

Was There a Fascist Foreign Policy? Tradition and Novelty

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## Essays and Reflections

### Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy? Tradition and Novelty

ALAN CASSELS

NAZI GERMAN FOREIGN policy has been much debated: that of Fascist Italy less so. Nevertheless, in each case the same basic questions present themselves. How far was the foreign policy of Hitler and Mussolini, respectively, an extension, albeit in hyperbolic form, of conventional German and Italian nationalist aspirations? Conversely, how far was each policy the product of the peculiar cosmology of one movement and its leader, part of the warp and woof of a vaster design than was encompassed by traditional national interests? And depending on the degree of novelty in Nazi and Fascist foreign policies, how far could new objectives be achieved through the historic diplomatic strategies of Germany and Italy?<sup>1</sup>

In the German context, the thread of continuity from the pre-1933 period to the Nazi era has often been traced. The primacy of eastward expansion for Germany from at least the Wilhelmian annexations of the treaty of Brest Litovsk, through Weimar's acquiescence in the loss of Alsace-Lorraine while scarcely disguising an ambition to revise the nation's eastern frontiers in the Locarno era, culminated in 1941 in Hitler's notorious Operation Barbarossa. Yet it is hard, not to say impossible, to dismiss the full sweep of Nazi conquest as Prussian militarism writ large – this despite the now twenty-year-old and no longer shocking Taylor thesis which, significantly, takes no account of events after September

<sup>1</sup> Several recent titles prompt consideration of these questions, even though they do not all confront directly the issue of Nazi-Fascist parallels: R. J. Bosworth, *Italy: The Least of the Great Powers* (London, 1979); D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire* (London, 1976); *idem*, *Mussolini* (London, 1982); R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: I, Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*; II, *Lo Stato totalitario, 1936-1940* (Turin, 1974-81); R. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino: Politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940* (Rome, 1980); M. Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941* (New York, 1982).

1939.<sup>2</sup> Hitler's faith in his own star which drove Germany into wilful confrontation with the Soviet Union and the United States at the same time had little in common with the balanced calculations of normal international power politics. His 'soil policy' stemmed organically from his own special racial *Weltanschauung*. As such, Nazi foreign policy emerges in scholarly consensus as profoundly radical and perhaps unique.<sup>3</sup>

The parallels with the Italian historical experience are instructive. Between the Liberal and Fascist Italian approaches to international problems a direct line can be drawn through the Associazione Nazionale Italiana founded in 1910.<sup>4</sup> The contributions to Fascism of such Nationalists as Enrico Corradini, Luigi Federzoni, and Alfredo Rocco are too well-known to require elaboration. More to the point, it has been argued that the Italian Nationalist Association was less a critic and goad of pusillanimous Liberal governments than it was a mirror reflecting the secret imperialist wishes of the Liberal establishment at large. As R.J. Bosworth puts it in his scathing analysis of San Giuliano's foreign ministry on the eve of the First World War: 'Pre-1914 Italy was a Power on the make, looking for a bargain package deal which would offer the least of the Great Powers a place in the sun. The major difference with Fascist Italy lay in the method of diplomacy, in the preference ... for conjuring up paper victories by stealth and diplomacy rather than by bluster or war. Yet, if a relationship is sought with the realities of Italian society ... Liberal foreign policy was as absurd and disastrous as was Fascist diplomacy.'<sup>5</sup> This is an extreme verdict, and it is manifestly unfair to tar all Liberals with the same brush, especially those of a Giolittian persuasion. On the other hand, the national will to empire, identified with the name of Francesco Crispi, had strong roots and an enduringly pervasive influence.<sup>6</sup>

The aims of these nationalistically-inclined Liberals lacked something in precision. Of course, they had their sights fixed on irredentist territory in the north and certain deserts in Africa, but acquisition of these lands was only a means to a larger end. This was assurance of the nation's stature in the eyes of the world, an assurance needed to override the knowledge that Italian unification had been accomplished by foreign

<sup>2</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> The most authoritative statement of majority opinion is G.L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, (2 vols., Chicago, 1970-80).

<sup>4</sup> A. De Grand, *The Italian Nationalist Association and the Rise of Fascism in Italy* (Lincoln NEB, 1978); F. Gaeta, *Nazionalismo italiano* (Naples, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Bosworth, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>6</sup> F. Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896*: 1, *Le premesse* (Bari, 1951); J.A. Thayer, *Italy and the Great War* (Madison wis, 1964); R.A. Webster, *Industrial Imperialism in Italy, 1908-1915* (Berkeley, 1975).

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arms and that the new united Italy was regularly derided as the sixth wheel of European diplomacy. Such a lack of national self-confidence manifested itself sometimes in ostentatious display – for example Sacconi's extravagant Vittorio Emanuele monument to national 'grandezza' in the middle of Rome;<sup>7</sup> sometimes in a keen sensitivity to national slights – the Italian demeanour at the post-First World War Paris Peace Conference was fair demonstration of this trait.<sup>8</sup> Foreign observers tended to find these attitudes alternately wearisome and comical, and nearly always incomprehensible.

