



ITALY AT

WAR

1940-1945





ITALY AT WAR

THE STRUGGLE TESTS THE NATION

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COVER: The SM-79 Sparrow Hawk, one of the best torpedo bombers of the war
The Savoia Cavalry charge at Izbushensky, Russia 1942 an amazing victory, last of its kind
Battleship Roma, Italy’s most advanced warship in 1943.



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INTRODUCTION

Media mogul Ted Turner once told an audience, “*Imagine Italians at war. I mean, what a joke. They’d rather be involved in crime and making some wine and just having a good time.*”

This is the picture most Italian Americans have been given in history books and in movies since the 1940s. Even today, the two world wars are recounted with few honorable references to Italy, this despite Italy having lost nearly one million lives in those struggles. Italy may as well have been neutral for all historians care.

This volume explores a more balanced approach to Italy’s efforts in the Second World War. But first we must understand the years prior to the war.

The Great War 1915 – 1918

Originally a member of the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy) the Italians had nothing to do with the madness that engulfed her northern neighbors in 1914. The very rational Italians saw no obligation in their defensive alliance with the Teutons in what was clearly an aggressive war. For its neutral stance Italy earned the reputation of a traitor, a reputation that would have profound effects in the Second World War.

By 1915, the European powers were stalemated in trench warfare, looking for a game-changer. That game-changer was Italy, still neutral, but now being seduced by Britain and France. In the Secret Treaty of London that year, Italy agreed to enter the war and tie down Austria-Hungary’s army and navy. Italian forces were also sent to the Balkans (210,000 troops at their peak), to Palestine (10,000) against the Teutonic ally Turkey, and 60,000 to Libya to suppress a Turkish-led revolt. (Italy had “liberated” Libya from the Turks in 1912 and pioneered the use of airplanes in combat during that conflict). In 1916, Italy declared war on Germany and sent 53,000 men to fight on the Western Front — a little known contribution.

In a series of battles in the Alpine regions the Italians bled themselves and the Austro-Hungarians white. So battered were the Austro-Hungarians that Germany had to rescue its stumbling ally with 7 crack divisions in September, 1917. No tribute to Italy’s war effort could be better expressed than the words of German Field Marshal Eric von Ludendorff, an enemy: “...it became necessary to decide for a [German] attack on Italy in order to prevent the collapse of Austria-Hungary.” [*Ludendorff’s Own Story*, vol II. p. 95, Harper, 1920]

Among the Germans rushed to the Italian front was young Lieutenant Erwin Rommel. With fresh German

troops in the attack, the Italians were forced back in what is now labeled the disaster of Caporetto. This disaster continues to be the Mark of Cain on the Italian military. Yet, despite the rout, 40,000 killed or wounded, and the surrender of 265,000 Italian troops, the enemy was stopped on the Piave River before even one French or British soldier arrived to help.

On the Western Front, the Italian II Corps helped to stop Germany’s last offensive at the Second Battle of the Marne. Marshal Philippe Petain as late as 1934 acknowledged that the Italian corps under General Albricci saved the Allied flank. The Americans would soon be famously engaged in that battle at Château-Thierry and Belleau Wood. But who remembers the Italians?

By November 1918, the Italian Army completed the destruction of its enemy at Vittorio Veneto, capturing 450,000 prisoners and finally achieving Austria-Hungary’s collapse. Germany’s southern flank was now exposed and its last ally crushed. The Germans would linger on only for another week on the Western Front. Nevertheless, the Allies did not inflict a *coup de gras* on the German Army as the Italians had done to the Austro-Hungarians and Germans. Although the terms of the Armistice cost the Germans their planes and armaments, their army in France withdrew, intact, back to Germany.

Italy lost over 650,000 soldiers in the Great War. Yet, all its stunning victories and sacrifice have been darkened by Caporetto. Caporetto was immortalized in Ernest Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms*, and is incessantly emphasized by Allied historians to this day.

Wars in Abyssinia and Spain

Mussolini’s warlike nature gave Italians little respite from military interventions between the world wars. The pacification of Libya in 1929 was the first introduction of tanks to desert warfare against Berber and Arab natives. The cost in men and treasure was only just being recouped when in 1935 Italy engaged 700,000 men in the conquest of Abyssinia. No sooner had victory been achieved in 1936, then Mussolini dispatched a “volunteer” corps to aid General Francisco Franco’s rebellion in Spain. From 1936 to 1939, Italy fielded 70,000 men and committed 700 planes in gaining victory over the Soviet dominated Republicans. Italy’s cost was some \$4 billion in today’s dollars. The loss of men, tanks, planes, and arms could hardly be made up by 1940 when Italy entered World War II.

These factors must be considered in any true assessment of Italy’s efforts in World War II.

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The State of Italy's War Machine in 1939

HITLER'S WAR

THE BIG PICTURE



Mussolini was preparing a World's Fair for 1942.
Hitler's war made it impossible.



Italy's 3-year participation in the Spanish Civil War had just ended with this victory parade of Italian troops in Madrid in May, 1939. Hitler invaded Poland only three months later.

ITALY'S MILITARY AND INDUSTRY WAS NOT PREPARED FOR A WAR BEFORE 1943

Italy still had not recovered from the Abyssinian War (1935-36) and Spanish Civil War (1936-39) when Hitler invaded Poland in 1939. Its national goals at the time were to create viable colonies for Italian emigration into Libya and Abyssinia. Vast sums were being spent on infrastructure to accommodate tens of thousands of Italian colonists. In fact, Mussolini explained this and his unpreparedness to Hitler at the time to beg off entry into the new European conflict.

Italy would not be prepared for a major war until the end of 1942. With that in mind Mussolini was planning a world's fair: *Esposizione Universale Roma* for 1942, anticipating a Europe still at peace.

From Mussolini's perspective in September 1939, Hitler's invasion of Poland was a blunder which provoked France and Great Britain into a European war. He was shocked that Hitler had made a pact with Stalin — their ideological nemesis — beforehand to avoid a war with the USSR over Poland. In short, Hitler was a wild card with a questionable future. The Allies were still a force to be reckoned with.

All that changed in 1940 when Hitler completed the conquest of Poland and turned his attention to the West. By May, 1940 the Germans had overrun Holland, Belgium,

and Norway. They had invaded France and trapped the French and British forces against the sea at Dunkirk. Paris was soon to fall.

Although many other factors would play into Italy's fatal decision to enter the war in 1940, the shock of seeing the results of *blitzkrieg* and the collapse of France in such short order understandably pushed Mussolini to war.

In 1940, Hitler was considered a military and political genius: neutralizing Stalin, devouring Poland, and bringing Great Britain and France to their knees.

Mussolini was not to foresee Hitler's endgame based on race hatred of Jews and Slavs — the Holocaust, the invasion of the USSR and a two-front war.

In 1940, Mussolini only anticipated a "parallel" war in concert with Germany's northern theater of operations. Italy's primary goals were in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Balkan peninsula, not northern Europe.

Italy, with half the population, a fraction of the industrial capacity of Germany-Austria, and few natural resources was embarking on a European war not of its making, linked to a maniacal racist whose global ambitions knew no bounds.

RESISTING HITLER'S CALL



Dino Alfieri (l), ambassador to Germany, Count Galeazzo Ciano, Foreign Minister and Mussolini's son-in-law. Both were against joining Hitler's war



Mussolini only learned at the last minute of this Nazi-Soviet deal to split Poland

“ENOUGH TO KILL A BULL...” - GALEAZZO CIANO

Mussolini got wind of Hitler's plan to invade Poland only a week before it happened. *Der Führer* wanted Italy at his side but Mussolini wanted no part in it. For the sake of his pride, Mussolini informed Hitler that Italy would need tons of supplies to even carry on a war of twelve months. When Hitler asked for a list, the Italians cobbled together a huge inventory that would be impossible for Germany to fill. Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano wrote in his diary that the list was “...enough to kill a bull – if a bull could read”:

Coal...6 million tons, Steel...2 million tons, Lumber...one million tons, Copper...150,000 tons, Sodium Nitrate...220,000 tons, Potassium salts...70,000 tons, Rosin...25,000 tons, Rubber...22,000 tons, Toluol...18,000 tons, Turpentine...6,000 tons, Lead...10,000 tons, Tin...7,000 tons, Nickel...5,000 tons, Molybdenum...6,000 tons, Tugsten...6,000 tons, Zirconium...20 tons, Titanium...400 tons, anti-aircraft batteries and ammunition, machinery of all kinds.

Ciano estimated it would take 17,000 railcars to transport 17 million tons of these supplies from Germany, if the German even had such quantities.

The request letter ended by offering Italy's help in negotiating a settlement with Poland and the Allies. Hitler wanted no such talks and counted Italy out. On September 1st he invaded Poland. Two days later France and Great Britain declared war on Germany.

The Italian people during this period were “*fundamentally anti-German. Germanophiles can be counted on the fingers of one hand,*” according to Ciano's *Diaries* [13 Sept. 1939] Neutrality was certainly popular, giving the regime very little internal unrest.

The Germans believed Italy's neutrality was of some use now that Poland was subdued for possible negotiations with the Allies, but they asked for covert support in stationing U-boats in the Mediterranean and spying on Allied naval convoys. On the advice of his key advisors, Mussolini refused to compromise Italy's neutrality. Still, he was in agony being neutral rather than a participant.

Another factor in staying on Hitler's good side was an agreement the two dictators previously made on relocating ethnic Germans from the border region of Alto Adige. Italy's neutrality suspiciously slowed down that exit.

REGIA MARINA



Adm. Domenico Cavagnari



Adm. Arturo Riccardi



Adm. Angelo Iachino



Adm. Carlo Bergamini



Adm. Inigo Campioni



Adm. Angelo Parona

THE ITALIAN NAVY WAS THE FAVORED BRANCH

The Fascist regime undertook a massive shipbuilding program in the 1930s to prepare for an ocean-going navy.

Admiral Domenico Cavagnari was Chief of Staff of the *Regia Marina*. He was largely responsible for preparation of the Italian Navy in the years before the war: heavy in battleships and submarines, no carriers and little radar development. After two battle losses he was succeeded by Admiral Arturo Riccardi.

Arturo Riccardi was promoted to Chief of Staff despite having been in charge of Taranto Naval Base at the time of the 1940 British attack. Still, he had Mussolini's confidence, remaining in charge until the Duce's overthrow.

Adm. Angelo Iachino commanded the Italian battle fleet at the Battle of Cape Matapan (March 1941), a major defeat. The "Battle of Mid-June 1942" was his most important success, repelling a British convoy trying to re-

supply Malta. In April, 1943 Iachino was promoted and replaced by Admiral Carlo Bergamini.

Adm. Carlo Bergamini was preparing to fend off the Allied invasion of Salerno in September, 1943 when word came of the Armistice. He was ordered to sail the fleet to an Allied port. German aircraft sunk his battleship *Roma*, killing him and 1,350 crew members. (see p. 40)

Adm. Inigo Campioni commanded the battle fleet early in the war but was considered too cautious by the Fascists. In 1941, he was made governor of Aegean Islands. When Italy surrendered, he was captured by the Germans and turned over to Mussolini. Refusing to recognize Mussolini's new republic, he was shot in 1944.

Adm. Angelo Parona commanded the Italian submarine force in the Atlantic. He was highly successful and praised by German Admiral Doenitz. (see p.25)

EQUIPMENT & TECHNOLOGY



Littorio Class battleships, the most advanced design, included *Littorio*, *Vittorio Veneto*, *Roma*, and the uncompleted *Impero*.



Ocean-going sub *Leonardo da Vinci* was Italy's most successful hunter.



The older Cavour Class battleships include *Conte di Cavour* and *Giulio Cesare*



Mussolini reviewing a ship's company



Italians pioneered underwater demolition with manned torpedoes ('maiale' or "pig") and frogmen

WEAKENED BY A LACK OF RADAR AND AN AIR ARM

One of the major shortcomings of the navy was lack of radar technology, which gave the British a marked advantage in repelling air attacks (eg., the *Blitz*) and in naval engagements especially at night or in fog.

We can rightly wonder why the Italians were behind in radar. Inventor Guglielmo Marconi pioneered radio waves – long, short, and micro. In 1922 he conceived of radar. However, he died in 1937 before achieving it. The breakthrough component, the cavity magnetron, was invented by the British in 1940 and shared with the Americans. Although the Axis powers had developed forms of radar, none equaled the British achievement.

Another major handicap was the lack of fuel. Italy depended on Middle East oil which was controlled by the British and Americans (Libyan petroleum fields were discovered only after the war.) The only other source was in Romania which joined the Axis but was in the grip of the Germans, who took most of the oil. Rationing oil for its ships left the Italian Navy limited in operations and training exercises. Fuel oil also had to be used by tankers to carry fuel and supplies to Axis forces in North Africa. In short, oil greatly determined victory or defeat on both land and sea.

The Italian Navy pioneered small scale weapons such as torpedo boats, frogmen, and underwater explosives (see photo above). The December, 1941 raid on Alexandria Harbor tipped the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean to the Italian Navy for most of 1942 (see p.32).

Mining British waters was another successful tactic. The Italians laid some 54,000 mines around Malta to prevent it being supplied. As the Allies closed in on Axis forces in 1943, 3,000 Italian mines were laid off French Tunisia.

The Italian Navy had no aircraft carriers as Mussolini considered the Italian peninsula to be one huge carrier. He invested heavily in submarines, and Italy had the largest force of any combatant in 1940. An advanced torpedo system that exploded as it passed under a ship's keel gave Italian submarines and torpedo bombers a good attack/kill ratio. The Germans adopted this Italian technology.

Without carriers, there was no "air arm" in the Italian Navy. Large vessels carried seaplanes for reconnaissance. Inter-service coordination led to delays and confusion.

REGIO ESERCITO



Marshal Pietro Badoglio



Marshal Ugo Cavallero



Marshal Rodolfo Graziani



Marshal Giovanni Messe



Gen. Alfredo Guzzoni



Gen. Ettore Bastico



Gen. Italo Gariboldi



Gen. Vittorio Ambrosio

THE ITALIAN ARMY WAS DEPLETED BY 1940

Much of the Army high command was traditionally Piedmontese or Northern and connected to the Royal House. This often undermined a merit-based army.

Marshal Pietro Badoglio (Piedmontese) joined the Fascist Party but was never considered loyal. As Chief of Staff before the war, he developed Army doctrine and organization. His victory in Abyssinia (1935-36) earned Mussolini's confidence, who later ignored his advice in the invasion of Greece (1940). He was sidelined but reappeared to lead the government when Mussolini was ousted by the King in July, 1943.

Marshal Ugo Cavallero (Piedmontese) replaced Badoglio as head of *Comando Supremo* and Italian forces in Greece in Dec. 1940. In 1942, he opposed Erwin Rommel's expedition into Egypt, which ultimately failed, and protested to Berlin Rommel's insubordination.

