



Frontispiece: Mussolini with marshal Pietro Badoglio

Able, ambitious and self-promoting, marshal Pietro Badoglio became the leading military personality in Fascist Italy. A Piedmontese soldier of the old school, loyal to the king above all else and therefore something of a potential threat to Mussolini, he was made chief of the armed forces' general staff in 1925, a post he held for the next fifteen years whilst simultaneously serving for part of the time as governor-general of Libya (1928–33). His task was to co-ordinate the war preparations of the armed services, though after only two years Mussolini reduced both his status and his powers. Regarding war against Britain and France as potentially disastrous for Italy, Badoglio oversaw fitful attempts at co-ordination in such a way as to make it difficult still to know whether he was skilfully resisting Mussolini's policies or cynically going through the motions of doing his job.

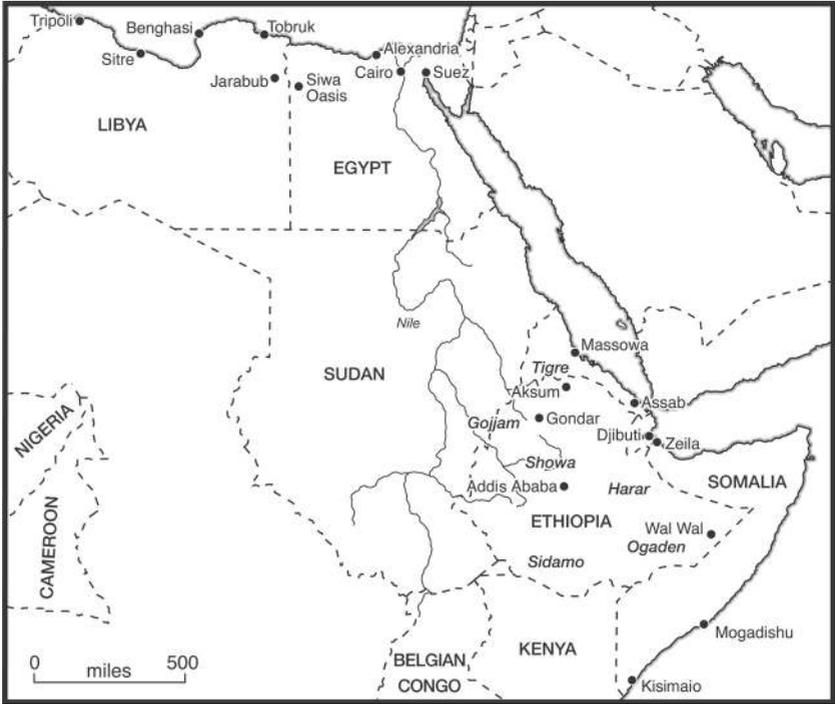


Map 1. Central Europe



Map 2. South East Europe and the Balkans

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Excerpt  
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Map 3. Ethiopia and its neighbours

## Introduction

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Fascist foreign policy has been the object of intensive scrutiny by historians ever since the regime collapsed – and indeed before it did so – but no consensus has yet emerged as to its goals or its fundamental characteristics. Anglo-Saxon historians, led by Denis Mack Smith and Donald Watt, have until recently tended by and large to see it as a gigantic bluff carried out by a blustering and incompetent poseur, the keys to whose character and make-up are to be found in a propensity for violence which was apparent in his early years, in his choice of journalism as a *métier*, and in the twists and turns of a political career apparently bereft of any principle save the acquisition and maintenance of power. Renzo De Felice, Mussolini's foremost Italian biographer, and his pupils present a very different picture. In their eyes Mussolini was an industrious and politically adroit realist who sought for as long as possible to 'balance' between the rising power of Nazi Germany on the continent and the extant power of Great Britain to control the seas that surrounded it. War – outside the confines of Italy's colonies – was not central to his plans and war with England something not sought or even accepted as in due course inevitable, but forced upon him. When a European war broke out in September 1939 it was unexpected and at that moment unwelcome. For the next nine months or so he waited, calculating that he would not have to fight because the Germans were doing the job for him and hoping to expand his 'Roman Empire' on Hitler's coat-tails. In June 1940, believing that the collapse of the western democracies was imminent, Mussolini pounced.<sup>1</sup>

While the history of Italy's foreign policy between 1922 and 1939 is well known and strongly contested ground, that of her armed forces is, for most English-speaking readers at least, more or less unknown territory. The view that bluff was the defining feature of Fascism provides an explanation which unites the leading English historian of the older school with the doyen of Italian military history. For Denis Mack Smith, it was not a shortage of resources which was chiefly responsible for the military inadequacies of Fascism, but the fact that the money was

