

The Historiography of Fascist Foreign Policy

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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF FASCIST FOREIGN POLICY*

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ABSTRACT. *This article analyses how, in the last half-century, scholars have differed over the nature of Italian foreign policy under the fascist regime. It examines the debate between orthodox and revisionist historians over Mussolini's foreign policy in general, and also over three specific areas of Italian policy in the interwar years: Franco-Italian relations, Italian participation in the Spanish Civil War, and the alliance with Nazi Germany. The author concludes that much of the debate has arisen because of conceptual befuddlement; writers have been primarily concerned with questions of coherence and continuity, and not with understanding Italian foreign relations. Historians have also disagreed over whether Mussolini had a 'programme', but a closer look shows that many of them were engaging in a semantic debate, and did not differ over the nature of fascist policy.*

No aspect of interwar Italian history has received more attention than fascist foreign policy. The first historians to study the question were Mussolini's opponents – most notably Gaetano Salvemini – who wrote polemics condemning everything that pertained to fascism.¹ These scholars not only criticized Mussolini's conduct of foreign affairs as ineffective and immoral, they also refused to accept the existence of any coherent policy. In their view, Italy's foreign relations under Mussolini consisted only of stealing headlines to satisfy the domestic audience. The interpretation of fascist foreign policy drastically changed with the opening of the Italian archives and with the publication, beginning in 1953, of the volumes of *I documenti diplomatici italiani* dealing with the fascist period. By the end of the 1980s the Italian foreign ministry had published more than 17,000 pages of documents covering the periods from October 1922 to March 1934, and from May 1939 to February 1943. Spurred by the availability of sources, many historians published reassessments of the Salvemini interpretation. Virtually all works written by Italians and Americans since 1953 have shown that Mussolini had a defined policy in foreign affairs.

This consensus did not extend to the British Isles. Some of the most respected historians in the English-speaking world, including A. J. P. Taylor and Denis Mack Smith, insisted that Mussolini improvised his foreign policy from day to day, intending

* The author is grateful to Professor George Urbaniak for advice and criticism.

¹ Of the histories of the fascist period written by Mussolini's enemies in the post-war period, the most important are: Gaetano Salvemini, *Mussolini diplomatico*, revised edition (Bari, 1952); Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II* (London, 1953); Federico Chabod, *A history of Italian fascism* (London, 1963); Luigi Salvatorelli and Giovanni Mira, *Storia del fascismo: L'Italia dal 1919 al 1945* (Rome, 1952); Luigi Salvatorelli and Giovanni Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel periodo fascista* (Turin, 1956).

it only to serve propaganda purposes. According to Mack Smith, the Duce was so skilled in propaganda that he was able to make the church, the monarchy, the fascist party, and the intellectual and business elites accept participation in the Second World War. This dated interpretation, however, ignored the mountain of revealing monographs that appeared on the topic in the last thirty years. Italy's difficult position as a great power lacking greatness gave fascist foreign policy a neurotic tone and forced Mussolini to resort to bluster to ensure that the other powers did not ignore Italy. The literature of the 1960s and 1970s convincingly showed that, in spite of Mussolini's opportunism and often contradictory rhetoric, he pursued a consistent policy in international affairs.

Once most scholars accepted the existence of a coherent fascist foreign policy, they began the age-old debate over continuity. Many historians asked whether Mussolini's policy of the 1920s continued into the next decade. The revisionists believed that he altered course in the early 1930s, but they could not agree if the effects of the great depression or the stagnation of the fascist regime caused this change. The more adventuresome historians also suggested a continuity between Mussolini's foreign policy and that of the previous liberal regime.

Regardless of whether they add to one's understanding, these themes of coherence and continuity dominate the literature on fascist Italy's foreign relations and are, therefore, central to any study of the historiography. Coherence – as a concept in explaining Mussolini's policy – first appeared in the early orthodox interpretations, published before the opening of the Italian archives. The discussion continued after documentary evidence became available. The revisionists found a consistency in Mussolini's policies which the later orthodox historians rejected, insisting that the documents did not prove coherence. Similarly, continuity and discontinuity attracted much attention, both in contrasting the 1920s with the 1930s, and in comparing the Duce's government to previous regimes. A study of the literature also must look at how historians have explored the most important cases in Italian foreign relations, particularly the quarrel with France, participation in the Spanish civil war and the alliance with Nazi Germany. Only by an examination of both broader questions and specific facets of fascist foreign policy can one understand the state of the historiography on this subject.

I

Salvemini's *Prelude to World War II* appeared in 1953, the same year as the publication of the first volume of documents dealing with the fascist period. Salvemini published an early version of the book under the title *Mussolini diplomatico* in 1932 while in self-imposed exile in the United States. When Mussolini came to power in 1922, Salvemini was a social democrat and Italy's leading historian. As the Duce extended his control over the Italian state, Salvemini became active in the Florentine resistance movement, and was a founder of the anti-fascist paper *Non Mollare!* (Never Yield!). After many threats and much harassment, Salvemini left Italy in 1925. He continued to oppose Mussolini in France and the United States, founding the resistance organization *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Liberty) and writing polemics aimed at convincing the West to oppose Mussolini.² Salvemini saw Mussolini as 'always an irresponsible improviser, half madman, half criminal, gifted only – but to the highest degree – in the

² Gaetano Salvemini, *The fascist dictatorship in Italy* (New York, 1927); Gaetano Salvemini, *Under the axe of fascism* (London, 1936); Gaetano Salvemini, *Italian fascism* (London, 1938).

arts of “propaganda” and mystification’.³ According to Salvemini, the dictator conducted Italy’s foreign affairs with a view to its impact in the daily press and was not concerned with long-term policy implications.

That Salvemini’s interpretation prevailed from 1932 until the mid-1960s speaks not to the validity of the interpretation, but to Salvemini’s stature as an historian and a public figure in Italy. In post-war Italy’s highly politicized society, Salvemini played a role that no scholar could in North America, his character winning him the respect of the Italian political and intellectual elite. One of his students dedicated a book to him saying,

Remembering him here briefly in these words is the minimum tribute that I can make to the most venerated teacher. Speaking of Salvemini is not easy: words remain inadequate as much for those who knew him closely as for those who did not have this incomparable experience; beyond all rhetoric and bias, he remains an example, rare – even unique – in the history of our universities, and extremely rare in the political culture of our country.⁴

Another of his disciples wrote simply, ‘Salvemini has a greatness that will not die’.⁵