Marshal Rodolfo Graziani succeeded Libyan Governor

Italo Balbo after his accidental death by friendly fire. Mussolini pushed Graziani to launch an invasion of British Egypt in 1940, which failed miserably with the surrender of 130,000 Italians. He was sidelined until 1943 when he headed the military in Mussolini's Salò Republic.

Marshal Giovanni Messe (Puglia) Considered the best Italian general of the war, he was given command of the Italian Expeditionary Corps on the Eastern Front until Dec. 1942. He was sent to Africa in February, 1943, as commander of the Italo-German Tank Army which was now three-quarters Italian. His defensive campaign against superior Allied forces ended with Axis forces trapped in Tunisia where they surrendered in May, 1943.

Generals Italo Gariboldi, Vittorio Ambrosio, Ettore Bastico, and Alfredo Guzzone were all competent leaders who were rotated to different fronts and leadership positions, but they could not stave off defeat.

EQUIPMENT & TECHNOLOGY



Ansaldo M13/40 Medium tank



Ansaldo Semovente 149/40
Motorized artillery



Cannone da 90/53



Standard infantry rifle:
Carcano 91/38 held six rounds
and needed the hand bolt to
chamber each round.



The *Breda 30* light machine gun (left) was prone to jam. The *Breda 37* medium machine gun (right) had a good reputation for reliability.



ARMY DIVISIONS WERE UNDERSIZED

The Royal Army was substandard by any measure. It was armed for colonial wars with light tanks and WW I vintage artillery.

The army was divided into the formations below. (Important Note: Italian divisions were “binary,” consisting of two regiments (“brigades” in modern nomenclature), while the Allied and German armies consisted of the more conventional three regiments. This is crucial information in describing battles. Speaking of “divisions” rather than “regiments” is not an equal comparison.)

Infantry Divisions	Parachute Units
Armored Divisions	Motorized Divisions
Artillery units	Horse Cavalry
Bersaglieri (shock troops)	Fascist Militia Units
Alpini (mountain troops)	Carabinieri (police)
	Colonial Divisions

Troop morale varied by unit and draftee but all Italian soldiers knew that Italy had never lost a war in the 20th Century (in Libya, WWI, Abyssinia, or Spain). Morale boosters like hot meals were rare at the front, so troops subsisted on tinned rations: soup, pasta, vegetables, and meat. Coffee and wine were included. A Papal dispensation was given for meat on Fridays.

Infantrymen were issued bolt-action *Carcano** rifles that held 6 rounds. By comparison, a British soldier had an Enfield bolt-action that held 8 rounds. Germans also used bolt-action rifles, as did the Soviets and French. Americans had the best rifle: the M1-Garand held 8 rounds which were chambered automatically, no bolt-action needed, which increased the rate of fire.

[* A war surplus *Carcano* was used by Lee Oswald to assassinate President Kennedy in 1963]

The Italian divisions lacked a powerful artillery component, usually only 48 lower caliber guns compared to the 72 guns in a British division. A German division had 48 guns but of heavy caliber. Italian heavy guns were at Corps level (two or more divisions).

Armored divisions used medium tanks (M11/39, M13/40) no match for Allied or German tanks. In 1941, the army bought captured French tanks from the Germans. The Germans also offered to license their Panzer III to Italian manufacturers but there were so many strings attached that the offer was rejected.

To increase their anti-tank capabilities, the Italian developed the *Semovente da 74/18* class of self-propelled guns using tank chassis. Some 288 were produced and so effective that with Italy's surrender the Germans used them.

REGIA AERONAUTICA



Air Marshal Italo Balbo



General Francesco Pricolo



General Pietro Piacentini



General Enrico Pezzi



General Stefano Cagna



Wing insignia



Fuselage insignia



General Rino Corso
Fougier

MANY AIR FORCE LEADERS WERE AVIATION PIONEERS

Air Marshal Italo Balbo was a Fascist leader and founder of the *Regia Aeronautica* in 1923. He pioneered trans-Atlantic flights of mass aerial formations. As governor of Libya in 1940 he commanded all Italian forces but was killed by friendly fire at the outbreak of the war.

General Francesco Pricolo commanded the Italian air forces until November 1941, after clashing with *Comando Supremo* and the Germans over his refusal to release advanced fighter planes on the North African front due to lack of sand filters and pilot training. He was praised for increasing the power of the *Macchi 202* with German engines and for converting the *SM-79 Sparrow Hawk* into a first-rate torpedo bomber. He diverted Italian torpedoes meant for Nazi U-boats to the SM-79s.

General Pietro Piacentini commanded squadrons on the East African front where he personally led attacks on

British airfields. He was captured in June, 1941 with the defeat of Italian forces in that theater.

General Enrico Pezzi was the youngest general in the *Aeronautica*. He commanded the airforce on the Eastern Front where he was killed in 1942 leading a rescue mission.

General Rino Corso Fougier commanded the Italian Air Corps in Belgium where he carried out raids on England between 10 September 1940 and 28 January 1941.

General Stefano Cagna helped create the first unit of paratroopers, the *Fanti dell'Aria*. In 1940, he was given command of an Air Brigade of Savoia-Marchetti SM-79 torpedo bombers to intercept British convoys supplying Malta. Personally leading an attack in August, his plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire killing him and all his crew.

EQUIPMENT & TECHNOLOGY



The *Macchi 205 Veltro* (Greyhound) one of the best fighter planes of the war, 399mph.



The *FIAT G55 Centauro* (Centaur) an excellent fighter, 385 mph.



The *Savoia-Marchetti 82* (“Kangaroo”) one of the best military transports on either side.



Reggiane Re2005 Sagittario (“Archer”) a superb fighter plane, 390mph.



The *Piaggio p.108* bomber with a *Breda Ba.65* escort.



The *FIAT Cicogna* (Stork) a reliable bomber.



The *BR 42t* one of the last biplanes with great performance.



The *SM-79 Sparviero* (Sparrow-Hawk) was a first-rate torpedo bomber.



The *Caproni Ca 311* was an excellent reconnaissance plane.

ITALY COULD NOT PRODUCE ENOUGH PLANES

In 1940, the *Regia Aeronautica* had 3,296 aircraft in Italy, the Aegean area, and Libya. Of these, only 1,796 were operational — 783 bombers, 594 fighters, 419 reconnaissance. Although the quantity of aircraft was adequate, the quality, especially the fighters, was inferior to the enemy’s. [per air historians Angelucci and Matricardi]

Early in the war Italian biplanes were passable fighters. During the Battle of Britain, Italian bombers were escorted by *FIAT Cr.42 Falco* biplanes (see p.23 photo). Pilots had to endure frigid temperatures in open cockpits. But biplanes weren’t uncommon on the Allied side. The British had the *Gladiator*, not as good as the *Falco* but it had an enclosed cockpit.

As the war progressed, the Italians developed a fleet of mono-wing fighters culminating in the *Macchi 205 Veltro*

(Greyhound), a fighter even envied by the Germans. Another, the *SM-79 Sparviero* proved to be one of the most successful torpedo bombers of the Second World War, claiming 72 Allied warships and 196 freighters.

Air speed increased with the use of German engines. Italy’s best fighters averaged close to 400 mph. In comparison: Japanese Zero, 329 mph; American P-51, 441 mph; Messerschmitt 109, 441 mph; Spitfire, 446 mph.

The *Regia Aeronautica* has been faulted for poor coordination with the other military branches, especially the navy. Another critique has been de-emphasizing individual aces, competition among pilots for number of “kills”. Fascist ideology encouraged teamwork rather than personal score. But, by far the greatest deficiency was Italy’s inability to produce substantial numbers of aircraft.

FASCIST FORMATIONS



Young Fascists (*Giovani Fascisti*) were recruited at universities and attached to regular army units. Their badge (center) GIL: *Gioventù Italiano del Littorio*.



Blackshirt “legions” (left badge), evolved from the Fascist Militia, were attached to Royal Army divisions. Above, troops from a *Battaglione M* unit. Their insignia patch is on the right - M for Mussolini.



FASCIST UNITS NEVER EQUALLED THE FANATICAL SS

Mussolini envisioned the Fascist militia as shock troops within Royal Army divisions just as the pre-Fascist *Arditi* (the Daring Ones) of the First World War had been. Italy pioneered the use of such Special Forces, and after the war the new Fascist *squadristi* adopted their dagger salute and battle cry: “*Victory or die trying!*”

In 1939, Mussolini ordered the formation of 133 Legions of Blackshirts to be attached to infantry divisions as a “third” regiment. Royal Army divisions had been reduced by Mussolini from 3 to 2 regiments (“binary” — see p.9) but adding a Blackshirt legion didn’t raise the manpower much. It wasn’t until 1942 that the system was completed. Whether these were “elite” units is debatable.

On the other hand, the *Giovani Fascisti* (Young Fascists) had a very high *esprit de corps* due to their youth and indoctrination at universities. Some 19,000 university students volunteered for service and were organized in 24 battalions (800 men each). However, the Royal Army command thought them and Blackshirts too political. By war’s end, and due to a high casualty rate, the *Giovani Fascisti* numbers were reduced to a mere two battalions.

In 1941, Mussolini created the *Battaglioni M*, for special operations like the planned invasion of Malta. The M

stood for Mussolini.

The Blackshirt units never equalled the fanaticism of the *Waffen SS*. The latter carried out mass exterminations and were used to “stiffen” regular German Army units. By war’s end, the *SS* instilled fear by summarily executing deserters. Blackshirt units were not utilized for this function. In the First World War decimations were carried out by the *Carabinieri*.

Morale is a problem in every army, especially among draftees. Not every soldier buys into the idea that sacrificing his life helps the nation. Italian units ran the gamut from elite to half-baked. Morale also varied by training, equipment, and battle conditions. In the First World War, over 750 Italian soldiers were summarily shot to maintain discipline during the disaster at Caporetto. The French executed 600 of their troops in that war, the British 300. There were no such wholesale decimations by the Fascist government in the Second World War. The Germans reportedly shot 10,000 of their own. Stalin’s decimations were notorious and a key factor in Soviet battle success. Even the United States famously shot Pvt. Eddie Slovik in 1945, the only one of 49 condemned men executed for desertion during the conflict to maintain American discipline.

Justifications for Entering the Conflict

ITALY'S STRATEGIC LIMITATIONS



The Allies wanted to keep Italy out of the Black Sea by proposing the Montreux Convention in 1936. Italy refused to sign on.



Fortress Gibraltar, British since 1713

THE MEDITERRANEAN CHOKE POINTS OF SUEZ AND GIBRALTAR WERE IN BRITISH HANDS

As tensions with Great Britain grew, Italy realized that any war against it must be waged both in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic. As an Axis partner it was also necessary to remain on an equal footing with Germany, Italian armed forces needed to participate in all theaters of operations in the event of a European war. This was not a spur-of-the-moment strategy but one that the Italian naval command, *Supermarina*, had planned prior to the Pact of Steel (1939).

A larger-size class of submarines had been designed and constructed during the 1930's specifically for ocean use. Since Mussolini's fundamental war aims included keeping the Straits of Gibraltar open to Italian shipping, submarines had to be able to operate outside the Straits in the Atlantic Ocean. The larger Italian submarines, because of their slower speeds and longer diving times, would work very well in the Atlantic where their large size would enable them to ride out storms when on the surface. In addition, their long cruising range would enable them to stay on patrol for several months and even to

cruise where the shore-range German Type VII submarines could not reach.

At Suez, the British took military control of the Canal in 1936, a response to Italian aggression in Abyssinia. Prior to that, the British and French had administrative control of the waterway from its opening in 1869. (In 1875, the British foreclosed on Egypt's canal debts and blatantly made Egypt a "protectorate" in 1882. The British and French resisted for a century any Italian participation on the Suez Canal Board even though it was a major user of the canal. At their whim, the Allies could close this exit.)

To further control access points in the Mediterranean, the British and French agreed to restrict the passage of warships from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea by endorsing a Montreux Convention in 1936. They primarily wanted to keep Turkey neutral in any European conflicts by protecting its right to control the Dardanelles and Black Sea straits. Only two major powers refused to sign on: Italy, whose naval build-up had prompted this reaction, and the United States which was isolationist.

EXPANDING THE EMPIRE: A SHORT WAR WITH SPOILS



In 1938, 20,000 colonists were settled in Libya in a massive program.



Actress Claudia Cardinale was born in French Tunisia which had an Italian population of 100,000

ITALY HAD A SURPLUS POPULATION

Mussolini was a man of the 19th Century in many ways. He judged Great Britain's power as flowing from its colonialism (see p.31). Colonial powers needed strong navies and a population raised on the mastery of foreign peoples ("lesser breeds", as Kipling wrote).

The first ambition of Italy's House of Savoy soon after reunification (1861-70) was the acquisition of colonies in Africa. An attitude of "*sacro egoismo*" or 'Italy First' became the new nation's foreign policy. But before any military adventures began, impoverished Italians leaving their homeland led the way.

Soon after the reunification Italian emigrants fled to the Americas and Africa for economic reasons. When France negotiated a protectorate in Tunisia (1881) Italians, especially Sicilians, preferred settling in nearby French Tunisia rather than far off America. That year the number of Italians grew to over 11,000, more than half of the European population in Tunisia, certainly higher than the French community of 708. By 1921, a French census registered almost 85,000 Italians in Tunisia, but believed by many historians to be closer to 90,000-100,000.

In 1911, Italy went to war with a declining Turkey (the 'sick man of Europe'). The defeat of Turkey in 1912 gave Italy the colonies of Tripoli and Cyanaica which were consolidated as Libya. However, indigenous resistance limited Italian colonization. By 1929, the new Fascist government 'pacified' the resistance and thousands of Italian colonists were enticed to settle there.

French Tunisia now had Italian Libya for its neighbor. Relieving North Africa of this French "protectorate" and its rule over so many Italians seemed attainable to Mussolini as France succumbed to German victories in 1940.

Part of Fascist ideology was to inculcate Italians with a Roman martial spirit, and colonialism was a vehicle to that end. Italian mothers furnished the raw material for conquest and colonization. There were 44.5 million Italians in 1940 with over one million births per year and a fertility rate of 3.07 children per family. These rates were never surpassed in the years after. Today, Italy's fertility rate is only 1.25 children per family. The median age of Italians in 1940 was about 26, today it is almost 50. This means there was a surplus of young men to man Italy's armed forces in 1940.

ITALIA IRREDENTA



The old Venetian Empire along the coast of the Adriatic Sea. These areas were purchased by Venice and held until 1797: Ragusa (from 1205), the Isthrian Peninsula and Dalmatia (from 1420).



