

INTRODUCTION

Hitler's decision to send troops to North Africa was made with considerable reluctance, and his motives for finally agreeing were political rather than military. Right from the very beginning of his political career he was convinced that an alliance with Italy should be the cornerstone of German foreign policy. There were many powerful opponents to such an idea within the National Socialist hierarchy. It would, after all, mean that Germany would have to abandon any claim to German-speaking South Tyrol, which had been awarded to Italy at the Versailles peace conference. There was widespread contempt for the Italians as an inferior race and soldiers pointed to the wretched state of their armed forces, as well as their pitiful lack of natural resources. Conventional wisdom was that in the event of a major European war, Italy would be more of a hindrance than help. Hitler, who thought in ideological and political rather than strategic terms, would have none of this. He shared many of these reservations about Italy as a partner, but believed that the two countries had a common destiny, as well as a compatibility of interests, and saw in Mussolini an outstanding leader, a faithful comrade and loyal partner in a common cause. The relationship became increasingly strained, but Hitler's loyalty to Mussolini never broke, not even when his bankrupt regime lay in ruins.

Italy did not enter the war until shortly before France's surrender, much to the relief of Hitler's senior military advisers. Meanwhile Major-General Erwin Rommel, a highly ambitious soldier who had won the *Pour le Mérite*, Germany's highest military award, in the First World War, had established a close relationship with Hitler. He was attached to Hitler's headquarters during the Polish campaign as one of the 16 officers and 274 men responsible for the Führer's safety. He first attracted attention as the forceful commander of an armoured

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division in France. The state secretary in the Ministry of Propaganda, Karl Hanke, was attached to Rommel's staff and gave him access to Goebbels, who in turn did much to enhance Rommel's reputation. The unusual appointment of an infantry officer to command an armoured unit was due to Hitler's influence, which gave the grateful and appreciative Rommel the reputation of being a Nazi general. Rommel admired Hitler and was grateful to him for furthering his career, but he had no time for National Socialist ideology and it is highly unlikely that he ever read the signed copy of *Mein Kampf* that Hitler gave him in February 1940. Baldur von Schirach, the head of the Hitler Youth, was perfectly correct when he told Martin Bormann that Rommel 'was in no way to be considered as a Nazi'.

Hitler, who in 1940 was at the very pinnacle of his power, basked in popular adulation. He had crushed the 'hereditary enemy' and made good the 'shame of Versailles'. Germany dominated Europe, from the Bug to the Atlantic coast, from Norway to the Brenner; the 'racial comrades' now began to enjoy the profits gouged from the plunder and exploitation of those outside the 'racial community'. Wilhelm Keitel, in his capacity as head of the High Command of the Armed Forces, proclaimed Hitler to be 'the greatest commander of all times'. The British had ignominiously retreated at Dunkirk, leaving the bulk of their equipment behind, and had virtually nothing with which to resist an invasion that was expected at any moment. Final victory seemed to be only a matter of time. The Security Service (SD) and Security Police (SiPo) got ready for the invasion, drawing up a lengthy list of prominent figures to be liquidated shortly after the arrival of the Wehrmacht on British soil. On 31 July, confident that Britain was already beaten, Hitler issued instructions to the Wehrmacht for planning to begin for a two-pronged attack on the Soviet Union towards Moscow and Kiev. The invasion was to begin in May 1941. The army, ever eager to oblige, had already begun planning such an attack when Hitler first ordered Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief, to examine 'the Russian problem' on 21 June.

There was ample reason for the Germans to be so confident that Britain was on the verge of collapse. By late June statisticians were warning Fighter Command that within six weeks they would have no aircraft left. On 12 August the Germans inflicted severe damage on the vital radar stations on the Channel coast. Attention now turned to Operation 'Sea Lion', designed to deliver the *coup de grâce* to Britain;

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but for an invasion to be successful Germany had first to gain control over British airspace. It was at this point that Göring's Luftwaffe made the fatal mistake of stopping the attacks on airfields and radar installations in southern England and concentrated on bombing cities and towns. The Germans did not count on Churchill's dogged determination to continue the fight against all the odds and whatever the cost, nor on the gallantry and skill of the fighter pilots in 'The Few', many of whom were exiled Poles. They saved Britain, and ultimately Europe from Nazi tyranny. This was indeed Britain's 'finest hour'. On 17 September Hitler cancelled Operation 'Sea Lion', the invasion plan, but he still clung to a vague hope that Britain would in the end come round to see that an alliance with Nazi Germany would be a wiser course.

