Introduction

On 10 June 1940, despite a distinct lack of enthusiasm from both the German and Italian military high commands, Benito Mussolini formally joined the war on the Axis side. That evening he gave a speech from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia in Rome to an assembled crowd, informing them that their country was going to war to stop 'the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the west'.[1] In reality, much of that 'stopping' had already been done by Germany: most of the British personnel had already been evacuated from the continent to a homeland faced with the prospect of invasion, while France would soon sign an armistice. What it did achieve was to transform the war by spreading it beyond the boundaries of Europe and igniting a long and bloody contest to control the Mediterranean. It was the ultimate ability of the Allies to prevail in controlling its waterways and thence strangle Axis communications at sea, which proved vital to securing victory. This forced the collapse of the Italo-German position across the broadly defined 'Mediterranean theatre', removed the threat to key British imperial possessions and ensured the defeat of Fascist Italy.

The Italian entry into the conflict was undertaken in order to deliver on Mussolini's long-held ambition of building a Mediterranean empire. With France now supine, realising this dream appeared to require one simple objective: to 'drive the British from the Eastern Mediterranean'.[2] Building and sustaining such an empire would require vast quantities of supplies, a requirement that would be exacerbated by the increased demands of expeditionary warfare. Given the geography of the Mediterranean, there was only one realistic method for the creation and sustainment of this new empire: to ship vast quantities of men, vehicles, munitions, fuel and supplies across the Mediterranean Sea. Axis shipping was in abundance across the Mediterranean, fulfilling multiple roles over the 1940–44 period in what became a sprawling maritime logistics network. Its best-known use was to transport vital stores and reinforcements from Italy to North Africa, to conduct and support the mobile land campaign that took place there for almost three years. Once these men

and materiel had been transferred, they then had to be delivered to the frontline. This was achieved through a mixture of overland haulage and coastal shipping, which carried cargo from the main Libyan port of Tripoli to the advance Axis ports along the coast, such as Benghazi, Derna and Tobruk, when they were in Axis possession. Beyond North Africa, a seaborne system of supply was also vital to sustaining important Axis island territories from Sardinia to the Aegean. Finally, it was essential to the Italian war economy itself, as Italy was incapable of producing sufficient quantities of key resources such as oil, coal and iron domestically, and so relied on imports.[3]

The efforts of the Axis powers to develop a maritime supply chain to support their expansionist aims brought them into conflict with Britain, the dominant sea power in the region, which relied upon the Mediterranean for its own trade and supply.[4] Shipping was at the heart of this conflict and forms the central focus of this book. It shows that Allied efforts to curtail Axis shipping in the region were crucial to their ultimate victory in North Africa, the Middle East and southern Europe. This was so for two reasons: first the interdiction of supplies at sea decisively degraded Axis fighting capability on land, particularly in the campaigns in North Africa. Second, the overall attrition to Axis shipping resources fatally undermined their ability to sustain a wider Mediterranean position by depriving them of the means to support their various overseas territories.

This attrition to vital Axis shipping resources caused a fundamental collapse of their entire Mediterranean position due to the systematic isolation and debilitation of key logistical and air staging posts. Consequently, the retention of outposts in North Africa, Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily and in the Aegean all became completely untenable. The anti-shipping campaign thus played a central role in reversing the fortunes from a position of Axis dominance in mid-1942, when they exercised control of nearly the entire theatre, to one where they retained a hold over a fraction of the sea's northern shore by late 1944. The anti-shipping campaign was thus the fulcrum about which strategy in the theatre pivoted, and the vital enabling factor to ultimate Allied victory.