2 *Mussolini and his Generals*

spent on the wrong things: ‘grandiose fascist buildings. . . sports stadiums, barracks and splendid parades’. In the hollow world of Fascist posturing, the Duce’s need to manipulate the armed forces had deleterious consequences which magnified and even institutionalised their shortcomings. Particularly, the need to ensure that the high command caused him as little trouble as possible led him to appoint a series of lickspittles who offered no danger of opposition – and no hope of reform and regeneration – because they possessed little or no initiative.<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Rochat for his part sees an army not intended for war at all but one designed and maintained to suppress domestic political opposition. Because it was unfit for war – a charge which could certainly and with some justice be extended to cover the air force and perhaps the navy as well – Mussolini pursued a policy ‘which backed imperialistic ambitions not with force, but with propaganda and bluff’.<sup>3</sup>

The full nature, extent and causes of the military ‘bluff’ – if indeed that is quite what it was – upon which Mussolini’s aggressive ambitions relied have remained largely unplumbed. Some advances in our understanding have occurred. Latterly the less than dazzling performance of the three services during the Second World War has, not unsurprisingly, focused attention on their many shortcomings and led scholars to delve into the inter-war years in an attempt to identify both the nature and the causes of their deficiencies.<sup>4</sup> However, in many respects the picture remains skeletal. Nor has much been done to examine in detail the strands of foreign and military policy in Mussolini’s Italy in order to explore their relationship and assess the extent and nature of the responsibility borne by those on both sides of the politico–military divide for the position in which Fascist Italy found itself in June 1940. Discarding bluff as an unnecessary and unconvincing explanation, MacGregor Knox has suggested that the answer is to be found in institutionalised military incompetence deriving primarily from the recruitment, traditions and training of the military. When set alongside the picture of an ‘intentionalist’ Mussolini who saw war as the means by which to achieve his long-term goals, the catalogue of failures and inadequacies which in 1940 condemned the armed forces to defeat answers some questions but raises others.<sup>5</sup>

What follows, then, is an attempt to marry two hitherto largely separate approaches to the history of Fascist Italy in order to see how they fit – or do not fit – together and to explain why things happened as they did and produced the outcomes they did. Since it would be impossible to attempt such a task without clearly coming down somewhere in the contested ground of Fascist foreign policy, I have perforce had to develop my own picture of what that policy was. Any claim it may have to originality perhaps lies in a strategic approach to the analysis of the international

scene from Rome's point of view which puts more emphasis on the smaller Mediterranean and Balkan powers than is often the case. I have also paid more attention to the incoming intelligence on which Rome could draw in making policy than is commonly given to it. As far as Mussolini goes, I take the view that he was single-minded and brutal but also politically competent and certainly not a fool; had he been, he could not have maintained his domestic position so effectively for almost two decades. Like Stalin his calculations were rational, though their rationality was not that of a Chamberlain or an Eden. The armed forces over which he presided developed under many pressures. Each had its own character, purpose, strategic outlook and leadership – gifted or otherwise. All three services had to accommodate themselves to Fascism and to its leader, a task which they undertook with differing degrees of enthusiasm and one which was profoundly affected by their leader's conceptions of his role and theirs.

## 1 The beginning of the Fascist era, 1922–1925

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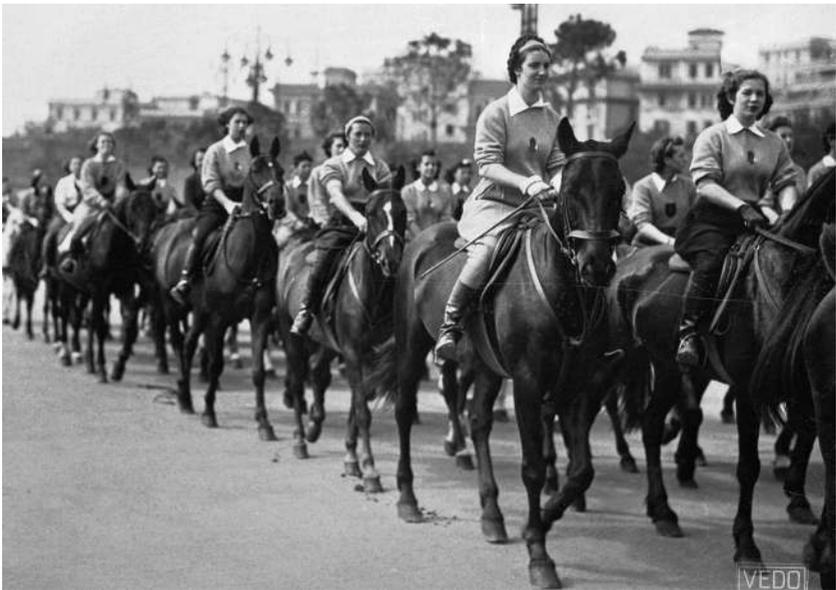


Fig. 1 Mobilising the nation: female Fascist soldiers

As Italy entered the First World War, Mussolini identified the spiritual preparation of the population as one of the ‘co-efficients’ of victory. By the time that he came to power he was fully convinced that the psychological mobilisation of the nation was every bit as important as its physical mobilisation. The militarisation of society which he oversaw, and which was purveyed in images such as this, had two purposes. On the one hand it was an act of propaganda directed at Italians and foreigners alike to show them that Italy was ready for war. On the other, it was a practical act designed to ready the Italian people for the war he expected to come.

