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MUSSOLINI:  
FROM POWER TO PUPPET

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CHAPTER 1: "THE GREATEST FIGURE OF OUR AGE"



Modern dictatorships frequently display an impressive exterior: the façade will be showy and the ramparts apparently impregnable. Within, however, the structure often conceals weakness and even rottenness. In these conditions Benito Mussolini's régime in Italy found itself midway through its career in the 1930's. Despite a decade of political corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and outright brutality, the Fascist government enjoyed considerable popularity at home and awakened boundless admiration in many quarters abroad. At first -- and indeed until Italy entered the Second World War -- the major powers, especially Great Britain, were content with the situation in Italy, for it seemed quiet and orderly. Even the sensational assassination of the Socialist deputy Matteotti and the Italian bombardment of Corfu in 1923 did not permanently damage the Duce's good press or retard the eventual creation of the Mussolini myth.

Between 1924 and 1926, many prominent Italians were driven or chose to take the path of exile. Among the political expatriates were Francesco Nitti, Count Carlo Sforza, Don Luigi Sturzo, Gaetano Salvemini, Filippo Turati, and Caludio Treves. These exiles because of doctrinaire extremism and intolerance towards one another were unable to do much to puncture the flattering myth surrounding il Duce. They were generally (and often rightly) regarded as merely bitter. Moreover, the democracies were more frightened by the threat of Communism than Fascism. Hence, it was almost with a sigh of relief that much of Europe saw in Mussolini a statesman who would ruthlessly root out all traces of Marxism. Only later did the Duce's régime arouse doubts and distrust.

Unlike his later German counterpart, Mussolini was careful to construct the Fascist monolithic state slowly and out of this cautious process grew the Mussolini myth and his substantial popularity. Reverend William Herrstrom expressed a typically enthusiastic response to Benito Mussolini's domestic policies in a work significantly entitled The Revival of the Roman Empire:

Begging has been abolished by law. Unemployment is not in evidence. Crime is practically unknown. There is perfect order everywhere. The cities are well policed and one may safely walk the streets any hour of the day or night. The people are well fed, well clothed, and well housed.... They walk erect with the dignity of royalty.... One may easily discern that the people have been inspired, stimulated, and electrified by the mighty force of personality of their dynamic and resourceful leader, Mussolini.<sup>1</sup>

Of particular interest to most of Mussolini's apologists and admirers was the corporative state. For the corporative state it must be noted that the number of strikes diminished rapidly, the currency débâcle was first halted, then checked, and a semblance of business recovery was achieved. Highways were constructed at Mussolini's command, the trains ran on time,

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<sup>1</sup> William Herrstrom, The Revived Roman Empire (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1939), p. 7.



and the "battle of wheat" to make Italy self-supporting was waged vigorously by the Duce.<sup>2</sup> The means used to effect these accomplishments was a matter supporters of Fascism rarely discussed.

In 1929, moreover, Mussolini completed negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church for a reconciliation. For fifty years the Popes had refused to leave their "prison" in the Vatican or even to recognize the existence of Italy. When the signing of the Lateran Treaty was announced, the Duce's star soared throughout the Catholic world, for he had solved a problem which had plagued the Italian government since the Risorgimento. Pius XI paid a tribute to "the man sent to us by Providence," the man who fortunately lacked the "preconceptions of liberalism."<sup>3</sup> This reconciliation undoubtedly contributed to the Duce's enormous victory in the plebiscite of March 24, 1929 -- only 136,000 dared vote against him.

That these achievements were artificially conjured up was not always recognized by the foreign public. Tourists, journalists, and statesmen alike were often deceived by these Potemkin-like reforms, either not realizing or ignoring that they were achieved at the price of civil liberty and through recourse to coercion or outright violence. Although the outward show of well-advertised schemes of modernization and welfare services was purely decorative in many cases, to the foreign public they seemed signs of constructive statesmanship.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Phelps Hall, World Wars and Revolutions (New York, 1943), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> Denis Mack Smith, Italy (Ann Arbor, 1959), p. 441.



If Mussolini followed a cautious program in consolidating his régime internally, he was equally moderate in most of his earlier diplomacy. From his accession to power in 1922, the dictator maintained that he was willing to cooperate with Great Britain and France and would join the Great Powers in maintaining the peace of Europe. Despite the Corfu incident, Mussolini appeared content to spend his energies in promoting the welfare of the Fascist state. His views in the 1920's and early 1930's seemed reasonable, a great deal more reasonable than those held by many other European statesmen at the time. Carlo Sforza, pre-Fascist ambassador to France and a violently bitter critic of Fascism, said of Italian foreign policy before 1934:

There now began a decade of Mussolinian recantations, half of which would have been sufficient to make any other government ridiculous: for the League of Nations and against the League of Nations; for disarmament and against disarmament; for France and against France.... Yet the world's orchestra continued to play up to Mussolini until his attack on Ethiopia....<sup>4</sup>

Inconsistent as his diplomacy was during the first phase of the dictatorship, Mussolini's foreign policy was frequently aligned with that of Great Britain and the United States, though less often with France's.

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<sup>4</sup> Carlo Sforza, Contemporary Italy (New York, 1944), p. 350.

This essential harmony of views was well illustrated in the Duce's attitude toward the League. Although frankly a revisionist, the revision of the peace treaties was conceived by the Duce within the framework of the League (as Article 19 of the Covenant admitted). "Those who reject the idea of revision," Mussolini declared, "are therefore outside the spirit of the League of Nations, which cannot be reduced to the duties of a mere guardian of the 1919 treaties, but must be raised to the stature of a guarantor of justice between peoples."<sup>5</sup> This attitude was not, however, a serious obstacle to European cooperation among the Great Powers. Both Curzon and Poincaré, like Mussolini, wanted to bypass the League, not only in the Corfu crisis, but in any other case in which the "sovereignty" and "honour" of a Great Power might be involved.<sup>6</sup> Hence Great Britain scarcely viewed the League of Nations Covenant with more respect than did "revisionist" Italy.

Benito Mussolini's diplomatic debut was a disaster and hardly suggested the success he would later achieve in winning the reputation of a statesman. One of the first foreign leaders to comment on the Duce was the British Prime Minister Bonar Law, who met the new dictator at the London Conference in 1922. Mussolini had gone to London with the absurd notion that he could

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<sup>5</sup> Luigi Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini (New York, 1956), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, Prelude to World War II (New York, 1954), p. 39.



best achieve Italy's revisionist aims by rolling his fiery eyes and thrusting forward his jaw. This aroused the opposite of admiration. Bonar Law replied, when asked for his reaction to the dictator's performance, that Mussolini was "a lunatic" and that "he had never seen such an ignoramus in his whole life."<sup>7</sup>

As months and years passed and triumphs began to materialize, the setbacks discounted or denied, legends created and sustained (by Fascism's very successful propaganda apparatus), and truths distorted or suppressed, the image of the Duce as a benevolent Superman loomed ever larger in the public mind. His inconsistency, his superficialities, his vanity in public, his egotism in political matters, his constant dismissal of subordinates, and his violence and brutality in domestic regimentation -- all these things were either forgiven or ignored, suppressed or unknown. The Fascist press came forth with the dictum that "Mussolini is always right." Many Europeans, above all the British, seemed to agree and showered flattery and praise upon the Italian dictator.

Sir Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary under both the MacDónald and Baldwin cabinets, referred to the Duce as a "wonderful man...working for the greatness of his country."<sup>8</sup> Even Winston Churchill visited Rome in

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Hibbert, Il Duce (Boston, 1962), p. 74.



1927 and was widely reported to have said, "If I were an Italian I would don the Fascist black shirt," a view in which both the London Times and the Manchester Guardian concurred when they called Fascism a most promising movement.<sup>9</sup> An even more enthusiastic response was given in the London Daily Mail when Lord Rothermere declared that Mussolini was "the greatest figure of our age."<sup>10</sup>

Stories of his vanity and his histrionics, his absurd gestures and behavior were denied by visitors to Rome who found Mussolini sensible and extremely charming. The fact was that Mussolini made a special effort to impress these people with his good intentions. Duff Cooper's reaction was typical. After an interview with the Duce at Easter, 1934, Alfred Duff Cooper recalled later,

I was favorably impressed. There were no histrionics, nor was I obliged, as I had been told would happen, to walk the length of a long room from the door to his desk. He met me at the door and accompanied me to it when I left... Because he laughed at my joke I thought he had a sense of humor and was quite prepared to imagine he had other good qualities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>11</sup> Viscount Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget (London, 1953), p. 183.

That his charm was largely manufactured for such occasions was usually overlooked. There were, however, a few like Lord Vansittart, who noticed that the Duce "took such obvious pleasure in his own company" that he was reminiscent of "a boxer in a flashy dressing gown shaking hands with himself."<sup>12</sup> Yet, as he came towards his visitors, walking with a springy, lively step, friendly and courteous, suspicion and hostility were immediately disarmed. Although he rarely laughed, Mussolini had a winning, flattering smile and a delightful manner.

The image of the Duce as a great statesman was also encouraged by the dictator's conscious effort to present himself as a devotee of peace. And in this sense, the Four Power Pact, signed in Rome on July 15, 1933, was the crowning achievement of his diplomatic career. The vogue of the early 1930's was "collective security." It was based partly on the illusion that the democracies could restrain the Nazis through moral pressure and partly on the fact that the new international alignment had not yet crystallized -- for in 1933 and 1934 the two fascist powers still stood very far apart. Mussolini's proposals for peace thus were in tune with a concept enjoying wide acceptance.

Although Mussolini was never a believer in perpetual peace, he was a sincere supporter of the possibility and desirability of a temporary peace. Throughout 1932-1933 Mussolini, in conversations with various

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 75.



persons, was ever repeating that he had no wish for war. Deeply involved as he was in measures for social reform and the improvement of Italy's economic condition, a war, he maintained, was to him inconceivable unless the very existence and vital interests of Italy were threatened. His first reference to the Four Power Pact, which was to be the object of much discussion in diplomatic circles, came in a speech in 1932 in which the Italian Premier stated:

I think that if, tomorrow, on the basis of justice and with recognition of our sacrosanct rights, it were possible to define the premises necessary and sufficient for the cooperation of the four great powers /Russia was naturally excluded/, Europe would be tranquil from the political standpoint.<sup>13</sup>

When Mussolini proposed that France, Britain, Italy, and Germany join in a Four Power Pact to maintain peace, there seemed little reason to refuse to sign it. On July 15, 1933, the Pact was formally announced. Its object was to establish a ten-year collaboration between the signatories for a revision of the Paris Peace treaties, as provided for in the League of Covenant, and to take up the problem of disarmament if the Geneva Conference came to nothing.

Although the Four Power Pact was not ratified by France or Britain, Mussolini's prestige was augmented since he was recognized as an apostle of international conciliation. For many, the image of Mussolini the peacemaker was not shattered until the Duce's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

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<sup>13</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, Prelude, p. 131.



"It would have been difficult to foretell in 1931," Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, assistant to the British Ambassador in Rome, later observed, "that our harmonious relations with Italy would so quickly deteriorate and that Mussolini himself would become the gross and repugnant bull-frog whom we met in Munich in 1938."<sup>14</sup> In the middle of the decade, the dissident and isolated voices of opposition to the Mussolini myth were generally disregarded, even despised. Few had foresight to match the hindsight of Mrs. Anne O'Hara McCormick, who wrote in the New York Times Book Review (January, 1941):

If Benito Mussolini had been taken less seriously and Adolf Hitler more seriously when the two made their respective debuts upon the world stage, the history of these times might have been different.... The Duce was admired as a great civil administrator, a mighty builder, a successful strike-breaker.... You wonder what the effect would have been if, in the beginning, the whole performance had been viewed as a political farce and subjected to a barrage of satiric laughter.<sup>15</sup>

Like so many other people, Mrs. McCormick forgot or chose to forget that the Duce had once been her idol and that she, too, had been duped by him. When Adolf Hitler came to power, the legend of Mussolini was at its strongest; the world showered the Duce with praise and he relished every

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<sup>14</sup> Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, The Inner Circle (New York, 1959), p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, p. 156.

moment of it. Benito Mussolini was enjoying a popularity which Hitler would never have.

1933 was a turning point for Mussolini, for it was the year when Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor -- an event which the Duce had not foreseen and at which he was not particularly pleased. There had been no Italian support of the Nazi movement and, in fact, Mussolini had even decided that Gregor Strasser, not Hitler, was the horse to back in German politics.<sup>16</sup>

With Hitler's advent to power on January 30, 1933, the European situation changed overnight and not really to Mussolini's pleasure, despite what the Fascist press said. Because the Nazi and Fascist movements espoused similar doctrines, Mussolini's press greeted the victory of National Socialism with some show of enthusiasm. The Tevere proclaimed:

Hitler, together with Fascist Italy, will create a well-defined and solid barrier of will-to-peace in distraught Europe....In the name of the new order that Europe wants, we hail the advent to power of Hitler, loyal friend of Fascist Italy, admirer of Mussolini.<sup>17</sup>

Mussolini, however, was far from ecstatic over Hitler's triumph, for he knew that there was a lingering tenderness for him and his régime in many European conservative circles.

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis (New York, 1949), p. 28.

Although Ambassador François-Poncet says that in the early days Nazism received subsidies from the Fascists, there is little evidence that Italy aided the Nazis, except that numerous Nazis, Goering among them, found refuge in Italy when the Munich Putsch failed in 1923. François-Poncet, The Fateful Years (New York, 1949), p. 238.

<sup>17</sup> Gaetano Salvemini, pp. 134-135.