Sea Power and the Global Second World War

Whilst assessing the relative contribution of sea power to Allied victory in the First World War has proven problematic,[5] historians generally agree that maritime dominance exerted a crucial influence on the outcome of

the Second World War. It received a dedicated chapter in Richard Overy's seminal *Why the Allies Won*, placing it as one among several key causal factors and emphasising the link between operations at sea and those on land. More recently Phillips Payson O'Brien's *How the War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* went much further in making a case for its importance.[6] He minimised the role of the war on land compared to that from the air and at sea, positing that success in these environments had the greatest effect in terms of outstripping Axis production capacity. In a similar vein, Craig Symonds has since argued that while '"boots on the ground" were essential in this war (as they are in every war), it was supremacy at sea that eventually proved decisive'. For Symonds, while operational success at sea was an important factor, it was primarily the Allied ability to build vessels faster than the Axis ability to sink them that enabled this decisive role. Ultimately, the ability to build vast quantities of shipping and retain global sea communications within acceptable levels of loss was absolutely central to Allied victory in the war.[7]

These are key conceptual works that seek to place the importance of the war at sea within the multifaceted, global nature of the Second World War. In a separate strand of literature, historians have sought to determine the importance of the Mediterranean within this same global context and its position within different nations' grand strategy. Douglas Porch has argued forcefully that the Mediterranean was a pivotal theatre for the Allies, with victory there playing a central role in determining the overall outcome.[8] Simon Ball has taken a broader view of the position of the Mediterranean, assessing the changing dynamics of regional hegemony and the importance of the Mediterranean towards great power status, as well as identifying different themes of conflict ongoing in the theatre.[9] Sitting alongside these works are several studies that assess Anglo-American wartime strategy and the various frictions that developed over their disagreements regarding the place of the Mediterranean within it.[10]

The published works across these two strands of literature have delivered important analyses and new lenses through which to assess the outcome of the war. However, these two strands – assessing the paramountcy of sea power in the war and of the Mediterranean respectively – remain largely distinct. Discussions of sea power in the war generally focus on the Battle of the Atlantic and the war in the Pacific, while studies of the Mediterranean are either narrative histories of the engagements at sea or are dominated by the land campaigns around its periphery. This book reverses that trend by placing the anti-shipping

campaign in the Mediterranean at the forefront of its analysis. Doing so enables us to see that success in the maritime war in the Mediterranean was crucial to ultimate Allied victory both in the basin itself, and more broadly.

After all, exerting any form of control over seas or oceans is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the benefits in terms of mobility that this allows the dominant power, or denies the opponent, that is important, a point recognised by key theorists of maritime warfare.[11] As Herbert Richmond succinctly put it immediately after the conflict, in wartime

> Sea power is that form of national strength which enables its possessor to send his armies and commerce across those stretches of sea and ocean which lie between his country or the country of his allies, and those territories to which he needs access in war; and to prevent his enemy from doing the same.[12]

In this sense, while the importance of shipping within the global context of war has received historical attention,[13] the impact within and importance of the Mediterranean has been underestimated. In other words, by understanding the shipping war in the Mediterranean, we simultaneously gain a fresh perspective on both an important theatre, and on the global Second World War.

Historians, Shipping and the Mediterranean War

Beyond the literature with a global scope, the war in the Mediterranean certainly does not lack in quantity of specialist studies, but this historiography is segmented and is missing a holistic approach. The question of how much the land and sea environments intertwined to deliver military victory is beyond the scope of the analysis offered in the numerous histories of the war at sea; both those covering the war as a whole,[14] and those dedicated specifically to the Mediterranean.[15] For a theatre where both military operations on land and the ongoing sustainment of territories relied so heavily on the lifeblood of shipping, these pieces of scholarship offer little coverage of the anti-shipping campaign and even less of the resultant effects. The narrative works tend to focus on fleet actions, with the anti-shipping campaign relegated to single chapters, footnotes and passing comment.

The official naval histories, while extensive, offer only a little more in this respect. Roskill's *War at Sea* outlines the conduct and results of anti-shipping operations and points to tabulated figures of shipping sunk as a sole indicator that they 'contributed greatly to the collapse in Africa', yet it does not actually assess the effect of those sinkings.[16] Italy has produced by far the most comprehensive of the official naval histories, with a series

of nineteen volumes. These, along with a contemporaneous book by Giorgio Giorgerini, provide full statistical data regarding Axis shipping in the Mediterranean, as well as three volumes dedicated to the effort to safeguard their shipping for North Africa, and one volume that does the same for the Adriatic and Aegean.[17] The series gives valuable insight into the organisation, and frequently lack thereof, of Axis efforts to safeguard their shipping. This includes the priority assigned to the role and tactical and technical developments. However, these operational histories offer relatively little in the way of analysis as to the effects of the campaign. This is perhaps surprising when, by way of comparison, naval histories looking at British logistics and concerned with the siege of Malta offer rich analyses of the effects of supply losses on the island's sustainment.[18]