France had possession of Italian-speaking areas: Corsica, Nice (Nizza) and Savoy (Savoia)

FEW ARE THE NATIONS WITHOUT ANCIENT CLAIMS

The French areas of Nice (Nizza) and Savoy (Savoia) were Italic or the realm of the House of Savoy until 1860 when they were traded off to Napoleon III for his support of Italy's reunification. Nizza was the birthplace of Giuseppe Garibaldi who achieved the reunification by conquering Sicily and southern Italy. He never forgave the House of Savoy for giving away Nizza and went into self-exile protest in Sardinia until the end of his life.

Corsica has been Italic since Roman times and later held by Genoa for five centuries until it was sold to France in 1767.

The Dalmatian coast was Roman then Venetian from 1420 to 1797, when Venice was conquered by Napoleon I

Albania was often of interest to Italy as both a choke point to the Adriatic Sea, and because it would be a foothold on the Balkan Peninsula. In fact, during the First World War Italy established a protectorate in southern Albania, stationing 100,000 troops there and creating an Albanian republic. With the collapse of the Ottoman

and Austria-Hungarian Empires in 1918, the Italians took over the rest of Albania and coastal Montenegro.

During the centuries of Ottoman occupation, Albania had no infrastructure to speak of. Under the brief Italian protectorate 339 miles of new roads were created, 68 miles of new railroads, 1,900 miles of telegraph lines, 9 tramways, a few hospitals and some modern administrative buildings. Nevertheless, by 1920 anti-Italian partisans and a general demobilization of Italy's armed forces left Italians little choice but to abandon Albania.

Further inroads into the Balkans was not an Italian or Fascist goal. Romania was a distant "Latin sister," and the Croat people within Yugoslavia were Roman Catholics. In fact, Mussolini is quoted by Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano during Italy's neutrality (1939-40) as wanting an understanding with Greece, "a country too poor for us to covet." [*Ciano's Diaries* entry 9/12/1939]

As you will see, Italy's 1940 invasion of Greece was provoked by British designs for naval and air bases there.

AN EMBARGO AND FRENCH FLEET



The French aircraft carrier *Béarn*
It is doubtful Mussolini would have entered
the war if the French fleet were intact.



Both the British and the French navies were
enforcing the embargo in the Mediterranean
until the fall of France.

THE MEDITERRANEAN BECAME FRENCH-FREE

In the nine months (Sept, 1939 - June, 1940) between the start of World War II and Italy's entry on Germany's side, Britain and France harrassed Italian shipping within the Mediterranean.

Italian merchant ships were regularly stopped and directed to a French or British port for contraband searches. There, the ships would be held for days or weeks. Italian ships were often unloaded for inspection. Sometimes, a ship would undergo British inspection at one port and a French inspection at a different port. Wasted time and fuel were borne by the Italian ships. Perishable cargoes were often lost in the delays. To add insult, the ships had to pay for the port fees as well as the unloading costs.



The French Navy had sizeable fleets in the Mediterranean in 1939 with naval stations at Toulon, France; Ajaccio, Corsica; Bizerte, Tunisia; and Mers-el-Kebir, an ancient Roman port in Algeria. Moreover, the French Navy had an aircraft carrier, which the Italians did not.

The Washington Naval Conference of 1922 allowed France and Italy equal tonnage. The French had 8 battleships, 20 cruisers, 70 destroyers, and 78 submarines — a formidable force when combined with Great Britain's.

When Mussolini declared war on June 10, 1940 France was only twelve days away from capitulation to the Germans. The future of the French fleet must have weighed heavily on his mind. Would the Germans seize the fleet at Toulon or would it be rendered non-active by the defeated French? Could he claim that fleet as spoils for in-

tervention?

As it turned out, Mussolini's forces barely penetrated a few miles into southern France, nowhere near Toulon. But by the terms of an armistice with the French Vichy government, all French naval bases in the Mediterranean were to be "demilitarized."

On July 3, 1940, on orders from Winston Churchill, the British Navy suddenly attacked the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir, Algeria to keep it out of German and Italian hands. Among the vessels destroyed were three battleships. Some 1,300 French sailors were killed.

In 1942, the Vichy French fleet at Toulon, which had been "demilitarized" was scuttled by its own commanders, who feared German or Italian seizure.

Although Free French leader General Charles DeGaulle retained some remnants of France's mighty navy in Britain and Dakar, Africa, the French had little impact on the Mediterranean theater. That part of Mussolini's gamble in entering the war proved correct. Even the French aircraft carrier *Béarn* sat out the war in Martinique after it was ordered by the U.S. Navy to remain there, fearing that a return to France would mean seizure by the Axis.



The famous British historian Hugh Seton-Watson observed that Italy had two choices before it: either to throw in with Germany in order to become a large, powerful empire at the expense of Britain and France, or to join the two Western Powers against Germany and eke out a middling existence as a weak, insignificant country.

THE DECLARATION OF WAR

At 6:00 PM from his balcony in the *Palazzo Venezia*, Mussolini explained why Italy was declaring war on Great Britain and France.

Combatants of the land, sea, and air. Black shirts of the revolution and of the [Fascist] legions! Men and women of Italy, of the Empire, and of the kingdom of Albania! Listen all!

An hour appointed by destiny has struck in the heavens of our fatherland. It is the hour of irrevocable decisions.

The declaration of war has already been delivered to the ambassadors of Great Britain and France. We go to battle against the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West who, at every moment have hindered the advance and have often endangered the very existence of the Italian people.

Recent historical events can be summarized in the following phrases: promises, threats, blackmail, and finally to crown the edifice, the ignoble siege by the fifty-two states of the League of Nations. Our conscience is absolutely tranquil. With you the entire world is witness that Fascist Italy has done all that is humanly possible to avoid the torment which is throwing Europe into turmoil; but all was in vain. It would have sufficed to revise the treaties to bring them up to date with the changing needs of the life of nations and not consider them untouchable for eternity; it would have sufficed not to have begun the stupid policy of guarantees, which has shown itself particularly lethal for those who accepted them; it would have sufficed not to reject the proposal [for peace] that the Fuhrer made on 6 October of last year after having finished the campaign in Poland.

But now all of that belongs to the past. If now today we have decided to face the risks and the sacrifices of a war, it is because the honor, the interests, the future impose an iron necessity, since a great people is truly such if it considers sacred its own duties and does not evade the supreme trials which determine the course of history.

We take up arms to resolve, after having resolved the problem of our land frontier, the problem of our maritime frontiers; we want to break the territorial chains which suffocate us in our own sea; since a people of forty-five million souls is not truly free if it does not have free access to the ocean.



Mussolini's speaking style changed noticeably as he ruled. His very Italian gesticulations were controlled by clutching his belt or standing akimbo.

This gigantic struggle is nothing other than a phase in the logical development of our revolution; it is the struggle of peoples that are poor but rich in workers against the exploiters who hold on ferociously to the monopoly off all the riches and all the gold of the earth; it is the struggle of the fertile and young people against the sterile people moving to the sunset; it is the struggle between two centuries and two ideas.

Now that the die is cast and our will has burned our ships at our backs, I solemnly declare that Italy does not intend to drag into the conflict other peoples bordering her on land or on sea. Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Egypt take note of these my words and it depends on them and only on them whether or not they will be rigorously confirmed.

Italians! In a memorable meeting, that which took place in Berlin, I said that according to the laws of Fascist morality, when one has a friend, one marches with him to the end. This we have done with Germany, with its people, with its marvelous armed forces. On this eve of an event of century-wide scope, we direct our thought to the majesty of the King and Emperor which as always has understood the soul of the fatherland. And we salute with our voices the Führer, the head of great ally Germany. Proletarian and Fascist Italy stands up a third time, strong, proud, and united as never before. The single order of the day is categorical and obligatory for all. It already spreads and fires hearts from the Alps to the Indian Ocean; Victory! And we will win, in order finally to give a long period of peace with justice to Italy, to Europe, and to the world.

People of Italy! Run to arms and show your tenacity, your courage, your valor!

Theaters of Operation

A MAXIMUM EFFORT

NORTH AFRICA



Italy's invasion of Greece actually took the pressure off North Africa. Beginning in February, 1941, some 57,000 British troops and equipment were eventually shifted to Greece.

The Italians had created a second front.



The last stand at Giarabub was a propaganda windfall for Italy with a 1942 movie and rousing battlesong.

DESERT WARFARE IS UNFORGIVING

In June, 1940, Italy declared war on Great Britain and France. An Italian war aim was the capture of British-controlled Egypt and the Suez Canal. In late 1940, despite a glaring lack of preparation and overextended supply lines, an Italian Army crossed into Egypt as ordered by Mussolini himself. Disaster soon struck as the more mechanized British caught the Italians in the unforgiving desert. With few tanks and isolated by overextended supply lines, the Italian forces halted just a few miles into Egypt, dividing into separate defensive positions. The British then took the initiative and attacked each position.

By December, the isolated Italian units had neither the means to escape or to resist. Mass surrender over the coming weeks, eventually totaled 130,000 men. Fascist arms became the butt of jokes and Italian morale plummeted. For the British, who were suffering through the aerial Battle of Britain and barely escaped at Dunkirk, the weak link in the Axis was found. Gen. Graziani's remaining force retreated to western Libya.

At this point, Mussolini accepted Hitler's offer of an armored division. Rommel and his *Afrika Korps* arrived in western Libya in February, 1941.

The Italian public had very little good news except that Libya was not lost and the great expanse of the Sahara had limited the British advance. Moreover, a surrounded

Italian infantry unit held its ground at a Libyan border town called Giarabub.

Under the command of Lt. Colonel Salvatore Castagna, from December 16, 1940 to March 20, 1941 the garrison held off a British/Australian division. The Italians held out long enough to hear from German General Edwin Rommel who arrived in North Africa after the Italians stabilized the Libyan front. On March 17th he sent the beleaguered garrison some hope, "*I salute the heroic defenders of Giarabub...Continue your arduous struggle. In a very few weeks we shall reach you.*" That relief never happened. On March 21, 1941, with 500 men killed, Giarabub fell to the British along with 800 Italian and Libyan prisoners.

But, as fortune would have it, Italian forces in Greece had stressed the Greeks to their limit. (see p.28) On February 12th, Churchill ordered his North African commander to immediately despatched 57,000 men and air squadrons to Greece. Newly arrived Rommel and the Axis forces now had an advantage over the British thanks to Mussolini's unplanned "second front."

The transfer of these troops to Greece sapped British equipment as well as manpower. But unlike the Italians the Brits had an inexhaustible supply of armaments from the United States.

EAST AFRICA



Honorable surrender at Amba Alagi. The Italians pass in review with their weapons.



After the defeat in East Africa: "We Shall Return!"

ITALIANS FOUGHT WITH NO HOPE OF RESUPPLY

The sixteen month war in East Africa was fairly one-sided, as the Italians could not be resupplied or reinforced. At the battles of Keren, Amba Alagi, and Gondar over 6,000 Italian and native levies were killed or wounded. The British Commonwealth suffered 4,000 casualties. The Italians lost 250 aircraft, the British 140.

In East Africa (Abyssinia, Eritrea, Somalia), even the British propagandists were hard-pressed to denigrate Italian troops. The siege of Gondar lasted seven months, that of Keren in 1941 lasted two months. "Keren was as hard a soldiers' battle as was ever fought, and let it be said that nowhere in the war did the Germans fight more stubbornly than those (Italian) Savoia battalions, Alpini, Bersaglieri and Grenadiers....except for the German parachute divisions in Italy and the Japanese in Burma no enemy with whom the British and Indian troops were matched put up a finer fight than those Savoia battalions at Keren." [Compton Mackenzie, *Eastern Epic*]

Italian Cavalry officer Amadeo Guillet, nicknamed the "Devil Commander" by the British, tried to slow the inevitable British advance in East Africa by hurling his cavalry against a British armored unit in what was to be the last cavalry charge ever faced by the British military. The

British newspaper *The Observer* reported, "Yelling, flashing scimitars, firing carbines and tossing grenades, the 1,500 Italian horsemen swept through the camp, attacking tank crews and brigade HQ staff in a whirlwind of dust and gunfire."

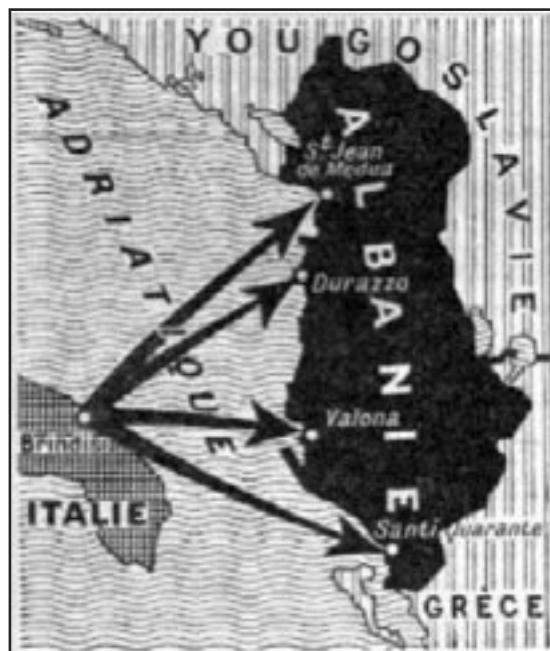
Among the little known exploits of Italian soldiers is the life of Francesco de Martini (right), a member of the Italian Army's secret service (SIM). Born and educated in the Middle East, de Martini was fluent in Arabic, Turkish and Amharic (Ethiopian). He served in Italy during the First World War and spent the post-war years serving in Eritrea and Abyssinia. In 1941, stricken with malaria, he was captured by the British, but escaped a week later. By August he led a raiding party that destroyed a huge British ammunition dump. He became Italy's master spy in the Red Sea area with a price on his head offered by British intelligence. Captured in 1942, he spent four years as a POW. Eventually promoted to general, he received Italy's highest military honor at war's end.



THE BALKANS



Invading mountainous Greece required Italy's famous Alpini regiments and mules that were bred in Italy since Roman times.



Over the centuries Italy has absorbed many Albanian refugees (*“Arbëreshë”*) who fled Muslim Turks. Italy partially occupied Albania during the First World War and later provided military and civilian experts to that kingdom. When Italian forces invaded in 1939, collaborating Albanians expelled their King Zog and offered the throne to Italy's Victor Emmanuel III.

BRITAIN AND GERMANY WERE DUAL THREATS

Challenging Britain's naval and air power in North Africa (i.e., to capture Suez) required the neutralization of any potential bases around the eastern Mediterranean rim including Greece and the Balkans. Moreover, Mussolini feared Hitler as much as he feared the Allies. He needed to keep Germany away from the Mediterranean, a future Italian preserve. To accomplish these goals and secure both coasts of the Adriatic Sea, Mussolini ordered the occupation of Albania in April 1939. This occurred before Hitler invaded Poland later in the year. Albania became a strategic base in the Balkans and a warning to anyone thinking of entering the region, including Hitler.