No one effectively challenged the Salveminian interpretation in the 1940s or the 1950s. The British journalist Elizabeth Wiskemann, in her 1949 study of the *Rome-Berlin Axis*, sounded much like Salvemini: ‘For many years Mussolini had rolled his eyes and brandished his chin, he had shouted cruel phrases with Romagnol violence, but his goal had never become clear to him’.⁶ Similarly, ‘The early diplomacy of Italian fascism, 1922–1932’ by the American historian Stuart Hughes recognized no pattern in the Duce’s diplomacy. In the 1920s Mussolini could have pursued the revision of the Versailles settlement, but, according to Hughes, he was ‘feeling his way’ and not ready to exploit revisionism ‘as a fully consistent policy’.⁷ Hughes relied heavily on two sources: Salvemini’s *Prelude to World War II* and the memoirs of the Italian diplomat Raffaele Guariglia. Hughes’s work, like Wiskemann’s, suffered significantly from the lack of access to Italian documents. Later historians, using ample documentation, would show that, while Mussolini was feeling his way in the early twenties, by 1926 he was pursuing revisionism more consistently than Hughes believed.⁸

The first of the historians to use the official sources did not fully break with the Salveminian interpretation. In 1960 Ennio Di Nolfo, a professor at the University of Florence, published a study of Mussolini’s policy from 1922 to 1933, though he only had access to documents for the period up to 1925. Di Nolfo accepted the interpretation that ‘For Mussolini, the Palazzo Chigi was not so much a foreign office, as a branch of the ministry of propaganda’⁹ and that ‘Mussolini was a master of propaganda’.¹⁰ Although he accepted Salvemini’s argument for a *Primat der Innenpolitik*, Di Nolfo argued that this did not mean that Mussolini’s policy was incoherent. Indeed, Di Nolfo believed that, in his subordination of foreign to domestic policy, Mussolini showed ‘a clear and early awareness of his objectives’.¹¹ The main flaw with Di Nolfo’s work was his lack of official sources for the period from 1926 to 1933. The year 1926 was crucial:

³ Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II*, p. 10.

⁴ Gianni Azzi, *Modena 1859–1898: Condizioni economiche, sociali, politiche* (Modena, 1969), p. 17.

⁵ Ernesto Sestan, ‘Salvemini storico e maestro’, *Rivista storica italiana*, LXX (1958), 43.

⁶ Elizabeth Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis: A history of the relations between Hitler and Mussolini* (London, 1949), p. 339.

⁷ H. Stuart Hughes, ‘The early diplomacy of Italian fascism, 1922–1932’, in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., *The diplomats 1919–1939*, 1 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1953), 224.

⁸ Alan Cassels, *Mussolini’s early diplomacy* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1970).

⁹ Ennio Di Nolfo, *Mussolini e la politica estera italiana* (Padua, 1960), p. 45.

¹⁰ Di Nolfo, p. 100.

¹¹ Di Nolfo, p. 45.

Mussolini identified it as his 'Napoleonic Year',¹² and a later historian – with documentation for the entire decade – would argue that in 1926 the Duce's 'foreign policy really began to take shape.'¹³

II

Unlike Di Nolfo, the revisionist historians – most notably Giorgio Rumi, Giampiero Carocci, Alan Cassels, Esmonde Robertson, MacGregor Knox and Renzo De Felice – rejected outright the Salvemian interpretation. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, they identified revisionism and imperialism as the root of a fascist foreign policy.¹⁴ Although differences existed among them, the revisionists all accepted that Mussolini had defined foreign policy aims which he pursued with some consistency, in spite of his wild rhetoric. As documentary evidence became available, the revisionists slowly created the picture of an intelligible policy.

In his 1965 article on fascist revisionism and colonial expansion, Giorgio Rumi, a professor at the State University of Milan, claimed that Mussolini had defined, coherent foreign policy goals from as early as 1925:

The way was set: criticism of the order established by the diplomats at Versailles, an affirmation of the 'rights' of Italians in the Adriatic, and then of the necessity for expansion in the Mediterranean and in Africa.¹⁵

Rumi continued this theme in his book *Alle origini della politica estera fascista*, which traced the origins of fascist foreign policy from 1918 to 1923.¹⁶ Rumi accepted that Mussolini did not come to power with a programme in foreign affairs, but nonetheless insisted that the Duce defined his revisionist and imperialist goals before he assumed office. Mussolini's newspaper, *Popolo d'Italia*, served as Rumi's major source, and this limited the scope of his work. Although he could define Mussolini's views before coming to power, Rumi was unable to discuss whether the dictator put his ideas into action when he took office.

Rumi's work further suffered from his ambiguous terminology, a problem shared by many of the historians of fascist foreign policy.¹⁷ He claimed that Mussolini did not have a programme, but insisted that he had specific goals. Rumi was not explicit in what he meant by 'programme', though obviously he thought that it was more than a set of aims, perhaps a defined blueprint with a clear timetable. No Italian leader, however – and few statesmen anywhere – could realistically follow such a plan. Mussolini could pursue certain ends, but he also had to respond to the international and internal situation. The stubborn attachment to an agenda would lead quickly to disaster. To argue, therefore, that Mussolini did not come to power with a programme is to say virtually nothing. Some of the disagreement between the orthodox and revisionist schools arose because of the vague terms – such as 'plan' and 'programme' – which historians use with little explanation.

¹² Cited in Cassels, *Mussolini's early diplomacy*, p. 390.

¹³ Cassels, *Mussolini's early diplomacy*, p. 401.

¹⁴ In foreign affairs, revisionism was the policy of seeking to alter the Versailles settlement. In historiography, the revisionists were those scholars who challenged the orthodox interpretation.

¹⁵ Giorgio Rumi, "'Revisionismo" fascista ed espansione coloniale', *Il movimento di liberazione in Italia*, xvii (1965), 45.

¹⁶ Giorgio Rumi, *Alle origini della politica estera fascista* (Bari, 1968).

¹⁷ Ian Kershaw had a similar criticism of the literature on Nazi foreign policy. Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: problems and perspectives of interpretation* (London, 1985), pp. 121–2.

Giampiero Carocci's study of the period from 1925 to 1928, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista*, appeared in 1969. A Marxist, Carocci stressed Mussolini's imperialism and his desire to expand in Africa and in Europe. According to Carocci, Mussolini's African policy merely continued liberal Italy's colonialism. Fascist foreign policy, however, broke with tradition in its plans for Europe:

Mussolini's diplomatic actions aimed to create in the Danube and Balkans 'hunting reserves' [closed markets], that is, he wished to dominate unilaterally these areas of Europe, refusing to collaborate with the other powers.¹⁸

Alan Cassels covered much of the same ground, though more impressively, in his study of *Mussolini's early diplomacy*. Cassels, a British historian at McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada, competently argued that the aggressive Mussolini of the 1930s existed in the earlier decade. Domestic constraints, however, prevented the Duce from pursuing a dynamic course in foreign affairs. The experienced hands at the foreign office held Mussolini in check during his first few months in office. Freeing himself of their control, he pursued a bold policy from mid-1923 to mid-1924, characterized by the Italian attack on Corfu and the annexation of Fiume. This active period ground to a halt with the assassination of the socialist leader, Giacomo Matteotti, in June 1924. Mussolini diverted all his attention to the affair to assure the survival of his government. Having established the dictatorship in early 1925, Mussolini was free to carry out policy without the domestic limitations that had existed. Cassels made a strong arguments, which suffered only slightly from his tendency to exaggerate the differences between Mussolini and the career diplomats – which justified the argument that the Palazzo Chigi prevented Mussolini from pursuing his preferred course in foreign affairs – and from his lack of direct evidence linking the Matteotti affair to the passive nature of Italy's foreign relations in late 1924.