### **Mussolini, military power and the goals of foreign policy**

As a young man, Benito Mussolini was by instinct, upbringing and inclination entirely out of sympathy with the Liberal state and with the army which served it. He was, however, far from being a pacifist, as his violent childhood and adolescence went to prove. A native of the 'red' Romagna and the son of a radical socialist, he combined as a youth the ideals of an anarchist with the enthusiasms of a militant nationalist; in 1898, at the time of the Greco–Turkish war and then aged fifteen, he dreamed of fighting with Amilcare Cipriani's *legione garibaldina* to free Crete from its oppressors. Having returned to temporary exile in Switzerland in December 1903 partly in order to avoid conscript service, he bowed to his mother's wishes eleven months later and came back to fulfil his military obligations under the terms of a general amnesty for military deserters proclaimed to celebrate the birth of prince Umberto. Between January 1905 and September 1906 he served with the 10th Bersaglieri stationed at Verona, participating with enthusiasm in the everyday life of the army and earning the accolade in his leaving certificate that he had always distinguished himself 'for capacity, zeal and excellent (*ottima*) conduct'.<sup>1</sup>

Passing from Marxist socialist to interventionist in 1914, Mussolini was called up with his class of reservists on 31 August 1915. For eighteen months he served in the front line, earning promotion to corporal but failing to pass officer candidate school, almost certainly because of his background of subversive socialism. The experience impressed upon him the 'mechanical' nature of industrial war (something of which he did not altogether approve), the courage of the rank and file and the importance of national discipline if the *nazione armata* was to triumph.<sup>2</sup> On the Carso in February 1917, he was seriously wounded when a mortar exploded during ranging fire, killing five of his companions. After five months in hospital, he was sent on convalescent leave which was to be extended until the end of the war.<sup>3</sup>

Mussolini's reading of Italy's experience in the world war in which he had participated – albeit to a limited extent – led him to conclude that the key to victory lay in the superiority of mass armies that were not mere inert instruments of the high command but were morally as well as physically mobilised for war – the *massa cosciente* ('conscious mass'). The nation standing behind them must be militarised to provide the maximum moral and material support. Weapons were by no means to be neglected – in August 1918 he called for 'more men and more fire' – but not all of them met the needs of the Italian front; 'elsewhere machines are enough,' he argued, 'here machines are needed but above all men'.

The ‘mental fossilisation’ of the general staff earned his disdain, particularly because it failed to recognise, as Napoleon had done, that speed of manoeuvre was the key to victory. Defeat at Caporetto had finally changed Italy’s war for the better, leading to improvements in the morale and material conditions of the army which reflected an identity of outlook between army and nation that had not existed before. Once in power, however, he characteristically shifted his position and decided that the recovery of 1918 had not been due to the institution of a more liberal regime but to the imposition of ‘the necessary discipline of war’.<sup>4</sup>

In both military matters and foreign affairs Mussolini was untrained and technically quite unprepared, learning as he went along in a process of self-education. His military education, such as it was, appears to have come largely from reading, from which he took the lessons he wanted. In 1933, he cited Marshal Gallieni’s *Carnets* to justify taking over the war ministry for a second time when faced, like its author, with the absolute ignorance of a backward general staff; and he found in Joffre’s *Memoirs* both evidence of a decisive ‘Fascist style’ and useful lessons on how to remedy the defects of a high command paralysed by peacetime routines and ‘excessive scholasticism’.<sup>5</sup> After the Second World War, and in circumstances in which they had much to explain, his generals broadly agreed on his talents as a supreme commander. General Mario Roatta, head of SIM during the early 1930s and an adroit if unscrupulous operator in a world of manipulators, claimed that ‘(T)he substance, the true essence of military questions, escaped him completely’.<sup>6</sup> General Ubaldo Soddu, deputy chief of the army general staff and then under-secretary of state for war in the later 1930s and a convinced Fascist, had seen at first hand an intuitive genius at synthesis – ‘or pseudo-synthesis’ – who despised technical experts in general and soldiers in particular, who used military history as a source of anecdotes about great captains, and yet who despite all his defects had ‘a genuine strategic mind’.<sup>7</sup> In foreign affairs, where his skills could make him an effective interlocutor on the international stage, Mussolini proved a rapid learner but one whose style was less appreciated abroad than at home.<sup>8</sup>

To his early domestic critics and to some historians, Mussolini’s foreign policy in these years operated according to no discernible and considered plan; rather, it seemed ‘more like a random and unco-ordinated striking-out in all directions in the hope of scoring points on the cheap’.<sup>9</sup> In fact, although he did not run it along the polished grooves of traditional diplomatic practice, Mussolini’s foreign policy was neither as random nor as unfocused as it has sometimes been made out to be. The broad motive forces driving it were well established in his political credo by 1922. Aggressive nationalism deriving in part from the concurrence of