In early October 1940, after Italy and Britain were at war, Hitler informed the Italians that the Greek government had agreed to grant Britain naval and air bases to assist it against Italy. In fact, British ships and airplanes had already begun using Greek ports and bases for supply and refuge from Italian naval forces.

Not only the British were menacing the Balkans. Just as Mussolini had feared, Hitler unexpectedly occupied Romania on October 8th with 500,000 German troops to secure the oil fields at Ploesti. Mussolini needed to counter both the British and the Germans.

Immediately, Mussolini held a series of conferences in Rome to plan an attack on Greece, setting the date for October 28, 1940, the anniversary of the Fascist March on Rome in 1922. This left Italy with only two weeks to prepare for the campaign. His general staff envisioned a force of 40 regiments - (see p.9 for Italian Army formations) but only 16 regiments were allocated in the Fascist belief that the Greeks would collapse easily.

Meanwhile, the Greeks had begun mobilizing in August. By October, the Greeks had concentrated 12 regiments in Macedonia opposite the Italians in Albania and would soon have 24 regiments facing them with another 24 regiments in reserve. The Italians were in for a surprise.

On October 26th, drenching rains in Albania began turning the Italian attack route into a sea of mud. On October 28, 14 regiments invaded Greece without air cover, due to weather. They advanced nevertheless pushing 40 miles into Greece. The British quickly dispatched five RAF squadrons of fighters and bombers to Greece, which attacked Italian ports and supplies in Greece and Albania.

This Anglo-Greek counter offensive forced the Italians to retreat 55 miles back into Albania, before reinforcements from Italy arrived to stem the attack, now a stalemate.

BATTLE OF BRITAIN



Seventy-three *Cicogna* (“Stork”) bombers were stationed in Belgium for the raids on England. Their bomb load was only 1,500 lbs and their wings were fabric covered.

Weather conditions over the Channel and vulnerability to Spitfire attacks led to the loss of 20 Storks early on.

Fighter protection was provided by open-cockpit CR/42s (left), themselves vulnerable to Spitfires and Hurricanes.



The cover of a popular magazine published just four days before Italy's declaration of war. Pictured: Savoia-Marchetti 82 (“Kangaroo”) transport plane. Even the Germans loved this plane.

A BRIEF MORALE BOOSTER FOR ITALY

British radar often neutralized the powerful Italian Navy and helped save Britain during the Italian “*blitz*” of 1940-41 by tracking Italian bombers and fighters that crossed the English Channel. This Italian effort was short-lived and according to British accounts ineffective. Unlike the German *blitz* the Italians targeted port installations not the London population. The primary reason the Italian Air Force was diverted from more vital fronts was a matter of revenge. Soon after Italy declared war on France and Britain in June, 1940, the Brits sent bombers to attack Italian industrial cities. One raid on June 12th accidentally bombed a residential neighborhood in Torino killing fourteen civilians and wounding twenty children. Outraged by the attack on civilians, the Italians asked Germany for an airdrome in Belgium and dispatched a squadron to participate in the air war.

British historians, if they mention the Italian effort at

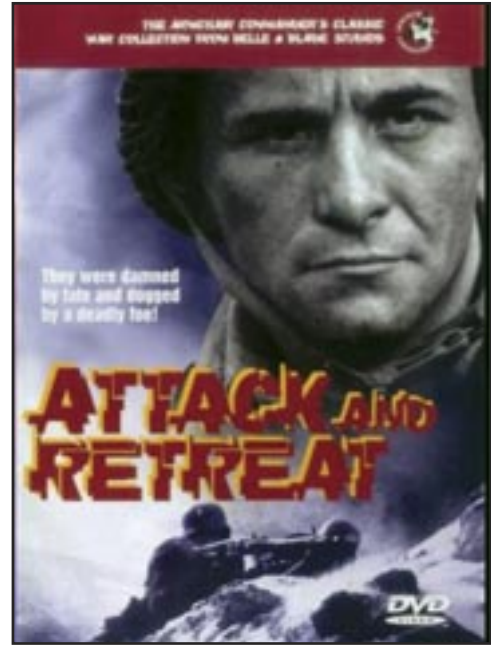
all, say it came out of Mussolini’s bombastic need to show the Italian flag on every front. They neglect to mention the provocative Torino raid. As with every other front, the Brits dismiss the Italian air attacks as a humorous sideshow (“*The Chianti Raiders*”), of little consequence. They point to the Italian use of antiquated biplanes to escort their bombers. Nevertheless, they concede that the biplanes (CR/42 *Falcon*) gave as good as they got. They also concede the courage of these daring pilots in fighting during the bitter winter in open cockpits against radar detection and the legendary Spitfires and Hurricanes.

Italy’s Battle of Britain lasted only a few months (October, 1940 – April, 1941) but it gave the embattled Italian people satisfaction in having avenged British bombings. However, it was a costly diversion that took much needed machines and men away from other fronts.

EASTERN FRONT



A tribute to the Savoia Cavalry and its amazing service on the Eastern Front



The film *Attack and Retreat* (originally *Una Brava Gente*) was released in 1964 to dramatize the humanity of Italian troops in the USSR. Actor Peter Falk starred in it.

THE USSR WAS AN IDEOLOGICAL ENEMY

Hitler invaded Poland and the Soviet Union for “living space” (*Lebensraum*) for the Germanic people. Mussolini followed him to crush Communism at its source. Italy had no colonial or irredentist goals in Ukraine or Russia.

The invasion was a surprise to Mussolini and the forces he sent had little preparation or equipment. Beginning in July, 1941 an expeditionary force of 60,000 men and 100 aircraft were spared to send to that front. Eventually, that force grew into the 8th Army under General Giovanni Messe (photo on p.8) with 235,000 men. Among the units sent were elite *Alpini*, mountain troops who found no such terrain on the flat Soviet steppes.

The Italians had only light tanks to compete with the legendary Soviet T-34. Fortunately, the initial battles with Soviet forces met with success, owing to mass surrenders and Stalin’s unpreparedness. However, they faced a different enemy when winter came. Men and equipment froze in the below zero temperatures. Moreover, the Soviets stiffened their military discipline with mass executions. Soviet retreat and surrender were things of the past by the winter of 1941-42.

On the southern front the following summer, the Italians performed one of the amazing feats of the Second

World War — a cavalry charge.

This would be the last cavalry charge of the war, or any war to come, and it resulted in a resounding Italian victory. Colonel Alessandro Bettoni was confronted with a superior Russian force on the banks of the Don River. On the morning of August 24, 1942, the 600 men of the Savoia Cavalry regiment mounted their horses and upon the traditional cry of *Avanti Savoia!* they unsheathed their sabers and charged a Russian position comprised of 2,000 men equipped with artillery and mortar support. Within a couple of hours, the battle was over. The Italians had wiped out two Russian battalions and sent a third packing across the Don, leaving behind 600 prisoners.

Another unique aspect of the Italian occupation of Soviet territory was the contrast in treatment of the civilian population. The cruelty of the *Waffen SS* and even regular German Army units in occupied nations is well known. Indeed, Ukrainian and Russian civilians expected the same of all Axis forces. To their surprise, the Italians treated them with respect and often with brotherhood. Italian soldiery was considered *Una Brava Gente* (“A Nice People”). In 1964, an Italo-Soviet movie with that title was released as a testament to that relationship.

NORTH & SOUTH ATLANTIC



When Italy declared war in 1940, the freighter *Olterra* was anchored in Gibraltar Bay in Spanish territory. The Italians scuttled the ship so it could be used as a secret base for underwater attacks against British ships. A portal was cut into the hull below the waterline for secret exit and entry of saboteurs. From September, 1940 to September, 1942, 40,000 tons of Allied ships were destroyed either by frogmen or manned torpedoes.



Capt. Gianfranco Gazzana Priaroggia, the most successful non-German submariner during World War II. His subs sunk 11 ships for 90,601 tons. He was nicknamed *Ursus Atlanticus* ("The Bear of the Atlantic") by his crews.

ITALIAN SUBS WERE HIGHLY EFFECTIVE WHEN WORKING ALONE

On June 24, 1940 *Supermarina* offered the Germans a fleet of ocean-going submarines for use in the North Atlantic. Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz welcomed the offer to supplement his then-meager U-Boat force. By August, 1940, the Italian submarine force under Admiral Angelo Parona (see photo on p.3) obtained a separate base in Bordeaux in German-occupied France. The location of this base would put Italian subs much closer to the action and would also avoid the dangerous round trip through the Straits of Gibraltar. The French base required only one trip through the Straits. (During the war Italian submarines ran the Straits 44 times and only lost one ship. This was a far better record than that of the German Navy, which during the summer of 1941 attempted to run 10 U-Boats into the Mediterranean and promptly lost 5 of them.)

There were 27 to 32 Italian submarines stationed at Bordeaux. the average patrol lasted 40 days, most of them concentrated in the vicinity of the Azores. This was a good station since the weather was generally clear making sightings and engagements easier. More importantly,

most Allied merchant ships that steamed through this sector of the Atlantic travelled independently not in convoy.

According to Admiral Doenitz, Italian submarines were a disappointment when integrated with German wolf packs — they worked best on independent patrols. Yet, from December 1940 to February 1941 Italian submarines dominated the North Atlantic force, there being only 3 to 6 U-Boats available for service.

Thirty-two Italian submarines in the Atlantic destroyed nearly 917,000 tons of Allied shipping, an average of 28,656 tons per boat. Even though U-boats sunk 12 million tons, their per boat average was less when spread over hundreds of U-boats (Germany built over 1,100 during the war). In short, the Italians were surprisingly efficient.

Italian submarine Capt. Gazzana Priaroggia (photo above) had a higher success rate than Britain's Malcolm Wanklyn or America's Richard O'Kane. He was killed in 1943 when his sub was sunk by British destroyers.

Turning Points

DECISIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

THE TARANTO RAID



Twenty-one British Swordfish biplanes were launched from a carrier.



Conte di Cavour, built in 1915, (before and after).

The Taranto Raid was a great boost for British morale at the time. Their victory in Africa was still weeks away and London was enduring the *Blitz*.



THE TARANTO RAID WAS NOT A KNOCKOUT, BUT CAME WITH THE DEBACLE IN GREECE

The British had counted on the French Navy to help dominate the Mediterranean if the Italians entered the war. However, the French Navy had been neutralized with the fall of France in May, 1940. From that point on, the Italian Navy was a formidable foe.

Pampered by Mussolini at the expense of his Army and Air Force, the Italian Navy was the best prepared. Its order of battle included six modern battleships, enough to dominate *Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea), and more in production. What the navy did lack, however, was radar, ample fuel, and aggressive leadership. Unfortunately for Mussolini, the British had what the Italians lacked.

The naval base at Taranto in the instep of the Italian boot was a key target in pre-war British planning. On November 11, 1940 the harbor held 6 battleships, 7 cruisers, 28 destroyers, 16 submarines, and numerous other war vessels.

Using 21 Swordfish biplanes launched from aircraft carriers, the Royal Navy managed to surprise the battle fleet at anchor. Despite the skill and daring of the British pilots, damage was minimal. Only one battleship (*Conte di Cavour*) was not readily repaired and sat out the war in drydock. However, the psychological impact greatly undermined Italian morale.

The Japanese took great interest in Taranto and it served as a model for their great strike on Pearl Harbor one year later. Like Taranto, Pearl Harbor called for low-level torpedo attacks and the element of surprise.

What the British reaped from Taranto was a blow to Italian morale. What the Japanese reaped at Pearl Harbor was the whirlwind. It should be noted, however, that the Italian Navy avenged Taranto the following year when six of its intrepid frogmen sunk two British battleships and their supply ships at Alexandria, Egypt (see page 32).

VICTORY IN GREECE 1941



Early on, the Greeks counterattacked and pushed Italian forces 55 miles back into Albania (blue area)

AN UNDERSIZED FORCE MET THE ENTIRE GREEK ARMY

A massive Greek effort in 1940 had pushed the Italians back into Albania. (see p.22 Balkans), partly caused when Albanian allies “*massively deserted the front line.*” [ref: Albanian Studies website] Reinforcements from Italy arrived and the Italians managed to stalemate the Greeks throughout the winter of 1940-1941. By February, 1941 the toll on the Greeks forced them to ask for British ground troops.

On March 7th, the British relief force began arriving — 57,000 men to add to the five air squadrons already in action. To counter this aid, Mussolini ordered a new Italian offensive on March 9th and personally flew to the front to see his troops “*smash [Greek] kidneys.*” After five days, this offensive further weakened the Greeks but gained little ground.

With the British expeditionary force arriving daily, Mussolini grudgingly asked for German support. Hitler agreed, but the Italians had to wait a full month until the weather improved for German armor to arrive. The Italians doggedly held their line against Greek and British forces until then.

On April 6th, the Balkan conflict took on a wholly new turn. Yugoslavia reversed its Axis leanings and became a

target of German aggression. Hitler now sent forces to both Yugoslavia and Greece. Mussolini simultaneously declared war on Yugoslavia, and both Axis partners subdued the country within days. Meanwhile, the Greeks were outflanked by a German thrust and the Italians broke out of the Albanian stalemate rolling up the beleaguered Greek line.

By April 17th, Yugoslavia surrendered to Italy and Germany, yielding up 334,000 POWs. By April 23rd, Greece capitulated separately to Italian and German forces. The British were routed and lost 3,700 men killed and 11,500 captured while the Germans lost 2,232 killed and 3,000 wounded in this campaign.

Some 218,000 Greek soldiers surrendered. About 2,700 Greeks were killed fighting the Germans. On the Italian front Greek losses were 13,000 killed, 50,000 wounded, tens of thousands captured and thousands maimed by frostbite. The Italians had lost 13,755 killed, 50,000 wounded, 20,000 captured and 12,368 maimed by frostbite over the previous six months.

The British pulled off another Dunkirk, saving 50,000 by evacuation. But their Greek diversion was a disaster.

THE DESERT SEESAW



The *Giovani Fascisti* were to prove themselves outside Tobruk in November, 1941 defeating an attacking Indian brigade.



Monument to the fallen of the 7th Bersagliere Regiment at El Alamein: “[They] Lacked Fortune not Valor.”

60% OF AXIS FORCES WERE ITALIAN

The best evidence of Italian military performance is often found in the words of the adversaries who fought against them and the Germans that fought with them.

In November, 1941, the Italo-German forces under Rommel went on the offense laying siege to the lost Italian port city of Tobruk, Libya. To break the siege, the British launched *Operation Crusader*, a massive armored attack. However, they ran into the Italian “*Ariete*” (“Ram”) Armored Division. A tank battle ensued that stopped the British offensive. *Ariete* lost 34 tanks and the British between 30 to 50 tanks. *Ariete* had won the day. (Its commander General Mario Balotta received the German Eagle and Iron Cross, and later served on the Russian Front.) His division remained in place while Rommel opted to avoid more encounters with the superior British force. *Ariete* covered Rommel’s successful retreat.