Another effective look at Mussolini's foreign policy was Esmonde Robertson's 1977 examination of the theme of Italian imperialism from 1932 to 1936. A professor at the London School of Economics, Robertson found, 'despite apparent contradictions, some system' in fascist imperialism.¹⁹ He explained Mussolini's shifts from friendship to hostility towards the western powers:

If France and Britain refused to cede, or allow Italy to share in control over, important strategic points in the Mediterranean, an alternative was open to him: disruption of French or British rule in the territories they governed.²⁰

Robertson argued that international events largely determined fascist foreign policy. Nevertheless, he could have devoted more space to domestic affairs and Mussolini's personality, which played an important role – even if Robertson thought it secondary – in Italy's foreign relations.

One finds more attention to internal affairs in the work of the American historian MacGregor Knox. In *Mussolini unleashed, 1939–1941: politics and strategy in fascist Italy's last war*, Knox argued,

Mussolini had a genuine foreign policy program: the creation of an Italian *spazio vitale* [living space] in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Success would have raised Italy at last to the status of a true great power, a goal Mussolini shared with the Italian establishment, although the latter, like the generals and admirals, lacked his taste for risk.²¹

¹⁸ Giampiero Carocci, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista* (Bari, 1969), pp. 13–14.

¹⁹ Esmonde M. Robertson, *Mussolini as empire-builder: Europe and Africa, 1932–36* (London, 1977), p. 17.

²⁰ Robertson, p. 17.

²¹ MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini unleashed, 1939–1941: politics and strategy in fascist Italy's last war* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 286.

Domestic interests – especially the military and the king – restrained Mussolini, who rid himself of their influence only with the German victories in the west. In Knox's work, however, the problem of terminology again appeared. Rumi had argued that Mussolini had no plan, only the defined goal of 'expansion in the Mediterranean and in Africa'.²² Knox, on the other hand, insisted that this aim in itself constituted the Duce's programme. Rumi and Knox, therefore, did not differ over the nature of Mussolini's policy, only over the question of whether his goals constituted a 'programme'. This dispute was clearly more a semantic debate than an historical one.

Although each of the revisionists effectively chipped away at the orthodox school throughout the 1960s and 1970s, none came close to Salvemini's stature, except Renzo De Felice, a professor at the University of Rome. Beginning with the 1965 publication of the first volume of his massive biography of Mussolini, De Felice established a reputation as the father of Italian contemporary history. This first volume in a projected eight-volume work covered Mussolini's life until 1920, with little space devoted to foreign policy; De Felice noted only that Mussolini thought of foreign problems mainly in relation to the domestic situation.²³ Similarly, the next volume, *Mussolini il fascista I*, had little to say about Italian foreign relations. De Felice asserted, however, that Mussolini's policy largely followed the tradition of the Italian foreign office.²⁴ *Mussolini il fascista II*, which appeared in 1968, paid significantly more attention to international affairs. De Felice attributed Mussolini's moderate policy of the 1920s to the lull in international activity, to his subordination of foreign policy to domestic – especially economic – policy, and to the lack of support among Italian economic interests for an aggressive policy.²⁵

De Felice reaffirmed this view in the 1974 *Mussolini il duce I*:

until about 1929 foreign policy was in Mussolini's strategy subordinated to domestic and financial policy. This was because of...the need for Mussolini – before dedicating himself to a more demanding and dynamic foreign policy – to resolve internal problems, to reinforce his power and to supply the necessary institutions and to secure the greatest possible stability and the greatest possible consensus.²⁶

De Felice insisted that Mussolini succeeded in forging this consensus and that by 1935 he enjoyed the support of most Italians. This assertion sparked an acrimonious debate in Italy, as bitter as the Fischer/Ritter controversy in Germany and the Taylor/Trevor-Roper dispute in Britain. The leftist press attacked De Felice, accusing him of being pro-fascist. De Felice and the American historian Michael Ledeen further heightened the controversy with their interview on fascism, or *Intervista sul fascismo*, which was published the following year. This sparked a reaction from some historians in the English-speaking world who thought De Felice was erecting a 'monument for the Duce'.²⁷

This debate over the consensus theory overshadowed De Felice's views of Mussolini's foreign policy, which did not differ radically from the other revisionists writing at the time. Like them, he disagreed with Salvemini's conclusions:

²² Rumi, "'Revisionismo" fascista', p. 45.

²³ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario* (Turin, 1965).

²⁴ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista: I. La conquista del potere* (Turin, 1966), p. 559.

²⁵ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista: II. L'Organizzazione dello Stato fascista* (Turin, 1968), p. 439.

²⁶ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: I. Gli anni del consenso* (Turin, 1974), p. 323.

²⁷ Denis Mack Smith, 'A monument for the Duce', *Times Literary Supplement* (October 31, 1975), p. 1278.

Today, with the diplomatic documents that have come to light and after the new interpretations that they have allowed, a similar judgement is no longer acceptable. It is indisputable that Italian foreign policy in these years was essentially a function of Mussolini's domestic policy... It is difficult to argue, however... that Mussolini's policy was therefore improvised and incoherent.²⁸

De Felice found that Mussolini's foreign policy, both in the 1920s and 1930s, 'excluded the possibility of a European war to concentrate on local successes in the name of revisionism'.²⁹ By 1981 the controversy had died down and De Felice's *Mussolini il duce II* sparked little debate, in spite of De Felice's continued insistence that Mussolini enjoyed a large consensus in Italian society.³⁰ Similarly, the two volumes of *Mussolini l'alleato I*, which appeared in 1990, did not provoke fierce opposition in Italy or elsewhere, though De Felice was now more sympathetic to Mussolini than he had ever been in the past.³¹

III

Despite the effective destruction of Salvemini's thesis by some of the top historians inside and outside Italy, the interpretation lived on in the works of some British historians. In his contentious *Origins of the Second World War* the always brilliant and sometimes perverse A. J. P. Taylor refused to acknowledge any consistency in anything fascist:

Everything about Fascism was a fraud. The social peril from which it saved Italy was a fraud; the revolution by which it seized power was a fraud; the ability and policy of Mussolini were fraudulent. Fascist rule was corrupt, incompetent, empty; Mussolini himself a vain, blundering boaster without either ideas or aims.³²

Similarly, in his biography of Mussolini, Ivone Kirkpatrick accepted the main lines of the Salvemini interpretation:

If Mussolini was ill-informed, uncertain, and vacillating at home, he was equally so in his conduct of foreign affairs. Here he was torn in every direction by ingrained prejudice, ignorance, passing predilections, ambition, and above all by fear... Mussolini allowed himself to drift in any and every direction; and his changes of course were often as unpredictable as the weather.³³

Neither of these interpretations was surprising. Taylor's book did not primarily focus on Italy and, in spite of a bibliographic mention, he probably did not look at the Italian diplomatic documents. Similarly, Kirkpatrick based his work largely on his experience in the 1930s as a diplomat in Rome and Berlin, and not on the then unavailable official Italian sources.