Mussolini's truculent bravado afforded a perfect vehicle for the expression of this aggrieved Italian nationalism. He perhaps caught its spirit best in his famous assertion that he preferred to have his country feared rather than loved.<sup>9</sup> On becoming premier and also foreign minister in 1922, he addressed himself first not to any of the concrete postwar problems but to the issue of Italian prestige. His announced objective was to achieve parity of treatment for Italy with her wartime British and French allies; 'niente per niente' ran his aphorism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it might be said that the entire first decade of Fascism was spent in cultivating international prestige and attention for its own sake. Little care was taken over constancy of policy. At one moment the Duce acted the agent of peace and security at Locarno and anticipated a share of the Nobel Peace Prize, the next he endorsed revisionism and encouraged subversive factions in Italy's neighbouring states; a professional anti-bolshevik, Mussolini was nonetheless anxious that Italy be the first Western power to accord *de jure* recognition of the USSR; openly scornful of the talking shop at Geneva, he was also insistent that Italy enjoy her quota of high offices in the League of Nations secretariat.<sup>11</sup> All that seemed to matter was that Italian foreign policy be active and be noticed. A phrase of Sallust comes to mind: 'Quieta movere magna merces videbatur' ('Just to stir things up seemed a great reward in itself').<sup>12</sup>

Truth to tell, Fascist Italy was not unsuccessful at first in cutting a figure on the world stage. Partly, this was a reflection of the admiration

<sup>7</sup> Bosworth, pp. viii, 64.

<sup>8</sup> R. Albrecht-Carrié, *Italy at the Paris Peace Conference* (New York, 1938), *passim*; R. Vivarelli, *Il dopoguerra in Italia e l'avvento del fascismo*, 1 (Naples, 1967), 342-84; A.J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking* (New York, 1967), pp. 673-715.

<sup>9</sup> B. Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, (44 vols., Florence, Rome, 1951-80), 29 Oct. 1934, XLIV. 91; 20 Sept. 1938, XXIX. 153.

<sup>10</sup> Speech to Chamber of Deputies, 16 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*, XIX. 19-20; press interviews, 19 and 21 Nov. 1922, *ibid.*, 31, 37.

<sup>11</sup> A. Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy* (Princeton, 1970), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> *Catalina*, 21.

evinced across a wide spectrum of foreign opinion for the law-and-order accomplishments of Fascism within Italy; partly, it was a function of the friendship which the British foreign secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain, for reasons both personal and political, bestowed on Mussolini.<sup>13</sup> One who entered whole-heartedly into the prestige hunt was Dino Grandi. This former *squadrista*, being made under-secretary for foreign affairs in 1925, fell under the sway of the career diplomats in the Palazzo Chigi who, almost to a man, hailed from that nationalist segment of Liberal society deeply exercised by Italy's indifferent diplomatic status. Grandi proved a ready pupil,<sup>14</sup> and, raised to the post of foreign minister in September 1929, set about garnering publicity for himself and his country by attendance at the League of Nations and through vigorous participation in a constant round of conferences on naval and general disarmament, reparations, and war debts. In due course, Grandi was able to boast of a 'moral victory' won at the London Naval Conference where Fascist Italy had the temerity to stand defiantly alone; to account the visit to Italy of US Secretary of State Stimson a 'noteworthy diplomatic success'; and to contrast the attentive reception he won at Geneva with the disparagement once accorded the spokesman of Liberal Italy.<sup>15</sup> Self-congratuation apart, these boasts were not unwarranted, and according to Grandi, Mussolini found it 'superfluous to say how satisfied' he was with his minister's work.<sup>16</sup> The odd thing is that, within a few months of these congratulations, Grandi was dismissed when Mussolini resumed personal direction of the foreign ministry on 20 July 1932.

<sup>13</sup> A. Berselli, *L'opinione pubblica inglese e l'avvento del fascismo, 1919-1925* (Milan, 1971), pp. 79-162, 192-204; P. Milza, *L'Italie fasciste devant l'opinion française* (Paris, 1967), pp. 46-76; J.P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 22-73, 144-59; P.G. Edwards, 'The Austen Chamberlain-Mussolini Meetings,' *Historical Journal*, xiv (1971), 153-64.

<sup>14</sup> On Grandi's diplomatic education, see R. Guariglia, *Ricordi, 1922-1946* (Naples, 1950), pp. 47-50; G. Carocci, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista, 1925-1928* (Bari, 1969), pp. 23-9.

<sup>15</sup> Grandi to Mussolini, 13 April 1930, 2 Dec. 1931, 22 June 1932, Georgetown Univ. Library, Washington DC, Grandi MSS, microfilm, reel 1, frames 14-80; reel 3, frames 217-54, 8-12. The entire corpus of Grandi's personal archive (300 packages of material which survived the Second World War) is now in the hands of Professor Renzo De Felice, Città Universitaria, Rome, where under some restrictions during the lifetime of Count Grandi it may be consulted by scholars. In due course, an inventory of the collection will be printed with the help of Italy's state archives. Selections amounting to 22 reels of negative microfilm have been deposited with the Georgetown University Library; these concern Grandi's term as foreign minister, 1929-32, including a personal diary for these years, and also his closing years at the London embassy in the 1930s. Since Grandi's papers have only recently become accessible, a worthwhile biography of the man remains to be written.