On the other hand, Hitler's admiration for the Duce was unfeigned and open. In Mein Kampf, the struggling Hitler had said of the Italian dictator:

In this period [the 1920's] -- I openly admit -- I conceived the profoundest admiration for the great man south of the Alps, who full of ardent love for his people, made no pacts with the enemies of Germany, but strove for their annihilation by all ways and means. What will rank Mussolini among the great men of this earth is his determination not to share Italy with the Marxists, but to destroy internationalism and save the fatherland from it....How miserable and dwarfish our German would-be statesmen seem by comparison....<sup>18</sup>

Apart from his admiration for the Duce personally, Hitler wrote that Italy was the Germans' natural ally against a common enemy -- France.<sup>19</sup>

The first overture for friendship naturally came from the Duce's German disciple. In 1926 Hitler had written to Rome to ask for an autographed photograph of Mussolini. The Duce's answer was short and to the point. "Please thank the above-named gentleman," the Italian Foreign Office replied to the German Embassy in Rome, "for his sentiment and tell him in whatever form you consider best that the Duce does not think fit to accede to the request."<sup>20</sup> Mussolini had no wish to sully his reputation by open contact with the unsavory German adventurer.

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<sup>18</sup> Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (Boston, 1962), p. 681.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 620.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 73.



Nor did the Duce's suspicion relax after Hitler had come to power. He had made Fascism both respected and admired; he had no desire to taint it by supporting "the revolt of old German tribes of <sup>the</sup> ~~any~~ primeval forests."<sup>21</sup> Mussolini was flattered, however, by the extravagant praise of Hitler and Goering.

Nonetheless, il Duce, like most Italians, viewed National Socialism as a crude and brutalized version of Fascist themes and fully recognized that the ambitions of a Greater Germany towards Austria and South Tyrol conflicted with Italian interests and security. Suggestions that there might be a resemblance between the two dictators were angrily rejected by Mussolini himself. He was compelled to agree that Nazism, like Fascism, was authoritarian, collectivist, anti-parliamentary, and anti-liberal; further than that he would not go. Mussolini once told Prince Starhemberg that Hitler was the natural leader of National Socialism, which was a "barbarous and savage system, capable only of slaughter, plunder, and blackmail."<sup>22</sup> Again, he told his friend, the journalist Michele Campana:

I should be pleased, I suppose, that Hitler has carried out a revolution on our lines, but they are Germans, so they will end by ruining our idea. They are still the Barbarians of Tacitus and the Reformation in eternal conflict with Rome.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Hibbert, p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 72.

Moreover, the Duce, in countless interviews, dismissed the Nazi philosophy of the master race as "arrant nonsense, stupid and idiotic."<sup>24</sup>

Stronger than the political or historical reasons for the early lack of affinity of the two leaders was the conflict of temperaments of the Germans and Italians. The Italians, frequently easy-going and fatalistic, individualistic by nature, sarcastic and quick-witted, could not appreciate the often humorless drive and the unbending meticulousness of the Germans who seemed so given to pompous formality, strict discipline, and lack of tact. Neither were the personal traits of the two dictators conducive to friendship -- at least not at first. Mussolini and Hitler represented the most extreme characteristics of their peoples. Mussolini made his way early in life; he had a clear, if rather cynical mind and a robust, emotional temperament; he knew what he wanted and was rarely the dupe of his own passionate oratory. Hitler, on the other hand, was a drifter, a man whose early career was one of uniform failure. Benito Mussolini, although vain and puffed up with illusions of greatness, was still never the mad dreamer that Hitler was. Hitler's mind bore all the marks of a psychopath; he followed his political instinct, as he himself put it, "like a sleepwalker."<sup>25</sup>

Yet the Duce, at the high point of his career in 1934, was in time to submit to the Fuehrer's enticements and fall under his spell. Gradually

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>25</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, Contemporary Europe: A History (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1961), pp. 422-423.



from a position of power and independence at the time of their first meeting, at Venice in 1934, Mussolini was to become Hitler's satellite in 1937, and finally, during the Salò Republic, less the Nazi leader's ally than his puppet.

That the friendship and collaboration between Hitler and Mussolini was from the outset "inevitable" is no more the belief of this writer than that any historical phenomenon is or can be "inevitable." The story of the Rome-Berlin Axis is essentially the story of the decline of Benito Mussolini -- of a man who went from power to puppet. Until 1935, Mussolini was hailed as "the greatest figure of our age"; by 1943, he was little more than Hitler's Italian Gauleiter. To examine how and why this change took place is the purpose of this paper.

CHAPTER II: "OUR MEETING CAME TO NOTHING"



The long collaboration of the German and Italian dictators sprang from the most unpromising beginnings. Mussolini and Hitler met for the first time in June, 1934, at Venice, for two days of general talks. The Venice meeting did nothing to warm the already chilly Italo-German relations and, in fact, increased the Duce's distrust and disdain of the Nazi leader.

Long before Hitler came to power, Germany and Italy were sharply divided over the Austrian question, which centered upon German-speaking territories in the Tirol annexed by Italy after the Great War. Indeed, until 1937 Austria was the crux of the problematical relations between the two dictators--an issue which prevented any effective union of aims. Above all else in Europe, Mussolini was determined to prevent the Anschluss, or the absorption of Austria into Germany's sphere through Gleichschaltung.<sup>1</sup> To this end Mussolini became a staunch advocate and patron of an independent Austria.

Mussolini disregarded the traditional Austro-Italian hostility and strove to establish a friendly Fascist régime in Vienna. Between 1930 and 1934 the Duce took a very firm stand on Austria, insisting that the incorporation of Austria into the Reich would constitute a mortal threat to Italy. "Italy," he said in a private

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<sup>1</sup> Gleichschaltung implied the creation of an extensively autonomous régime in Austria analogous to that of Hitler.

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conversation with von Starhemberg, head of the nationalist Heimwehr party and Vice-Chancellor of Austria, "can never allow that."<sup>2</sup>

Then, he went on to say excitedly:

Pan-Germanism is stretching its tentacles toward Pan-Slavism. That is why Austria is so important. If Austria ceases to exist, there can be no more order in Central Europe. Great dangers will then threaten Italy.<sup>3</sup>

Italy, according to the Italian Premier, simply would not tolerate the designs of a Greater Germany.

By the summer of 1933 the Italo-German friction over Austria was obvious. Chancellor Dollfuss had gained power in May, 1932, as the leader of a coalition of Clericals and Austrian Fascists. Both parties were no less fascist than the Austrian Nazis, but they decidedly opposed Anschluss with Germany. The Austrian Fascists, however, hated the Socialists even more than they hated the Nazis, but they were convinced that Mussolini and France would prevent Hitler from attacking Austria. On August 20-21, 1933, Dollfuss and Mussolini met at Riccione and a close personal and political understanding was reached between them regarding both Nazi and Socialist agitation in Austria. The Rome Protocols of the following March underlined the political dependence of Vienna upon Rome.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, pp. 30-31

3 Ibid., 31.

4 Alan Bullock, Hitler, A Study in Tyranny (New York, 1952), pp. 298-299.



It was in the spring of 1934, apparently, that Hitler realized the extent to which his relations with Italy had deteriorated. The activity of the Austrian Nazis simply rendered useless normal diplomatic contact with the government of Rome. Believing profoundly in the persuasiveness of his own personality, Hitler suggested a meeting to clear up all misunderstandings. Mussolini, cool to the idea, instructed Cerruti, his Ambassador to Berlin, that he would agree only if a clearly defined program were settled beforehand. Enraged as he knew the Duce was by Nazi subversion in Austria, Hitler travelled to Venice "to try to disarm Mussolini's hostility."<sup>5</sup>

There may well have been other reasons, too, behind Hitler's visit to Italy. The meeting, it appears, was desired by some of the Reich Chancellor's own advisors who hoped that Mussolini might have more success than they in moderating Hitler's attitude toward Austria. Franz von Papen, German Minister to Vienna, asked the Duce, on a secret visit to Rome late in 1933, whether he would be prepared to invite Hitler for a State visit, "in an attempt to make him mend his ways and to convince him of the need for a peaceful foreign policy."<sup>6</sup> Von Papen's optimism of the outcome of such a meeting was based on the favorable impression the Duce

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Roux, Mussolini (Paris, 1960), p. 206.

<sup>6</sup> Franz von Papen, Memoirs (New York, 1953), p. 331.

had made on him during a visit a few months earlier. Von Papen described this impression of Mussolini in his Memoirs:

I found the Italian dictator a man of very different calibre to Hitler. Short in stature, but with an air of great authority, his massive head conveyed an impression of great strength of character. He handled people like a man accustomed to having his orders obeyed, but displayed immense charm and did not give the impression of a revolutionary. Hitler always had a slight air of uncertainty, as though feeling his way, whereas Mussolini was calm, dignified, and appeared the complete master of whatever subject was being discussed. I felt he would be a good influence on Hitler; he was much more of a statesman, and reminded one of a diplomat of the old school rather than a dictator.<sup>7</sup>

Aware that Hitler admired the Duce's personality and achievements, von Papen felt that Mussolini would bring useful pressure to bear upon the Nazi leader. Mussolini, reluctant but flattered by the rôle he would assume at such a meeting, finally extended the invitation, with the clear understanding, as officially announced, that the conference "was not directed against France."<sup>8</sup>

The first meeting, consisting of two days of personal talks, began on June 14, 1934, in the Villa Pisani at Stra, on the Brenta River. From the very first Mussolini had the upper hand and was self-assured and vigorous. When the Nazi leader came

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>8</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 157.



down the ramp from his plane, the "little family comedy" commenced, as Filippo Bojano put it.<sup>9</sup>

Hitler looked pale and sickly and was wearing a brown mackintosh, nervously clutching a soft gray hat, which he twisted in his hands as if, a French journalist noted, he were a "little plumber holding an embarrassing instrument."<sup>10</sup> Mussolini, however, who had also arrived in civilian clothes, changed on arrival into a splendid military costume. As a result the German Chancellor seemed insignificant and somewhat out of place in his shabby raincoat against a background of brilliant military uniforms and at the side of an apparently more dramatic, more vital dictator. Mussolini was greatly amused by this obvious disparity of their personalities at the reception. Sisley Huddleston, an English observer, was particularly struck by this reception at the airfield:

One almost felt sorry for Hitler, shabbily dressed, shrinking, one might have supposed shy, beside his proud-strutting compeer. Mussolini cast himself deliberately in the rôle of Superman.<sup>11</sup>

Mussolini's pompous and condescending greeting to the German dictator was followed by a display of quite evident hostility to Hitler from the Venetian populace--much to the

<sup>9</sup> Filippo Bojano, In the Wake of the Goose-Step (Toronto, 1944), p. 41

<sup>10</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 193.

Duce's delight. It is difficult to guess to what extent Hitler was aware of this situation, for while the crowds cried only, "Duce, Duce!" Achille Starace, secretary of the Fascist Party, explained, with considerable difficulty, that Duce meant Fuehrer in Italian.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, Count Galeazzo Ciano, head of the Press Bureau, encouraged the foreign press to stress the coolness of the populace and the affectionate condescension of Mussolini toward Hitler.

The two days of conversations went as poorly as the Italian Premier had hoped. On the afternoon of the first day, Hitler asked to speak to the Duce tête-à-tête. The conversation was hindered by the fact that Mussolini, whose German was far from perfect, would not confess that he needed an interpreter and by the fact that Hitler, who spoke only German, embarked on one of his explosive monologues. No wonder there was no meeting of minds!

Hitler had come to Italy full of admiration for the Duce and was determined upon a friendship. "Prussianism is a moral, not a geographical conception," Hitler wrote in 1931. "Mussolini is a Prussian."<sup>13</sup> It was this notion, along with his solution of the Austrian question, which animated his monologues. But the Duce was in no mood for such sentiments. Mussolini understood little of what Hitler was saying and what he did comprehend, he did not appreciate or agree with. Before their first conversation was

<sup>12</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21.



over, Mussolini had already made up his mind about Hitler. Leaving the conference-table during a pause in the "discussion," he remarked to Ciano with a kind of amused contempt, "He's quite mad. I don't like him."<sup>14</sup> By early evening the two could agree only on dislike of France and Russia and were on the verge of a quarrel; they could not agree on much else. Therefore, the two dictators went to bed and in the morning, after a painful night fighting mosquitoes, the Duce suggested they leave humid Stra and move the conference to Venice.<sup>15</sup>

The first day's talks had yielded little except irritation on the Duce's part. As Mme. Cerutti, wife of the Italian Ambassador to Berlin, summed up the worth of the first encounter, "Ce ne fut pas une entrevue, ce fut une collision."<sup>16</sup> Mussolini related the progress of the first day's interview when he told Marshall Badoglio that Hitler was "a phonograph with seven voices. Once his repertory is played out he puts the first record on again and begins all over without variations."<sup>17</sup> A special point was made by the Duce to repeat these stories of his reaction to Hitler to everybody. Rome was alive with the gossip.

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<sup>14</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> It was rumored that Mussolini left Stra, not because of the mosquitoes, but because he was haunted by the ghost of Napoleon, who had once slept in the villa.

<sup>16</sup> Roux, Mussolini, p. 206.

<sup>17</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 158.

The next day, June 15, the atmosphere in Venice was even more strained than the day before. Again the Italian press turned up simply to see "the strange freak, Hitler."<sup>18</sup> During a conversation on the Alberoni golf course when the two men were left alone, their anxious staffs, who were following at a distance, heard shouts which Constantin von Neurath, the German Foreign Minister, later described as "the barking of two mastiffs."<sup>19</sup> What they were arguing about no one knew or could afterwards discover.

Apart from the affinity between their two political movements, their only common ground was the intended revision of the peace treaties, which Mussolini had been urging for years. As on the first day, members of the conference reported that the two chiefs spent most of their time talking at each other, rather than to each other. Hitler, in particular, kept up an almost uninterrupted flow of words which made discussion practically impossible. Mussolini gave up arguing and remarked sarcastically of the "garrulous monk", after the conference was ended:

I was afraid I'd have difficulties with the German language. But I had none whatever. He gave me no chance to speak.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Bojano, In the Wake of the Goose-Step, p. 41.