In contrast to the literature written from a maritime perspective, those from a land perspective have contributed a greater effort to integrate the issue of Axis supply losses with operational effect in North Africa. The multi-service British official history on *The Mediterranean and Middle East* gives a balanced study. Like Roskill, it also makes use of detailed tables of Axis shipping sunk, giving sinkings by cause and month in both number and tonnage. There is in addition some analysis of the development of the campaign, focusing particularly on the role of Malta within it and of the effects on Axis forces in North Africa.[19] Yet it does not delve deeply into how the actual repercussions on Axis fighting effectiveness manifested in North Africa, or the result of the loss of large quantities of shipping on the Axis war effort as a whole. The German official histories, while bringing useful new source material into an English-language publication, do not specialise on aspects of the war through the use of sub-series in the same way as their British counterparts. Therefore, they suffer from the same issues as the British series, to a greater degree, thanks to their brevity on this subject.[20] Numerous recent operational histories of the war in North Africa have also acknowledged the part played by Axis logistical difficulties, but their focus does not extend to examining a causal link between the war at sea and on land.[21]

Finally, there are a handful of specialised works that focus purely on the anti-shipping campaign and North Africa. Martin van Creveld, in *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, limits himself solely to the period from spring 1941 to autumn 1942 and dismisses the campaign as irrelevant. He places the reason for Axis logistical difficulties squarely on overland routes and port capacities. In a similar vein, Brad Gladman has argued that the effects of the anti-shipping campaign paled in comparison to those of the aerial interdiction of motor transport. Alan Levine's *The War against Rommel's Supply Lines, 1942–1943* offers a more positive assessment of the impact of the campaign but is limited both

temporally and in terms of material, relying almost entirely on Anglo-American sources for evidence.[22] Alongside these are several books focused solely on the role of Malta in the anti-shipping campaign. Of these, Douglas Austin's *Malta and British Strategic Policy, 1925–1943* is the most comprehensive, with the second half of the book offering both an operational analysis of the campaign and some exploration of the effects on the war in North Africa.[23]

What this survey of the current literature highlights is that the anti-shipping campaign in the Mediterranean lacks a dedicated and holistic study, incorporating the entirety of the theatre and the period after the fall of the Axis in North Africa.[24] What is more, no existing work has set out to ask the question of whether there were wider ramifications from the loss of large quantities of Axis shipping to their attempts to control the Mediterranean. This study rectifies both lacunae by taking such an approach. It examines the evolving place of the Mediterranean in Allied grand strategy, and the priority of the anti-shipping campaign within the theatre. It analyses the nature and number of forces of all types that were used within it, and their suitability, tactical development, efficacy, and the results they achieved in terms of sinkings. Finally, it assesses their effects on *both* the fighting effectiveness of Axis armies and air forces and on their broader ability to maintain a position across the Mediterranean theatre. Through the use of a unique mix of multinational source material, much of which has been underused to date, it demonstrates that the campaign fatally undermined the Axis in both of these respects. In total, source material from twelve archives across three different countries has been consulted during the research for this book.

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This book opens with a discussion of the importance of the Mediterranean to the British Empire, highlighting its role as a 'vital artery' of communication between the eastern and western worlds. By examining the changing position of the Mediterranean in British strategic policy from the construction of the Suez Canal through to the Italian declaration of war in 1940, it shows how important the Mediterranean would be in the event of a major global war. However, British foreign policy in the late inter-war period included numerous efforts to keep Italy neutral, allowing the Mediterranean to be denuded of military assets in favour of their deployment against threats elsewhere. Consequently, these decisions led to a difficult context in which to plan realistically for war in the Mediterranean, and the subsequent paucity of British forces stationed there at the start of hostilities. It was this situation which set the foundation for early failures in the anti-shipping campaign.