The strongest opponent of the revisionist school, the Oxford historian Denis Mack Smith, showed a solid command of the Italian documents. His 1976 study of fascist foreign policy, *Mussolini's Roman empire*, concentrated entirely on the war-mongering Duce. Mack Smith refused to accept any coherence in the Duce's policy and, indeed, sounded as Salvemini as the great *Maestro* himself:

[Mussolini] had got used to living in a cloud-cuckoo-land, where words and not facts mattered... It was a world where a skilled publicist could fool most of the people fairly easily, where decisions could be reversed from day to day without anyone minding or even noticing, and where in any case decisions were designed to impress rather than to be put into effect. It was an

²⁸ De Felice, *Il duce I*, p. 337.

²⁹ De Felice, *Il duce I*, p. 338.

³⁰ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: II. Lo Stato totalitario* (Turin, 1981).

³¹ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato: I. L'Italia in guerra*, two volumes (Turin, 1990).

³² A. J. P. Taylor, *The origins of the Second World War* (London, 1962), p. 56.

³³ Ivone Kirkpatrick, *Mussolini: a study in power* (New York, 1964), pp. 165-6.

essentially unserious world, where 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.³⁴

Mack Smith continued this interpretation in his 1981 biography of Mussolini, in which he went to extremes to refute De Felice.³⁵ Although honoured as one of the few non-Italian historians whose works are translated and widely read in Italy, Mack Smith's books on Mussolini remain superficial, seldom moving beyond a one-dimensional portrait of the subject. In his review of *Mussolini's Roman empire*, even Taylor recognized the limitations of Mack Smith's analysis, saying that the Duce 'was not as foolish or incompetent as Mack Smith makes him out'.³⁶ One finds difficulty in disagreeing with Knox's assertion that Mack Smith – like Salvemini before him – 'exchanged analysis for sarcasm'.³⁷

To call Mussolini an opportunist with a flighty temperament did not prove that he lacked long-term goals. He worked throughout his years in office to increase Italy's power on the international scene. Like his predecessors, he wanted Italy to have the strength of France or Britain, with African colonies and a European sphere of influence. Mussolini would accomplish his goals by pursuing revisionism when it supported Italian interests and Italy's status as a great power. The Duce signed the anti-revisionist Locarno Treaty, largely because he, like most Italian nationalists, worried about Italy's status. Exclusion from this concert of great powers would be a blow to Italian pride. Moreover, Locarno's preservation of the Franco-Belgian-German boundary did not prevent Italian expansion. Mussolini accepted the *Anschluss* in 1938 – after having previously opposed it – because the wars in Ethiopia and Spain had weakened Italy and Mussolini believed that he was no longer able to contain Hitler's ambitions in Austria. Another apparent sign of inconsistency was Mussolini's early recognition of the Soviet Union. Mussolini's foreign policy, however, like that of the other western states, was not ideologically driven in this case. Mussolini showed no more inconsistency than the rest of the capitalist world which accorded Stalin recognition in the interwar period. None of this is to say that Mussolini's foreign policy was effective or in Italy's best interests. The utter desolation of Italy during the war, its occupation by both Germany and the Allies testified to the inadequacy of the Duce's foreign policy. The first aim of any country's foreign policy is self-preservation, and in this Mussolini failed miserably.

IV

The revisionist historians agreed that Mussolini's dynamic foreign policy had some coherence, though they could not agree if this policy existed from the beginning or if it developed in the early 1930s. Many believed that Mussolini's aggressive policy began with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and that it was an attempt to distract attention from Italy's economic problems.³⁸ For example, George Baer's 1967 book,

³⁴ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman empire* (London, 1976), p. 252; first published as *Le guerre del Duce* (Bari, 1976).

³⁵ Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London, 1981).

³⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, 'The great pretender,' *New York Review of Books* (August 5, 1976), p. 4.

³⁷ Knox, p. 2. One wonders if Mack Smith has based his argument on an *a priori* use of the evidence. His views were first advanced in an article in 1959 and have not significantly changed since then, in spite of the opening of the archives and a revolution in the historiography. Denis Mack Smith, 'Mussolini, artist in propaganda: the downfall of fascism', *History Today*, ix (April 1959).

³⁸ Salvemini – shortly after the war began – was the first to argue that Mussolini invaded Ethiopia because of the domestic economic situation: '[T]he war was willed primarily by

The coming of the Italian-Ethiopian war, argued that the depression fundamentally changed fascist foreign policy:

In 1934 Mussolini found himself faced with intensifying popular discontent, which called for release before it could become a threat to the dictatorship. The world economic crisis of the early 1930s hit Italy with great force.³⁹

Mussolini designed the war with Ethiopia as a 'safety valve for this mounting social and economic stress'.⁴⁰ This view gained support from Franco Catalano and from Italy's foremost military historian, Giorgio Rochat.⁴¹

The first explicit attack on the economic interpretation did not appear until 1974 in De Felice's biography of Mussolini. De Felice accepted that Mussolini's policy changed in the early 1930s, but did not think that economic factors caused this reorientation. He argued that the period immediately before the Abyssinian adventure represented that of the greatest consensus in Italian society, and therefore Mussolini had nothing to gain and everything to lose by embarking on an overseas adventure. De Felice argued that before 1929 Mussolini had not cared about foreign policy because of the need 'to reinforce his power... and to secure... the greatest possible consensus' for his regime.⁴² Once it became apparent, however, that his bid to reform Italian society had failed,

fascism attempted to become progressively more totalitarian and to reduce the period necessary for fascisticizing the masses to a minimum. In this attempt it turned to foreign policy. Foreign policy becomes increasingly the keystone of fascist policy beginning with the Ethiopian war.⁴³

In short, Mussolini used foreign policy to reinvigorate his flagging quest to create a fascist society.