<sup>19</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Roman Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall (New York, 1956), p. 7.



As Hitler prepared to return to Germany, it was clear that the meeting had been barren of results except that a sort of gentleman's agreement was arrived at regarding Austria, whereby, Mussolini thought, Germany would not interfere in Austria's domestic affairs. Mussolini's chief recollection of Hitler at the conference was the pretentious talk of the Nazi leader. "Instead of discussing major problems, Hitler," the Duce claimed, "merely recited from memory Mein Kampf-- that boring book which I have never been able to read."<sup>21</sup> When Hitler was boarding his private plane for the return to Berlin, Mussolini amused Fulvio Suvich, Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs, by exclaiming, "What a clown this Hitler is."<sup>22</sup> Filippo Bojano, a close friend of the Italian dictator, accurately summed up the negative results of the Venice meeting:

The German prescription for the holding of a personal meeting had a negative result on this occasion. I am even of the opinion that it made the position worse, so far as could be judged from its apparent reaction on Mussolini.<sup>23</sup>

If there were any tangible results of the first personal encounter--and there were certainly no indications that the Duce was going to play Hitler's game by the latter's rules-- it is apparent that Mussolini still considered Hitler a not very intelligent disciple whom he could use to good purpose,

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<sup>21</sup> op. cit., Hibbert, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Paolo Monelli, Mussolini: The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, (New York, 1954), p. 129.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 129.

if he had to. It was he, the Duce, who would pull the strings, not Hitler. He was convinced that the clownish and absurd Hitler, whom he now personally disliked, was destined to play second-fiddle to himself. For the time being, as a result of Hitler's political victory in Germany, the Duce's stock was rising in the world, and this alone mattered. Consequently, it was <sup>WITH</sup> little remorse or dissatisfaction that he told his wife, Donna Rachele, that "Our meeting came to nothing."<sup>24</sup>

Whatever agreement had been reached at Venice was soon wrecked by the Nazis' attempted Putsch in Austria four weeks later. At the close of their meeting, the Associated Press had announced that Hitler and Mussolini had agreed that "Austria must remain an independent nation, but Italy would not object if a Nazi were elected Chancellor of Austria."<sup>25</sup> This statement was so blatantly incorrect that the head of the German Press Bureau told the journalists that it was not true and Dollfuss insisted that it was absurd. Furthermore, the announcement was made not by Mussolini, but Ciano. That Mussolini made any concession to Hitler of this nature is highly improbable. On the other hand, it is quite possible that the Nazi leader considered that Mussolini had given him carte blanche in Austria; or else he simply did not care what the Duce's attitude was.

<sup>24</sup> Rachele Mussolini, My Life with Mussolini, (London, 1959), p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 161.



After a temporary diminution in Nazi activities in Austria after the Venice meeting the Nazis so far overplayed their hand as to attempt on July 15, a coup d'état by murdering the Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss, while his wife and children were guests of Mussolini in Italy. The Duce's reaction was immediate and forceful. Telegraphing Prince von Starhemberg, the Vice-Chancellor, the Italian Premier promised Italian support and dispatched three divisions to the Brenner frontier as a guarantee that the promise was not an idle one. Order was quickly restored by the Austrian authorities.

Hitler, realizing that his supporters had gone too far and observing Italy's quick action in the crisis, was obliged to give way and disavow any connection with the agents of the abortive coup. Hitler had failed to recognize that not only was Dollfuss little more than a tool in the Duce's hands, but that he was also a close personal friend. His assassination produced in the Duce an <sup>N</sup>ager and bitterness that for once was not simulated.

The news of the attempted Putsch infuriated the Duce. Mussolini railed violently and bitterly against the Nazis and their Fuehrer; he interpreted Hitler's act as a deliberate insult on his own person. The French Ambassador to Berlin, André François-Poncet, reported the Duce's reaction to the Austrian crisis:

Le Duce éclate en indignation furieuse. Il ressent l'attentat comme un affront personnel. Dollfuss était son ami, son protégé. Il a été tué le jour même où il devait retrouver sa famille, à Riccione où Mussolini les avait invités chez lui. Le Duce ne doute pas que le meurtre n'ait été accompli par des hommes envoyés d'Allemagne. Le conflit est poussé très loin. Le presse italienne ecume.<sup>26</sup>

Mussolini told von Starhemberg, visiting Rome after the restoration of order in Vienna, "Hitler is the murderer of Dollfuss, Hitler is guilty, Hitler is responsible for what has happened."<sup>27</sup> In the same interview the Duce frantically went on to call the Fuehrer, "a horrible, sexually degenerate character, a dangerous man."<sup>28</sup> Mussolini's feelings came close to hatred.

The Italian press was allowed to unleash a violent anti-German campaign. Reports were heard that Italians were continually making jokes about the Fuehrer's Charlie Chaplin moustache.<sup>29</sup> In Rome, Hitler was hissed when he appeared on the screen in newsreels and there was even an attempted demonstration before the German Embassy, which the very police who had undoubtedly organized it, suppressed at just the right moment. Mussolini, sincerely disturbed by Dollfuss's

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<sup>26</sup> Roux, Mussolini, p. 207.

<sup>27</sup> Monelli, Mussolini: The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, pp. 132-133.

<sup>28</sup> op cit., Hibbert, 72.

<sup>29</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 162.



assassination and the Austrian disorders, was also quite willing to make political capital out of it. Arnaldo Cortesi cabled the following comment to the New York Times:

How wide is the gulf now separating Italy from Germany is made evident by the attitude of the Italian Press. The newspapers unanimously hold the Nazi Government responsible for what has taken place in Vienna....The newspapers are just beginning to say things that were in the minds of all Italians after Herr Hitler's bloody repression on June 30 of the revolt(!) among his followers, but they were unable to print at the time because it was contrary to government policy.<sup>30</sup>

On July 30, however, Cortesi unexpectedly wrote that "German tension in Italy ceases."<sup>31</sup> Why did Mussolini so soon put an end to his anti-German demonstrations? Probably the best answer is that the powers of the West had not backed his mobilization as he had been confident they would as signatories of the Four Power Pact. When he mobilized on the Brenner, the Duce had expected London and Paris to do the same--instead, they did no more than send Berlin a stern note of protest. This forced the Italian Government to abstain from further measures, which Mussolini favored.<sup>32</sup> Mussolini

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<sup>30</sup> op. cit., Salvemini, 163.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that, in his interview with von Starhemberg, the Duce anxiously said: "Perhaps the Great Powers will recognize the German danger. Hitler will create an army. Hitler will arm the Germans and make war--possibly even in three years. I cannot stand up to him alone. We must do something, we must do something quickly." (Salvemini, p. 162.)

found himself "left in the lurch" as he later expressed it in an article in Popolo d'Italia (February 13, 1935).<sup>33</sup>

Herein lies the irony of the abortive Austrian Putsch, which confirmed the Duce's dislike and distrust of Hitler. He might have followed the West if London and Paris had backed him up. But Mussolini failed to win Western support. The events connected with Austria, together with the failure of the ratification of the Four Power Pact, convinced Mussolini that he could not count on any collaboration of the British and French in his policy for European peace. France was too fearful of Germany and Great Britain of continental commitments to support an eventual Italian policy directed against Hitler. But the Duce did not give up hope at once. Long a revisionist himself, the July crisis turned Mussolini from any support of German revisionist aspirations. The murder of Dollfuss enabled Mussolini to draw closer to the former Allies, however tenuously, and led eventually to Stresa and to a genuine anti-German front.<sup>34</sup>

The passivity of Britain and France toward the Fuehrer's activities in Austria, although it greatly disappointed and

<sup>33</sup> Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 114.

<sup>34</sup> The so-called Stresa front is discussed in the following chapter.



disillusioned the Duce, did not directly throw Italy into the arms of Hitler. Mussolini's bitterness over Dollfuss's assassination and the memory of the Venice meeting made such a friendship inconceivable to everyone but Hitler. Only the German dictator foresaw the isolation in which Italy was to find herself and became "as wary as a cat watching his prey."<sup>35</sup> But at the end of 1934 the Fuehrer's optimism was without visible foundation. Political and personal relations between the two leaders were hardly conducive to agreement and the Austrian question was by no means settled.

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<sup>35</sup> Laura Fermi, Mussolini. (Chicago, 1961), p. 347.

**CHAPTER III: A SPLENDID LITTLE WAR**



In 1937 General Emilio de Bono, the first commander of the Ehtiopian campaign, revealed that Mussolini had decided upon that expedition as early as the autumn of 1933. "The Duce spoke with no one of the coming operations in East Africa," de Bono remarked. "Only he and I knew what was going to happen."<sup>1</sup> In truth, however, diplomatic preparations for Mussolini's splendid little war went back much further -- as early as the 1920's.<sup>2</sup>

The continued independence of Ethiopia, as Abyssinia preferred to be called, seemed to stand as a permanent taunt to Italy's martial valor and her capacity to be a colonial power. The humiliating defeat at the hands of the Ethiopians at Adowa in 1896 still rankled in the minds of many Italians, and Benito Mussolini, bitterly called it "the great account opened in 1890."<sup>3</sup> What could be more natural, then, than for Mussolini to renew the struggle forty years later against the mountain empire which the Italians had so long regarded as rightfully theirs?

There was, however, one significant difficulty which Mussolini overlooked: the European attitude toward colonial wars had changed. Mussolini was completely mistaken in supposing that the Powers would regard an Italian war of conquest in the 1930's as casually as they did in the 1890's.

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<sup>1</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> Abyssinia and Italy, compiled by The Royal Institute of International Affairs (New York, 1935), pp. 11-15.

<sup>3</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 310

Colonial warfare was simply no longer in vogue. Winston Churchill was entirely correct, however sanctimonious, in remarking in his memoirs:

Mussolini's designs upon Abyssinia were unsuited to the ethics of the twentieth century. They belonged to those dark ages when white men felt themselves entitled to conquer yellow, brown, black, or red men, and subjugate them by their superior strength and weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Mussolini, however, with good reason thought once-imperialist Britain in no position to oppose the colonial aspirations of Italy, a latecomer in Africa.

Great Britain herself, to be sure, showed considerable willingness, at first, to tolerate and even encourage the Duce's designs on Ethiopia. In December, 1925, the British and Italian Governments had exchanged notes by which Britain pledged herself to support Italy in her endeavor to obtain a concession to build a railway from Eritrea to Italian Somaliland. In return, Rome agreed to support the British Government in its own effort to secure from Ethiopia the concession to construct a dam on Lake Tana. The agreement appeared to be of an economic nature and did not explicitly allow the Duce to wage war on Ethiopia. But Mussolini could not have built and operated a railway cutting across Ethiopia had he not been entitled to establish a military control over that territory. In fact, what Foreign Secretary Sir Austen Chamberlain did in December, 1925, was to pledge the British Foreign Office not to interfere with Mussolini -- even if he involved himself in a war -- so long as British interest in the Tana region remained secure.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Winston Churchill, The Gathering Storm (Boston, 1948), p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, pp. 75-76.



Thus, speaking before the Italian Chamber on May 25, 1935, the Italian Premier said:

The Italian-Ethiopian problem goes back to 1925, as is shown by documents which can be published if the time comes. It was in that year that I began to examine the problem.<sup>6</sup>

In 1935, Sir Austen Chamberlain was still alive and did not contradict him. Mussolini's interpretation of the Anglo-Italian agreement was correct. But then, 1935 was not 1925. Nonetheless, the attitude of the Foreign Office in 1935 departed little from this early line until British public opinion intervened.

When Mussolini prepared for the fulfillment of Italy's traditional -- or fin-de-siecle -- dream of Ethiopian conquest, he was not accepting Hitler's policy in Austria, nor was he casting his lot with the Nazis. His plan to attack Ethiopia was based in large part upon the fact that Hitler had admitted it would take two years to prepare Anschluss and that Mussolini assumed the African conflict would be short, since he expected the tacit approval of Britain and France.<sup>7</sup> He was neither abandoning Austria nor ceasing to oppose Hitler in 1935. In fact, relations between Hitler and Mussolini during the first half of 1935 were frankly hostile. By April, Goering was bitterly complaining that Mussolini was working against Germany in every possible field.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the German press was particularly aroused against Italy in 1935, especially against the Duce's announced plans

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>7</sup> Roux, Mussolini, p. 215.

<sup>8</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 44.

for Ethiopia. Until it was clear that Mussolini's policy would bring him into conflict with the League and Great Britain, Italy's colonial aspirations enjoyed no sympathy in Germany.

Relations with France, on the other hand, were quite friendly. The events in Austria the previous summer had driven France and Italy closer together. Although Mussolini recognized in 1934, during the Austrian crisis, that France and England would do nothing to collaborate with them against an aggressive Germany,<sup>9</sup> Mussolini in his foreign policy was anxious not only to safeguard Italy's position in Europe against the German threat, but also to secure her imperial future in Africa. Against Germany, closer relations with France and Great Britain would be useful and essential, but in the Mediterranean and Africa disagreements with both these powers might well arise. The Duce hoped, nevertheless, that the common need for security felt by Italy, France, and Britain might induce the two democracies to accept the Italian imperialist program in East Africa and he was not far wrong.

Hence, in late 1934 and early 1935, Mussolini was cultivating French good will and he found France extremely eager for an understanding with Italy. On January 5, 1935, Pierre Laval, French Foreign Minister and soon to become Premier, visited Rome and met the Duce at Palazzo Venezia.

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<sup>9</sup> On October 6, 1934, addressing the workers of Milan, Mussolini said: "Une entente entre l'Italie et la France serait inutile et féconde." This did not mean, however, that he did not desire closer relations with both France and Great Britain. Georges Roux, Mussolini, p. 216.