The Germans were now faced with an awkward dilemma. Would it be unwise to attack the Soviet Union before finishing off the British, or would an attack on the Soviet Union bring the British to their senses and force them to realise that it lay in their best interests to co-operate with Germany in confronting the Communist menace? Failing this, once the Soviet Union was destroyed, as most experts believed would be achieved with a matter of weeks, the British would have to throw in the towel, and the awkward business of a cross-channel invasion against an overwhelming naval force would be avoided.

It was at this point that the Italians found themselves in serious difficulties and reluctantly admitted that they desperately needed German help to save themselves from defeat in North Africa. Italy had entered the war in June 1940, confident that the war would be over by September. Against the advice of cooler heads, Mussolini imagined that his ragtag army in Libya, now secure from an attack from the French in Tunisia, could take on the British in Egypt. The German military knew full well that their gallant allies could not do it alone, but some were tempted by the glittering prospect of a German-Italian armoured force seizing the Suez Canal which, given Britain's command over the Mediterranean, was still an essential lifeline for the Commonwealth and Empire.

By the end of August 1940, by which time it was clear that an invasion of southern England would not be possible until the following year, Hitler began to think of a strategy for driving the British out of the Mediterranean. The Panzer were not to be used in 'Sea Lion' and would not go into action against the Soviet Union until the following spring.

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Therefore two armoured divisions could be sent to North Africa, without which the Italian offensive against Egypt was likely to fail. At the same time Gibraltar would be seized, but this would only be possible were Franco's Spain and Pétain's Vichy regime prepared to co-operate. Both men stubbornly refused and Hitler, who was absorbed with preparations for the campaign against the Soviet Union, was obliged to put the plan on hold.

By this time fundamental differences between the various branches of the German armed forces, as well as between the Germans and the Italians, had become glaringly apparent. The basic issue was whether the attack on the Soviet Union should be launched before Britain was defeated. Grand Admiral Erich Raeder and the navy, thinking in global rather than continental terms, were adamant that Britain had first to be knocked out of the war, and that this goal could best be achieved not by a cross-channel invasion, but by defeat in Egypt and the Mediterranean. Indeed, Raeder went even further by suggesting that with the defeat of Britain the problem of the Soviet Union would take on a quite different complexion.

Hitler took the opposite view. He came to the conclusion that the simplest way to bring Britain to its knees was to smash the Soviet Union in a lightning campaign. With no hope of support on the continent of Europe, Britain would be forced to sue for peace. Within Hitler's military entourage there was a considerable degree of disagreement, until after weeks of cajoling, bullying and tantrums they were all brought into line, albeit with varying degrees of reservation. Some soldiers agreed with the navy that priority should be given to defeating Britain in the Mediterranean. Others were intoxicated by the vision of a vast campaign of conquest in the east. A few cautious souls wondered whether an attack on the Soviet Union might be altogether too hazardous an operation. But the idea of sending armoured forces to North Africa was agreeable to all three positions. Those who wanted to defeat Britain in the Mediterranean were enthusiastic. Those who gave priority to the invasion of the Soviet Union felt that limited operations in North Africa would provide excellent cover for their true intentions. Those with second thoughts welcomed the idea of tying up German forces in another theatre. There were still two outstanding issues. The first was that of how substantial the commitment to North Africa should be. Once the second option was adopted it was clear that it would be modest. Absolute priority had to be given to building up the largest

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possible reserves of men and matériel for the massive attack on the stronghold of Jewish Bolshevism and the foundation of a vast racially purified eastern empire. The other thorny issue was the attitude of Mussolini.