This interpretation has won widespread acceptance. Even Alan Cassels, who argued for continuity in fascist foreign policy, later accepted that

By the mid-1930s whatever social reforming zeal Italian fascism had initially possessed was exhausted... In a sense, military imperialism supplanted social change as the *raison d'être* of Italian fascism.⁴⁴

Similarly, Esmonde Robertson has pointed to evidence that suggested 'that the economic crisis hit Italy first in 1932, and that recovery had started in 1934'.⁴⁵

Mussolini... because something had to be done to restore the prestige of the Fascist regime in Italy... [which had] steadily declined during the six years of world depression... The Ethiopian war was the way out of domestic stagnation.' The other orthodox historians did not agree. Kirkpatrick and Taylor saw the Ethiopian adventure as merely a continuation of the Duce's bid for propaganda successes. According to Kirkpatrick, 'Jealousy, aggravated by his natural egotism, drove him to attempt to match the German dictator and so to embark on a series of adventures'. Similarly, Taylor argued, 'he was merely intoxicated out of his senses by the militaristic blustering which he had started and in which Hitler was now outbidding him'. Mack Smith thought Mussolini was trapped by his own propaganda into believing that the conquest of Ethiopia would help solve Italian economic problems. Salvemini, *Under the axe of fascism*, pp. 390-1; Kirkpatrick, p. 192; Taylor, *Origins*, p. 88; Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p. 190.

³⁹ George W. Baer, *The coming of the Italian-Ethiopian war* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967), p. 31.

⁴⁰ Baer, *Coming*, p. 33.

⁴¹ Franco Catalano, *L'economia italiana di guerra* (Milan, 1969); Giorgio Rochat, *Militari e politici nelle preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia* (Milan, 1971).

⁴² De Felice, *Il duce I*, p. 323.

⁴³ Renzo De Felice, *Fascism: an informal introduction to its theory and practice*, with Michael A. Ledeen (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1976), p. 79.

⁴⁴ 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* (Winchester, Massachusetts, 1986), p. 80.

⁴⁵ Robertson, p. 123.

According to Robertson, an aggressive policy for Mussolini was not new in 1935; it was only in that year that he realized he could not pursue a dynamic policy in Europe:

After the collapse of the Four Power Pact...Mussolini became thoroughly disillusioned with Europe as an arena for the deployment of 'Fascist dynamism' on behalf of Italian greatness. To deflect the minds of Italians from unemployment and apathy, the regime needed some dazzling success overseas.⁴⁶

The debate over continuity also focused on another area: the differences between fascist foreign policy and that of the preceding liberal regime. One can find the first threads of the continuity argument in the works of Stuart Hughes and De Felice. Both argued that during Mussolini's first years in office his foreign policy differed little from that of the previous regimes. 'Aside from the one great cleavage over relations with Albania and Yugoslavia,' argued Hughes, 'none of the questions at issue between the Duce and his professional advisers was important enough really to change in one direction or the other the main course of Italian policy.'⁴⁷ De Felice made a similar argument in the second volume of his Mussolini biography:

Mussolini's foreign policy from 1922 to 1924, and even later – roughly to Locarno – was a policy of prestige, but largely in the manner, in the tradition of the Italian foreign office. In spite of what was feared by many in Italy and especially abroad, Mussolini substantially avoided every adventure.⁴⁸

Neither of these historians, however, would extend the analogy beyond 1925.

The only serious sustained attempt to show a continuity in Italian foreign policy before and after the March on Rome was Richard Bosworth's brilliant *Italy, the least of the Great Powers*.⁴⁹ Bosworth, an Australian historian, examined Italian foreign relations from unification to the First World War and saw the roots of several of Mussolini's adventures. In pre-fascist Italy Bosworth found an imperialism that led to the annexation of Libya, a long-standing bitter Italo-Greek feud, and a policy of *mare nostrum*; implicitly, he had discovered the precursors of the Corfu incident, the Ethiopian campaign, and Italian participation in the Spanish civil war. As Bosworth pointed out in a later article, 'what was different about the foreign policy of Liberal and Fascist Italy was not the aim, but the method (and even that only partly so).'⁵⁰ Bosworth even went so far as to compare Italy's entry into the Second World War with its entry into the Great War:

It is at least arguable that, whatever his rhetoric, Mussolini waited longer and displayed more scruples in 1940 than did Salandra and Sonnino in 1915. It is equally arguable that no imaginable Italian leader, who accepted the myths around which Italian society had been organized since the risorgimento, would not have entered a Great Power war at a time when it seemed plain that one side had won a total victory... By this interpretation, Italy's entry into the Second World War was not solely Mussolini's responsibility, but was instead the natural result of Italian history.⁵¹

In this passage Bosworth raised the problems of the myths in Italian foreign policy. Italy had the status of a great power, but, in the words of Alan Cassels, 'Italy was a major power by courtesy title only'.⁵² Italy simply did not have the military, political, economic, or natural resources to be in the same rank as Britain, France, Germany and

⁴⁶ Robertson, p. 93.

⁴⁷ Hughes, p. 229.

⁴⁸ De Felice, *Il fascista I*, p. 559.

⁴⁹ R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the least of the Great Powers: Italian foreign policy before the First World War* (London, 1979).

⁵⁰ Richard Bosworth, 'Italian foreign policy and its historiography', in Richard Bosworth and Gino Rizzo, eds., *Altro Polo: intellectuals and their ideas in contemporary Italy* (Sydney, 1983), p. 73.

⁵¹ Bosworth, 'Italian foreign policy', pp. 78–9.

⁵² Alan Cassels, *Fascist Italy* (New York, 1968), p. 73.

the United States. From the time of the *risorgimento*, however, the rhetoric of Italian leaders thrust Italy into a much greater role in world affairs than it could bear. The poet of Italian unification, Giuseppe Mazzini, wrote that an independent Italy would be the hub of the new world order and would be – as it had been 2000 years before – the centre of world civilization:

Although many cities have perished, and all in turn may pass away from this earth, Rome, by the design of Providence, and as the People have divined, is the *Eternal City*, to which is entrusted the mission of disseminating the Word that will unite the world. Her life will be reproduced on an ever widening scale.⁵³

These exaggerated expectations – which all leaders of united Italy shared to some degree – led to the neurotic tone in Italian foreign policy. The country faced failure time and again: Italians could not achieve unification without foreign help, they missed out on the grab for colonies, and at the peace table the Allies overlooked promises made to Italy during the Great War. With each blow to their prestige, Italian leaders tried harder to make an impact on the international stage, though their resources could not support their ambitions. Thus Italy's foreign policy took on a character different from that of any other European power.

The Italian sense of aggrieved nationalism – which reached its peak in the early twenties – and Mussolini's view of the world contributed to the perceived inconsistencies in policy. The Duce promised to give Italians the greatness they thought they would achieve with unification, but which the liberals could not deliver, but even he could not live up to the excessive rhetoric that abounded during the *risorgimento*. As a social Darwinist Mussolini also believed that powerful states would dominate the international scene. But how did one who believed in 'survival of the fittest' act when he was not the fittest? Mussolini lived in a similar world to that of his predecessors, with the same – though greater – problems and ambitions. Because of his *Weltanschauung*, he relied more on violence and intimidation, but at the most basic level his goal remained the same: to make Italy a great power like Britain or France. Towards this end, Italy needed colonies and a European sphere of influence. Without the means to achieve this goal, however, Mussolini often relied on bluff. He would charge forward, hoping to intimidate opposition; sometimes he succeeded, but often he had no choice but to retreat. In any case, as a skilled politician, he claimed victory. This seemingly erratic behaviour has puzzled historians.