During Laval's stay in Rome, an agreement between the two governments was concluded on January 8 dealing with Italian policy in East Africa and the position of Italian citizens in French Tunisia. Hoping to present a strong anti-German front and in view of the concessions Italy gave France in Tunisia, Laval granted Mussolini a more or less free hand in Ethiopia. There has been much controversy over whether Laval gave Italy "a free hand" politically or whether he had meant to do so only in an economic sense. Laval himself, later in a private letter, admitted that he had actually used the expression "a free hand" without any qualifications, so that it might be interpreted in either political or economic terms.<sup>10</sup> Laval was determined to achieve an entente with Italy and was willing to ignore the Ethiopian question for French security. Mussolini, naturally, preferred the political interpretation and felt Italy one step closer to a diplomatic carte blanche in Ethiopia, while still opposing Hitler in Europe.

The German announcement of renewed conscription in March -- an open defiance of the Versailles Treaty -- led in early April to Italian cooperation in the so-called Stresa front. Less than a week before the League of Nations was to condemn the German action, representatives of France, Great Britain, and Italy met at the Italian Alpine lake resort of Stresa and agreed to stand together against resurgent Germany. The Stresa

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<sup>10</sup> Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 124.

front, however, was only a very tenuous pledge of a common policy to oppose Hitler. When Mussolini proclaimed anew the independence of Austria and undertook to protect it as "indispensable à l'équilibre spirituel comme politique de l'Europe," Paris supported him, but London was much more cold and evasive.<sup>11</sup> And when he further proposed that the Great Powers intervene to keep Germany from rearming against the terms of the Versailles Treaty, both Britain and France were hostile to the suggestion. Mussolini's proposals were far too vigorous to suit Britain and France. Hence, the Stresa front was psychological rather than concrete.

Although the approaching Ethiopian conflict was not discussed at Stresa, it was very much present at the talks. The Western powers were well aware that Mussolini was preparing for an attack on Ethiopia. Fearing that the ticklish Ethiopian question might hinder an understanding, it was, it seems, carefully avoided by the French and British representatives.<sup>12</sup> Since Ethiopia was not mentioned, Mussolini became convinced that Britain as well as France had now given him the green-light in Africa in return for his services against Germany.

Unhampered by fine scruples of legality (Ethiopia was a League member) and encouraged by the Japanese precedent in Manchukuo in 1931, Mussolini was willing to undertake the risks of the colonial adventure. Failing to

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<sup>11</sup> Roux, Mussolini, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> Ironically the British representative at Stresa was Anthony Eden, who was in the next few months to become the author of the Government's apparent Italophobe foreign policy.



goad Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie into an aggressive act, the Duce used a boundary dispute between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland -- the Walwal incident of December 5, 1934 -- as a pretext for launching hostilities.<sup>13</sup>

At the outset, it seemed as if the Duce would succeed with little or no opposition from the European powers. He had persuaded Laval to accept a free hand for Italy in Ethiopia and it appeared that the British Government was prepared to ignore the tension in Africa. But by early summer, as Italy's preparations for the as yet undeclared war became increasingly obvious, the British public began to take alarm. As Albert Shaw pointed out in an article in Review of Reviews (October, 1935):

Every step in the mobilization of Italy's forces and their transport to the points on the African coast from which they were to advance in due time, was proclaimed with the most impressive publicity. Mussolini's statements, taken in conjunction with Italian activities, would have been construed as a declaration of war if directed against a European power.<sup>14</sup>

Although British public opinion decidedly favored the Ethiopians, the Government seemed to ignore the implications of the Italian troopships which were passing through the Suez Canal.

On June 23-24, however, the British Minister for League Affairs, Anthony Eden visited Rome in an attempt to prevent a war in Ethiopia. Eden offered Mussolini concessions which the latter rejected as inadequate,

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<sup>13</sup> Contemporary Europe, A Symposium (New York, 1941), p. 313.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Shaw, "The Progress of the World," Review of Reviews (October, 1935), p. 14.

maintaining that the Eden plan would only have added to Italy's already superabundant "collection of deserts."<sup>15</sup> Mussolini's refusal had a profound effect on Eden who, unable to accept that a proposal made by him could be turned down, never forgave Italy or Mussolini for this imagined snub. Leaving Rome, Eden remarked that Mussolini was not a gentleman, and the Duce caustically issued the rejoinder, "I never saw a better-dressed fool."<sup>16</sup>

While Eden's handling of the British side succeeded only in antagonizing the Italian Premier, Mussolini was determined at all costs to let nothing interrupt or modify his plans. The Duce remarked to the French Ambassador to Rome, "If you brought me Abyssinia on a silver platter, I would not accept it, as I am resolved to take it by force."<sup>17</sup> The pretense that Italy was threatened by the Ethiopians and was acting defensively was put forward for the sake of diplomatic etiquette, and could not be (nor was it) taken seriously. At any rate, it is doubtful that the British public would have accepted the compromise offered by Eden, since by June there was public rage in Britain over Italy's military preparations.

The British opposed Italy in Ethiopia partly on the domestic issue of the Peace Ballot in 1935. The Ethiopian question over which British public opinion and, to a lesser extent, the British Government was becoming

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<sup>15</sup> Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 231.

<sup>17</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 259.



aroused, had not been discussed at Stresa. It was only when the results of the Peace Ballot, a sort of referendum for collective security sponsored by the Labor and Liberal parties,<sup>18</sup> were published and seemed to prove the existence of League fanaticism in millions of British citizens, that the Baldwin Cabinet decided it must adopt a strong League policy if it was to win the next election.<sup>19</sup> Hence, after June the Government initiated a foreign policy apparently hostile toward Italy.

On October 3, after months of visible military preparations by Italy and stern diplomatic protests from Britain, the Duce launched his invasion of Ethiopia. Within little more than a week, the Council of the League, which had ignored the Ethiopian crisis all this time, declared Italy an aggressor, and its Assembly, under pressure by Eden, voted economic sanctions in the form of embargoes (Article 16 of the Covenant). In the imposition of sanctions, the British Government was the leading protagonist. The League members other than Great Britain were not at all keen about sanctions; in France, Laval continued to maintain his strong opposition to them, although he dared not irritate the British too sharply.

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<sup>18</sup> Villari maintains in Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini (pp. 135-136) that "no member of the Government /British/ seems to have realized that the ballot was one of the most colossal frauds of modern times" and thus compromise was not given a real chance until it was too late.

<sup>19</sup> Churchill, The Gathering Storm, pp. 169-170.

There was, however, one powerful voice of opposition to the Government's Ethiopian policy. The one person who seems to have realized the dangers of an Italophobe attitude was Winston Churchill. Churchill expressed in Parliament as early as July grave misgivings about the truculent rôle Britain was playing in the crisis:

As we stand today there is no doubt that a cloud has come over the friendship between Great Britain and Italy, a cloud which, it seems to me, may very easily not pass away, although undoubtedly it is everyone's desire that it should.<sup>20</sup>

There were also many in the Foreign Office who believed that Italy had good grounds for complaint against Ethiopia and that had the latter not been encouraged by Britain, she might have compromised with Italy.<sup>21</sup> But the Cabinet declared, having misunderstood the importance of the Peace Ballot, that Britain would uphold her obligations to the League -- which meant opposing Italy vigorously in Ethiopia.

The Committee on Sanctions spent five weeks in deliberating upon what sort of sanctions might be most effective. After a month of deep study, it decided that no embargo should be put on coal, iron, steel or cotton -- all essential raw materials for war; and no embargo was placed on oil, which would have made Mussolini's war impossible. But, ironically, an embargo was

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>21</sup> Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget, p. 191.



put on camels, mules, and donkeys, as well as upon aluminum, a material which Italy produced in such large quantities that she exported it.<sup>22</sup>

These half-hearted sanctions, according to Duff Cooper,

doing the minimum of harm, we incurred the maximum of ill-will, and at a time when the wind of fear was rising and the nations were anxiously watching for indications of weakness or strength, Great Britain appeared before them as a friend not to be relied upon and a foe not to be feared.<sup>23</sup>

What was the effect of economic sanctions on Italy? Militarily, of course, they were useless and did not obstruct the progress of the conquest. More important, however, sanctions, despite their obvious leniency, infuriated the Italian people, who quite justly blamed the British Government. Before the Ethiopian conflict, the summer and fall of 1935 had marked a low point in the popularity of Fascism in Italy. For the first time since the Matteotti affair, Italians grumbled openly and anti-war slogans were chalked on buildings. Furthermore, discontent increased with the opening of hostilities on October 3. What dispelled a large measure of it and rallied the Italian people around the Duce was the imposition of economic sanctions by the League which, to most Italians, seemed a gross injustice.<sup>24</sup> Typical of the indignation of the Italians was that expressed by Giorgio Pini, a Fascist apologist, in The Official Life of Benito Mussolini:

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<sup>22</sup> Carlo Sforza, Contemporary Italy (New York, 1944), p. 351.

<sup>23</sup> Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget, p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 319.

On November 18, the European coalition conspiring at Geneva initiated the monstrous unforgettable crime of economic sanctions against Italy; it was a veritable siege calculated to strangle it into submission for lack of raw materials and of gold and through the closing of all doors to its exports.<sup>25</sup>

Italy was indignant and the Duce and his propaganda machine exploited the situation to the utmost.

It was not until late fall, however, that the British Government revealed what it meant by sanctions. Although Baldwin was resolved on sanctions, he was equally resolved there must be no war as a result.<sup>26</sup> In early December, the French Premier Laval lured Sir Samuel Hoare, British Foreign Secretary, to Paris and persuaded him to accept a compromise under which the Emperor of Ethiopia would be obliged to cede two-thirds of his land to Italy.<sup>27</sup> If the Duce would have accepted the Hoare-Laval plan, it is quite possible that a practical solution could have been reached. Although on December 9 the British Cabinet approved the Hoare-Laval plan to partition Ethiopia, the reaction of Parliament and public to it caused Baldwin to disavow the note and say hypocritically that he had really never liked the idea. Hoare was forced to resign and French hopes for compromise were destroyed.

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<sup>25</sup> Giorgio Pini, The Official Life of Benito Mussolini (London, 1939), p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Mussolini left no doubt that he would regard "oil sanction" as an act of war. F. A. Voigt, Unto Caesar (New York, 1938), p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> Hughes, Contemporary Europe, p. 284.



The Ethiopian war, having dragged on much longer than Mussolini had anticipated, ended May 5, 1936. "My objective is simple," The Duce had declared some years before. "I want to make Italy great, respected, and feared."<sup>28</sup> Few Italians, after Ethiopia, denied that he had done so. It is no exaggeration to say that Benito Mussolini reached the summit of his popularity on the night of May 9, 1936, when <sup>he</sup> dramatically proclaimed the Empire from his balcony of Palazzo Venezia: "The Italian people has created the empire with its blood. It will fecundate it with its work and defend it against anyone with its arms."<sup>29</sup> For once the exuberance of the crowd was genuine.

Yet the success of the Ethiopian war was not without a very high price: it resulted in diplomatic isolation and disastrous overestimation of Italian strength. Mussolini did not understand that he was provoking the other powers over Ethiopia. Hitler hoped to and did profit from Mussolini's isolation. William Shirer noted accurately the Fuehrer's attitude toward the whole affair in Berlin Diary:

Either Mussolini will stumble and get himself so heavily involved in Africa that he will be greatly weakened in Europe, whereupon Hitler can seize Austria...or he will win, defying France and Britain, and thereupon be ripe for a tie-up with Hitler against the Western democracies. Either way Hitler wins.<sup>30</sup>

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28 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 69.

29 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 327.

30 William L. Shirer, Berlin Diary (New York, 1941), p. 43.

The German dictator did not have to give any effective aid to Mussolini; he merely offered moral encouragement in his fight against the League. With great skill, Hitler fruitfully exploited the diplomatic crisis over Ethiopia.

Mussolini's victory in Africa caused his popularity at home to reach its peak. On the other hand, however, his once enormous popularity abroad -- and it had been indeed considerable -- all but vanished. The Ethiopian war and the League's débâcle over sanctions against Italy wrecked the League, reducing it to visible impotence. Worse, moreover, the conflict brought about the breakdown of the Stresa front. The disintegration of this alignment forced Mussolini, however unwillingly, closer to friendship with Hitler. For this situation, both the British Government and Mussolini were responsible. The British politicians, especially Baldwin and Eden, failed to consider that they might need Italy to maintain collective security against Hitlerism.<sup>31</sup> It was a mistake they would attempt to correct later -- unsuccessfully.

Unhappily for the peace of Europe, Mussolini's adventure in Ethiopia and its diplomatic repercussions in the West ultimately drove Fascist Italy into the arms of Nazi Germany and so produced a situation that the British, the French, and Mussolini had been fortunate enough to avoid since the beginning of 1933. Yet with the conquest of Ethiopia and the

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, Italy, p. 452.



creation of the Empire, Benito Mussolini was far from eager for an alignment with Hitler, much less ready to subject Italy's destinies to the will of the Fuehrer. But the Duce did not immediately grasp the meaning of isolation -- or the lasting consequences of his splendid little war.

**CHAPTER IV: THE ROAD TO BERLIN**



Paul Gentizon, the Swiss publicist, commenting on the consequences of British and French diplomacy from 1934 to 1936, wrote in Défense de l'Italie: 'The Rome-Berlin Axis was forged in Paris and London. It bears the trademark 'made in England.'<sup>1</sup> While Gentizon's contention is slightly exaggerated, it is not wholly inaccurate. The Italo-German rapprochement was in the beginning a decidedly shaky one. The first meeting between Hitler and Mussolini had been a complete fiasco, ending in a misunderstanding over Austria which made matters worse than before. Britain's conspicuous rôle in the imposition of sanctions by the League, however, outraged the Italians and when Germany ostentatiously refrained from associating herself with the policy of the League, which she was on the verge of quitting, 'the Rome-Berlin axis was born.'<sup>2</sup> The outbreak of the Spanish civil war in July, 1936, while not the immediate cause of the friendship, confirmed the possibility of an Italo-German agreement. Spain was important because the two fascist nations began to view one another more cordially as soon as the parallelism of their policies became evident.