<sup>16</sup> Grandi diary, 19 Feb. 1932, quaderno 39, Grandi MSS, microfilm, reel 22.

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The move is usually ascribed to the Duce's dislike of Grandi's un-Fascist deference to diplomatic formality, his excessive Anglophilia, and his attachment to the allegedly pacifist League of Nations.<sup>17</sup> Yet Mussolini had tolerated these lapses from grace for several years, and indeed had encouraged Grandi to pursue a policy of 'Cloroformizzare. Lubrificare.'<sup>18</sup> The question remains why it all became intolerable only in 1932. The answer must surely lie in the fact that Grandi had become content with the outward trappings of great power status which disguised a dearth of substantive or territorial gain, and obscured the need for a drastic turn in Italian foreign policy in order to realize such gains. For Mussolini a bubble reputation was not enough by 1932. The time was approaching to move beyond the circumspection of the pre-Fascist nationalists which had entwined Grandi and his kind, and to explore the potentialities of a novel Fascist diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> Thus, almost simultaneously in the early 1930s, Mussolini and Hitler embarked on the identical task – the reorientation of national methods and goals in the great game of world politics.

Mussolini was impelled to radicalize Italian foreign policy in the 1930s by domestic factors. This is not to argue that the Great Depression, which certainly hit Italy hard, raised the spectre of social discontent which was then consciously laid to rest by recourse to adventure abroad; there are simply no grounds for accepting this simplistic formula.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Fascism's revolution at home had stalled. The 'second wave' of Fascism, which was supposed to sweep away the old hidebound, class-ridden Italy, had instead seen the ardour of the party zealots thwarted by a corrupt and centralized administration. The corporative state was proving to be largely a *modus operandi* between the PNF and Italy's bourgeoisie, leaving untouched fundamental economic and social relationships.<sup>21</sup> What has been termed 'fascismo-regime' was short on inspiration and idealism;<sup>22</sup> it was to supply these qualities that Mussolini turned to militarism and empire.

<sup>17</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, I, 393-5; Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p. 173.

<sup>18</sup> Grandi diary, 27 Dec. 1929, quaderno 11, Grandi MSS, microfilm, reel 10.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 30-1. A wholesale switching of posts in the Italian foreign service accompanied Grandi's dismissal, thus giving a further portent of a new phase in Mussolinian diplomacy (F. D'Amoia, *Declino e prima crisi dell'Europa di Versailles, 1931-1933* [Milan, 1967], pp. 95-106).

<sup>20</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, I, 610-14.

<sup>21</sup> A. Lyttleton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919-1929* (London, 1973), pp. 269-307; *idem*, 'Fascism in Italy: The Second Wave,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, I (1966), 75-100; G. Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism* (New York, 1936), Part 1, 'The Corporative State'; D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (Chapel Hill NC, 1979), pp. 274-306.

<sup>22</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, I, chaps. 1-3; *idem*, *Fascism: An Informal Introduction to its Theory and Practice*, an interview with M.A. Ledeen (New Brunswick NJ, 1976), pp. 43-78.

Fascism, of course, had always extolled the military virtues, and violence in international affairs was natural to a movement which had never ceased to be violent at home. But in the 1930s the campaign to instill a garrison-state mentality in Italians went into high gear. Uniformed and military posturing for all age groups and autarkic economic practices led to the conclusion that Italy's destiny would be fulfilled only through force.<sup>23</sup> So the familiar slogans hammered out the militaristic message: 'Live dangerously'; 'Believe, obey, fight'; 'Better one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep'; 'War is to man what motherhood is to woman';<sup>24</sup> and so on and so forth.

Imperialism, too, had been a staple in the Fascist programme from the beginning – witness the brutal suppression of the Senussi in Libya after Mussolini took power.<sup>25</sup> Like militarism, though, the cult of empire received new and urgent emphasis in the thirties. This was not just a matter of the conquest of Ethiopia, planning for which got under way in 1932,<sup>26</sup> nor of the perpetuation of nineteenth-century colonialism into which tradition the Ethiopian adventure can be conveniently fitted. Mussolini's conception was at once traditional and novel. From the pre-1914 era he took over the notion of united Italy as a Third Rome.<sup>27</sup> But Fascist, not Liberal, Italy now claimed to be the true heir of Roman tradition, and Mussolini to be the twentieth-century Caesar who would fight a Fourth Punic War.<sup>28</sup> The public prominence given to maps of classical Rome's empire at its zenith hinted at the enormity of Fascist imperial aspirations. Modern maps, in contrast, were to be bound in soft, that is, temporary covers because Mussolini intended to 'change the map of the world.'<sup>29</sup> 'Italy's historical objectives,' declared the Duce in 1934 in a major review of his regime, 'have two names: Asia and Africa. South and east are the cardinal directions which must excite the interest and will of Italians. There is little or nothing to be accomplished in the north, nor even to the west. ... These objectives of ours have their justification in

<sup>23</sup> On the militarization of Italian society, Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 124-5, 133-4; *Mussolini*, pp. 100, 176, 186; on autarky, F. Catalano, *L'economia italiana di guerra* (Milan, 1969), pp. 13-25.