V

One can see the difficulty in explaining Italian policy in the classic case of Italy's relations with France. Though deserving an in-depth study, historians have largely ignored this area. Only two books have appeared on interwar Franco-Italian relations: Jean Baptiste Duroselle and Enrico Serra have edited a collection of articles on some narrow facets of the Franco-Italian relationship, while William Shorrock has ably examined France's policy towards Italy.⁵⁴ No one, however, has tried a complete assessment of fascist policy towards Italy's most powerful neighbour.

The explanations of Mussolini's French policy found in the general studies have been very unsatisfying. Gaetano Salvemini attributed Mussolini's anti-French policy to his

⁵³ Gaetano Salvemini, *Mazzini* (London, 1956), p. 83.

⁵⁴ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and Enrico Serra, eds., *Italia e Francia dal 1919 al 1939* (Milan, 1981); William Shorrock, *From ally to enemy: the enigma of fascist Italy in French diplomacy 1920–1940* (Kent, Ohio, 1988).

need to distract attention from the domestic scene, pointing out that criticism of France began when Mussolini formed his dictatorship:

It was not possible to uproot the powers of the Italian parliament and the personal rights and political liberties of Italian citizens without having recourse to some 'scalp dance', intended to paralyse the opposition. In emergencies of this kind the handiest expedient is the staging of demonstrations against some 'foreigner'.⁵⁵

There exist, however, serious problems with this interpretation. For example, it is not clear why Mussolini chose to alienate France, instead of a less formidable opponent, especially when he would need French acquiescence for his plans in Africa. Moreover, the anti-French campaign did not preoccupy Italians, at least not enough to hide Mussolini's dismantling of Italian democracy.

Salvemini, however, had other explanations as well. He believed that Mussolini held a grudge against the French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, with whom he had a private meeting at Locarno. According to Salvemini, Mussolini bristled when Briand would not believe his promise to restore Italian democracy and refused to come to an arrangement over Ethiopia.⁵⁶ Salvemini, however, had no proof that Mussolini's anti-French policy resulted from this personal encounter. Moreover, by acknowledging that in 1925 Mussolini actively pursued an agreement with France over Ethiopia, Salvemini weakened his own argument that Mussolini had no long-range goals.

The other interpretations also do little to illuminate Franco-Italian relations. Cassels saw Mussolini as a Francophobe who sought 'excuses to pick a quarrel'.⁵⁷ De Felice, on the other hand, stated that Mussolini actually wanted friendship and not animosity with Italy's Latin sister:

To understand Mussolini's revisionism and, more generally, all of the Duce's policies in this period one must begin with the premise that may seem absurd and paradoxical, but is the key to his political strategy until the middle of the 1930s and, to some degree, even later: Mussolini pursued an anti-French policy to reach an accord with France.⁵⁸

De Felice, however, makes this assertion with little supporting evidence. A more convincing explanation for the anti-French policy set Franco-Italian relations in a general European context. Although accepting Salvemini's scapegoat theory, Ennio Di Nolfo has also suggested that Mussolini recklessly played off the European powers against one another: 'For some time he looked to continue the policy of oscillation between the opposing positions: from time to time he favoured Great Britain, Germany, the Soviet Union, and even France.'⁵⁹ Historians have also used this interpretation extensively to explain Italian policy towards Germany in the 1930s; however, with France, they have not made the argument in any depth. Until they know more about fascist Italy's relations with France, scholars lack an important part of the picture of interwar Italian foreign policy.

VI

Happily, the area of Italian participation in the Spanish civil war has received substantially more attention from historians. The early interpretation stressed the importance of ideology in Mussolini's decision. The fascist propagandist, Luigi Villari, wrote in his apologetic *Italian foreign policy under Mussolini*,

⁵⁵ Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II*, p. 72.

⁵⁶ Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II*, p. 77.

⁵⁸ De Felice, *Il duce I*, pp. 357–8.

⁵⁷ Cassels, *Fascist Italy*, pp. 80–1.

⁵⁹ Di Nolfo, p. 308.

It was evident that world Communism, assisted by Socialists, Freemasons and other seditious organizations, was preparing a gigantic mobilization to ensure Red predominance in Spain. For this reason Mussolini finally decided to lend Italian assistance to the Spanish Nationalist cause.⁶⁰

The more reputable and judicious Alexander De Grand recently agreed with the main line of this interpretation:

The Italian decision to intervene was... motivated by hostility toward the French and the Spanish Popular Front governments, by vague plans for expanded influence in the Mediterranean region, and by fears of Soviet penetration in Spain.⁶¹

Some historians, however, convincingly interpreted Mussolini's Spanish policy as strategic rather than ideological. Alan Cassels, for example, thought that Mussolini wanted a puppet government in Madrid as part of his battle with France for control of the Mediterranean: 'This would be a mortal blow to France in the western Mediterranean, which would, thus, fall under Italian hegemony.'⁶² Pietro Pastorelli agreed with this assessment, saying that Mussolini sought Spain as an ally against France and wanted a military base on the Balearic Islands to block communications between France and northern Africa.⁶³

A consensus formed around this interpretation with the publication in 1975 of John Coverdale's brilliant study of *Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War*. Coverdale, educated at Rome, Navarre and Wisconsin, used a wide range of sources, showing that Mussolini's decision resulted neither from public opinion nor from a desire to spread fascism abroad. Coverdale began his research with the conviction 'that internal public opinion must have been an important factor in shaping Italian policy toward Spain'.⁶⁴ He combed the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, trying to find evidence to support this thesis and failed. He concluded that Italian interests in the Western Mediterranean – not propaganda aims – determined Mussolini's policy. Ideology had an impact on the Duce's decision, but only in a negative way: 'Mussolini was more concerned about preventing a successful revolution in Spain than he was about promoting Fascism there.'⁶⁵ According to Coverdale, Mussolini feared that the spread of communism to Spain would threaten his regime in Italy, though this played only a secondary role in the Italian decision. Coverdale insisted that liberal Italy's policy towards Spain continued under the fascist regime:

Italian intervention in Spain was motivated largely by traditional foreign policy considerations relating to Italy's political and military position in Europe and the Mediterranean.⁶⁶

The situation was open-ended, and though he had no set goals, 'Mussolini was interested in exploiting it for whatever advantages it might offer'.⁶⁷ 'As a maximum goal, Mussolini may have set his sights on gaining control of the western Mediterranean by establishing Italian naval bases in the Balearic Islands and obtaining the active support and collaboration of a friendly Spain.'⁶⁸ Coverdale's interpretation immediately gained widespread acceptance among scholars. Even Mack Smith, who found little

⁶⁰ Luigi Villari, *Italian foreign policy under Mussolini* (London, 1959), p. 167.