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1 Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 186.

2 Maxwell H. H. Macartney, One Man Alone (London, 1944), p. 18.

At the beginning of 1936, despite Italy's isolation resulting from the continued hostilities in Ethiopia, relations between Italy and Germany were still complicated by the question of Austrian independence. Speaking with von Starhemberg in January, 1936, Mussolini remarked: "Is it possible to make a pact with Germany? Is Germany capable of keeping a pact? Is peace with Germany possible?"<sup>3</sup> When von Starhemberg became alarmed by the talk of an Italian rapprochement with Germany, he asked Il Duce if the Austrians could definitely count on Italy not to come to an agreement with Berlin at the expense of Austria. Mussolini assured the leader of the Heimwehr: "I will not give up Austria. I cannot give her up. You may count on that definitely."<sup>4</sup> The difficulties in Ethiopia had not changed his Austrian policy. Thus, until Hitler offered some tangible guarantee of Austrian independence, any thought of an Italo-German understanding was out of the question. As long as the issue of Austria remained unsolved and uncertain, demonstrations of friendship between Germany and Italy were no more than that -- showy demonstrations without basis in reality.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 481.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 481.

<sup>5</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 56.



Nonetheless, the first clear symptoms of a rapprochement between the Nazi and Fascist régimes were manifested as early as February, 1936, when France was on the point of ratifying the Franco-Soviet Pact, which had been signed on May 2, 1935. By the middle of February, distaste for the pact was expressed in the Italian as well as the German press. On February 25, there were rumors in Rome, unfounded it later turned out, that Italy intended to join Germany in a denunciation of the Locarno Pact as a means of exerting pressure upon the sanctionist West-European powers. New reports of an understanding between Germany and Italy cropped up in March -- this time in Berlin. From its Berlin correspondent, the Manchester Guardian learned that Germany and Italy had already come to an agreement. This was far from the real situation. Actually diplomatic relations between Rome and Berlin were of an on-again, off-again nature, and were rendered especially difficult when Hitler announced the remilitarization of the Rhineland. In spite of Britain's hostile attitude towards the Ethiopian conquest, the Duce was anxious for a return to amicable relations with both Britain and France. The Hoare-Laval Pact of the previous December had created consternation in Berlin, because it was thought that Mussolini would accept the compromise, thus reasserting the Stresa front. The failure of the Hoare-Laval compromise restored Hitler's optimism.

Not quite five months after the Italian victory in Ethiopia, the Spanish civil war broke out. This three-year struggle produced the gravest of diplomatic problems for the Duce, because it opened a profound abyss between his government, which supported the Spanish insurgents, and Great Britain and France, who sympathized with republican Spain. As F. A. Voigt described the Spanish civil war:

Europe, instead of uniting in common pity to stop it, is divided in ardent partisanship to prolong it....Sides have been taken as in a football match, and enthusiasm has been inflamed rather than cooled by the cruelty of the spectacle.<sup>6</sup>

Mussolini foolishly took an active part in the Spanish conflict, hardly speculating on what Italy had to gain from Franco's victory.

From the very beginning, however, the Fuehrer's Spanish policy was shrewd, calculated and far-seeing.<sup>7</sup> It was Hitler's intention to prolong the Spanish civil war in order to keep Britain and France and Italy at loggerheads and draw Mussolini toward him. More than a year later, on November 5, 1937, Hitler reiterated his Spanish policy in a confidential talk with his generals:

A hundred percent victory for Franco is not desirable from the German point of view. Rather we are interested in a continuance of the war in keeping up the tension in the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup>

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6 F. A. Voigt, Unto Caesar (New York, 1938), p. 211.

7 William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich (New York, 1959), p. 297.

8 ibid., 297.



Thus, Germany's support for Franco was limited. In return for the money and effort Italy expended on intervention in Spain, Mussolini got nothing for his pains, except a diplomatic and military headache. While victory would bring little reward, once Italy had taken an active part, defeat would mean a loss of face which he dared not contemplate. Spain was a political mistake as elementary as it was now irreparable.<sup>9</sup>

Diplomatically isolated after the Ethiopian war, the "ideological" struggle in Spain drew Italy closer to Germany. Although the British and French attempted to win Mussolini back after sanctions had been dropped (they were abolished soon after Italy's victory in Africa), the common object of Mussolini and Hitler in their Spanish policies helped to bring the two régimes to an understanding. By July, it was again common talk in Rome that an Italo-German alliance was in the making. Birchall, the New York Times correspondent in Berlin, was informed that "there was every reason for believing that the relations between Berlin and Rome were most cordial and under stress might become more so."<sup>10</sup>

Although Mussolini had not abandoned his disdain and distrust of Hitler, his relations with Germany took a new turn during the summer. In June the Duce arranged an official visit to Germany by his daughter the

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, Italy, p. 458.

<sup>10</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 483.

Countess Edda Ciano, an emissary whose opinion carried considerable weight with her father and who was dispatched to Berlin for a general appraisal of Nazi moods and policies. Countess Edda spent four weeks in the capital of the Reich and was the guest of honor at a reception on June 17 by Hitler at Reichskanzlei. A visit of this length was especially significant when the visitor was the daughter of Mussolini and the wife of the newly appointed Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Galeazzo Ciano. Thoroughly disgusted by Edda's deportment, the Nazis nevertheless employed every charm to please her, to flatter her tastes, and to captivate her. They dragged her from fête to fête and she returned to Italy enthusiastic and delighted with what she had seen in Germany.<sup>11</sup>

There were also other important personal meetings at this time. In Rome, on June 27, a set of commercial clearing agreements was signed by Count Ciano, the Austrian Minister and the German Ambassador. Count Volpi, President of the Italian Federation of Industrialists, was in Berlin for five days of talks in mid-July with Dr. Schacht, the Nazis' economics expert; and simultaneously a German military mission visited Rome. On July 25, Hitler's Ambassador to Rome, Ulrich von Hassell, called on Ciano and informed him that the German Government had decided to abolish the

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<sup>11</sup> Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 242.



German Legation at Addis Ababa and replace it by a Consulate-General -- a step welcomed by Italy as a recognition of the Italian empire and one which neither Great Britain nor France was in a position to make.<sup>12</sup>

On August 7, in Berlin, the exchange of visits was continued when a party of five hundred Italian students was received by Baldur von Schirach, leader of the Hitler Youth. Two weeks later, on August 29-31, Paul Joseph Goebbels paid a weekend visit by air to Venice, where he was entertained by Dino Alfieri, Italian Minister for Propaganda, who returned Goebbels' visit in September. In addition, at the end of September a second party of five hundred Italian students visited Germany, while a similar group of five hundred Hitler Youth visited Italy and were personally greeted by the Duce.

The visits chronicled in the preceding paragraphs were manifestly of unequal importance, and they were chiefly remarkable for their frequency. Of more immediate significance was the agreement signed between Austria and Germany on July 11, 1936. The Austro-German agreement was clearly a Nazi attempt to remove the troublesome Austrian question from Italo-German diplomatic relations. In order to placate Mussolini and ensure Italy of Germany's good intentions, Hitler recognized the full sovereignty of Austria and agreed that the latter's political structure was an internal affair with which Germany would neither directly nor indirectly interfere. Although

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<sup>12</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs, 1936A (London, 1937), pp. 579-580.

von Starhemberg disliked the agreement which Chancellor Schuschnigg signed with Hitler, the Italian Minister in Vienna, Preziosi, reassured him:

Often some incident gives a totally unexpected turn of events. It is not impossible that the Austrian Nazis will do something stupid which will give the Austrian Government the opportunity of breaking the agreement and taking sharp measures against them.<sup>13</sup>

Since Mussolini was by this time beginning to consider seriously closer relations with Germany, Preziosi was dismissed from service in Vienna for his indiscreet assurances to von Starhemberg.

There could be no doubt of the coming rapprochement when Count Ciano visited Germany in October, some months after his wife had prepared the ground. On October 19, Ciano left for Berlin with the mission, it was correctly rumored in Rome, of bringing about a "co-ordination of the policies of the Italian and German Governments."<sup>14</sup>

From October 20-25, 1936, Ciano was in Germany where he conferred with Konstantin von Neurath, the Foreign Minister, and with Ribbentrop, the Fuehrer's special advisor on foreign policy. When Ciano visited Hitler at Berchtesgaden on October 24, Hitler informed the Italian Foreign Minister that the German Government had decided to recognize the Italian Empire of Ethiopia. This first meeting, a luncheon discussion, between Ciano, Hitler, and Ribbentrop was very cordial, although Ciano and Ribbentrop later came to hate each other.<sup>15</sup> During these conversations, which led to the Rome-Berlin Axis,

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13 Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 484.

14 Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs, 1936, p. 581.

15 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 348.



Hitler's welcome must have filled the young Foreign Minister with pride and flattered his vanity. The Fuehrer, on this occasion, was a most charming host and particularly complimentary to the Duce. Hitler referred to Mussolini as "the leading statesman in the world to whom none may even remotely compare himself" and Ciano was quick to relate this adulation to his father-in-law by telephone.<sup>16</sup>

On October 25 a secret protocol was signed in Berlin by Ciano and von Neurath which outlined a common policy for Germany and Italy in foreign affairs. The accord provided for (1) the collaboration of the two Governments in all matters affecting their "parallel interests," (2) the defense of European civilization against Marxism, (3) economic cooperation in the Danubian region, and (4) the maintenance of Spain's territorial and colonial integrity.<sup>17</sup> These provisions, however, were not made public. "The final communiqué" as Arnold Toynbee pointed out in 1937, "which was issued in Berlin on the 25th was, however, no more informative than was usual in documents of this genre on the question of what the conversations had actually been concerned with or what conclusions and decisions, if any, had been reached...."<sup>18</sup> But it was clear that an

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16 Ibid., 349. Not much later Hitler was to modify his opinion of the Duce and demote Mussolini from Superman Number One to Superman Number Two, second only to the Fuehrer himself.

17 F. Lee Bennis, Europe Since 1914 in Its World Setting (New York, 1954), pp. 315-316.

18 Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs 1937, p. 581.

understanding had been arrived at.

When Ciano wired the contents of the accord to Mussolini, the Duce replied that the Berchtesgaden agreement was quite satisfactory. Thus, in diplomacy Hitler had obtained in 1936 that alliance which he had stated in Mein Kampf would be necessary for Germany's foreign policy. The Germans, however, held no illusions of Italian power and were fully aware of the shortcomings of their ally. They entertained a profound contempt for the military valor of the "new" Italy even before seeing it perform in Spain.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Berlin welcomed and even solicited the alliance with Italy. A few days later, in a speech at the Piazza del Duomo in Milan, Mussolini, without divulging the content of the accord, commented on Ciano's Berchtesgaden conversations:

The Berlin conversations have resulted in an understanding between our two countries over certain problems which had been particularly acute. But these understandings which have been sanctioned in fitting and duly signed agreements, this Berlin-Rome line is not a diaphragm but rather an axis around which we can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps unwittingly, Mussolini christened the Berchtesgaden agreement with the name "the Rome-Berlin Axis" and the road to Berlin was opened.

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19 M. E. Ravage, "Il Duce, Tool of Hitler," Nation (December 25, 1937), p. 713.

20 Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 68.



Many observers immediately pointed out that, as a result of Italy's joining the Rome-Berlin Axis, Mussolini had brought himself to the very position which he had sought to escape in 1933 by his Four Power Pact. Alienated from Great Britain and France, it was thought that he would find it difficult to withstand German pressure in Austria.<sup>21</sup> Marshal Badoglio even went so far as to tell the French General Gamelin that Mussolini was going over to Hitler's camp because he considered France "finished." The agreement with Laval, Badoglio intimated, had been a "front" behind which the Duce had launched his Ethiopian enterprise and wrecked the League of Nations; now he no longer needed that "front."<sup>22</sup>

We have no reason to suppose that Mussolini ever entertained such notions or that he intended Italian policy to follow Germany's from this time on. Mussolini was convinced of his own intellectual superiority and sincerely believed that he would be the senior partner in any alliance with Hitler, just as he continued up to the 1940's to tell his friends that he was the more intelligent and skillful of the two.<sup>23</sup>

It is also quite possible that Mussolini believed that, having succeeded in securing a stronger continental position through the understanding with Germany, Italy could hope to negotiate more favorably with

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21 Bennis, Europe Since 1914 in its World Setting, p. 316.

22 Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 485.

23 Smith, Italy, p. 454.

France and Great Britain. This had occurred before World War I and there seemed no reason why Italy could not play the bargaining game with both sides again.

At any rate, Mussolini in 1936 was definitely not, to use William Shirer's phrase, "in the bag." Despite the existence of the Axis and the repeated mutual expressions of friendship, relations between Hitler and Mussolini remained strained and tinged with a certain suspicion until the Duce's fateful Maifeld visit in September, 1937. One indication that he was not ready for a friendship that would impinge on Italy's freedom of action and decision was Italy's attitude towards the German-Japanese agreement against the Third International of November 25, 1936. The agreement expressly provided for the adherence of other governments and it was thought that Italy might avail herself of this invitation, after having signed the Berchtesgaden Pact a month before.<sup>24</sup> Instead, although the German-Japanese agreement was duly applauded in the Fascist Press, the Italian Government maintained a careful reserve on the question of their intentions and pointedly avoided giving any substance to the suggestion that Italy's joining in the new pact was under consideration.