<sup>24</sup> Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, 2 Aug. 1924, XXI. 40; 7 Oct. 1934, XXVI. 362; 23 May 1932, XXV. 104; 26 May 1934, XXVI. 259.

<sup>25</sup> E. Salerno, *Genocidio in Libia* (Milan, 1980), *passim*; C. Segrè, *Fourth Shore* (Chicago, 1974), pp. 57-81.

<sup>26</sup> G. Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia* (Milan, 1971), pp. 26-33.

<sup>27</sup> Bosworth, pp. 8-9, 144, 282, 340.

<sup>28</sup> D. Germino, *The Italian Fascist Party in Power* (Minneapolis, 1959), pp. 137-8; Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, 12 Jan. 1942, XXXI. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, pp. 184, 225; G. Ciano, *L'Europa verso la catastrofe* (Milan, 1948), p. 378.

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geography and history. Of all the great western powers of Europe, the closest to Africa and Asia is Italy. A few hours travel by sea, fewer by air, suffice to join Italy with Africa and with Asia.<sup>30</sup> More exactly, it was intended that Italian hegemony should be established not merely over the limited *mare nostrum* of the Adriatic but over the entire Mediterranean; Italian territorial gains would range across the width of the northern half of the African continent, and also extend into the Middle East. In sum, it all constituted an exaggeration of Liberal Italy's colonial dreams carried to the ultimate. The moral sanction for this new imperialism rested on the alleged superiority of Italian civilization regenerated under Fascism. In Fascist propaganda, Italy had become 'the director of world culture,' her influence 'spiritual imperialism.'<sup>31</sup> Renzo De Felice's latest biographical volume of *Mussolini il duce* covers the years 1936-40; not surprisingly, 'il mito della nuova civiltà' figures prominently.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Fascism, once advertised as a particular solution for purely Italian problems, was transformed into the dynamo of a civilizing mission far afield. It was quite consistent with Mussolini's assertion, often repeated in the thirties, that Fascism was the *Zeitgeist* of the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup>

Broadly speaking, then, success overseas supplanted socio-economic change at home as the *raison d'être* of Fascism in its second decade. It was assumed in Fascist propaganda that in some mysterious way changes had already been wrought in the temper and material condition of Italy sufficient to support a vigorous expansionist drive abroad.<sup>34</sup> Alternatively, as McGregor Knox argues provocatively in his *Mussolini Unleashed*, the Duce looked deliberately to the experience of victorious war and empire-building to remake Italy within – 'to prove ... to the Italians themselves that they were indeed a warrior nation, and ... also [to] give the dictator the prestige to at last sweep away monarchy, Church, and "bourgeoisie" enamored of the comfortable life.'<sup>35</sup> In a perverted way this was the same syndicalist revolutionary war preached by Mussolini in 1914-15.<sup>36</sup> But in any event, *das Primat der Aussenpolitik* was clear.

<sup>30</sup> Speech to Fascism's second quinquennial assembly, 18 March 1934, Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, xxvi. 191-2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 Oct. 1932, xxv. 147; 1 July 1926, xxii. 172-3.

<sup>32</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II. 254-330.

<sup>33</sup> See, most notoriously, the boast that the twentieth century was destined to be 'a Fascist century' in the article on Fascism which appeared above Mussolini's signature in the *Enciclopedia italiana* (Rome, 1932), xiv. 847-51. Cf. speech to PNF directorate, 27 Oct. 1930, Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, xxiv. 283. Also De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, I. 306-10.

<sup>34</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 190-1.

<sup>35</sup> Knox, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> R. De Felice, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario, 1883-1920* (Turin, 1965), pp. 288-361, *passim*; Roberts, pp. 113-14.



Mussolini's mounting preoccupation with his imperial vision invites comparison with Hitler's dedication to a new global order. To be sure, the Fascist world-view lacked the specificity of the National Socialist one, if only because it possessed no centripetal ideology which racism gave to Hitler's doctrine. Although colonial racism was rife throughout Fascist Italy's African lands,<sup>37</sup> it was difficult, indeed impossible, to reconcile the classical and Christian precursors of the Third Rome with race as the *deus ex machina* of all historical change. On the other hand, a distinct affinity between Fascist and Nazi imperialisms may be sensed in their common sense of mission. At the root of both Mussolini's and Hitler's actions lay the conviction that they rode a tide of history; after the Lateran Accords had not the Pope dubbed Mussolini 'a man . . . whom Providence has set in our path?'<sup>38</sup> It was this certitude which persuaded each leader to envisage such ambitious schemes in terms of both geography and future time; and interestingly, it also predisposed each to ignore almost wilfully the logistical preparations for conquest of a world empire in favour of a naïve trust in a beneficent providence. Even a partial parallel with Hitler's megalomaniac imperialism suggests that, by the 1930s Mussolini's military and diplomatic ambition had outdistanced that of the Liberal Nationalists in kind as well as degree. And if one accepts the hypothetical integration of foreign triumph with revolutionary and sociopsychological change at home, then the Duce's goal appears what, thirty years ago, the social scientists might have called a totalitarian one.<sup>39</sup>

At this point, it seems pertinent to observe that the attribution of a precise imperial design to Mussolini serves to undermine somewhat the interpretation of the Duce as sheer opportunist, consistent only in his inconsistency. This is a view kept very much alive, not least by the brilliantly iconoclastic studies of Denis Mack Smith, which leave the Fascist emperor virtually devoid of clothes – and policy.<sup>40</sup> Yet it is worth

<sup>37</sup> L. Preti, *I miti dell'impero e della razza nell'Italia degli anni '30* (Rome, 1965).