⁶¹ Alexander De Grand, *Italian fascism: its origins & development* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1989), p. 119.

⁶² Cassels, *Fascist Italy*, p. 88.

⁶³ Pietro Pastorelli, 'La politica estera della fine del conflitto etiopico alla seconda guerra mondiale', in Renzo De Felice, ed., *L'Italia fra tedeschi e alleati: La politica estera fascista e la seconda guerra mondiale* (Bologna, 1973), p. 105.

⁶⁴ John F. Coverdale, *Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1975), p. 15.

⁶⁵ Coverdale, p. 390.

⁶⁶ Coverdale, pp. 388–9.

⁶⁷ Coverdale, p. 77.

⁶⁸ Coverdale, p. 76.

common ground with the revisionists, asserted that strategic reasons outweighed ideology in Mussolini's mind:

Later, when Russia sent military help to the Spanish government, it was possible for the Fascists to generate more enthusiasm by calling the war a crusade against bolshevism, but in fact they decided to intervene long before bolshevism had been any danger: their original motive was rather to assert the authority of fascism and of Italy through the Mediterranean.⁶⁹

De Felice, who seldom accepted another historian's interpretation without qualification, closely followed Coverdale's argument, footnoting the American historian nineteen times. Coverdale had successfully struck a blow for the theory that Mussolini's policy followed Italy's traditional strategic policy, except for Mussolini's aggressive blustering style. More in-depth studies of other areas of Italian policy may very well produce the same results.

VII

The most written about and most controversial area of fascist foreign policy has been Italy's alliance with nazi Germany. D. C. Watt's article, 'The Rome-Berlin axis, 1936-1940: myth and reality', attacked the early interpretation, which stressed the ideological similarities between the two dictatorships. 'While there are clear likenesses and parallels between the two dictators and their systems of government,' argued Watt, 'only an acceptance of Axis propaganda at its face value can make them into an explanation for the existence of the Axis.'⁷⁰ Watt believed Mussolini and Hitler signed the alliance only to intimidate the other great powers, but he did not explain, however, why Italy entered the world war if the Duce signed the alliance only as an exercise in myth-making.

Watt's article did not prevent later historians from emphasizing ideology. In 1973, German historian Jens Petersen published *Hitler-Mussolini: Die Entstehung der Achse Berlin-Rom, 1933-1936*, arguing that the Axis resulted from the ideological affinity of the two regimes.⁷¹ Although well-balanced and solidly researched, Petersen's work was not fully convincing. Petersen ended his narrative in 1936 and the rifts in the Axis after this date seriously throw his argument into question. Moreover, one wonders if Petersen confused common Italian and German interests with ideology.

Historians from the orthodox school challenged Petersen's thesis. For example, Denis Mack Smith rejected the ideological argument, saying that Mussolini wanted the Pact of Steel only for propaganda reasons, namely to frighten the western powers, never intending it to be a real alliance at all.⁷² Similarly, Salvemini argued that Mussolini had no real policy towards the other great powers, and tried only to keep the European situation fluid so he could score points on the cheap: 'He was using Germany to wrest concessions from France, and vice versa, meaning to show his hand only after he had received enough to tip the scales one way or the other.'⁷³ Kirkpatrick argued that in Mussolini's mind, 'The most profitable course was to keep in contact with both sides, to play one off against the other, and in the process to extract what advantage he could for Italy.'⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Mack Smith, *Roman empire*, p. 100.

⁷⁰ D. C. Watt, 'The Rome-Berlin axis, 1936-1940: myth and reality', *The Review of Politics*, xxii (October 1960), 522.

⁷¹ Jens Petersen, *Hitler-Mussolini: Die Entstehung der Achse Berlin-Rom, 1933-1936* (Tübingen, 1973).

⁷² Mack Smith, *Roman empire*, p. 132.

⁷³ Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II*, p. 156.

⁷⁴ Kirkpatrick, p. 289.

Some revisionist historians also believed that Mussolini tried to play off the great powers. De Felice presented the interpretation in a much different tone that attributed more shrewdness to Mussolini than Salvemini had. His interview with Ledeen foreshadowed the argument he would later use in the Mussolini biography:

After the African war, he prolonged the formula of the 'pendulum' policy – the oscillation between Germany and England – the so-called policy of the 'determinant weight'. In the new situation, however, the possibilities of realizing this strategy of the pendulum became increasingly limited. The Spanish civil war threatened this policy even more, because the attitude of many countries with regard to Italian fascism became increasingly ideological... From this situation stemmed the great difficulties of the policy of the pendulum: Mussolini continued to effect it, but the arc of the pendulum became narrower and narrower.⁷⁵

In 1980 De Felice's disciple, Rosaria Quartararo, published a study of Italian relations with Britain and Germany, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*. She argued that from an early date, Mussolini pursued a policy of 'equilibrium between opposing weights',⁷⁶ swinging between Europe's two greatest powers in the hopes of achieving some support for Italian goals. After signing the Pact of Steel, Mussolini still sought an accord with the western powers, a fact Quartararo believed was 'confirmed on many fronts'.⁷⁷ Mussolini's policy of equilibrium continued even after the outbreak of war, when he hoped that Germany would not crush Great Britain: 'if it were true that Fascist Italy, to feel "free", wanted access to the Atlantic, it was ever more true that Italy did not intend to become a province of the Third Reich.'⁷⁸ According to Quartararo, therefore, the fault for the German alliance lay not so much with Mussolini, but with Britain and France who 'coldly rejected' all his advances.⁷⁹ Many historians have accepted this interpretation – whether called 'determinant weight', 'pendulum', 'oscillation', or 'equidistance' – though the orthodox historians portrayed the policy as foolish, while the revisionists see Mussolini's judgement of Hitler as similar to the miscalculation made by most European statesmen.

There is, however, another interpretation: that Mussolini did not enter the alliance because of the rejection by France and Britain, but rather because of a calculated choice to oppose the western powers. For example, according to Felix Gilbert,

The bulk of available evidence indicates that Mussolini was irrevocably set on a pro-German course of Italian foreign policy. He too may have had moments of doubt – particularly because he must have been continuously aware of Italy's economic deficiencies – but if so, he overcame his doubts quickly under the sway of Hitler's persuasive personality or under the impact of demonstrations of German strength.⁸⁰

In 1970 Manfred Funke made an important contribution to the question with *Sanktionen und Kanonen*, a study of Italo-German relations during the Ethiopian crisis.⁸¹ Funke showed there was considerable tension between Italy and Germany during and after the Abyssinian affair, and, therefore, the crisis did not force Mussolini into Hitler's arms. Funke's work was quickly translated into Italian and his argument was accepted

⁷⁵ De Felice, *Fascism: an informal introduction*, pp. 80–1.