In his diary, Rommel wrote after the loss of Africa: “*In the Ariete we lost our oldest Italian comrades, from whom we had probably always demanded more than they, with their poor armament, had been capable of performing.*”

The Axis forces did not give up on capturing Tobruk.

The next spring the fortress succumbed and some 30,000, mostly South Africans and Indians, surrendered to General Enea Navarini. The victory also yielded 2,000 vehicles, 2,000 tons of fuel, and 5,000 tons of rations. So shocking was the capitulation of Tobruk that Winston Churchill later wrote in his memoirs of the calamity “*Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another.*” Rommel was promoted to Field Marshal.

At the ill-fated Battle of El Alamein in 1942, after the heroic *Folgore* (“Lightning”) division of paratroopers destroyed over 120 British tanks. The division was drained of manpower from casualties and capture as they successfully covered the Axis retreat, British General Hughes, who led the opposing British 44th infantry division stated, “*I wish to say that in all my life I have never encountered soldiers like those of the Folgore.*” No less an adversary than Winston Churchill himself praised the *Folgore* when, before Parliament on November 21, 1942, he said, “*We really must bow in front of the rest of those who have been the ‘lions’ of the Folgore Division.*”

It is a simple, indisputable fact that many of the Axis victories in North Africa attributed simply to the “genius of Rommel” were won with the blood and valor of Italians.

WAR AGAINST THE USA - WHY?



Eight months before Italy declared war on the U.S., neutral America seized 26 Italian merchant ships and imprisoned their crews.



The passenger liner *Conte Biancamano* was seized at the Panama Canal. It became the USS *Hermitage* in 1942, a troop transport, and returned to Italy in 1947.



The Tripartite Pact laid the groundwork for a "war of continents".

THE UNITED STATES NEEDED TO BE SPREAD THIN

It would seem insane for a nation with a land area of Arizona and a population half that of Hitler's *Reich* or Japan to declare war on the USA. But it was the logical conclusion to America's pro-British "neutrality." President Roosevelt's Lend-Lease program unleashed America's vast industrial base in support of the British war effort. Thousands of tanks, ships and warplanes were shipped to England even before Italy and Germany declared war on the U.S. Those ships, planes, and tanks were used against Italian troops.

In September, 1940, after entering the war against France and Great Britain, Italy signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Japan. Japan needed allies as they had just been defeated by the Soviet army in a border war in Manchuria (1939). Hitler needed Japan to keep Stalin's army preoccupied in Siberia so Germany could invade Russia in 1941. Italy had no objective in signing other than gaining an Asian ally to distract the British.

In April, 1941, eight months before Pearl Harbor, when Britain was on the verge of defeat in the North Atlantic and North Africa, President Roosevelt seized 26 Italian merchant ships in U.S. harbors. These ships were eventually "sold" to the British or used to ferry American supplies. In September, 1941 the U.S. Navy was permitted to engage Axis ships in defense and to safeguard convoys.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, which nei-

ther Hitler or Mussolini had forewarning, the dictators saw a new advantage. The U.S. would halt Lend-Lease shipments to Britain and the USSR, having its own need for war material to use in a Pacific war.

Italy and Germany could have left Japan and the U.S. to fight it out alone. But who would have thought that the United States had the potential to convert its peacetime economy within months and produce war material enough for a multi-continental war and supply Britain, the USSR and China at the same time? On the heels of Pearl Harbor the British, an Asian power, also found themselves at war with Japan.

Although the Tripartite Pact was purely defensive and Japan was clearly the aggressor, the Japanese pressured Hitler and Mussolini to join them against the U.S. and Britain. It didn't take much persuading. President Roosevelt had all but declared war on them in the Atlantic. American warships were already protecting convoys and exchanging fire with U-boats.

However, with Britain at war with Japan, elements of the British Navy were transferred from Europe to Asia. Moreover, the American Navy would reduce its power in the Atlantic to make up for the battleships lost at Pearl Harbor.

For Mussolini, declaring war on America on December 11, 1941 was yet another gamble.

THE GLOBAL MOBILIZATION DOOMED THE AXIS



Indian troops in North Africa



Note the colonials bring up the rear.

A COMMONWEALTH AND AMERICAN INDUSTRY

During the war, the U.S. supplied Britain with 7,411 aircraft, 5,128 tanks, 4,932 anti-tank weapons, 4,000 machine guns as well as ships and vast amounts of fuel, food and other materiel. The USSR was similarly supplied. There is hardly any record of Germany supplying the Italian Army, Navy or Air Force with anything significant other than coal, oil and equipment parts. Either the Germans didn't have enough tanks or planes to give Italy or they didn't trust Italians with their equipment. When Mussolini asked for tanks in Africa he also got General Erwin Rommel and the German *Afrika Korps* to operate them. The Italians fought and died with mainly their own equipment in Africa, the USSR, and the Balkans.

When the port city of Tobruk in Libya was captured by Axis forces in June, 1942 (p.29), Churchill was visiting President Roosevelt in Washington, DC. He could not conceal his shock from FDR. Roosevelt anxiously asked what he could do to help, and diverted a large shipment of about 300 Sherman tanks, and about 100 guns, earmarked for other theatres, to Egypt. These would eventually provide General Montgomery's superiority in weapons and equipment that would play a major role in stopping the Italo-German forces at El Alamein later that year.

For manpower, the major contributor to Britain's victory was the Commonwealth. More than 600,000 African men served Britain during the war in combat and support

roles. India alone supplied some 2.5 million troops to the British war effort, just as they had done in the First World War when one million Indians went into uniform. Over 87,000 Indian troops died in World War II, many in Africa and Italy. Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, a North African commander, stated that Britain "*couldn't have come through both wars if they hadn't had the Indian Army.*"

India also supplied, among other goods, 25 million pairs of boots, 37,000 silk parachutes and 4 million cotton supply-dropping parachutes during the war. Food exports from Bengal left Indians unprepared for a major drought in 1943, compounded by the refusal of Winston Churchill to release ships to transport grain from Australia. The Bengal famine cost the lives of 3 million people, sacrificed for Great Britain's war effort.

Including men from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, the British had some 15 million men under arms. Canada delivered almost \$4 billion in direct financial aid to the United Kingdom.

How the Italians endured on so many fronts against these odds is nothing short of amazing. Ironically, the last line of an Italian song inspired by the last stand of a battalion in North Africa (p.20) rightly predicted Britain's ultimate loss of empire:

"The end of England begins at Giarabub!"

ALEXANDRIA HARBOR



Insignia of the Decima MAS

Shortening the supply line would have saved 500 sea miles and attacks from Malta.

1962 movie poster dramatizing the Alexandria attack



HITLER HESITATES AND OPPORTUNITIES ARE LOST

In the Mediterranean, Italian merchant ships ran the suicide run to North Africa while the British knew their routes and schedules from breaking the German *Enigma* code (see p.35). The Italian naval codes were only partly compromised but the Brits got what they needed from highly detailed German communiques. The Germans blamed an Italian admiral in Naples for the security leaks. Eventually, the Italian merchant fleet was annihilated and supplies had to be ferried by Italian warships and aircraft.

To shorten the supply run, the Italians wanted to take control of the port of Bizerte in Tunisia, still under Vichy French control. Hitler would not consent, as he did not want to upset his relations with Vichy. As a result, Italian ships had to continue running the guntlet to Libya.

The two sources of British attacks on Italian supply lines were Egypt and the island of Malta. Italy's *Comando Supremo* had Plan DG10/42 to seize Malta with a joint Italo-German invasion force in 1941. At first Hitler was on board, but was soon seduced by Rommel to focus on the drive to Suez which was having some success at the time.

As for the British naval base in Egypt, the Italians addressed that without German assistance. Italian frogmen penetrated Alexandria Harbor, sinking two British battleships, a tanker, and destroyer in December, 1941. A British-Italian movie, *The Valiant*, was produced in 1962

depicting this heroic attack. In one stroke, the Italian commandos of *Decima MAS* had knocked the British from control of the Mediterranean. Upon hearing the news, Winston Churchill called a secret emergency session of Parliament in early 1942 to deal with the Mediterranean crisis, in which he referred to the Italian frogmen's "*extraordinary courage and ingenuity.*"

At the other end of the Med, frogmen were sinking British ships at Gibraltar in the dead of night using a derelict merchant ship in the Spanish sector of Gibraltar Bay (see p.25).

All told, this sort of low-budget warfare, from Gibraltar to the Crimea, cost the Allies thirty ships. Had Malta been taken as *Comando Supremo* wanted, North Africa might not have been lost and Italy not invaded.

British supply convoys to Malta and Egypt fared no better. German and Italian pilots were relentless in attacking these ships. Italian naval units engaged them in daring confrontations. For those who want an unbiased British version of how effective the Italians were against British convoys in the Mediterranean, the book *Siege: Malta 1940-1943*, by Ernle Bradford would be a start. "*The stories of cowardice carried in the British press, like all things else always in wartime, were designed for home consumption by civilians.*"

EL ALAMEIN & KASSERINE



The *Folgore* Parachute Division

At El Alamein, after disastrous losses, the *Afrika Korps* retreated, often using Italian trucks, leaving the stranded Italians to cover their escape

THE AXIS CAME WITHIN 71 MILES OF SUEZ

One of the amazing feats of historical revision has been exorcising the Italian Army from accounts after the mass surrenders of 1940. For example, the word Axis is rarely used. It is invariably “Rommel and the *Afrika Korps*.” Military maps generally use the swastika without the fasces to delineate frontlines and troop movements. Yet, two-thirds of Rommel’s forces were Italian, even after the mass surrenders. The British are loath to refer to their nearly 3-year struggle with Italian adversaries except in humorous and degrading ways.

As the war progressed and training improved, Italian units like the *Ariete*, *Folgore*, and *Centauro* Divisions could match any in the war in spite of inferior equipment. “*The sacrifice of the Ariete, Littorio and Trieste and the tough Folgore was gradually forgotten. Yet without them the Afrika Korps could not have garnered the laurels it had, survived at Alamein as long as it had, or escaped in the manner it did.*” [El Alamein, Bryn Hammond]

In his diary, Rommel wrote: “*In the Ariete [Division] we lost our oldest Italian comrades, from whom we had probably always demanded more than they, with their poor armament, had been capable of performing.*”

Perhaps the most fitting tribute to Italian soldiers is written on a humble marker that lies three miles west of El Alamein in Egypt, where so many of them gave their

lives. The marker, erected by veterans, reads simply, “*Manca la fortuna non il valore*” (“Fortune was lacking, not valor.”) - photo on p.29.

American troops first encountered Italians at the Kasserine Pass in February, 1943. Like the Brits, our American historians gloss over the Italians. The fact is Kasserine was an American disaster, its first defeat in the European theater with 2,000 killed, 3,700 captured, and 300 tanks destroyed. It was Rommel’s last planned battle in Africa and it began with an all-German attack against the Allied lines in Tunisia. When a break-through eluded them, the Germans called in the Italian *Centauro* Division with its *Bersaglieri* component. On February 20th, Col. Luigi Bonafatti’s 5th Bersaglieri shock troops broke through the American lines. Bonafatti was killed in action. This is how Rommel described it: “*...I have special praise for the 5th Bersaglieri, who attacked fiercely and whose commander fell during the attack; they threw the American, British and French forces out of the pass, allowing the II/86 and K.10 to exploit the breakthrough ...The German soldier has impressed the world. However, the Italian Bersaglieri has impressed the German soldier.*”

By May, 1943, the Axis position in North Africa was hopeless and escape by sea was impossible. German and Italian units lost freedom of movement and were methodically surrounded and trapped.

THE RUSSIAN SINKHOLE



Italian 8th Army Retreats

ITALIAN COMMUNISTS IN THE USSR WERE AS RUTHLESS AS STALIN

In the summer of 1942, Hitler ordered his generals to capture the southern city of Stalingrad. The Axis allies — Romanians, Hungarians, and Italians — were all needed to defend a 700-mile front. The Italian 8th Army was assigned 200 miles to cover with no reserve. The battle for Stalingrad lasted into the winter.

The Soviets planned to surround the Germans by breaking through the Romanian flank and then attacking the Italian line. Fifteen Soviet divisions and 100 tanks were unleashed against two Italian divisions. The Italians held for eleven days until the Soviets broke the Romanian and Hungarian forces on the either side of the Italians — the Italians were encircled. Two army corps were destroyed.

Trapped, the remaining 8th Army fought on for almost two weeks until the elite *Alpini Tridentina* Division led a breakthrough. For fifteen days in January, 1943 the Italians trekked 180 miles, fought twenty battles, and spent fourteen nights in below-zero temperatures.

On the morning of January 26th, the 4,000 men of *Tridentina* attacked 6,000 Soviets at Nikolayevka, the last unit to block its retreat. The Soviets held until *Tridentina* commander General Luigi Reverberi mounted one of his last three tanks and ordered the full Italian corps of 40,000 worn-out men to take the village. The decimated

8th Army had escaped encirclement, but 60% of its ranks were killed or captured.

There was no quarter given on the Eastern Front. Thousands of Italian prisoners were executed upon capture. The survivors of these massacres were subjected to extreme cold, malnutrition, lack of sanitation, forced labor and brutality. Based on data released after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been revealed that only 14.4% of the Italian prisoners of war that fell into Soviet hands returned to Italy alive. This stands in stark contrast to the 99.9%, 98.7% and 94.4% who survived American, British and German internment respectively.

Italian Communist leader Togliatti, who was in exile in Moscow, refused to intercede for the 80,000 to 115,000 Italian POWs: “...by no means do I believe the prisoners should be liquidated, especially since they can be useful in reaching some of our objectives. **But if the objectively difficult conditions should mean the end of many, I see no cause to argue against a concrete manifestation of historical justice.**” (emphasis added)

[*Stalin and Togliatti*, by Agarossi and Zaslavsky, pp 167-168]

SECRET CODES & SPIES



British code-breakers could do nothing with their captured *Enigma* machine (left) unless they knew the daily rotor settings. In a series of high-seas captures of a German weather ship and U-boats 110 & 559, the British developed the “*Ultra*” computer code-breaker.

INTERCEPTED GERMAN CODES PUT ITALIANS AT RISK

When Poland fell in 1939, Polish Intelligence captured a German *Enigma* coding machine. A series of rotors with alphabet letters could be set to an infinite arrangement of letters to encrypt wireless messages. On the receiving end, an *Enigma* operator would need to know how the sender set his rotors. The Germans supplied each military unit and naval vessel with a code book of daily rotor settings. Without these daily settings, *Enigma* was almost impossible to break.

Although the Poles gave the British the captured *Enigma* machine, the code-breakers at Bletchley Park still needed enough daily settings to invent an automated method to decipher German messages.