<sup>38</sup> C.A. Jemolo, *Chiesa e Stato in Italia negli ultimi cento anni* (rev. ed., Turin, 1971), p. 485.

<sup>39</sup> This is to employ the word totalitarian in its qualitative sense to imply a system which aspires to control and shape the very minds of the citizenry; on this score most authorities on totalitarianism deny the epithet to Fascist Italy (for example, H. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* [new ed., New York, 1966], 258-9, 278, 308-9, 325, 395). Mussolini, on the contrary, used totalitarian more narrowly and quantitatively to convey the dominance of the organs of the Fascist state over all areas of national activity, particularly economics; it is with this latter connotation that many Italian scholars describe the Fascist regime as totalitarian (A. Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* [Turin, 1965], pp. 290-311; De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II. 66-155).

<sup>40</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 1-2, 32, 82-5, 202-3; *Mussolini*, pp. 11, 40, 48, 112, 138-42, 158, 204-5, 311.

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recalling that the original portrait of a Mussolini operating without plan or principle was painted by Gaetano Salvemini whose *Mussolini diplomatico* in its first French edition rendered an account of Fascist diplomacy solely in the decade 1922-32. Salvemini thereby set a long-standing fashion in Mussolinian biography, but it must be questioned whether 'a policy of improvisations without a definite aim' (Salvemini's own phrase) is an adequate explanation of why and how the Duce took his nation into the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, much recent specialist literature on Fascist foreign policy amounts to a mildly revisionist chorus to the effect that some pattern is to be discerned in Mussolinian diplomacy, especially in the 1930s. In this connection, one thinks of the works of De Felice and Knox already mentioned, and of the writings of Giorgio Rumi, Ennio Di Nolfo, Gampiero Carocci, Fulvio D'Amoja, E.M. Robertson, and Jens Petersen.<sup>42</sup> And because Fascism is still so controversial a topic, it may be proper to add that to find coherence in its foreign policy is not necessarily to applaud it.

Since Mussolini's imperial objectives as they unfolded proved to be of a radical nature, the question was automatically raised whether they could be achieved by traditional Italian diplomatic strategy. Liberal Italy's customary stance had been one of equidistance among the nations. By acting as 'peso determinante,' Italy had been in a position to profit by siding first with one power bloc and then another; this had been the essence of Italian policy in 1914-15.<sup>43</sup> But it was too ignoble a posture to

<sup>41</sup> G. Salvemini, *Mussolini diplomatico* (rev. ed., Rome, 1945), p. 354.

<sup>42</sup> G. Rumi, *Alle origini della politica estera fascista* (Bari, 1968); *idem*, 'Mussolini e il "programma" di San Sepolcro,' *Movimento di Liberazione in Italia*, no. 71 (1963), pp. 3-26; *idem*, "'Revisionismo" fascista ed espansione coloniale,' *ibid.*, no. 80 (1965), pp. 37-73; E. Di Nolfo, *Mussolini e la politica estera italiana, 1919-1933* (Padua, 1960); *idem*, 'Il revisionismo nella politica estera di Mussolini,' *Il Politico*, xix (1954), 85-100; G. Carocci, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista, 1925-1928*; *idem*, 'Appunti sull'imperialismo fascista degli anni '20,' *Studi Storici*, viii (1967), 113-37; F. D'Amoja, *La politica estera dell'impero dall'conquista dell'Etiopia all'Anschluss* (2d ed., Padua, 1967); E.M. Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire-Builder: Europe and Africa, 1932-1936* (London, 1977); J. Petersen, *Hitler-Mussolini: Die Entstehung der Achse Berlin-Rom, 1933-1936* (Tübingen, 1973); *idem*, 'Gesellschaftssystem, ideologie und Interesse in der Aussenpolitik des Faschistischen Italien,' *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, liv (1974), 428-70. In the same general vein, see my own *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*. Bibliographical exegeses on the meaning of Fascist diplomacy include: P. Pastorelli, 'La storiografia italiana del dopoguerra sulla politica estera fascista,' *Storia e Politica*, x (1971), 575-614; Petersen, 'Die Aussenpolitik des faschistischen Italien als historiographisches Problem,' *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, xxii (1974), 417-57; Rumi, 'Tendenze e caratteri degli studi sulla politica estera fascista, 1945-1966,' *Nuova Rivista Storica*, li (1967), 149-68.