The Duce was determined not to play second fiddle to the Germans, and to fight a 'parallel war'. In fact he imagined that he might be able to avoid doing much fighting at all. All that was needed was a few thousand Italian dead to earn an honourable seat at the armistice negotiations. He had heard that 'Sea Lion' had been postponed indefinitely and that Hitler was seeking a diplomatic solution, which he was confident in achieving. At the same time he was told that Keitel had announced that the seizure of Cairo was more important than that of London. Encouraged by the success of the Duke of Aosta in driving the British out of British Somaliland in early August, while conveniently overlooking the fact that an overwhelmingly superior Italian force had suffered almost ten times as many losses compared with the British, Mussolini was determined to launch an offensive in North Africa to deliver a final mortal blow to an enemy that appeared to be on the verge of total collapse.

Mussolini's generals were appalled at such aggressive posturing. They knew that the Italian forces in Tripoli were no match for the British and that an immediate offensive would end in disaster. They pleaded for an indefinite postponement. Knowing full well that this was unlikely to happen, they then tried to persuade the Duce to delay the offensive until German units began landing in England. Mussolini ignored all their objections. He turned down the German offer on 6 September 1940 to send Panzer units to North Africa, for fear that his ally would insist on a degree of command and control. On the following day he ordered General Rodolfo Graziani, the commander of the Italian forces in North Africa, to launch an offensive two days later. The British, who were very thin on the ground, prudently retired. Graziani advanced across the empty desert, but all he achieved was to lengthen his lines of communications, while the Western Desert Force took up a defensive position at Mersa Matruh and prepared to strike back.

In late September Hitler began a dramatic and ultimately fatal process of rethinking his grand strategy. Whereas he had hitherto thought purely in terms of a continental strategy, with his Italian partners dealing with the Mediterranean, he now began to think in global terms. It is within this context that the campaign in North Africa,

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apparently a peripheral affair, played such an important role, even though Hitler never realised its true significance. He knew that Britain's survival depended to a large extent on assistance from the United States. Although he tried to downplay this factor during his meeting with Mussolini at the Brenner Pass on 4 October 1940, he argued that it might be wise to make preparations for a confrontation with the United States. To this end Germany should create a firm foothold in north-west Africa, make use of Vichy's military installations in Casablanca and Dakar, and establish bases in the Canaries, the Cape Verdes and Azores, whence submarines and the long-range Amerika bombers could disrupt Atlantic shipping and raid the United States. At the same time Hitler made yet another dramatic change of tack. Whereas he had previously been strongly opposed to the idea of Germany attempting to rebuild an overseas empire, although he had often used a threat to reclaim the colonies lost at Versailles as a diplomatic bargaining chip, he now saw these new strategic bases as a means of safeguarding a German 'Middle Africa'.

Mittelafrika had been a dream of the German colonial lobby since Bismarck had first made his ill-fated move to enter the race for overseas possessions. It was seen either as complementary or as an alternative to the concept of a German-dominated *Mitteleuropa*. That Hitler made this dramatic switch was due in large part to pleading from Raeder and the foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, both of whom were anxious to finish off Britain before tackling the Soviet Union. Hitler, believing that the swift defeat of the Soviet Union would force Britain out of the war, saw no urgency in the matter, but was also anxious to keep up the momentum during the hiatus before 'Barbarossa' was launched. Ribbentrop's concept of a 'continental bloc', an alliance of all the countries from the Iberian peninsula to Japan, depended on the active participation of Spain and Vichy France and, since it would include the Soviet Union, would only have been a temporary measure. None of this was possible. Franco chose to remain aloof, thus saving Gibraltar from attack, and denying the Germans use of bases in Spanish Morocco. Pétain also would not commit himself wholeheartedly to the Third Reich, so that Vichy's colonies were denied to Germany. The Soviet Union was naturally wary of joining a revamped version of the Anti-Comintern Pact. Nothing came of this new grand strategic concept, but Hitler's vision of world domination remained vivid. Mussolini was greatly relieved when it all came to nothing, for he feared

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that an alliance between Germany, France and Spain would be at Italy's expense.