In early 1941, the British seized a German weather ship near Iceland and found a book of daily rotor settings. Soon after, the Royal Navy captured U-110 and its code books. In October, 1942, U-559 was captured with its code books. With enough insight into *Enigma* and the habits and quirks of its German key operators, mathematician Alan Turing and his team at Bletchley Park conceived of *Ultra*, a computer to break *Enigma* messages on a mass scale.

A little-appreciated fact about breaking the *Enigma* code was that it wreaked havoc on Italian naval operations.

Although the British had broken the codes for the Italian Army and Air Force in 1940 and 1941, the Italian Naval codes still appeared to be secure. So, it was baffling

to Italian naval intelligence how so many of their convoys and fleet operations encountered British opposition.

Italian merchant ships ran a suicidal run to North Africa because the British knew their routes and schedules from breaking the German *Enigma* code. The Brits got what they needed from meticulous German transmissions. Rommel was informed by his German logistical support in Italy every detail of what, when, and how supplies would reach him via Italian convoys. When convoys were attacked, the Germans blamed Italian spies in Naples for the security leaks. They scoffed at Italian suggestions that *Enigma* was compromised. Eventually, the Italian merchant fleet was annihilated and supplies had to be ferried by Italian submarines and aircraft.

To cover the *Ultra* secret, the British would send a scout plane to make an obvious appearance over an Italian convoy before an attack. Such “chance” encounters were effective in misleading the Axis partners.

The Barzini Treason

Italian journalist Luigi Barzini opposed the Pact of Steel with Germany. Just before Italy entered the war, on April 26, 1940, Galeazzo Ciano noted in his diary: “*Barzini, Jr., was arrested. From one of the usual documents shown to us at the British Embassy it appears that he had informed the British that we have a secret service operating effectively inside the embassy itself...*” Barzini was sentenced to a relatively comfortable “internal exile” on the Tuscan coast due to his popularity and family connections. He survived the war and prospered.

Defeat and Surrender

OVERWHELMED

THE AXIS FALLS APART



Italian General Giovanni Messe (r) and German General Kurt Freiherr von Liebenstein, prisoners on 13 May 1943.



This prisoner count was off by nearly 100,000. Had 230,000 Axis troops been able to escape to Sicily, Italy may have been spared invasion.

AN AXIS ARMY HAD NO ESCAPE

North Africa

Taking their last stand in Tunisia, Axis forces were ultimately penned in against the coast. With their escape by sea cut off by British and American naval and air forces, German resistance collapsed starting 6 May 1943. Divisions and large units began surrendering to the Allies. Italian forces under General Messe saw their German allies dissolve. On 12 May, General Messe cabled *Comando Supremo* for instructions. Mussolini ordered him to surrender.

In all, 230,000 German and Italian troops surrendered in Tunisia. Had these troops been able to escape to Sicily, the history of World War II and particularly the fate of Italy might have been different. Malta was the linchpin in Allied strategy (see p.32)

The Allies were now poised to take the Italian island fortress of Pantelleria and invade Sicily.

Eastern Front

The Axis reversals in Russia began with the battle of Stalingrad (August, 1942 - February, 1943). After that time, the Italian 8th Army no longer existed — crushed by the Soviets and winter. Italy's role on the Eastern

Front was finished. Soviet forces continued to push the Germans back westward.

Prisoners of War

A word must be said for the mortality rates of prisoners of war. More Italians died in Soviet captivity than Germans (84.5% vs 35.8%)*. In fact, this rate was the highest mortality rate of all prisoners in World War II. For example, 33% of American prisoners died in the notorious Japanese camps. Russian prisoners in Germany suffered a 57.5 mortality. One belief is that Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti, in asylum in Moscow, asked Stalin to annihilate his compatriots to foment revolution in Italy (see his quote on p.47). People tend to forget that old-style Communists were as vicious as Nazis. After Royal Italy switched sides in 1943, some 600,000 troops were enslaved by the Germans. It is estimated that 50,000 of these former allies perished in German labor camps.

[**Exorcising Hitler*, Frederick Taylor]

Laura Fermi, the Jewish wife of physicist Enrico Fermi, notes in her biography *Mussolini* that the dictator “obtained many concessions” for better treatment of Italian soldiers and civilians imprisoned in Germany.

THE LOSS OF SICILY



Admiral Gino Pavesi was condemned by Fascists for surrendering Pantelleria without destroying its infrastructure.

The Germans defied Italian Gen. Guzzoni by splitting their forces, placing a panzer division over 100 miles from his correctly predicted invasion beaches. Had both German divisions been in place, the Allied invasion might have failed.



THE LOSS OF SICILY DOOMED MUSSOLINI

Pantelleria, an island fortress that guarded the southwest coast of Sicily under the command of Adm. Gino Pavesi, surrendered to the Allies on 11 June 1943 after an appeal to Mussolini that the fortress had sustained some 14,000 bombs and exhausted its drinking water. The fortress was later utilized by the Allies for air cover for the invasion of Sicily — an invaluable strategic asset.

The Battle for Sicily

Sicily was not a cakewalk. Americans were to first learn of “battle fatigue” when Gen. Patton slapped a demoralized soldier there. Patton was later relieved of command.

It should also be noted that Italian General Alfredo Guzzoni (photo on p. 8) had ordered both German divisions in Sicily to cover what was to be the actual Allied landing site. Trusting their own judgement the Germans split their two divisions allowing the Allies to gain the beachhead. Had Guzzoni been obeyed, the Allied landing might have been disastrous.

Axis resistance cost the Allies some 20,000 killed and wounded in the 38-day battle. Axis forces were eventually cornered at Messina by generals Patton and Montgomery. Amazingly, the trapped Axis troops and equipment escaped to the mainland.

The Miracle of Messina

Much has been written of the “miracle” of Dunkirk in 1940. Over 338,000 British and French troops were rescued by small boats under the nose of Hitler’s conquering army. Movies have been made, legends created, but who ever heard of the Axis escape from Sicily? British Official

History called it “brilliantly successful.” Italian vessels ferried nearly 40,000 German troops, 47 tanks and 9,600 vehicles with supplies to mainland Italy. The escape included 70,000 Italian troops, 41 artillery pieces, 227 vehicles with supplies, and even 14 mules. (The Germans disdainfully confiscated the few Italian trucks when they arrived on the mainland.) When General Patton’s forces finally captured Messina on August 17th, the last Italian evacuation vessel had left just hours earlier. You will not see this in the iconic movie *Patton*.

The bad news from Sicily caused panic among the Fascist hierarchy, most notably Count Galeazzo Ciano (Mussolini’s son-in-law) and Dino Grandi, who decided to oust Mussolini. Spurring them on, the Allies increased the tempo of their aerial bombardment of Italian cities. Particularly disastrous was the bombing of Rome on July 19, 1943, claiming the lives of over 1,500 civilians. This brutal message convinced the plotters that they must act immediately. During this time, (on July 24, 1943), Mussolini held a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council. To Mussolini’s shock, Dino Grandi proposed a resolution restoring pre-Fascist state functions and command of the armed forces back to the Crown. After a long and exhausting meeting, Grandi’s resolution was passed. Word of the vote reached the King soon after.

On the afternoon of July 25th, during Mussolini’s weekly audience with the King, Victor Emmanuel abruptly dismissed him as Prime Minister and informed him that he was being replaced by Marshal Badoglio. As the Duce departed the royal villa, he was arrested by *Carabinieri*.

BADOGGIO'S ARMISTICE



Gen. Giuseppe Castellano, Badoglio's representative, second from right.



The armistice was kept secret for five days until publicly announced by Gen. Eisenhower. It was not enough time to warn or prepare Italian forces.

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

With Mussolini ousted, the King and the Badoglio government secretly planned a surrender to the Allies and ultimately joining them against the Germans. The hope was that the switch in alliances would soften Italy's defeat with more generous terms. It was a disastrous strategy that later caused more agony for Italy.

Military Armistice Signed at Fairfield Camp, (Cassibile) Sicily, September 3, 1943

Presented by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces, accepted by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Head of the Italian Government

1. Immediate cessation of all hostile activity by the Italian armed forces.
2. Italy will use its best endeavors to deny, to the Germans, facilities that might be used against the United Nations.
3. All prisoners or internees of the United Nations to be immediately turned over to the Allied Commander in Chief, and none of these may now or at any time be evacuated to Germany.
4. Immediate transfer of the Italian Fleet and Italian aircraft to such points as may be designated by the Allied Commander in Chief, with details of disarmament to be prescribed by him.
5. Italian merchant shipping may be requisitioned by the Allied Commander in Chief to meet the needs of his military-naval program.
6. Immediate surrender of Corsica and of all Italian territory, both islands and mainland, to the Allies, for such

use as operational bases and other purposes as the Allies may see fit.

7. Immediate guarantee of the free use by the Allies of all airfields and naval ports in Italian territory, regardless of the rate of evacuation of the Italian territory by the German forces. These ports and fields to be protected by Italian armed forces until this function is taken over by the Allies.
8. Immediate withdrawal to Italy of Italian armed forces from all participation in the current war from whatever areas in which they may be now engaged.
9. Guarantee by the Italian Government that if necessary it will employ all its available armed forces to insure prompt and exact compliance with all the provisions of this armistice.
10. The Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces reserves to himself the right to take any measure which in his opinion may be necessary for the protection of the interests of the Allied Forces for the prosecution of the war, and the Italian Government binds itself to take such administrative or other action as the Commander in Chief may require, and in particular the Commander in Chief will establish Allied Military Government over such parts of Italian territory as he may deem necessary in the military interests of the Allied Nations.
11. The Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces will have a full right to impose measures of disarmament, demobilization, and demilitarization.
12. Other conditions of a political, economic and financial nature with which Italy will be bound to comply will be transmitted at a later date.

GERMAN REVENGE



General Antonio Gandin whose division resisted the Germans on the Greek isle of Cephalonia. The Germans exacted a terrible toll.



The newest and finest of Italian battleships, *Roma*, was sunk by the Germans as it steamed to an Allied port as part of the September 8th surrender terms. It was struck by a German Fritz X radio-controlled bomb launched from a single bomber — the first cruise missile.

FROM COMRADES TO CANNON FODDER

The most pivotal figure in Italy's surrender was Marshal Badoglio, who had benefitted immensely during the glory days of Fascism. He was a nominal member of the Fascist Party whose loyalty was often questioned by Mussolini and Hitler.

Badoglio's intrigues began in the spring of 1941, after he had been relieved as Chief of Staff, and by November 1942, he was in secret touch with the Allies and committing outright treason. He was assisted in his efforts by General Ambrosio, new Chief of the General Staff, and Admiral Maugeri, Chief of Naval Intelligence.

As a result of the Italian surrender and switching sides, the Italian military was in a state of confusion. The Badoglio government had not planned for the complexity of a separate peace with the Allies. However, the Germans had planned for it and within days breached the Alpine passes and occupied the peninsula.

Italian Army units were only ordered to stand down and not initiate any attacks on German forces. Most Italian military stores and factories in the German-occupied north were quickly seized by the *Wehrmacht*. Entire units disintegrated for lack of specific orders, believing their war was over. Many attempted to return to their homes, some even walking from the Eastern Front.

Hitler considered Italian forces as traitors and ordered them made prisoner or executed. In areas such as Greece, occupied by both Germans and Italians, each army had conflicting orders. On the island of Cephalonia the Italian

commander Gen. Gandin was ordered to resist capture. His *Acqui* Division refused a German ultimatum to surrender and a battle broke out. Gandin requested naval and air support from nearby bases in Italy, but the Allies refused to allow their use.

From 15 September to 22 September, the *Acqui* Division fought the Germans to a standstill until ammunition ran out. The Italians had lost 1,315 men, the Germans 300. Upon surrender, the Germans massacred 5,000 soldiers of the *Acqui* and loaded 3,000 onto sea transports to Germany. The transports were sunk by Allied aircraft, all died. Gen. Gandin was shot on 24 September by his former ally.

As part of the September 8th surrender terms, the Italian Navy was to sail its ships to designated Allied ports. The very next morning an Italian flotilla — three battleships, three cruisers, and eight destroyers — left the northern Italian port of La Spezia ostensibly heading to attack the Allied invasion force at Salerno. This is the cover story Admiral Bergamini told his German counterparts. Unfortunately, the Germans knew otherwise because the Sept. 8th surrender was now public knowledge. Leading the flotilla was the *Roma*, the Italian Navy's newest and largest battleship. The fleet didn't get far when the *Roma* was spotted by a German air patrol. Using a new proto-type cruise missile, the pride of the Italian Navy was sunk after two direct hits. Among the Italians killed were Admiral Bergamini and *Roma's* captain as well as 1,253 crewmembers.

THE AGONY OF SURRENDER



An estimated 6 million Soviet soldiers surrendered in 1941 with the German invasion. Only about 2.5 million survived captivity.



Some 80,000 British, Indian, and Australian troops surrendered with the fall of Singapore after only 7 days. The Japanese observed that the Brits quit as though it was the end of a day's work.

NOT JUST AN ITALIAN MONOPOLY

The Italian military of the Second World War is generally held in especially low regard in the United States and England. In fact, the old Royal Italian Army, Navy and Air Force have been the butts of many a joke. However, few consider that Fascist Italy fought alongside the Germans for five years, to the very end, even after the Kingdom of Italy surrendered in September, 1943 and switched sides. The Royal military later contributed to the Allied effort.

To make light of Italy's crushing defeat in the Second World War is obscene. Italy lost 330,000 people in that conflict, more than Great Britain's 307,000 (excluding Empire troops) and certainly more than "victorious" France's 122,000.

The British surrender of 35,000 men at the well-fortified position of Tobruk in June 1942 was so devastating that it prompted Winston Churchill to comment, "*Defeat is one thing, humiliation is quite another.*" This was not the only British humiliation of the war. The surrender at Singapore of 80,000 Empire troops to a Japanese force half that strength ranks as the single greatest military disaster in British history.

Mass surrenders in theaters like the Sahara or the Russian steppes were common due to the expanse of terrain and lack of transportation. Just think of Dunkirk in 1940 when British and French troops had their backs to the

sea, and some 40,000 British troops were taken prisoner. Had Hitler finished the job, all of Britain's army would surely have been marched off to prison camps.

In East Africa, Italian troops could not be resupplied as the British controlled Suez, the Red Sea, and Sudan. Likewise, the Axis last stand in Tunisia (1943) was fought when the Allies controlled the Mediterranean escape route. Mass surrender or annihilation was inevitable.