<sup>43</sup> M. Toscano, *Il Patto di Londra* (Bologna, 1934); L. Valiani, 'Italian-Austro-Hungarian Negotiations, 1914-1915,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, i (1966), 108-31.

find approval with Italian Nationalists and Fascists. Nevertheless, one school of thought represented best perhaps by Renzo De Felice and his disciple, Rosaria Quartararo, holds that until a mere six weeks before Fascist Italy's entry into the Second World War, Mussolini struggled to preserve a median position between Nazi Germany and the Western democracies.<sup>44</sup> According to this scenario, his announcement of a special Rome-Berlin Axis in 1936 and subsequent acceptance of a political alliance with Germany were acts calculated to frighten the West into a general settlement of colonial issues on Italy's terms. The contention that Mussolini sought the middle ground is not wanting in circumstantial evidence at least – namely, to offset the Axis the Anglo-Italian Gentlemen's Agreements, half-hearted and mislabelled though they were; Mussolini's mediation, albeit fortuitous, at the eleventh hour of the Munich Crisis; his passing flirtation with a neutral bloc of Balkan states early in the Second World War; and the persistence, even as he entered the conflict, of his 'parallel war' mentality.<sup>45</sup> Beyond doubt, these chapters denoted a conscious Mussolinian effort to avoid total dependence on Berlin; the Duce was ever sensitive to the post-*Anschluss* taunt of *Gauleiter* for Italy.<sup>46</sup> But whether, in addition, they may be taken as a sign of Fascist Italy's even-handedness *vis-à-vis* the West is another matter altogether.

That reserve towards his Axis partner comported, in Mussolini's eyes, no obligation to meet the West halfway becomes clear when one turns away from the much publicized 'brutal friendship' between Hitler and Mussolini and considers instead the state of Anglo-Italian relations in the late 1930s. Great Britain held the key to the fortunes of Fascist Italy's foreign policy, as she had to those of Liberal Italy's. By and large, between 1922 and 1935 an uneven but prevailing cordiality between London and Rome had kept Mussolini more or less loyal to the cause of the First World War allies. Given the chronic animosity between the so-called

<sup>44</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II, 332-5, 465-7, 625-793 *passim*; Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino*, pp. 271-325 *passim*, 519-22, 624-5.

<sup>45</sup> D. Bolech Cecchi, *L'accordo di due imperi: L'accordo italo-inglese del 16 aprile 1938*; *idem*, 'I rapporti italo-britannici durante la crisi dei Sudeti e la Conferenza di Monaco,' *Il Politico*, xli (1976), 277-314; H. Cliadakis, 'Neutrality and War in Italian Policy, 1939-1940,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, ix (1974), 171-90; F. Marzari, 'Projects for an Italian-led Balkan Bloc of Neutrals, September-December 1939,' *Historical Journal*, xiii (1970), 767-88; B.S. Viault, 'Mussolini et la recherche d'une paix négociée, 1939-1940,' *Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale*, no. 107 (1977), pp. 1-18; G. Ciano, *Diario, 1937-1943*, ed. R. De Felice (Milan, 1980), 11 March 1940, p. 405; F.W. Deakin, *The Brutal Friendship: Hitler, Mussolini and the Fall of Fascism* (London, 1962), pp. 9, 12-13.

<sup>46</sup> D. Alfieri, *Due dittatori di fronte* (Milan, 1948), p. 226.

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Latin sisters, France and Italy, the Anglo-Italian entente assumed particular importance, and hence its rupture in the Ethiopian crisis was fraught with momentous consequences.<sup>47</sup> Significantly, it was in the wake of the Ethiopian affair that Mussolini in his determination to 'fascisticize' Italian foreign policy appointed his son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, as foreign minister. Ciano's elevation on 10 June 1936 should not be accounted a mere administrative shuffle to bring Italy's career diplomats to heel; the Palazzo Chigi, in fact, was always a fairly tame animal in Mussolini's hands.<sup>48</sup> Rather, it signalled a decisive shift in the direction of Italian diplomacy.

The fumbling nature of British opposition to his Ethiopian venture left a marked impression on the Duce. It served to confirm his diagnosis that what he termed the 'demo-plutocracies' of the West were 'sterile,' 'decadent,' and 'dying.' Conversely, the 'virile,' 'prolific,' 'young' nations were those to be seen on the march in Rome and Berlin.<sup>49</sup> It was this Social Darwinist ideology which brought on the Axis rather than any fancied identity of Fascist thought; the unhappy episode in 1934 of the Fascist International at Montreux had put paid to the latter.<sup>50</sup> Mussolini's simplistic division of the world into 'rising' and 'declining' states also served to bolster his faith that in the quest for empire Fascist Italy had destiny on her side; after Ethiopia, Mussolini became noticeably more fatalistic and impervious to reason.<sup>51</sup>

The more Mussolini was encouraged to dream of empire by a supposed weakness in the West, by the enticing example of Hitler's triumphs, and by Italian domestic requirements, the more it appeared that Britain was the stumbling block. Again, a lesson was drawn from the Ethiopian affair. To Mussolini, London's objection to Italian possession of Ethiopia was at once unexpected and incomprehensible; British motives – a mixture of concern for public opinion and for the survival of the League of

<sup>47</sup> R. Mori, *Mussolini e la conquista dell'Etiopia* (Florence, 1978), pp. 253-65; Quartararo, pp. 148-51 *et seq.*

<sup>48</sup> On Italy's foreign ministry under Fascism, see A. Cassels, *Italian Foreign Policy, 1918-1945: A Guide to Research and Research Materials* (Wilmington DEL, 1981), chap. 2; on Ciano's appointment, G. B. Guerri, *Galeazzo Ciano: Una vita, 1903-1944* (Milan, 1979), pp. 159-63, 184-97.