In an interview on December 15, Ciano, who was later bitterly to suggest repudiating the agreement with Germany, enthusiastically declared:

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<sup>24</sup> Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs, 1936, pp. 384-386.



My cherished plan of a close association with Germany has come true. I heartily rejoice that it was reserved for me, as Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, to have the opportunity of laying the coping-stone on this momentous change in the political constellation of Europe.<sup>25</sup>

Mussolini was far less ebullient. In 1936 the Rome-Berlin Axis was a matter of diplomatic expediency. Isolated as a result of the Ethiopian war and the apparently Italophobe foreign policy of the British Government, it seemed to Italy's advantage to seek closer relations with Berlin. The rift in the Stresa front had helped to drive Italy into Germany's arms, but the Duce did not cease to anticipate that relations with Britain and France would improve. In 1936 the Axis was not the dominating factor in Fascist diplomacy; after 1937 it would be.

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25 Ibid., 583.

CHAPTER V: MAIFELD AND THE NEW ORDER



Throughout the first months of 1937 Hitler sent a stream of important emissaries to Rome to cultivate Mussolini's friendship. Seldom a week passed that did not see a delegation of Germans in Rome or a visit from a Nazi leader, pockets bulging with decorations to be distributed to Germany's new friends.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite the agreement or Axis of the previous November, distrust and antipathy still continued in the relations between Rome and Berlin. Furthermore, Hitler was somewhat uneasy over Italy's flirtation with Great Britain in signing a "gentleman's agreement" in which the two Governments recognized each other's vital interests in the Mediterranean.<sup>2</sup> This, the Germans feared, might mean for Italy the beginning of closer relations with Britain and France.

When Hans Frank, the Nazis' legal authority, mentioned to the Duce Hitler's desire for a state visit by the Italian dictator, Mussolini's reply was cautious. As far as the visit was concerned, Mussolini declared, it was his wish to undertake it. But the Duce was insistent that the visit must be well prepared for, so that it might produce concrete results. He told Frank:

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1 William Phillips, Ventures in Diplomacy (Portland, Maine, 1938), p. 219.  
2 Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 301.

It will cause a great stir and must therefore in its results be historically important.... It must define and mark not only the solidarity of the regimes, but also the common policy of the Two States, a policy which must be clearly outlined as it affects the East and the West, the South and the North.<sup>3</sup>

Hitler readily agreed and on September 4, it was announced that the two dictators would meet in Germany later that month. Despite what he told Frank, Mussolini did not know then how fateful this journey would be, that it would be "the beginning of that surrender which led his regime to disaster and himself to the gibbet in the Piazzale Loreto in Milan."<sup>4</sup>

On September 23, 1937, Mussolini, with a large staff as splendidly dressed in military attire as himself, left for the Reich. Not to be outdone this time and repeat the Venice meeting, Hitler donned the official uniform of the Nazis and waited in Munich for the arrival of the Duce. Hitler's purpose was consciously not to engage in diplomatic conversations with his guest, but to impress him with Germany's strength and thus play on Mussolini's obsession to cast his lot on the winning side.<sup>5</sup> For weeks the Nazis had been preparing not only an impressive welcome for the Duce but a carefully calculated display of power, regimentation, and organization which Mussolini should never forget.

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<sup>3</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, Ciano's Diplomatic Papers (London, 1948), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Bullock, Hitler, p. 330.

<sup>5</sup> Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 301.



After a warm greeting by the Fuehrer, Mussolini and the Italian party were taken to witness a huge and elaborate display of Wehrmacht maneuvers in Mecklenburg, where real shells were fired and they were shown the armored divisions in action, the new artillery, the latest explosives, and the most modern airplanes. Ciano noted in his famous Diary: "Maneuvers at Mecklenburg. Interesting, but I was expecting more."<sup>6</sup> On September 27, Mussolini visited the Krupp steel foundries in Essen and he was highly impressed by the tremendous output of guns of all kinds. Even the usually cynical Ciano was awed by what he saw at Krupp's: "The industrial potential is very impressive."<sup>7</sup>

It was in Berlin, where the Reich capital was put en fê<sup>^</sup>te to receive the susceptible Duce, that the visit reached its "triumphal" climax on September 27-28.<sup>8</sup> French Ambassador André François-Poncet described Mussolini's arrival in Berlin on the 27th:

No monarch had ever been received in Germany with such pomp. Preparations amazing in their extent and magnificence were made in Munich and Berlin. Alighting from his train, Mussolini, marching between twin rows of busts of Roman emperors, appeared as their successor. His monogram, a huge M surrounded by a crown and perched at the top of a high column, dominated the square in which the population acclaimed him.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Galeazzo Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938 (New York, 1953), p. 16.

7 Ibid., 16.

8 Ibid., 16.

9 François-Poncet, The Fateful Years, p. 245.

With his love of parades and show, this spectacle overwhelmed the Italian dictator. The next day, September 28, the two fascist leaders stood side by side on the Maifeld near Potsdam to address a crowd estimated at eight hundred thousand. It was a masterpiece of showmanship and as Count Ciano accurately recorded: "the choreography was superb -- much emotion and much rain!"<sup>10</sup>

At Maifeld, Hitler made it a point to flatter Mussolini in his speech:

The common trend of ideas expressed in the fascist and National Socialist Revolutions have developed today into a similar course of action. This will have a salutary influence on the world, in which destruction and deformation are trying to win the upper hand. Fascist Italy has been transformed into a new Imperium Romanum by the ingenious activities of a compelling personality.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the downpour of rain which interrupted the display and became particularly violent when the Duce rose to speak, the crowd listened patiently. In an excited voice, Mussolini managed to make himself heard above the thunder: "Fascism and Nazism are two manifestations of that parallelism of historical positions which unite the lines of our nations."<sup>12</sup> After the speech, having dutifully and enthusiastically applauded Mussolini, the crowd hurriedly dispersed to escape the rain, flinging order and discipline to the wind. Mussolini returned to his car looking like a

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<sup>10</sup> Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Adolf Hitler, My New Order (New York, 1941), p. 430.

<sup>12</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 82.



"drowned rat," but he had been very moved by the Maifeld demonstrations.<sup>13</sup>

What was decided during Mussolini's visit? During the strenuous and extensive visit, dragged from one part of Germany to the other, Mussolini had hardly had time to see Hitler alone for more than a few moments and thus nothing of importance was discussed. Hitler, moreover, was anxious to avoid thorny subjects like Austria. But the Duce had made up his mind about Germany and the impression Nazi Germany made on the Italian dictator was decidedly the most profound of his life. Outwardly Hitler could not have been more cordial or complimentary and it was unfeigned. Mussolini had, in fact, been so pleased with the meeting that he did not even complain when Hermann Goering, who had invited him to tea, kept him for hours playing with his miniature electric trains.<sup>14</sup>

He had seen, Mussolini said, "the most powerful nation in modern Europe rising unquestionably to greatness."<sup>15</sup> Here was a power beyond all his megalomaniac dreams, and it would be well, he felt in the glow of his experience, not to hesitate to identify Fascist Italy with it. Mussolini had been bewitched by the display of power which had been carefully staged for him. Hitler had stamped on the Duce's mind an indelible impression of German might from which he was never able to set himself free. His German

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<sup>13</sup> Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>15</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 84.

visit sealed the friendship with Hitler and "snapped the lock on the chain that bound him to the Fuehrer."<sup>16</sup> Dazzled by the German war machine, Mussolini returned to Italy envious, awe-struck and intent to imitate the Germans. "When Fascism has a friend," he had shouted at Maifeld to the crowd, "it will march with that friend to the last."<sup>17</sup> For the rest of his life, disillusioned with the Germans and Hitler as he was later to profess himself, he never lost his admiration for their efficiency, their dedication, and their violently militaristic industry -- all the things that Italy lacked.

Three weeks after Mussolini's state visit von Ribbentrop went to Rome to urge the Duce to put Italy's signature to the year-old Anti-Comintern Pact between Germany and Japan. Mussolini needed little prodding. On November 6, after signing the pact, Mussolini declared that this represented "the first gesture which will lead to a much closer understanding of a political and military nature between the three powers."<sup>18</sup> He might as well have said his policy was to be servile toward the Fuehrer and inclined to please Berlin.

The sense of inferiority and the desire to please and imitate Germany soon revealed itself in the Duce's attitude toward the Italian character after his return from the Reich. Comparing Italians to the Germans he had seen, he came to the conclusion that Italian military men were not as efficient, hard or tough. "Italian character and mentality," he proclaimed, "must be freed from the crust deposited by the terrible centuries of

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<sup>16</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 351.

<sup>17</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 82.

<sup>18</sup> Bullock, Hitler, p. 331.

decadence between 1600 and Napoleon."<sup>19</sup> Later he announced that "the Italians must learn to grow less likeable and to become hard, implacable and hateful."<sup>20</sup> Thus Mussolini initiated a series of measures -- referred to as "Prussianization" -- aimed at reforming the Italian character, measures that were long remembered for their nuisance value. The most obnoxious of these measures was the introduction of the goosestep in the Army, an unnatural and tiresome parade step which the Duce strangely enough seems to have believed he originated as a show of force and energy. When he was accused of slavishly imitating the Nazis, Mussolini vehemently denied that he was imitating Germany, claiming that King Victor Emmanuel opposed the "romano passo" because he could not do it and in more humorous moments that the goose-step was not Prussian, for "the goose is a Roman animal -- it saved the Capitol. Its place is with the eagle and the she-wolf."<sup>21</sup>

As decree followed foolish decree, many Italians surmised that Mussolini was in an abnormal state of mind owing to the blow inflicted at the time of the Anschluss, when he realized that he was only the junior partner in the Rome-Berlin Axis and that he was trying to ingratiate himself with his senior partner.<sup>22</sup> The anti-Semitic campaign of 1938, modeled on the Nazi pattern, seemed to confirm this belief. The Fascist Grand Council

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19 Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 142.

20 Ibid., 164.

21 Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938, p. 68.

22 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 371. Note: the Anschluss of 1938 is discussed in the following pages.



passed race laws in which marriages with those of non-Aryan race -- a term never clearly defined -- were forbidden unless permission was obtained from the Ministry of Interior; foreign Jews and those who had come to Italy since January 11, 1919, were to be expelled; and no Jew was to be allowed to be a teacher, lawyer, journalist, banker or a member of the Fascist party.<sup>23</sup>

It does not seem that until November, 1937, that Mussolini took a decisive racist step. Even as late as February, 1938, the Italian Foreign Office declared that "a specific Jewish problem does not exist in Italy."<sup>24</sup> The Duce himself had told von Starhemberg in 1934:

I am not a particular friend of the Jews, but anti-semitism, as preached by anti-semitic movements, particularly by National Socialism, is unworthy of a European nation; it is stupid and barbarous....<sup>25</sup>

Hence, one can scarcely imagine the advent of official anti-Semitism in Italy in the absence of the Rome-Berlin Axis.

From the beginning his anti-Semitism was condemned by many Italians, especially by the Crown and the Pope, as a sign of his new subordination to Hitler. Even Mussolini had little real interest in anti-Semitic legislation and its enforcement. "It is typical of him," a German Embassy official said. "He barks like mad but doesn't bite."<sup>26</sup> The Duce himself

23 Hibbert, Il Duce, pp. 85-86.

24 Fermi, Mussolini, pp. 112-113.

25 Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, Between Hitler and Mussolini (London, 1942), p. 24.

26 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 86.

admitted, "I don't believe a bit of the stupid anti-Semitic theory. I am carrying out my policy entirely for political reasons."<sup>27</sup> The impression that he was carrying it out in deference to German wishes was inescapable.

The most significant outcome of the fateful German visit was Mussolini's apparent aloofness and indifference to the annexation of Austria. After Maifeld, Hitler was content to have the Spanish conflict continue in order to keep alive the possibility of an Anglo-French-Italian war because this kept Mussolini out of Austrian affairs. The Duce, for his part, was quite willing to wash his hands of Austria, with only one condition: neither Germany nor Italy would take any further step without consultation. The condition was fair and von Ribbentrop accepted it.<sup>28</sup>

On February 16, 1938, Count Ciano sent the following instructions to Dino Grandi, Italian Ambassador to London, marked "secret and personal":

....The Nazification of Austria may now be considered if not complete certainly very far advanced. That was foreseen; just as it is now easy to foresee that there will be still further bounds forward in the Nazi offensive. When? That is a question which seems difficult to answer....To use a phrase of the Duce's -- which is as usual most effective -- we find ourself in the interval between the fourth and fifth acts of the Austrian affairs....<sup>29</sup>

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27 Ibid., 86.

28 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 355.

29 Ciano, Ciano's Diplomatic Papers, p. 161.

By February 21, Grandl reported to the Foreign Minister that Chamberlain explained to him that the British Government looked upon Austria as lost and had no intention of making proposals or suggestions to other states in relation to the Austrian situation.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, by 1938, there was little prospect that Mussolini would move troops to the Brenner as he had done four years earlier, although there had been no prior agreement on Austria between the two governments.

When the Duce heard of the Fuehrer's Berchtesgaden meeting with Schuschnigg (February 18), where the bullying German dictator gave the Austrian Chancellor an ultimatum, Mussolini realized that Anschluss was by then inevitable. The Duce was hurt. What hurt him was not Hitler's push to annex Austria in spite of his pledges to preserve her independence, but the fact that he, Mussolini, had not been consulted or informed of so momentous an event as the Berchtesgaden interview. He warned Hitler that in the future consultation was expected on Austria, but Hitler was to ignore this reminder too when he invaded that country. Ciano noted the Duce's piqued attitude toward Hitler's actions:

The Duce was in a mood of irritation with the Germans this morning /February 18/, on the manner in which they have acted in Austrian business. In the first place they ought to have given us a warning--but not a word.<sup>31</sup>

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30 F. W. Deakin, The Brutal Friendship (New York, 1962), p. 836.