By October Mussolini had come to the reluctant conclusion that he needed German help in order to dislodge the British from Mersa Matruh, but he still hoped to continue with parallel warfare. In other words he wanted the Panzer without the Germans. Franz Halder, chief of the German general staff, knew that the Italians did not have the ghost of a chance in North Africa without help from German armour, and pointed out that it would take at least ten weeks for the troops to arrive, so that an offensive could not be mounted until the New Year. Mussolini accepted the idea of German support in principle, the Germans set to work examining the situation in North Africa, units of 3 Panzer Division were allocated for duty in North Africa, but no further practical steps were taken.

Mussolini, who had managed to convince himself that Graziani had won a great victory, now prepared his next dramatic move. On 28 October 1940 the Italians invaded Greece. They were soon in serious trouble. The Italians were, as the German military had already assumed, no match for the Greeks. A counterattack forced the Italians back into Albania where they remained tied up over the winter. These developments were most unwelcome to Hitler. The British responded to the Italian attack by establishing a base on Crete and sending troops to Greece. This left the Romanian oilfields, which were essential to fuel the armour for 'Barbarossa', vulnerable to attack. Hitler's attention was thus once again drawn to the Mediterranean, where he was determined to strengthen the southern flank of the forthcoming eastern offensive.

The British launched their offensive in North Africa at the beginning of December in Operation 'Compass'. Germany's Mediterranean strategy quickly began to unravel. Franco still refused to co-operate with the Germans in an attack on Gibraltar. Vichy France would not be lured into closer co-operation. The Italians were on the run, and it seemed likely that they would soon be kicked out of North Africa, which in turn could well lead to the collapse of the increasingly unpopular Fascist regime. That this did not happen was due in large part to the decision by the Defence Committee of the British Cabinet on 8 January to send a substantial contingent from the Middle East to Greece in anticipation of a German invasion.

Hitler, who was concentrating almost exclusively on preparations for 'Barbarossa', professed to be interested in North Africa only in

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as much as were the British to be victorious they would be free to send their troops elsewhere, and an Italian defeat could well lead to Mussolini's downfall. Having convinced himself that the campaign in the Soviet Union would be short and decisive, he failed to grasp a golden opportunity to destroy the only country still at war with Germany. He felt that all that was needed was to ensure that the Italians stayed in Tripoli. For this a modest armoured force would be quite sufficient. Once the Soviet Union collapsed the Germans would sweep down upon the Middle East from the Caucasus, so that there would be no need to face the nightmarish logistical problem of sending a large army across thousands of kilometres of waterless desert. His soldiers, who needed everything available not only for 'Barbarossa', but also for the invasion of Greece in Operation 'Marita', designed to secure its southern flank, were in full agreement.

Mussolini visited Hitler once again in mid-January 1941 and agreed to Operation 'Sunflower', the dispatch of a German force to Tripoli. He did so with considerable reluctance. Although the force was to be placed under Italian command, it was obvious that this was the end of parallel warfare. Having failed miserably in Greece, with his 10 Army in North Africa destroyed, and his East African empire falling apart, he now would have to bend to the exigencies of German strategy. Even though the German forces allotted to North Africa were initially very small, consisting of a light division, a Panzer regiment and an artillery unit, they had in Rommel a forceful commander who basked in Hitler's favour, and who was determined to go his own way. He was certainly not a man who would easily bow to his nominal superiors.

Both the Italians and the Germans knew full well that what was needed were Panzer to enable a mobile forward defence of Tripoli. This alone would allow for sufficient space for manoeuvre to counter an outflanking movement, as well as for an aerodrome for immediate air support. The Panzer was the Germans' key weapon, which they had learnt to master in the interwar years. The British had invented the tank, but apart from a few interesting experiments in the late 1920s had not found a way to integrate the weapon. The Red Army was obsessed with the tank, adopting the English name for it, and the T-34 outclassed all others in 1941. But it was the Germans who found the answer to how best to use the weapon at the operational level. They developed the Panzer division in which the Panzer were integrated

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with infantry, artillery, signals and reconnaissance, supported by supply columns and specialised engineers, with all units mechanised so as to be able to move at the same pace as the Panzer. Germany's opponents had nothing to stop the Panzer division with its awesome versatility and daunting speed. It is for this reason that Rommel, an infantryman whose first experience of commanding Panzer was in France in 1940, was able with strictly limited forces to deliver such a series of stunning blows against the British forces in North Africa. The British, who were left helpless against such operational brilliance, were painfully slow to learn, and only prevailed owing to sheer guts and an overwhelming superiority in men and matériel.