<sup>49</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 71, 92-5; *Mussolini*, pp. 208-9, 220; *idem*, 'Anti-British Propaganda in Fascist Italy,' in *Inghilterra e Italia nel '900* (Florence, 1973), pp. 87-101, 113-17. Predictably, the Duce's speech announcing and justifying Italian entry into the Second World War on 10 June 1940 was shot through with Social Darwinian terminology (*Mussolini, Opera omnia*, xxxix. 403-5).

<sup>50</sup> M. Ledeen, *Universal Fascism: Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928-1936* (New York, 1972), pp. 114-32.

<sup>51</sup> *Mussolini, Opera omnia*, 25 Oct. xxix. 195-6; De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II. 265-7; Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, pp. 202-4.

Nations<sup>52</sup> – were simply beyond his ken. Britain's anti-Italian stand, then, appeared gratuitous, and Mussolini's anti-British animus waxed accordingly greater. Furthermore, if Britain had opposed Fascist Italy in Ethiopia where no vital British interests were at stake (and Italian intelligence had purloined a copy of the Maffey Report which certified this),<sup>53</sup> what was to be expected from London when Mussolini moved on to greater and more glorious exploits in Africa and the Middle East? Geopolitics, very much a pseudo-scientific vogue in the 1930s, supplied an answer.

A prime instance of Fascist geopolitics was a confidential memorandum submitted by the Duce to the Grand Council of Fascism in its session of 4-5 February 1939 – the first written communication Mussolini ever made to the Grand Council.<sup>54</sup> Now recognized as key evidence of Fascist strategy, it has been called by one historian 'a sort of Mussolinian *Mein Kampf*' for its frank exposition of short and long-term aims.<sup>55</sup> In it, Mussolini reiterated Fascist Italy's unwavering priority – extra-European empire, placed here in its maritime context. 'States are more or less independent proportionate to their maritime position,' he reasoned. 'Thus independent states are those that possess ocean coasts or else free access to the oceans.' In consequence, 'Italian policy can have only one command – to march to the ocean. Which ocean? The Indian Ocean, by linking Libya with Ethiopia through the Sudan, or the Atlantic via French North Africa.' Parenthetically, Mussolini disavowed any interest in Continental aggrandizement, save in Albania – perhaps a rationalization of his fickle Austrian policy and also a pointer to future vacillations regarding Yugoslavia and Greece. In any case, the Balkans and the Danube took distinct second place to Africa. And as empire depended on sea power, Fascist Italy's immediate concern had to be in the Mediterranean. So Mussolini's memorandum trotted out the old saw of Italy's imprisonment in the Mediterranean. 'The bars of this prison are Corsica, Tunisia, Malta, Cyprus. The sentinels of this prison are Gibraltar and Suez.' Sentinels constituting more security than bars, it was British naval strength

<sup>52</sup> D.P. Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War* (London, 1975); G.W. Baer, *Test Case: Italy, Ethiopia, and the League of Nations* (Stanford, 1976); R.A.C. Parker, 'Great Britain France and the Ethiopian Crisis, 1935-1936,' *English Historical Review*, LXXXIX (1974), 293-332.

<sup>53</sup> M. Toscano, *Designs in Diplomacy* (Baltimore, 1970), pp. 412-13; Quartararo, pp. 143-7.

<sup>54</sup> Mentioned casually in Ciano's *Diario*, 4 Feb. 1939, p. 248, this important document was first cited by Deakin, pp. 5-6. It is reproduced in full by De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II. 321-7, who compares it with a similar statement made to the Grand Council of Fascism on 30 Nov. 1938.

<sup>55</sup> Knox, pp. 38-40, in the course of quoting also from the Fascist Grand Council sessions of 30 Nov. 1938 and 4-5 Feb. 1939. Cf. Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, p. 139.

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at either end of the land-locked Mediterranean which effectively prevented Italy's escape. Ironically, Fascist Italy's immediate territorial demands were directed at France – the shouts were for Nice, Corsica, and Tunis in the scandalous Chamber of Deputies session of 30 November 1938. Yet it was calculable that the paralysis of government in France at this time was such that French policy and surrender of territory were as likely to be determined in London as in Paris.<sup>56</sup> More important, however, in the long run a new Roman empire postulated a clear challenge to Britain's command of the sea and colonial pre-eminence. In this perceived geopolitical imperative of Anglo-Italian rivalry lay the root cause of Mussolini's inability, and disinclination, to preserve equidistance between Nazi Germany and the western democracies.

