HITLER'S ITALIAN ALLIES

This book tries to understand why the Italian armed forces and Fascist regime were so remarkably ineffectual at an activity — war — that was central to their existence. Military-economic weakness, Mussolini's ideological fantasies and strategic megalomania, and Hitler's failure in the wider war made Italian defeat inevitable. But those factors do not wholly account for the peculiarly undignified character of Fascist Italy's final ruin. The book offers an innovative analytical cross-section of the Italian war effort, from society and culture, through politics and war production, to strategy, operations, and tactics, and demonstrates the extent to which Italian military culture — a concept with applications far beyond Fascist Italy or its last war — and the blinkered approach of Italy's major industrial enterprises made humiliation inescapable. The result is a striking portrait of the military institutions and regime whose most significant — if temporary — conquest in 1940–43 was a dusty and useless corner of Africa, British Somaliland. The armed forces proved unable to imagine modern war, much less prepare or fight it. The industrialists, with the connivance of generals, admirals, and dictator, produced the least effective, least numerous, and most overpriced weapons of the Second World War. The regime failed miserably in mobilizing the nation's resources. Hitler's Italian Allies analyzes the resulting disasters, and explains why the Italian armed forces dissolved prematurely and almost without resistance, in stark contrast to the grim fight to the last cartridge of Hitler's army or the fanatical faithfulness unto death of the troops of Imperial Japan.

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HITLER’S ITALIAN ALLIES

Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–43

MacGregor Knox
The London School of Economics and Political Science
per Tina, anche questa volta e sempre
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This short book is in one sense an accident. It emerged from the rewriting of an old essay on Italian “military effectiveness” in the Second World War to fit within a book, Common Destiny Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, that sought to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Italian and German dictatorships. The new questions that purpose imposed – about the underlying causes of the striking contrast in wartime performance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany – soon cracked open the narrowly military-technical framework of the original essay. The mass of new primary sources and often excellent Italian secondary material on many aspects of Italy’s war that have appeared since the late 1980s likewise opened up entirely new questions, especially about the performance of the war economy. I pursued those questions obstinately, suppressing the guilty realization that I was writing an essay so long and complex that it would inevitably destroy the symmetry of the book for which I had intended it. When I had finished, I found I had written a novella-length piece that could and should stand on its own. Conversely, its sections on army operations and tactics, once equipped with an appropriate introduction and conclusion, fit well within the original collection as counterpart to a chapter on the unique synthesis between Prusso-German military tradition and Nazi revolution that propelled the Wehrmacht’s fight to the last cartridge in 1943–45.

In a broader sense this book, whatever its immediate origins, is nevertheless no accident. It derives from more than two decades of research

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and thought about Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and their last war. It covers material and issues largely unfamiliar to the English-speaking public within an analytical framework or frameworks often viewed as eccentric in Italy. It exploits German as well as Italian sources, a quality still relatively rare in the Italian literature, although happily less unknown now than in earlier decades.

The book’s analytical purpose dictates only brief chronological narrative of the military events, and rules out treatment of many aspects of Italy’s war. The internal politics of the regime and the dissolution of the home front in 1942–43 are best understood through the readings suggested in the bibliographical note. The wartime travails of Italian society, a subject of great fascination and some recent work in Italian, appear only briefly; however bizarre it may seem to an academic discipline under the domination of social and cultural microhistory, the conduct of war is subject to autonomous laws. Fascist Italy’s military failure, like that of France in 1940, was first and foremost a failure of Italy’s military culture and military institutions.

But by way of compensation, the book offers a large-scale analytical cross-section of the armed forces, Fascist regime, and their political and social roots that seeks to clarify the much-debated causes of Italy’s humiliation in the great war that Mussolini sought for twenty years and finally found. At its deepest level, and despite an occasional note of perhaps misdirected irony, the book is in its peculiar way an expression of a profound and enduring affection for Italy acquired in childhood along with – and through – the language itself. The critical analysis that Clausewitz taught, the unblinking search for the causes of things, is the fittest commemoration of the immense suffering that guerra fascista in alliance with Hitler inflicted upon Italy and its neighbors.

Many friends and acquaintances have helped me over the years, but three in particular have been indispensable to the writing of this book. Giorgio Rochat, with whom I have sometimes cordially disagreed, has been ever generous with copies of his own works, which are vital to understanding the subject, and with works by others. Brian R. Sullivan


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 supplied me, as he has for many years, with far-ranging bibliographical counsel and encouragement, and with documents turned up during his extensive archival explorations. And Lucio Ceva, whose work on the Italian armed forces and military-industrial complex in the interwar period and Second World War defines the field, has been tireless in keeping me up-to-date bibliographically and in offering incisive criticism and encouragement in equal measure. I also thank Allen R. Millett and Williamson Murray for permission to adapt parts of the essay from which this book ultimately derives, “The Italian Armed Forces, 1940–1943,” which appeared under their editorship in Military Effectiveness, vol. 3 (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 136–79.

I remain above all immeasurably beholden to my wife, Tina Isaacs, and I dedicate this book to her in love and gratitude. The faults of commission or omission it may yet contain are nevertheless my responsibility alone.

MacGregor Knox
London, December 1999
ABBREVIATIONS

AAR: after-action report.
ACS: Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Central State Archive, Rome).
DRZW: Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg, 6 vols. to date (Stuttgart, 1979– ).
NARA: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (cited as microcopy/roll/frame, microcopy/serial/frame or record group/box/folder).
OO: Benito Mussolini, Opera omnia (Florence and Rome, 1951–78).
USE: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico (Italian Army Historical Office, Rome).
Abbreviations

VCSMG 1939–43: Antonello Biagini and Fernando Frattolillo, eds.,
   Verbali delle riunioni tenute dal capo di Stato Maggiore Generale, 4 vols.