SUMMARY OF SURRENDERS (Not all combatants are represented)

Italians (North Africa)	130,000
Italians (East Africa)	50,000
Italians (Russia)	ca. 50,000
Germans (Russia)	ca. 1,287,000
Germans and Italians (Tunisia)	266,600
British (France)	41,000
British (North Africa)	45,000
British (Asia).....	80,000
French (France)	ca. 1,450,000
Russians & Empire (USSR)	ca. 6,000,000
Americans (Europe & Asia)	139,700
Poles.....	767,000
Yugoslavs.....	334,000
Greeks.....	218,000
Belgians	200,000

MURDER & INTRIGUE



Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti has never received the opprobrium he deserved for his role in the war. (also see pp. 34 & 47)



Lt. Aldo Icardi spent a good part of his life fending off smears by Italian Communists.

STALIN HAD A RUTHLESS AGENT IN ITALY

In April 1945, Togliatti called Luigi Longo, the Milan Communist chief, from Rome instructing him to liquidate any Fascists before the arrival of Allied forces. Longo responded by calling for a war of extermination in which captured Fascists would be murdered without even the pretense of a trial. Meanwhile, Allied Forces Headquarters had instructed twenty-five OSS teams to find Mussolini and take him alive. He was to be held securely and turned over to Allied troops after which he would stand trial for presumed war crimes. This was in accordance with the terms of the Armistice imposed on Italy when it surrendered. This led to two unsuccessful American attempts to locate the *Duce* and rescue him before the Communists got him. The Italian government in the South also launched a similar rescue mission.

Lt. Aldo Icardi was part of an OSS team sent to northern Italy with \$16,000 to be divided up among the various partisan groups. Each group represented a different Italian political party, united only in their hatred of Fascists and Germans. Icardi's team was composed of leader Major William Holohan and six other Italians and Italian Americans. Icardi was 22-years old at the time, a Pittsburgh native who was recruited by the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), forerunner of the CIA, because he

spoke the local dialect of the Italian province of Novara.

Shockingly, Major Holohan was murdered by a partisan who thought Holohan would cut off American funding to the Communists. By assassinating Holohan, an anti-Communist, the Communists hoped to receive their fair share of OSS money and arms; and that's what happened.

This episode showed how ruthless Italian Communists were during the last days of the war. According to British author Max Hastings (*The Secret War*, HarperCollins, p.27), the Communists foresaw a revolution after the defeat of Fascism. He quoted an OSS report stating that of all the partisan groups the OSS worked with in northwest Italy "20 per cent [were] for Liberation and 80 per cent [were] for Russia. We soon found that they were burying the German arms they had captured."

Rendering Technical Support to the Allies

With the Italian Armistice, inventor Carlo Calosi, by order of the Italian Navy Experimental Weapons Division, gave the Allies a countermeasure to disrupt the magnetic field of his *Torpedo Calosi*. The German U-Boats began using this torpedo by the thousands by the end of 1943. Calosi's countermeasure was successfully utilized on Allied merchant ships saving many lives and material.

CO-BELLIGERENCY



The 1962 movie *The Four Days of Naples* dramatized the uprising of the Neapolitan people in 1943. It was the only successful revolt against German occupation in Europe



Parachutists of the *Folgore* and *Nembo* Divisions on their way to infiltrate German lines in occupied Italy

ITALIAN ACTIONS AID THE ALLIES

Retaking of Corsica

Corsica was part of Vichy France until November, 1942 when Fascist Italy occupied it as a consequence of the Allied invasion of French North Africa earlier that month.

With the September 8th Italian surrender, German forces evacuated Sardinia for Corsica but found resistance by Italian naval and ground forces. Free French troops and partisans joined the Italian forces in repelling the Germans. On September 12th, Hitler ordered German troops to leave the island. The Italian 'Friuli' Division with Free French assistance took key passes on the island, inflicting 1,000 casualties on the evacuating Germans, losing some 700 men in the battles.

Corsica became a strategic asset to bomb northern Italy, and support the Allied invasion of southern France in August, 1944. That invasion (*Operation Dragoon*) unlike Normandy the previous June, met little German resistance.

Naples Rebels

The city of Naples sustained horrific Allied bombing from 1940-43. An estimated 20,000 civilians were killed during those months; 3,000 died in the air raid of 4 August 1943.

On the day of Italy's surrender, Fascist authorities turned the city over to the Germans and fled. Neapolitans sporadically resisted the German occupation until September 27th, when Germans began rounding up Italian men and boys for labor camps in Germany and executing those who resisted. For 4 days the city became a deathtrap for Germans. Civilians, soldiers, and *Carabinieri* used weapons and any flying object to crush the Germans. The revolt and the American landings at Salerno forced the Germans to evacuate the city. When Allied troops arrived on October 1st, Naples had liberated itself.

Operation Herring

As Allied armies fought their way up the Italian boot, there was a need to breach German lines and to save strategic infrastructure. The British conceived *Operation Herring* using elite Italian paratroopers to land behind enemy lines. Over three days the paratroopers reportedly killed 481 German soldiers, captured 1,983, destroyed 44 vehicles including some tanks, armored cars and guns. Some 77 telephone lines were severed, three bridges taken intact, and an ammunition storage site blown up. The successful action left 30 Italians dead.

Civil War

COMMUNIST RESURGENCE

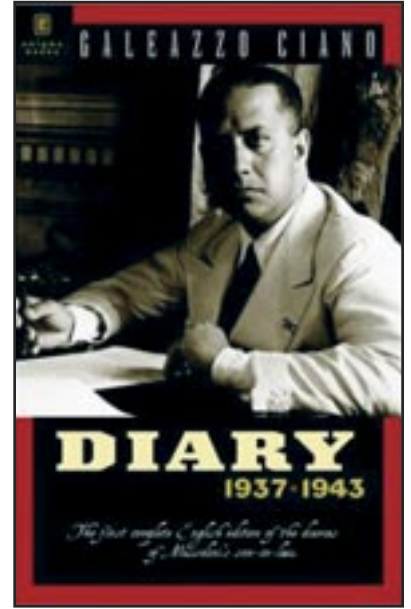
MUSSOLINI'S SALÒ REPUBLIC



Mussolini's Italian Social Republic was headquartered in Salò on Lake Garda

Mussolini meets Hitler on the day of his rescue by German commandos in Sept. 1943

After her father executed her husband, Edda Mussolini released his diaries.



MUSSOLINI TAKES REVENGE

At the insistence of Winston Churchill, the Allies invaded Sicily in July, 1943, and provoked the overthrow of Mussolini's Fascist regime. (see *Loss of Sicily*, p 38). Mussolini was arrested and imprisoned by the King on July 25th.

Technically, the King's actions were unconstitutional for several reasons. The powers of the Fascist Grand Council, which voted to unseat Mussolini, were only advisory. It would have required a no-confidence vote in Parliament (now all-Fascist) or in a general election to lawfully remove Mussolini as Prime Minister. Furthermore, the King had no right or authority to unilaterally confer full powers on Marshal Badoglio, since this was the prerogative of the Grand Council and Parliament. Having ushered in these constitutional changes during his 20 years in office, Mussolini felt he was the victim of a *coup d'etat*.

To make matters worse, on September 8th the Royal Italian government signed an armistice with the Allies and declared war on Germany. Anticipating such a betrayal by the House of Savoy, Hitler sent his army to occupy the peninsula — ultimately 750,000 men. To restore Mussolini, his commandos rescued the *Duce* from his mountain captivity on Sept. 12th in a daring aerial raid.

Hitler made it very clear that if Mussolini did not set up a new Fascist regime in the north, Italy would suffer the consequences of her betrayal and be treated no better

than German-occupied Poland. War-weary himself and preferring to retire, the *Duce* nevertheless agreed to shield his nation from Nazi wrath as head of the new "Italian Social Republic."

This clearly puppet state had all the trapping of a nation at war. The perception that Italy surrendered in 1943 is misleading. Mussolini's Republican army and airforce, under Marshal Graziani, fought alongside the Germans right to the end in May, 1945. Those forces waged war against both partisans and the Allied armies.

Mussolini remained embittered by the Grand Council vote that had been engineered by his own son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano. After the Germans captured Ciano, he was tried and sentenced to death along with three other Fascist conspirators. Ciano's wife Edda (Mussolini's daughter) pleaded with her father for his life, threatening to turn over his diaries to the Allies. Her father was unmoved. It is thought that Mussolini did not want to show weakness before Hitler, despite his internal agony. Hitler, whose own barbarity was well-known, was not impressed.

On 11 January 1944, Ciano and the others were seated in chairs with their backs facing the firing squad and executed.

The diaries were published and remain a valuable insight into the Fascist regime and relations with Hitler.

NOT SO SOFT UNDERBELLY



The Allies had to fight for every hill and mountain. They eventually destroyed the ancient monastery at *Monte Cassino* after a four month battle.

“And, what are you doing?” Republican and German soldiers recruiting to defend Italy from the Allied invasion.

MUSSOLINI CREATES A REPUBLICAN ARMY

The pressure to open a second front to relieve Stalin meant either an Anglo-American invasion of France, the Balkans, or Italy. Eisenhower wanted a cross-channel attack on France in 1943, but the British had nightmares of repeating Dunkirk or their disastrous Dieppe raid of 1942, when within ten hours, 3,623 of the 6,086 men who landed had been killed, wounded or became prisoners of war. The RAF lost 106 aircraft and the Royal Navy lost 33 landing craft and a destroyer in that disaster.

Instead, Churchill was insistent on invading Sicily and Italy. His primary goal was to topple Mussolini and remove Italy as a Mediterranean power. But, Italy’s mountainous terrain was a defender’s dream. Allied generals knew that. But, secret negotiations with King Victor Emmanuel’s representatives led everyone to believe that Italian resistance would be minimal, so Churchill won the debate.

Few could have predicted that Hitler would despatch eight divisions to Italy to cover any Italian “betrayal,” and supply nineteen more to defend the peninsula.

The Allied armies found the Italian mainland to be far from Churchill’s vision of the “soft underbelly of Europe.”

The Anglo-American forces encountered very stiff German resistance as they slowly advanced up the Italian peninsula. By April, 1945, after almost two years of fighting, Allied forces had only reached the Po Valley in north Italy. (The Soviets had already reached Berlin.)

Many ignored Napoleon’s sound advice that any would-be conqueror of Italy must enter the “Boot” from the top, not the bottom.

Mussolini’s new Salò republic was not a mere propaganda facade. Of the 600,000 Italian troops who surrendered to the Germans when the House of Savoy switched sides, four new Fascist divisions were formed and trained by the Germans. This Republican army fought the Allies until the bitter end in May, 1945.

One notable engagement was the *Monte Rosa* Alpine Division’s attack on the U.S. all-black 92nd Division (“Buffalo Soldiers”) in central Italy in December, 1944. The 92nd was badly mauled and was later withdrawn from the sector. In February 1945, the 92nd Infantry Division again came up against Republican units. This time it was against the 1st “*Italia*” Infantry Division. The Italians again successfully blocked the American advance.

PARTISAN WAR



Mussolini reviewing the 5th Alpine Mobile Black Brigade.
Even children were accepted as volunteers.



Togliatti: an ideologue not a patriot

*“Joseph Stalin is a titan of thought.
His name is to be given to
an entire century.” - Togliatti*

A DARK TIME OF FRATRICIDE

Were all partisans the noble democratic freedom-fighters that the popular media portrays? *“In the partisan movement there were the good and the bad, the heroes and the looters, the generous and the cruel. There was a people with its virtues and its vices. There were the partisans of the eleventh hour, in general a detestable race. And then the exploiters and profiteers of the partisan movement.”* —Ferruccio Parri, a partisan leader and Italy’s first postwar prime minister*.

[**Mussolini: The Last 600 Days of Il Duce*,
by Ray Moseley]

The murder of the *Duce*, and his ministers, along with Claretta and Marcello Petacci, proved to be only the beginning of a bloodbath that engulfed Italy at the end of the war. Communist partisans murdered thousands of Fascists and their families, as well as other political opponents. These mass killings were often accompanied by personal vendettas, score settling, and banditry. Togliatti secretly reported back to Joseph Stalin in Moscow that 50,000 Fascists and their families had been killed during

this period. This fit in perfectly with the Soviet plan to eliminate any opponents who could stand in the way of a post-war Communist takeover.

Togliatti was never called to justice for his many crimes and continued to play a prominent role in Italian politics until his death in 1964 in the USSR.

In a letter dated February 15, 1943, to Vincenzo Bianco, the Italian representative on the Comintern Executive Committee, Togliatti rebuffed his suggestion to intervene on behalf of Italian POWs and offered his advice on the war in Italy. He considered Italy’s suffering and destruction to be a good lesson for its people. He wrote,

“The fact that for thousands of families, Mussolini’s war and especially the expedition against Russia will end in tragedy and personal bereavement is the best, the most effective antidote [against Fascism]....”

[*Stalin and Togliatti*, by Agarossi and Zaslavsky, pp 167-168]

THE FOIBE MASSACRES



Yugoslav Communists launched an ethnic cleansing of local Italians, Fascist families, and Slavic collaborators. The goal was revenge for Fascist occupation and to make the Istrian Peninsula all Slavic.



Foibe (plural of *foiba*) were natural crevasses in the rocky landscape of the Istrian Peninsula. They were used to bury Italian victims alive or after execution.

THE MASSACRES WERE EXPUNGED UNTIL 2004

“... in the autumn of 1943,...a plan to eradicate Italian presence intertwined in what was, and ceased to be, the Julian March [Istria]. There was therefore a movement of hate and bloodthirsty fury, and a Slavic annexationist design, which prevailed above all in the Peace Treaty of 1947 (see p.54), and assumed the sinister shape of ‘ethnic cleansing’. What we can say for sure is that what was achieved - in the most evident way through the inhuman ferocity of the foibe – was one of the barbarities of the past century.” — Italian president Giorgio Napolitano, Rome, 10 February 2007

The massacres occurred in two waves. The first, when Italy surrendered on 8 September 1943, before the Germans arrived. The second, after the Yugoslav occupation at war's end in May, 1945.

The first wave was believed to be disorganized revenge murders by Slavic partisans. Hundreds of native Italian landowners, Fascist officials and their families were the victims. The second wave, Italian historians believe, was intended to ethnically cleanse the region in preparation of the Allied peace treaty with a defeated Italy. The fewer Italians living on the Istrian Peninsula the less likely Italy would be left in possession.

A period of terror was instituted by Communist Yugoslav leader Tito to eliminate Italian/Fascist regional

government officials and their families. The bloodbath would force native Italians to flee the region. Thousands were murdered utilizing the *foibe* to hide bodies in some cases, but mostly dumped in mass graves.

The family of Lidia Matticchio (Bastianich), the celebrity chef and restaurateur, was one of those affected by the Communist occupation. Lidia was born in 1947 just before the Italian peace treaty delivered Istria to Yugoslavia. The family lived under Communist rule until they fled to Italian soil in 1956.