Prevail they did, thereby scoring the first great victory over the Germans, a British victory that was only to be outshone by General Slim's brilliant campaign in Burma. For this reason the literature on the North African campaign in English, particularly on the Battle of El Alamein, is truly vast. The concentration, naturally enough, is on the British side, on the shifting reputations of the leading personalities, as well as 8th Army's bitter experience of learning on the battlefield how to cope with a highly skilled enemy. The British, from Churchill and Montgomery down through the ranks, were fascinated by Rommel to the point that he came to be regarded as almost superhuman. Goebbels was amazed at the assistance given to him by the enemy in boosting Rommel's reputation. Setbacks could be attributed to his genius, the defeat of his army represented as an extraordinary feat of arms. Early biographies, such as that by Desmond Young, were positively adulatory, while Liddell Hart's edition of Rommel's papers provided further material to enhance his reputation. A much more balanced account was provided by David Irving in his substantial biography, but he is unable to give a full account of the North African campaign in a work that covers an entire eventful career. More recent works in German by Ralf Georg Reuth and Maurice-Philip Remy are far too sketchy to be of much value. American historians have, like their British colleagues, examined the US army's brutal education in warfare after the 'Torch' landings, but are far more critical of the leadership and less triumphant in victory. They only had to deal with Rommel when he was already defeated, although they had a taste of his medicine at Kasserine. Besides they had, in General George Patton, a Rommel of their own.

German historians have largely ignored the North African campaign, not only because it was peripheral, but also because their major

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concerns have been with the eastern campaign and the degree of complicity of the Wehrmacht with National Socialist atrocities. This latter issue simply does not arise in desert war, which was fought according to established norms, although recent work by Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Cüppers shows that the SS, assisted by local Arabs, was ready to set to work slaughtering Jews, once Rommel had cleared the British out of the Middle East. Obviously the campaign in the Soviet Union was a far larger operation, and it was there that the war in Europe was decided, but defeat in North Africa significantly altered the strategic balance by immediately facing the Germans with the difficulty of dealing with the threat of a second front, thus draining the eastern front of valuable assets.

The North African campaign has usually been seen, as in the title of Rommel's account, as a 'War without Hate', and thus as further proof that the German army was not involved in any sordid butchering, which was left to Himmler's SS. While it is perfectly true that the German troops in North Africa fought with great distinction and gallantry, and that Rommel was ever scrupulous in the observation of the rules of war, to the point of deliberately ignoring Hitler's orders to the contrary, it was fortunate for their subsequent reputation that the SS murderers who followed in their wake did not have an opportunity to get to work. Hitler saw the Arabs as useful temporary allies against the Jews and the 'English', by which he meant the British Commonwealth and Empire. There could be no call for ethnic cleansing in the barely populated Western Desert. The 8th Army barred the way to Egypt and Palestine, thus denying special units from the SS the opportunity to set about the mass murder of Jews in close collaboration with the local populations. In the urban areas of Tripolitania and Tunisia German efforts to exploit and eliminate the Jewish communities were constrained by the Italians under whose command they served. Germany's Italian allies did not approve of their intense anti-Semitism and eliminatory zeal. They were determined that Jews who held Italian citizenship should be exempted from any form of discrimination, and with their colonial ambitions did not approve of German efforts to win over the Arabs to their cause by apparently supporting their national aspirations and fanning their anti-Jewish sentiments.

The political dimension of the campaign is ignored in two lively works of popular military history by Paul Carrell and Wolf Heckmann, the latter providing a stoutly revisionist account of Rommel's