⁷⁶ Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino: La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940* (Rome, 1980), p. 461.

⁷⁷ Quartararo, p. 469.

⁷⁸ Quartararo, p. 625.

⁷⁹ Quartararo, p. 461.

⁸⁰ Felix Gilbert, 'Ciano and his ambassadors', in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., *The diplomats 1919–1939*, vol. 2 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1953), p. 533.

⁸¹ Manfred Funke, *Sanktionen und Kanonen: Hitler, Mussolini und der internationale Abessinienkonflikt 1934–36* (Düsseldorf, 1970); translated as *Sanzioni e cannoni, 1934–1936: Hitler, Mussolini e il conflitto etiopico* (Milan, 1972).

by Italian historians, such as Pietro Pastorelli and Renato Mori, as well as Alan Cassels who had already suggested that the German alliance was Mussolini's conscious choice.⁸²

Historians also disagreed on Mussolini's reasons for declaring war against the western powers in June 1940. Most assumed that because of the German alliance, Italy could not avoid the war. These scholars have focused their attention, not on why Mussolini declared war, but on his reasons for having been a non-belligerent for the previous nine months.⁸³ Coverdale, however, believed that Mussolini declared war, not because of the alliance, but because he thought Hitler was about to win an overwhelming victory:

Had the allies been more successful in resisting the Nazi onslaught, Mussolini might very well have remained neutral or even eventually joined them if it seemed that in so doing he could better achieve his goals.⁸⁴

De Felice, again agreeing with Coverdale, accepted this thesis, arguing that Mussolini intervened when he thought that it was both impossible to reach an agreement with Britain and France, and to maintain neutrality for the duration of the war.⁸⁵

Richard Bosworth challenged the Mussolini-centric interpretation of Italy's declaration of war, advancing a deterministic explanation. On the final page of *Mussolini il duce II*, De Felice had quoted approvingly Winston Churchill's statement that one man alone brought Italy into the war.⁸⁶ Bosworth, however, found similarities between 1915 and 1940, and argued that because of the myths of the *risorgimento* any Italian leader 'would have declared war on Germany's side in June 1940 because it was by then the only step that could possibly lead to the survival of Italy's pretensions to be a Great Power'.⁸⁷ According to this argument, the Italian declaration of war was 'the natural result of Italian history'.⁸⁸ While very perceptive, this interpretation remains unsatisfying. Bosworth put Mussolini's decision in a broader context, but his interpretation did little to explain the decision itself.

VIII

Except Mack Smith, agreement has emerged that there was some coherence to Mussolini's foreign policy and that he did not improvise it as Salvemini had once argued. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of reassessment, largely spurred by the publication of the Italian diplomatic documents. By the early 1980s the consensus had formed and the field became less controversial and, therefore, lost much of its appeal for scholars. As a result, in the last decade historians have written little on the topic. There is much to do, however, before we have a clear picture of the foreign relations

⁸² Pastorelli, 'La politica estera', p. 103; Renato Mori, *Mussolini e la conquista dell'Etiopia* (Florence, 1978), p. 314; Cassels, *Fascist Italy*, p. 81; Cassels, 'Switching partners', p. 81.

⁸³ For example, MacGregor Knox looked at the factors that restrained Mussolini who wanted – from an early date – to enter the war. Knox, pp. 85–6, 187. ⁸⁴ Coverdale, p. 407.

⁸⁵ De Felice, *Il duce II*, p. 684.

⁸⁶ De Felice, *Il duce II*, p. 844. The quotation comes from Churchill's 23 December 1940 BBC address to the Italian people. See Winston S. Churchill, *Their finest hour* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1949), p. 620.

⁸⁷ R. J. B. Bosworth, 'In the green corner, Denis Mack Smith. In the red? black? corner, Renzo De Felice: an account of the 1976 contest in the historiography of Italian fascism', *Teaching History*, ix (August 1977), p. 38. See also Bosworth, 'Italian foreign policy', pp. 78–9.

⁸⁸ Bosworth, 'Italian foreign policy', p. 79.

of fascist Italy. To date, concepts of coherence and continuity have consumed much of the literature. Neither of these ideas, however, has significantly advanced our understanding of Mussolini's methods. To argue that propaganda entirely determined the Duce's policy is to join what Renato Mori called 'the cult of the unitary cause'.⁸⁹ Many factors contribute to any state's policy, including the leader's *Weltanschauung*, the political interests of the decision-makers, the government structure, public opinion, and events abroad. To disregard these elements is to ignore reality. To argue, however, that Mussolini had a defined blueprint is equally misleading. Any leader finds it difficult to follow a detailed plan, because the universe does not always unfold as it should, or as one wishes it would. Italian leaders were in a particularly difficult position because Italy did not have the power to set the international agenda. Saying that Mussolini was an opportunist is to recognize that he was in the same position as most statesmen, and is not to say that he lacked ideas or goals. The debate over coherence, therefore, has been artificial and has contributed little to our understanding of Italian foreign relations.

The discussions of continuity have been only slightly more helpful. In arguing that Mussolini became more aggressive in the 1930s, historians uncovered much material on Italy's economic position in the early 1930s, the state of Mussolini's regime and his changing attitudes towards the international situation. This, in turn, helped explain the formation of Italian policy. Similarly, by showing the continuity in Italian policy before and after the March on Rome, Richard Bosworth has underlined some of the profound forces – particularly the 'myths around which Italian society had been organized since the *risorgimento*'⁹⁰ – which influenced the formation of policy in all Italian regimes. These factors, however, were not the supreme determinant of Italian policy, any more than traffic accidents occur solely because of the existence of automobiles. This debate over continuity can easily dissolve into a conceptual dispute, with one side arguing for a continuity of forces and the other insisting that circumstances in the fascist era were significantly different from that of the preceding period. Such an argument would be of little benefit in comprehending Mussolini's conduct of foreign relations.

In their preoccupation with coherence and continuity historians have ignored many of the key questions in fascist foreign policy. For example, no one has examined the role of various groups in the formation of policy; Italian industrialists, the military, the royal family, and the fascist and nationalist elites have received little attention from scholars. Many have suggested that the officials at the Palazzo Chigi constrained Mussolini – at least in his first years in office – but no one has written a study of Italy's foreign office in the interwar period. Historians also need to look at Italy's policy towards Britain and France, which they have largely neglected in favour of Italo-German relations. There have been many general works in the last thirty years, but specific case studies have been few. John Coverdale showed that an in-depth study of one facet of Italian policy can illuminate Mussolini's strategy, motives and influences. Historians need more of this type of work before they can write a definitive history of fascist foreign policy, one that pays less attention to philosophical concepts, and more to understanding Italian foreign relations.

⁸⁹ Mori, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Bosworth, 'Italian foreign policy', p. 78.