbentrop's distrust of his Italian partner, the essential element of most military alliances - joint staff discussions - had begun well before the formal signing of the Pact of Steel in May 1939.

Hitler's occupation of Bohemia and Moravia on 15 March 1939 very temporarily soured Mussolini's devotion to the Axis. Mussolini noted in a fit of pique that he could not tell the Italian people the reassuring words of Hitler's belated emissary, the Prince of

Hesse: "Italians would laugh at me; every time Hitler occupies a country he sends me a message."¹ Still, despite Hitler's coup, Mussolini decided that he needed German support in order to pursue his imperial dreams; Nazi Germany still represented the vital force that would enable the Duce to defeat his British and French enemies. In April 1939, Mussolini finally carried out the long-planned annexation of Albania, demonstrating clearly that he had no interest in maintaining the Mediterranean *status quo*, despite the agreements with Britain that he had signed.

In August 1939, Mussolini flirted with the idea of war. Although Italy had no direct interest in a German-Polish dispute, the bombastic Duce could hardly restrain himself from throwing Italian forces into the fray. Only after weeks of hectoring from Ciano, other Italian diplomats, the Italian monarch, and ultimately, General Pariani, the Italian Undersecretary of State for War, did Mussolini recognize the bitter truth; Fascist Italy was woefully unprepared for war. Even Mussolini had to admit that the Italian air force flew largely obsolete aircraft, and that the Italian army could not muster eight million bayonets, never mind being able to equip its soldiers with modern artillery or tanks. Mussolini's devotion to warfare over the past five years had paradoxically stripped Italy of the ability to fight the future wars that he contemplated. And although he declared his 'non-belligerency' in September 1939, his nature would not allow him to remain on the sidelines for long. When the German *Wehrmacht* crushed France in May and June 1940, Mussolini saw the opportunity to realize his ambition of creating a new Roman Empire in Africa. German force of arms had accomplished what the Duce could not –

¹ Quoted in *CD*, 15 March 1939, p. 43.

splitting France from Britain. Unfortunately for Mussolini, Fascist Italy proved incapable of defeating even one Great Power in North Africa, and his war brought not a vast empire but defeat after ignominious defeat.

From the beginnings of the Fascist movement, Mussolini had nourished extravagant ambitions, marrying nationalist ideology to some brand of revolutionary syndicalism. During the first decade of Mussolini's rule, he consolidated power both domestically, and, to some extent, internationally. Internally, he made compromises with the monarchy, landowners, the Church, and the armed forces, diluting much of the reforming zeal that more ardent revolutionaries might have had. Mussolini made these essential compromises in order to secure support and freedom to pursue his major goal: conquering Italian *spazio vitale* in the Mediterranean. By the mid-1930s, Mussolini had established the expansion of Fascist Italy's borders as the central motivating principle of his regime. Subordinating most issues to his vision of national and State power, Mussolini sought to harness the demographic and, he believed, concomitant military power of the Italian people. Fuelled by a profound social Darwinist ideology, he thought it necessary that Italy replace 'pluto-democratic' France and Britain, supposedly weakened by Jewish and Masonic conspiracies, as the great North African imperial powers. For the Duce, only a young, vital, demographically vibrant country such as Italy had the power and energy to rule with a sufficiently firm imperial hand, keeping the fecund yet backward black African population cowed.

Though a rational planner or historian using hindsight would see that the means for carrying out this planned expansion lay in a modern, well-equipped, highly trained

military, Mussolini did not. He was hardly a rational thinker, and on this issue he believed that demographic power was more important than industrial power; he even thought that industrial cities, with their lower birthrates, sapped a nation's strength. He also squandered Italian military power in his wars in Ethiopia and Spain. He sent some 500,000 troops to Ethiopia, and despite the capture of Addis Ababa, successive revolts in Gojjam, the Amhara and throughout the country kept occupation troops stretched beyond their capabilities. Mussolini had hoped that this venture would allow him to supplant Ethiopians with Italian settlers, but he was never able to realize his grandiose plans. Instead, Ethiopia became yet another sinkhole for precious Italian capital that he could have invested in modernization of his military or industrial plant.

Similarly, he maintained an army of up to 50,000 troops in Spain for almost three years, and sent billions of lira in precious military supplies to Franco. This continuing commitment not only consumed enormous quantities of small arms ammunition, creating chronic shortages in the *Regio Esercito*, it squandered Italy's entire budget surplus, and Mussolini would be able to recoup virtually none of his vast expenditure before his planned conflict with France and Britain. Nor did Franco prove as tractable an ally as the Duce had hoped. Far from a servile quasi-fascist military ally against France, Franco turned his gaze toward reconstruction of Spain and continued destruction of his domestic foes rather than involving himself in Mussolini's or Hitler's wars. Mussolini's dubious battles from 1935 to 1939 prevented him from preparing for the greater war that he eventually planned to fight.

Nevertheless, Mussolini did understand that his dreams of an African empire would require allies; Italy's putative eight million bayonets did not have the power to defeat France alone, never mind France supported by Great Britain. In 1936, in the aftermath of the Ethiopian war, Mussolini began to recruit possible partners in Europe. His initial approaches to Germany essentially traded Austrian independence for possible German support in the event of some kind of British attack during the sanctions period. Their combined though initially sporadic intervention in the Spanish Civil War, where Italian and German officials began a tight co-operation on military and technical matters, began a process of bringing the two regimes closer together. Mussolini's relations with his Axis partner were not always entirely placid, but the relationship flourished, in spite of Hitler's cavalier treatment of Mussolini during the Anschluss, the occupation of Prague, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the invasion of Poland a full three years before Mussolini claimed Italy would be ready for war. Simply put, the Duce became increasingly dependent on his German partner in order to establish the conditions necessary to establish a new Fascist empire. Similarly, he tried to recruit the seemingly virile Japanese empire to help to cow Britain into abandoning its sometime French ally. That plan did not work precisely because Mussolini insisted that an Italo-German-Japanese alliance would have to be directed primarily against Great Britain. His pursuit of allies to fight by his side in a future war with France and later with Britain means that the De Felice school's arguments regarding equidistance and the *peso determinante* have little credence. Mussolini did want a temporary accord with Great Britain, but only in order to encourage British leaders to sever their ties to France. He had no intention of

fulfilling his own commitments, nor did he intend to arrange a permanent peace with pluto-democratic Britain. His short-term arrangements would allow Mussolini to wage war against one enemy at time, but there was no genuine comity of interest between Fascist Italy and democratic Great Britain.

Ultimately, the Duce's machinations led him down an ill-fated path. The skill of the German *Wehrmacht* could not save Italy from the industrial might of the Western allies, fuelled by precisely the capitalist, democratic means of production against which Mussolini had railed. And although in retrospect we know that Mussolini signally failed to prepare to fight the Second World War, that failure does not mean that the Duce did not want war. On the contrary, his *mentalité* drove him toward successive military confrontations, battles that bled Italy of the resources necessary to meet his eventual goals. Mussolini's irrational nature caused Italy's disastrous defeat, demonstrating the bankruptcy of his *mentalité*.

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