This is followed by an examination of British war planning for the Mediterranean over the late 1930s, as relations with Italy soured. It highlights the argument between proponents of a 'knockout blow' and those who preferred the slow strangulation of Italy by cutting key communications at sea. The ultimate prevailing of the latter argument led to an appreciation of the importance of cutting Axis sea communications by 1940, even if they initially lacked the military power to do so and were restricted by legal criteria prohibiting attacks on merchant shipping in most cases, a situation that would soon alter under the demands of war. By contrast, the Italians and especially Germans neglected measures to protect and conserve shipping resources in order to maintain their ability to operate in the theatre – a neglect that was to come back to haunt them! Like the British, they too held some hopes to control the Mediterranean as a waterway not only for the safeguarding of their own sea communications, but to strangle those of their enemies. Yet a lack of appropriate planning and cohesion between the Axis powers ensured such hopes proved ill-founded.

After the Italian declaration of war came the period of their short-lived 'parallel war', where they attempted to fight independently of Germany in the theatre. Chapter 2 highlights the great numerical disparity between the scarce British and Commonwealth forces spread from the Middle East to Gibraltar versus those of Italy. Despite this lack of resources, theatre commanders recognised the need to make inroads into Italian sea communications, and they also received clear direction from Whitehall to pursue this objective. Consequently, the failure to do so was not for lack of will at any level of command, but a question of means. The scattered, incoherent efforts that were made are shown to have been completely ineffectual, with British success against the Italians in North Africa during 1940 instead being the product of a series of other factors. Nevertheless, this period set important foundations for an anti-shipping campaign in terms of the recognition of the vulnerability of Italian sea routes and the need for greater resources to prosecute it.

The failure of the 'parallel war' was followed by turmoil caused by a combination of German intervention in the theatre and the British decision to send aid to Greece. The shift in focus towards what would be a disastrous Greek expedition resulted in neglect of the Axis sea lanes with North Africa, and abortive efforts at interdiction were made in the Adriatic instead. Yet, as this chapter shows, there were also positive developments in the campaign. New types of more suitable equipment and weaponry were employed, accompanied by the beginnings of a learning process to develop new tactics and procedures and to incorporate new technologies. This offered the potential for greater efficiency in

anti-shipping operations, but it was only from April onwards that significant attention was again paid to them. Sinking rates promptly increased and, although the overall required Axis supply quotas were generally met, the losses did cause logistical pressure in certain key areas. While anti-shipping operations had been relatively limited in terms of quantity and effect over the first year of the war in the Mediterranean, an important foundation was laid in terms of recognition of their importance, increasing priority and operational learning. This provided the platform for what would be become a decisive campaign.

Building on these progressive steps, Chapter 4 starts with the Mediterranean receiving a new level of recognition in British strategic priority during the August–December 1941 period, becoming the primary effort. Moreover, the anti-shipping campaign was promoted to a prime position in operational priority for the Navy and Air Force, with a corresponding dedication of forces to the task. Coupled with this was an increase in the pace of learning and the refinement of tactical procedures. This led to greatly increased levels of sinkings over August–December, which coincided with a new, major British offensive in North Africa: Operation 'Crusader'. These sinkings successfully denied Axis forces in Cyrenaica the necessary fuel and ammunition to either launch their own planned offensive or to resist the British advance, including the loss of 92 per cent of the fuel shipped in November. Furthermore, the increased levels of attrition meant that sinkings now greatly outstripped the Axis replenishment capability through new construction or other means. This was the first clear example of the dual effect of the anti-shipping campaign: one operational, affecting the war on land in North Africa, and one attritional, undermining the Axis ability to conduct any form of warfare in the Mediterranean. It caused serious concern among the Axis commands, leading to the adoption of new countermeasures, which were to have a major impact in the following year.

Despite the qualified successes of 'Crusader', Britain was faced with a disastrous turn of events in early 1942. The entry of Japan to the war had compelled a redistribution of force to the Far East, while some key British losses and new in-theatre German commitments had further redefined the Mediterranean balance of power. Chapter 5 outlines how the British were forced to adopt a defensive posture throughout the theatre, as their gains from 'Crusader' were rapidly reversed. As the Axis then advanced into Egypt, Malta was subjected to an intense aerial siege and came perilously close to being starved into submission. The difficulties in conducting anti-shipping operations during this period were numerous. Yet in a reversal of the thesis advanced by historians such as van Creveld and Gladman, the chapter demonstrates that significant

sinkings (of over 300,000 tons) were achieved during this period. This continued attrition was greatly troubling for the Axis, contributing to a shipping shortage that was to reach crisis point later in the year.