31 Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938, p. 77.



Despite his anger over the lack of consultation, when Mussolini was sounded out on March 6 by Colonel Liebitzky, the Austrian military attaché in Rome, on Schuschnigg's proposed plebiscite which the Chancellor hoped would throw Hitler's plan for annexation awry, the Italian dictator replied: "E'è un errore (It's a mistake). If the result is satisfactory, people will say that it is not genuine. If it is bad, the situation of the Government will be unbearable; and if it is indecisive, then it is worthless."<sup>32</sup> But Schuschnigg was determined to hold his plebiscite on March 13, and Mussolini, for his part, was still very irritated at not being informed of Berlin's intentions. Surely Berlin was not treating Italy like a partner!

As the end of the "fifth act" of the Austrian drama neared, Hitler appeared uneasy about Mussolini's calm. After the news of Schuschnigg's plebiscite reached the Fuehrer, he was not perfectly sure what Mussolini's reaction would be. Although extremely anxious to obtain Mussolini's agreement not to intervene as he had done in 1934, the orders for Operation Otto were given well before Hitler's messenger, Prince Philip of Hesse, was dispatched to Rome.<sup>33</sup> Hitler maintained that Schuschnigg had broken his promise (extracted under pressure at Berchtesgaden) and with his plebiscite proposal had plunged Austria into anarchy, from which he felt bound to

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<sup>32</sup> Churchill, The Gathering Storm, p. 267.

<sup>33</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 87.

intervene to restore order. When Mussolini declared himself disinterested in the solution of the Austrian problem, Hitler said excitedly over the telephone to Hasse:

You may tell him that I thank him ever so much; never, never shall I forget....I will never forget, whatever may happen. If he should ever need any help or be in danger, he can be convinced that I shall stick by him, whatever may happen even if the whole world were against him.<sup>34</sup>

Hitler was, in fact, "never to forget" and his personal bond with Mussolini was greatly reinforced.

The next day, Saturday, March 12, the Duce loyally, if with somewhat mixed feelings, replied to Hitler's message: "My attitude is determined by the friendship of our two countries consecrated in the axis."<sup>35</sup> Mussolini's acceptance of the fait accompli, while belying his indignation, manifested his subservience toward Hitler. Mussolini's popularity suffered a staggering blow from the whole affair.<sup>36</sup> For the first time since the Matteotti murder a general and deep sense of disenchantment swept over the Italians for, by his sudden change of policy, the whole traditional theme of Italian foreign policy had been contradicted and violated. Although the Axis survived the Anschluss, the Duce's hitherto enormous popularity did not.

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<sup>34</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 359.

<sup>35</sup> Maxwell H. H. Macartney, One Man Alone. The History of Mussolini and the Axis (London, 1944), p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 170.

Since the two dictators had last met in September the Axis had been subjected to considerable strain. The Anschluss was not forgotten, for the annexation of Austria in March had put a severe strain upon the friends and for a moment it looked as if the Axis might snap. Most Italians were furious and Ciano told Mussolini that "the anti-German current in Italy, fomented by the Catholics, the Masons, and the Jews, is strong and becoming steadily stronger."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, official propaganda worked at top speed and announced a visit by Hitler. Everywhere streets were dug up and resurfaced, for the purpose, so the contemporary joke went, "of trying to find the Rome-Berlin axis."<sup>38</sup>

The preparations for Hitler's visit revealed the spirit of emulation in Mussolini's relations with the Fuehrer: he wanted to give the German dictator at least as impressive and grandiose a reception as he had received in Germany. Ciano was put in charge of the festive preparations and planning had begun six months in advance. The Duce himself spent hours supervising the arrangement of military parades for the visit. On May 2, Hitler set out for Rome and every party boss and Nazi Hunger-on tried to squeeze into the four special trains which were needed to carry the German delegation. "Nothing appealed to the gutter-élite of Germany," Bullock writes, "so much as a free trip south of the Alps."<sup>39</sup> The German

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37 Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938, p. 96.

38 Phillips, Ventures in Diplomacy, p. 212.

39 Bullock, Hitler, p. 406.



party included von Ribbentrop, Goebbels, Hess, Keitel to represent the Wehrmacht, and Himmler "to guard his master against the Italian Jews."<sup>40</sup>

In Rome the Fuehrer was deluged with every imaginable sight in the imperial city: historic monuments, military pageants, navy demonstrations, and peasants dancing in provincial costumes at the Villa Borghese. Although Hitler had seen better parades in Germany and knew Italy, despite the displays, could not be a strong military power, he was still highly impressed by the spectacles the Italians offered him. The German dictator's enthusiasm for Italy and the Duce remained undampened even by the relative coolness of his public reception and of his treatment by King Victor Emmanuel and the Court. In his speech on May 7, Hitler, after affirming the historical friendship of the two nations and the irrevocable frontiers of the Alps between them, repeated his pledge of March:

Duce,  
Just as you and your people have kept your  
friendship with us in decisive moments, so  
I and my people are willing to show Italy the  
same friendship in times of stress....<sup>42</sup>

Since relations between the Fuehrer and the Duce were once again decidedly cordial, Hitler hit upon the possibility of a more definite alliance, such as he felt Mussolini had deserved since his acquiescence over Austria. This was the foreshadowing of what was to become the Pact

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<sup>40</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 106.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>42</sup> Documents of the Events Preceding the Outbreak of the War, compiled by the German Foreign Office (New York, 1940), p. 360.

of Steel in 1939, but the neglect of Italy during the Austrian crisis still irritated Mussolini and Ciano. When von Ribbentrop produced a draft German-Italian treaty of alliance, Ciano replied that a formal treaty was superfluous.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the farewell between the two dictators at the station was very affectionate and both men were obviously moved. The Duce said, "Henceforth no force will be able to separate us," and the Fuehrer's eyes were full of tears.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, it was after Mussolini's return from Germany that the pattern of friendship between the two fascist leaders emerged distinctly and in its final shape. To Hitler friendship was a simple and personal feeling, exclusively directed toward its object, "as linear and enduring as a steel wire."<sup>45</sup> Yet he could keep it in a separate compartment, and it never affected his political actions. In Mussolini, the friendship was a complex of feelings. There was, first of all, the pledge and a determination to remain faithful to the pledge, a determination in which his belief in Germany's invincibility played its part. There was also a keen sense of inferiority that drove him to appear self-assured, unaffected by Hitler's offenses; and there was a spirit of emulation which made him postpone recriminations or a breach in the friendship -- to a time when he would be

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<sup>43</sup> Bullock, Hitler, p. 406.

<sup>44</sup> Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938, p. 114.

<sup>45</sup> Adolf Hitler, Hitler's Secret Conversations (New York, 1953), p. 218.

In a stronger position.

Ciano expressed serious doubts on the Duce's new infatuation with German might after the Maifeld visit:

....No one can accuse me of being hostile to the pro-German policy. I initiated it myself. But should we, I wonder, regard Germany as a goal, or rather as a field for manoeuvre?...The Rome-Berlin Axis is to-day a formidable and extremely useful reality....As for the more distant future, there is no point in making prophecies.<sup>46</sup>

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With the visit of 1937, however, Italy's traditional foreign policy was thrown overboard. Instead of leaving herself free to exploit both sides -- which would have enhanced her power and prestige -- Italy became a campfollower in the march of German expansion.

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<sup>46</sup> Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938, p. 16.



CHAPTER VI: IL DUCE, ANGEL OF PEACE

The annexation of Austria was Hitler's first move in an ambitious scheme to reunite all Germans into a greater Germany. After the completion of Anschluss, Hitler was expected to pause and consolidate his gains before making his next move. Past experience suggested that he would follow such a course, and it was confidently asserted that the German dictator would require another year or two before he could undertake his next "Saturday Surprise."<sup>1</sup>

Actually, however, while working for the Nazification of Austria, Hitler had been making use of the same propaganda machinery and methods of intimidation to encourage agitation among the Sudeten Germans, the German minority in Czechoslovakia. The rise of the Nazis in Germany and simultaneously that of the Sudeten German Party led by Konrad Henlein in Czechoslovakia had raised the minority problem to the rank of a first-rate political issue. Henlein himself admitted that from the first his objective was annexation of the Sudetenland by the Third Reich, although he purposely disguised the ultimate objective for many years, claiming to be solely interested in bettering the lot of his fellow Germans.<sup>2</sup> Henlein was in fact no more than Hitler's stooge in the whole affair. But, since France

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight E. Lee, Ten Years (Boston, 1942), p. 311.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 313.

was Czechoslovakia's ally and Britain tended to work in increasingly close unity with France, the crisis over the Sudetenland soon threatened to spread over most of Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Returning from his visit to Italy in May, Hitler felt satisfied that the Duce would not interfere with his designs on Czechoslovakia. Only the vaguest reference to the problem had been made during the visit, but Mussolini was known to dislike the Czechs and had already referred to their country as "an ambiguity on the map of Europe."<sup>4</sup> Until the May crisis--when the Czechs on May 22 claimed Nazi Germany had massed troops on their border in preparation for an attack--Hitler kept up the elaborate pretense that the Sudeten German question was a domestic issue and declared that the May war scare was a hoax perpetrated by Czech President Beneš.<sup>5</sup> Mussolini was not taken in by Hitler's protestations of disinterest, but he was more concerned with events in the Spanish civil war.

By August the tension over the Sudeten question had become alarming, but Great Britain seemed determined to avoid a conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> The Anglo-French unity was purchased, however, at the price of virtually complete French surrender to British leadership. France of course was at liberty to accept or reject such leadership as came from Britain, but France never made a serious effort to assert herself. René Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe and the Two World Wars (New York, 1961), pp. 307-308.

<sup>4</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 93.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Ten Years, p. 314.



The British breathed easier when Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary for Home Affairs and a staunch supporter of appeasement, said:

Five men in Europe--three dictators (Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco) and the Prime Ministers of England and France--if they worked with singleness of purpose and unity of action might in an incredibly short space transform the whole history of the world. ...I cannot believe that others of Europe will not join him [Chamberlain] in the high endeavor upon which he is engaged.<sup>6</sup>

There was, however, one alternative to appeasement and that was ex-Foreign Minister Anthony Eden's suggestion: to draw closer to France, hold firm, refuse to be bluffed, and let time work against the dictators.<sup>7</sup> Chamberlain felt that appeasement was safer and as tension and disorder mounted in the Sudetenland and Hitler's tone grew more violent, the British Prime Minister took diplomacy increasingly into his own hands--with France meekly following in Britain's wake.<sup>8</sup>

In mid-September when it became apparent that Hitler was preparing an armed attack and the Benes and his colleagues were resolved to resist, Chamberlain decided to see the Fuehrer personally. It was quite evident that the Prime Minister was prepared to grant Hitler anything within reason in order to preserve peace. The meeting at Berchtesgaden on September 21 between Chamberlain and Hitler convinced Mussolini of the weakness of the

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6 Frederick L. Schuman, Night Over Europe (New York, 1941), pp. 91-92.

7 What America Thinks (Chicago, 1941), p. 1. Eden resigned as Foreign Minister in February, 1938.

8 Hughes, Contemporary Europe: A History, p. 299.

Western democracies and the Duce began to uphold Germany's demands. In a speech on the same day at Treviso, the Italian dictator maintained:

If today Czechoslovakia finds herself in a situation that might be called delicate, it is simply because she was not--by now one may say 'was'--simply Czechoslovakia, but Czecho-Germano-Polono-Romanio-Slovakia.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, Mussolini initiated a series of speeches in the leading cities of Italy from September 18 to September 26 in which he consistently intimated that in the event of war, Italy would support rigidly her Axis partner.<sup>10</sup> When Hitler raised his demands upon Chamberlain at Bad Godesberg, the Duce was disturbed, for he was decidedly not enthusiastic about the prospect of war. He might talk of war, but as war seemed more imminent the Duce became uneasy. He knew full well that Italy was in no position to enter any prolonged conflict.

Therefore, Mussolini jumped at Chamberlain's proposal that the Italian dictator call a conference to solve the problem and for the third time the peace-loving Chamberlain was to make "a journey to Canossa."<sup>11</sup> At 10:00 a.m. on September 28, four hours before the expiration of Hitler's ultimatum and the expected outbreak of the hostilities, the Duce graciously shifted his position from spectator to actor in the Czech crisis.<sup>12</sup> "Go immediately

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<sup>9</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 375.

<sup>10</sup> John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York, 1948), p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> Hall, World Wars and Revolutions, p. 314.

<sup>12</sup> At Bad Godesberg<sup>12</sup> demanded that the Czechs evacuate the Sudeten territory by September 28.

to see the Fuehrer," he told the Italian Ambassador to Berlin, Bernardo Attolico, over the telephone, "and assuring him first that I shall stand by him in any eventuality, tell him that I advise him to delay for twenty-four hours the beginning of operations. In the meantime, I shall study and decide what must be done to solve the problem."<sup>13</sup> After a slight hesitation, Hitler acceded to Mussolini's request.

It was not until Hitler received the message from Mussolini that he finally made up his mind to postpone the order to mobilize. The message from the Duce not only sought to persuade him of the advantages of accepting Western appeasement, but implied that if the Germans went on, they would have to go alone. As Goering later told Staatssekretär Ernst von Weizsäcker, "he knew from Hitler that two reasons had moved him to choose peaceful methods: first, doubts as to the warlike disposition of the German people; and second, the fear that Mussolini might definitely leave him in the lurch."<sup>14</sup> The Duce had in fact been irritated at Hitler's lack of consultation in the crisis and many Italian diplomats, especially Attolico and Ciano "were clearly terrified of being landed by Hitler in a European war."<sup>15</sup> Ciano noted his father-in-law's dissatisfaction as early as September 2:

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<sup>13</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 376.