Indeed, the Peace Treaty of 1947 (see p. 54) gave Yugoslavia the bulk of the Istrian Peninsula except for the city of Trieste, which remains Italian today. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, Istria was divided between Croatia and Slovenia.

Mussolini's Last Days

THE TRIAL THAT NEVER WAS

COMMUNISTS SEIZE MUSSOLINI



SS General Karl Wolff negotiated a surrender of German forces in Italy without Mussolini's knowledge.

In 1962, during the trial in Israel of Adolf Eichmann, evidence showed that Wolff had organized the deportation of Italian Jews in 1944.



Mussolini met with Cardinal Ildefonso Schuster of Milan on 25 April 1945, who told him of the German plan to surrender. Rather than arrange terms with the Allies, the *Duce* left Milan.

THE DUCE MISSED HIS CHANCE TO SURRENDER

We have been told that during the final days of the war, dictator Benito Mussolini was captured by Italian partisans as he tried to escape to Switzerland in April, 1945. The story gets a bit fuzzy after that as to why and how he was executed and hung upside down at a gas station in Milan. But one thing is certain. He was captured and executed by Italian Communists in direct violation of Article Art. 29 of the Allied-Italian Armistice of 1943. Benito Mussolini was to be captured alive and put on trial:

“Benito Mussolini, his Chief Fascist associates and all persons suspected of having committed war crimes or analogous offenses whose names appear on lists to be communicated by the United Nations will forthwith be apprehended and surrendered into the hands of the United Nations. Any instructions given by the United Nations for this purpose will be complied with.”

Mussolini's last hours began when Milan's Cardinal Schuster attempted to mediate between Mussolini and the National Council of the Resistance, which was recognized by the Italian government and the Allied High Com-

mand, and had authority over both Communist and non-Communist partisans. Mussolini asked if the partisans and Allied commanders would guarantee his life and the lives of his ministers and their families if he surrendered. Fascist troops should be treated as prisoners of war under the Hague Convention. The *Duce* insisted that he could not surrender without first consulting his German allies. It was then revealed that German General Wolff had already offered to surrender his forces in North Italy without informing Mussolini and that he would be coming to the Cardinal's palace later that day to sign the Armistice. The *Duce* was shocked by this news and angrily denounced the Germans for their treachery. Mussolini broke off negotiations and left the meeting to head for Como about thirty miles to the north in order to await the arrival of a Fascist force of 3,000 men and two hundred vehicles. The force was not there when he arrived.

It was then that Mussolini joined a German convoy and put on a German military overcoat and sat among the soldiers on the transport. The convoy was stopped at a Communist partisan roadblock and Mussolini was captured.

MYSTERIES STILL EXIST



Executioner
Walter Audisio
"Justice at Dongo"



Curator holds the French automatic rifle used to kill Mussolini and Claretta Petacci; donated to the Communist government of Albania after the war.

The controversial book:

*"Mussolini-Churchill
The Correspondence
Inquiries into one of
the Great Mysteries
of the 20th Century."*

Are the letters
fake or did the two
exchange letters
during the war?

Four months after
Mussolini's murder
Churchill "vacationed"
near the murder site. Was
he looking for something?



COMMUNISTS REPORTED TO A HIGHER AUTHORITY

Having captured Mussolini, the Communist partisans were initially ordered by their command in Milan to bring him back to that city alive. When Togliatti in Rome heard that the Duce had been captured, he unilaterally countermanded this order as head of the Italian Communist Party and Vice Premier of Italy. He gave the order by radio that Mussolini was not to be turned over alive to the British or Americans under any circumstances. Instead, he was to be executed without trial as soon as his identity was established. The same fate was ordered for all the other major figures of Mussolini's Italian Social Republic. This order was never revealed to the non-Communist members of the National Council of the Resistance because it was known that they felt bound by the terms of the Armistice, which stipulated that Mussolini should be surrendered to the Allies. In fact, Premier Ivanoe Bonomi, Togliatti's superior in the cabinet, insisted that he had never even heard of Togliatti's order to execute Mussolini.

The chosen executioner was a Communist partisan named Walter Audisio who went by the alias Colonel Valerio. That afternoon, he brought Mussolini and Claretta Petacci, who was captured separately, to a crossroads a few miles from the farmhouse where they were being held and shot them both. He then returned to Dongo to take charge of the killing of the fifteen Fascists he had earlier selected. The mayor's protests were dismissed as they were all gunned down including Claretta Petacci's brother Marcello. The bodies of Mussolini and the other victims were dumped at Piazzale Loreto in Milan, the scene of a

previous Fascist execution of partisans. The bodies were subjected to ghastly physical abuse then hung upside down from a gas station framework. Vengeance engulfed Italy.

Togliatti reported back to Joseph Stalin in Moscow that 50,000 Fascists and their families had been killed during this period. It was the Soviet plan to eliminate any opponents who could stand in the way of a post-war Communist takeover. Togliatti was never called to justice for his many crimes and continued to play a prominent role in Italian politics until his death in 1964.

His plan for a Communist takeover of Italy, however, was never realized. But his overriding loyalty to the Soviet Union (he also encouraged the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising) was acknowledged in the re-naming of the Russian city of Stavropol on the Volga River to Tolyattigrad in 1964.

It is known that Mussolini was preparing a defense of his actions. He had a trunk loaded with classified documents that disappeared with his murder. Some of those purported documents have surfaced over the years and can be found on the internet, including reputed correspondence with Churchill during the war. Even in death some world leaders wanted to understand Mussolini's motives. At his autopsy, his brain matter was analyzed for syphilis to explain why the rational *Duce* had succumbed to Hitler's charms. The results were negative.

The Aftermath

ITALY IS PUNISHED

NATIONAL REFERENDUM



Italy's last king: Umberto II
He reigned for 34 days, from 9 May 1946 to 12 June 1946, although he had been *de facto* head of state since 1944 and was nicknamed the "May King" (*Re di Maggio*).



The national referendum ballot
Note the German instructions to accommodate non-ethnic Italians in the Alto-Adige Region. Fascist policies to Italianize the region (see p. 5) were reversed by the interim government and the Allies.

THE MONARCHY WAS STILL POPULAR

Italy's entry into the war as an Axis ally had the backing of the King. But most Italians blamed the Fascists for the defeat and trusted their monarch to save the nation. However, when German troops approached Rome soon after the September 8th surrender, both the King and Marshal Badoglio fled the city, demonstrating how chaotic their planning was, not to mention their failure to resist.

At war's end, King Victor Emanuel abdicated in favor of his son Umberto, hoping to redeem the monarchy with the Italian people. But the partisan factions had already envisioned an end to monarchy.

A referendum was held in June, 1946 to decide if Italy would be a Kingdom or Republic. The *Repubblica Italiana* was born on 2 June 1946.

Some controversy still exists as to the fairness of the Referendum, if the partisans or the Allies rigged the vote to oust the monarchy. Italian diplomat Arturo Camillacci responded to one such query on Quora, online:

"Most of the burden of getting the vote done rested on the shoulders of the Socialist Minister of the Interior, Giuseppe Romita, who took upon himself the task of setting up the voting organisation in a country in which the

last popular consultation took place more than 20 years before, and which until then never had universal suffrage.

He started the process of replacing in every Italian province the Prefects politically appointed by the Partisan movements right after the liberation of the country from the Nazi occupiers with career government officers, the majority of which had served during the Fascist dictatorship...

Romita [then] called a string of elections for the mayors and councillors of 5,722 big and medium sized cities across Italy, which took place in five rounds between March 10th and April 7th. This provided a very much needed test run for the electoral machine, with the procurement of ballot boxes, voting papers, polling booths, etc., and the compilation of the electoral roll for both men and women voters...

On June 18th the Court of Cassation certified the definitive results: 12,672,767 votes for the Republic and 10,688,905 for the Monarchy."

[Note: Southern Italy favored a monarchy.]

PEACE TREATY OF 1947



The Allies let Italy keep the *Amerigo Vespucci*, built in 1931



Italy had to cede most of the Istrian peninsula to Yugoslavia - claimed by Italy from Roman times.

CO-BELLIGERENCY AVOIDED OCCUPATION BUT LITTLE ELSE

In 1947, the newly constituted Italian Republic was forced to sign a peace treaty officially ending the Second World War. Those who believe that switching sides in 1943 was a stroke of genius or a noble act to save the honor of Italy can judge those perspectives against the reality of what Italy was required to do to rejoin the family of nations. The surrender may have saved the South from extended Allied bombing but it led to a civil war in the North and brutal German retribution. It appears that neither Italy's 18-month sacrifice as a "co-belligerent" ally, nor its partisan resistance, earned it any better terms than the original unconditional surrender. You judge.

The Treaty of Peace (February, 1947)

Territorial changes: Loss of all African colonies: Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea. To Yugoslavia: the Istria peninsula except for the city of Trieste, the Adriatic islands of Cherso, Lussino, Lastovo and Pelagosa; the enclave territory of Zara in Dalmatia; of the city of Fiume and most of the region known as the Slovenian Littoral. To Greece: the Dodecanese islands (Acquired by Italy in the Italo-Turk War of 1912.) To France: Alpine towns of Briga and Tenda, at the Franco-Italian border; To China: the Concession in Tientsin held by Italy since 1901 Boxer Rebellion.

Reparations (in 2016 dollars) Italy was obliged to pay some \$3.4 Billion in war reparations (article 74): \$1 Billion to Yugoslavia; \$896 million to Greece; \$854 million to the Soviet

Union; \$213 million; to Ethiopia; \$43 million to Albania.

Military clauses Italy was banned from possessing, building or experimenting with atomic weapons, guided missiles, guns with a range of over 30 km, non-contact naval mines and torpedoes as well as manned torpedoes. The military of Italy was limited in size. Italy was allowed a maximum of 200 tanks. The **Italian Navy** was reduced. Some warships were awarded to the governments of the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdom and France. Italy was ordered to scuttle all its submarines and was banned from acquiring new battleships, submarines and aircraft carriers. The navy was limited to a maximum force of 25,000 personnel. The **Italian Army** was limited to a size of 185,000 personnel plus 65,000 *Carabinieri* for a maximum total of 250,000 personnel. The **Italian Air Force** was limited to 200 fighters and reconnaissance aircraft plus 150 transport, air-rescue, and training aircraft. It was banned from owning and operating bomber aircraft. The number of air force personnel was limited to 25,000.

Political clauses Article 17 of the treaty banned Fascist organizations ("*whether political, military, or semi-military*") in Italy. A subsequent annex to the treaty provided for the cultural autonomy of the German minority in South Tyrol. (Note: No such guarantees were given to Italians who were forced to flee *en mass* from Italian lands given to Yugoslavia).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Italy was a great power in 1940, but she has lost that status today. She lost her empire and the Istrian peninsula, notwithstanding Savoy Italy's switch to the Allied side in 1943 and even after a massive lobbying campaign by Italian Americans. Little did she know that her ethnic prestige was also a fatality. Among the innumerable indignities there is a popular board game called *Axis and Allies*, which does not even include Italy as one of the belligerents in World War II. Italian arms are still the butt of jokes among the ignorant and malicious.

When historians talk of Italy's surrender in 1943 they are more correctly referring to the Kingdom of Italy (south of Rome). Fascist Italy (aka Italian Social Republic) fought on until May 1, 1945, even after Mussolini's summary execution by Communist partisans. General Rodolfo Graziani signed the surrender of his remaining 50,000-man army one day before the German Army in Italy. The German homeland surrendered on May 8th.

Had Malta been taken and held, the Axis troops who were trapped in Tunisia in 1943 might have had a escape route back to Italy. Those troops could have prevented the fall of Sicily and prevented the fall of Mussolini. Yet, Italy and Germany were ultimately doomed by American industrial might.

Rommel, while praising many Italian units, had disdain for the *Comando Supremo*, his direct superior. He ignored orders from it or went directly to Hitler. It was at his insistence that the Axis leaders chose to abandon the invasion of Malta and focus on his drive to the Suez Canal, a decision which ultimately cost Africa.

Italian morale suffered as much from German mistreatment of Italian units as from setbacks by the Allies. Teutonic disdain was a major problem between the two allies. The retreat from the Don and the retreat from El Alamein share many aspects in common: German units abandoning positions without telling the adjacent Italian units, commandeering of Italian vehicles during a retreat while leaving Italians to surrender or die, not sharing available fuel and supplies, etc. These things weighed heavily on Italian spirits — camaraderie was the exception, not the rule.

Without question, the war was lost because Italy had no where near the resources or capacity to wage war on this scale. How it lasted three years cannot be explained merely by German rescue and support. The twenty years of Fascist rule created the organization and national unity necessary for mobilization and industrial priorities. If anything, Germany led Italy to its own demise. Mussolini

pulled Hitler into North Africa but that theater had more possibilities than Hitler's mad invasion of the USSR. A concentrated North African campaign would have led to the oil-rich Middle East and Caucasus. Moreover, capturing the Suez Canal would have severely crippled Great Britain's access to India, adding three weeks to any voyage and realistically bringing the Empire to the negotiating table, leaving Stalin with no Anglo-American support.

Finally, the invasion of Italy was not a strategic American or British plan, it was fully Churchill's obsession that he foisted on FDR and Eisenhower. His intent, according to Churchill researcher William Deakin, was to remove Italy permanently as a Mediterranean power to safeguard the Suez Canal and British access to India and the Orient. [Refer to our 2022 *Italy Between the Wars* report to understand this motivation.] The Italian Campaign was a 2-year nightmare that did not get the Allies to Berlin but only to the Alps, and it diverted much of the *Wehrmacht*.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

The Second World War can be "refought" in innumerable ways. But no matter how you play it, an Allied victory was impossible without American aid to Great Britain and the USSR prior to Pearl Harbor and our participation after.

In the matter of Fascist Italy, the road to war depended on the fortunes of France. Had France withstood Hitler's onslaught, its navy would have deterred Italy's entry. Mussolini's goal of a *Mare Nostrum* was never achievable with both the British and French navies active in the Mediterranean. A humiliating neutrality or dissolving the Pact of Steel to side with the Allies may have been Mussolini's only choices. In hindsight, both were better alternatives.

Another scenario envisions the Fascist Grand Council not voting to oust Mussolini on July 24, 1943. He would not have been arrested by the King, and the Allies would have had no illusions that invading the peninsula after their victory in Sicily would be viable. Their only recourse would have been bombing Italy back to the Stone Age. But without capturing the Axis-held islands of Corsica and Sardinia for airbases, that would be challenging.

The overthrow of Fascism also led to a fratricidal civil war which could have been avoided. If Mussolini were able to repatriate his troops from the Balkans (est. 500,000) he may have prevented a German occupation and cut a deal with the Allies, saving Italy from further ruin.

We shall never know.

ITALY AT WAR

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End Note

Page 50: "Mediterranean Highway or Prison?" Italian Library of Information, NYC, May, 1940

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