Chapter 6 begins by illustrating the respective positions of each side by September 1942. It shows that while the Axis position can in retrospect be viewed as highly precarious, the British evinced real concern about a complete collapse in Egypt. It highlights the resurgent emphasis that was placed on the Mediterranean from Whitehall, and on anti-shipping operations by the theatre commanders. These were pursued with a ruthless prioritisation; even after clear evidence that some Axis vessels were carrying British prisoners of war, the Chiefs of Staff (COS) decreed that there should be 'no prohibition' on attacks under any circumstances.

This allowed anti-shipping operations to thrive, aided by the effective use of all-source intelligence to target the most critical cargoes of fuel and ammunition at sea, to the bafflement of the Axis powers. As a result, over the three-month period, ninety-five vessels of nearly 200,000 tons were sunk, with grave effects on the Axis. The chapter closes by showing how these sinkings helped curtail the final Axis offensive in Egypt and contributed to the vital British victory at El Alamein by depriving the Axis of essential fuel and ammunition. In contrast to arguments put forward by scholars such as van Creveld, Barnett and Gladman, the book uses a mix of Italian, German and British material to conclusively show that the supply shortages suffered by the Axis were primarily the result of seaborne sinkings.

While El Alamein represented an important defensive victory at the eastern fringe of the Mediterranean, joint Anglo-American landings in north-west Africa caused a transformation of the theatre. Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of this shift to a truly Allied venture, where the war in North Africa was fought on two fronts, with consequent effects on Axis supply requirements. Anti-shipping operations continued to receive high priority throughout this period, with senior American leaders in the theatre, such as General Dwight Eisenhower, also urging for ever greater efforts in this vein. These appeals immediately led to the transferral of additional aircraft from other theatres precisely for this purpose. This resulted in a devastating 477 vessels of over 700,000 tons being sunk in five months. The numerous emergency countermeasures introduced by the Axis powers were simply incapable of reversing the devastating scale of attrition. These sinkings had important effects across two different levels. First the interdiction of shipping had a drastic degrading effect on Axis fighting efficiency in Tunisia. The sinkings ensured that the minimum level of supplies required by the Axis forces were not received. In fact, the losses were so devastating that the

Axis came to lack the necessary vessels to even attempt to ship the required amounts in the first place.

Finally, the chapter offers a revolutionary new argument: that the period around October 1942 represented a tipping point towards collapse for the Axis position in the wider Mediterranean due to the sheer scale of attrition to their shipping. The question of a 'shipping crisis' has been dismissed by the few who have briefly considered it, yet by using new multinational source material this chapter demonstrates that one truly took place. By October the consistently high rates of sinkings had greatly eroded the base of available tonnage, and efforts to improve construction had failed. The attempts to fill the void with seized French tonnage were far less effective than some have claimed, and by early summer 1943 the Axis were acknowledging that maintaining positions such as Sardinia and Corsica was no longer possible, while retaining the Aegean islands and even Sicily were tenuous aims.

The final chapter opens with a discussion of the transformed nature of the war in the Mediterranean after the Axis surrender in Tunisia, where Axis maritime commitments had shrunk, yet remained substantial. The Allied focus on other in-theatre tasks, particularly the invasions of Sicily and mainland Italy, pushed anti-shipping operations into a peripheral role. Yet there were times when they received greater focus, including the Axis evacuation of Sicily, and in the Aegean during 1943–44. An account of anti-shipping operations over the period in question shows that there were in fact very high quantities of sinkings at certain stages of the period in question. These contributed yet further to the overall shipping crisis, forcing the Axis to expedite the withdrawal from Sardinia, Corsica and many of their Aegean possessions. By late 1944, most of the territories reliant on maritime supply had been abandoned, and the anti-shipping campaign had been a key element in ensuring Allied victory in the Mediterranean.