Liberal Italy had never dared countenance a serious breach with Britain; at the opening of this century, with the outbreak of an Anglo-German naval race, Italy had been forced to choose between London and Berlin, and had proceeded gradually to disengage herself from the Triple Alliance.<sup>57</sup> But to Mussolini, competition with Great Britain was a price he was prepared to pay in pursuit of imperial grandeur. In a manner of speaking, Mussolini called the bluff of Italy's traditional Nationalists. First, he appropriated their imperial programme, inflated its scope, and tricked it out in the rhetoric of the Third Rome to suit the needs of Fascist doctrine; then he disclosed that its accomplishment meant almost certain war with Britain. Many of the Nationalists who had jumped on the Fascist bandwagon before 1922, and who later came to be designated the moderate Fascists, were far from happy with the Anglophobe logic of Mussolini's imperial plans. Throughout the spring of 1940, as war with the West became more and more probable, Balbo, Bottai, Bastianini, and above all Grandi, evinced qualms about the

<sup>56</sup> On the special instructions of Mussolini and Ciano London was alerted to Italy's colonial claims on France in advance of the propaganda outburst of 30 Nov. 1938 (Ciano, *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*, pp. 383-5). The presumptive hope that Britain would lean on France proved vain; on visiting Rome a few weeks later Chamberlain stressed his country's solidarity with France (Gt. Britain, Foreign Office: *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, series 3, III [London, 1950], no. 500; Ciano, *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*, pp. 395-404). See also P.R. Stafford, 'The Chamberlain-Halifax Visit to Rome: A Reappraisal,' *English Historical Review*, xcvi (1983), 61-100. On the other hand, during the spring and summer 1939 Paris was several times made well aware of the British desire to see France accommodate Mussolini (F. Bédarida, 'La gouvernement anglaise,' in *Edouard Daladier, Chef de Gouvernement*, ed. R. Rémond and J. Bourdin [Paris, 1977], pp. 228-40). And Italians continued to assume that French policy would be shaped in London; for example, Guariglia to Ciano, 8 and 9 Sept. 1939, Italy, Ministero degli Affari Esteri: *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, series 9, 1 (Rome, 1954), nos. 101, 128.

<sup>57</sup> L. Salvatorelli, *La Triplice Alleanza* (Rome, 1939), chaps. v-viii.

direction that Fascist diplomacy had taken.<sup>58</sup> The reservations, however muffled in expression in the world of *ducismo*, of such men who remained very much in the mould of old-fashioned Italian nationalism<sup>59</sup> provided conclusive testimony that, in the final analysis, the Duce's methods and goals comprised a radical and alarming experiment in their country's foreign policy.

Fascist Italy, we know, did not possess the capability to support a grandiose expansionist policy. To what degree Italy lacked the material resources to conduct a major war must remain uncertain because the problems of military procurement and supply were compounded beyond repair by the Duce's obstinate refusal to confront them; instead, they were wished into oblivion by propaganda.<sup>60</sup> Hitler's Germany, it will be remembered, fought for several years before being put on a total-war footing in 1944, but there a solid industrial base and a Prussian administration stood in reserve.<sup>61</sup> The absence of sound military planning in Fascist Italy quickly proved catastrophic. An independent or parallel war could scarcely be sustained for a few months; by the spring of 1941, Italy was well on the way to becoming a Nazi German satellite.<sup>62</sup>

This sorry outcome was a direct legacy of the 'stile Fascista' in foreign affairs. The inattention to detailed planning and to the realities of balance-of-power politics, by which Italy was delivered into Nazi hands, was of a piece with Mussolini's conceit of Fascist Italy's 'universal mission.' Fascist eyes were so fixed on the predestined glories of a distant future that they could not be lowered to gaze on the mundane circumstances of today. Whether such self-delusion should be dignified with the title of a foreign policy is a matter of opinion; but if foreign policy it was, it was certainly revolutionary.

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<sup>58</sup> De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, II, 671-4, 776, 789-93; Quartararo, pp. 579-81, 606-7; G. Guerri, *Giuseppe Bottai: Un fascista critico* (Milan, 1976), pp. 209-10; G. Bastianini, *Uomini, cose, fatti* (Milan, 1959), pp. 70-6, 180-2.

<sup>59</sup> A. Lyttleton, *Seizure of Power*, pp. 306-7, observes that 'the leaders of the 1938-43 opposition to the 'nazification' of Fascism ... were men from the same social and educational background as the majority of the old parliamentary class. They had all been to university' – which was not true of most *gerarchi*. Social and cultural upbringing thus inhibited the old-guard nationalists from breaking totally free from diplomatic norms and conventional *Realpolitik*.

<sup>60</sup> Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, pp. 169-89, 203-5; Knox, pp. 19-33, 58-9, 76-9, 159, 166, 193-5, 214.

<sup>61</sup> A.S. Milward, *The German Economy at War* (London, 1965); B.A. Carroll, *Design for Total War: Arms and Economics in the Third Reich* (The Hague, 1968).

<sup>62</sup> Knox, pp. 272-85.