<sup>14</sup> Bullock, Hitler, p. 432.

<sup>15</sup> Kirkpartick, The Inner Circle, p. 128.



The Duce is disturbed by the fact that the Germans are letting us know almost nothing about their programme with regard to Czechoslovakia. ...Attolico's reports do not, at the moment, provide decisive evidence--he personally is against our committing ourselves too far.<sup>16</sup>

Thoroughly frightened by the prospect of war, Mussolini was quite happy to play the mediator of peace and enjoyed a sense of confidence and security on his way to Munich on September 29 because he knew that without his influence the conference would not be taking place. Only he, the Duce believed, could reason with Hitler. The Fuehrer met Mussolini and Ciano at Kufstein on the Inn for pre-conference consultations. When Hitler said: "The time will come when we shall have to fight side by side against England," Mussolini was silent and did not answer him.<sup>17</sup> All this was most alarming. Hitler seemed to assume that the conference to which they were going would break down and Mussolini saw his chance of acting as a savior of the peace disappearing.<sup>18</sup> But the conference would not fail, if Mussolini could help it. Italy did not want war and Mussolini exerted himself to preserve peace, "albeit on Germany's terms."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ciano, Ciano's Hidden Diary, 1937-1938, p. 149.

<sup>17</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> R. G. D. Laffan, Survey of International Affairs 1938 (New York, 1951), p. 437.

<sup>19</sup> Contemporary Europe. A Symposium (New York, 1941), p. 314.

Chamberlain and Daladier arrived in Munich by midday on the 29th. Unlike the Axis partners, they had acted quite independently and had made no effort to meet en route. The conference which followed--"for which Hitler had given Mussolini directions and Chamberlain gave him thanks"--completely belied the Duce's visible former subservience to Hitler.<sup>20</sup> As François-Poncet, French Ambassador to Berlin and France's representative at Munich, noted: "It was to leave me with the lasting and erroneous impression that Mussolini exercised a firmly established ascendancy over the Fuehrer."<sup>21</sup> Hitler at first seemed stunned by the fact that the other Nietzschean colossus should have halted him. At the Munich conversations he stood in the shadow of Mussolini, who put up a show of speaking the four languages of the day. The Fuehrer appeared to admire the Duce and François-Poncet observed that Hitler was constantly watching the Italian dictator. "If the Duce laughed, he laughed; if the Duce frowned, he frowned."<sup>22</sup> Finally, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia was agreed upon and the Duce was greatly relieved.

Superficially Munich might be counted as a triumph for the Italian dictator. Mussolini had apparently shown that he did not fear war, but he had proved to be the savior of peace. On September

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20 Lewis Namier, In the Nazi Era (London, 1952), p. 165.

21 Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight (New York, 1955), p. 195.

22 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 96.

30, Mussolini left Munich "cocky as a rooster."<sup>23</sup> He returned to Italy more popular than ever. But he was jealous once more of Hitler, and his own rôle as "angel of peace" disturbed him because the Italians had hoped for peace. "The Italian people," he said angrily, "must not be allowed to hope for peace, their character must be moulded by fighting."<sup>24</sup> The success of Nazi Germany in the Sudetenland aggravated the Italian dictator's already keen sense of inferiority and his desire to imitate Germany. Soon after his return from the Reich he began making speeches accepting an aggressive Germany and wrote "Italy cannot be sufficiently Prussianized. I will not leave the Italians in peace till I have six feet of earth over my head."<sup>25</sup> It was a statement that proved too accurate.

After Munich Mussolini listened to the warnings of leading Fascists--from his son-in-law Ciano downwards--that Hitler was a dangerous associate who would destroy Italy after eating up the others first. He seemed to pay attention, but when it came to the point of some decisive action he never responded to their promptings. A. J. P. Taylor asserts with a good deal of truth:

At heart Mussolini was the only realist  
in the Fascist crew, the only one who appreciated  
that Italy had little strength of her own and could  
simulate greatness only as Hitler's jackal. He

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23 William L. Shirer, Berlin Diary, 1934-1941 (New York, 1941), p. 145.

24 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 96.

25 Ibid., 97.



might talk of an independent policy or of asserting Italian interests in central Europe. He knew that he would have to give way to Hitler if events reached a crisis.<sup>26</sup>

Before he went farther, Hitler desired to transform the Anti-Comintern Pact into a military alliance. In June, 1938, Prince Philip of Hesse had been sent to Rome to explain to Ciano the advantages of a military alliance between Germany, Italy, and Japan, but the Italians repeated that an alliance was superfluous. In reply to the German proposal of an alliance, the Duce argued that the solidarity of the two régimes had been so often and so obviously displayed that a formal alliance was not necessary and might even prove harmful.<sup>27</sup> Shortly after the Munich settlement, under the psychological effect of his success and the illusory sense of superiority over Hitler, Mussolini again refused an alliance. Hitler, however, felt that the Duce was showing too much independence. On December 3, 1938, Ulrich von Hassell, Ambassador to Rome, wrote the German Foreign Office that "Mussolini is fed up with playing second fiddle and can bring us into a very dangerous subordinate rôle overnight."<sup>28</sup> The Nazis, however, found their hands tied because at this point the Japanese were holding up any alliance and Attolico was violently opposed to a

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26 A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York, 1962), p. 139.

27 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 380.

28 Ulrich von Hassell, The Von Hassell Diaries, 1938-1944 (New York, 1947), p. 18.

written alliance with Germany. Therefore, von Ribbentrop went over Attolico's head. The Duce, however, remained stubborn and replied that Italian opinion was not yet ripe: in the parlance of a later day, --Axis yes, military alliance no.<sup>29</sup>

On March 14, 1939, the Axis received so serious a jolt that it was brought close to dissolution when Hitler, without consulting Mussolini, occupied what Munich had left of Czechoslovakia.

Ciano wrote in his diary on March 14:

News from Central Europe is becoming increasingly grave (Germany incorporating Bohemia, making Slovakia a vassal state).... It is not yet known as yet when all this will take place, but such an event is destined to produce the most sinister impression on the Italian people. The Axis functions only in favor of one of its parts, which tends to have preponderant proportions, and it acts entirely on its own initiative, with little regard for us. I expressed my point of view to the Duce.<sup>30</sup>

When Mussolini was given the news he was furious and bitter.

"Every time Hitler occupies a country," he shouted angrily, after the Fuehrer's envoy Philip of Hesse had called as usual to thank the Duce for his support, "he sends a message."<sup>31</sup> Ciano's reaction to Germany's occupation of the remaining part of Czechoslovakia was equally bitter:

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<sup>29</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943 (New York, 1946), p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 101.

Such pretexts may be good for Goebbels' propaganda, but they should not use them when talking with us; we are guilty only of dealing with the Germans too loyally.<sup>32</sup>

Although Mussolini agreed with Ciano that Germany was a difficult ally, he recognized that "the German trick" would have to be accepted with good grace.<sup>33</sup>

Mussolini, however, balked at the subordinate rôle Hitler was giving him. The timing of Italy's first major aggressive action since the invasion of Ethiopia--Albania-- was directly influenced by Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia. Although an attack on Albania had been discussed months previously, it was not until the middle of March that the Duce made up his mind. The occupation of Czechoslovakia ended his doubts. As soon as the news of the German invasion reached him, his mind flew to "the possibility of a blow in Albania" and over the King's warnings not to risk war in order "to grab four rocks," he determined to act as soon as Spain was over.<sup>34</sup>

Ciano, in a good position to know, asserts that the Albanian venture was actually inspired as an anti-German action, or at least by a desire to effect a counter-stroke to Germany's ever-increasing domination in Central Europe.<sup>35</sup> The sudden attack on

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32 Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, p. 43.

33 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 101.

34 Ibid., 102.

35 Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 223.



Albania in April, 1939, demonstrated that the Duce was still piqued at not being informed of Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia in March and that he was now determined to fend for himself.<sup>36</sup> Or so he thought. The invasion of Albania, which Mussolini and Ciano regarded as the assertion of Italian independence, only bound them more closely to the Axis in the face of growing British and French hostility.<sup>37</sup>

In April the Germans again began to press for the military alliance which Mussolini had so far evaded. Ciano was uneasy over the state of German-Polish relations and these anxieties were increased by Ambassador Attolico's reports from Berlin which, to say the least, were alarming. On May 22, Ciano, therefore, went to Berlin to present Italy's case and ascertain Germany's intentions. Ciano found von Ribbentrop most reassuring; Germany required a long period of peace--at least three years! Mussolini, apparently in a moment of anti-British feeling, ordered Ciano to publish news that an Italo-German alliance had been agreed upon.<sup>38</sup> This move suggests the ineptitude of Fascist diplomacy, for the Duce left the entire wording of the alliance to the Fuehrer.<sup>39</sup> The Italians stupidly accepted the German draft with very few changes and on May 30 the alliance, afterwards called the Pact of Steel, was formally signed in Berlin.

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36 Smith, Italy, p. 465.

37 Bullock, Hitler, p. 466.

38 Ibid., 466.

39 Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 145.

Perhaps Mussolini hoped that if he signed a military pact with Germany he would be able to exercise more influence on German policies. The preamble of the Treaty announced that the German and Italian nations were determined to collaborate in the securing of their living-space and the maintenance of peace.<sup>40</sup> When due allowance is made for the conventional ambiguity of diplomatic language, this may well be considered one of the most plain-spoken and openly offensive alliances concluded in modern times. In the previous October, the Duce had said the alliance must not be purely defensive, but the military alliance signed May 30, 1939, was so frankly aggressive that both Ciano and Attolico opposed it. The Pact of Steel did not even contain the customary escape clause restricting the obligations for assistance to cases of enemy attack!<sup>41</sup>

Ciano's diary clearly admits that the alliance was highly unpopular in Italy. Although Mussolini was hesitant and doubtful on the eve of signing the Pact of Steel between Italy and Germany-- a pact which Ciano described as "real dynamite"--two days later Mussolini revealed Italy's subordination to the Nazis when he told the Fascist Grand Council that it was necessary to carry out a policy of "uncompromising faithfulness to the Axis."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bullock, Hitler, p. 468.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert, ed., The Diplomats 1919-1939 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1953), p. 529.

<sup>42</sup> Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 174.

Rome's weak position was brutally exposed by Hitler's actions or lack of them in 1939. The Pact of Steel did not lead to corresponding Staff talks, or to any serious consideration of building up Italy's war potential from German sources. Hitler had no intention of preparing for a long conflict, and at no time now did he show any interest in Italian military co-operation in the event of a major war.<sup>43</sup>

The Munich conference, the Albanian conquest, and the Pact of Steel did not enhance the prospects of an independent policy for the Duce. His course was still determined by his association with Hitler, by his unwilling but growing dependence upon Germany, his reluctant admiration of the Nazis, and above all his bitter jealousy of the powerful ally.

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<sup>43</sup> Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 8.



CHAPTER VII: HITLER'S RELUCTANT GAULEITER

Despite the dictators' loudly proclaimed solidarity, the foreign policy objectives of Mussolini and Hitler were strikingly at odds. Mussolini, outside of Albania, had no continental ambitions; the Fuehrer did. Explaining Italy's foreign objectives at a meeting of the Fascist Grand Council on February 4, 1939, the Duce said:

The question of our land frontiers was settled by the war of 1915-1918. We are faced today with the problem of the maritime frontiers, and this conflict has for us a very special character, that of the Fourth Punic War.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Italy's ultimate success in the Mediterranean and in Africa, as Mussolini realized, might depend wholly upon his own diplomatic skill in restraining Hitler from pursuing immediate German interests which might drag Italy into a major war, the timing of which would be decided by Germany to her own political and strategic advantages. The Italian dictator had acted as arbitrator at Munich in 1938 and hoped to do so again for he realized that, although war was apparently inevitable, "the two European powers of the Axis need a period of peace lasting not less than three years."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Mussolini was convinced of the weakness of Britain and France. Chamberlain's visit to Rome, on January 11, 1939, for the purpose of reestablishing cordial Anglo-Italian

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<sup>1</sup> Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8.

relations, only confirmed his scorn for the British and their "decadence." Ciano recorded in his diary the British Prime Minister's visit and the Duce's low opinion of the British:

Arrival of Chamberlain....How far apart we are from these people! It is another world. We were talking about it after dinner with the Duce. "These men are not made of the same stuff," he was saying, "as the Francis Drakes and the other magnificent adventurers who created the Empire. These, after all, are the tired sons of a long line of rich men, and they will lose their Empire." The British do not want to fight. They try to draw us back as slowly as possible, but they do not fight.... I have telephoned Ribbentrop that the visit was "a big lemonade" [ a farce/....<sup>3</sup>

The visit to Rome, which was designed as the culmination of Chamberlain's policy, marked the end of any respect for Britain which Mussolini had hitherto entertained. Although the British did not know this, Chamberlain's maneuver pushed Mussolini further on the German side.<sup>4</sup>

In March, 1939, Bernardo Attolico, Italian Ambassador in Berlin, was looked upon as a panic-monger when he warned his Government of an impending German attack on Poland. The Duce seemingly believed the Nazis' protestations that they would prefer to avoid the danger of war. According to Ciano, Mussolini commented:

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<sup>3</sup> Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, pp. 9-12.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, p. 200.



The German people are a military people, not a warrior people. Give to the Germans a great deal of sausage, butter, beer, and a cheap car, and they will never want to have their stomachs pierced.<sup>5</sup>

When Mussolini placed the Fascist Grand Council on March 21, 1939, under the necessity of adopting a policy of uncompromising loyalty to the Axis, Italo Balbo remarked quite accurately, "You are shining Germany's boots."<sup>6</sup> Although the Duce indignantly denied the charge, he was, in fact, worried about Germany's intentions towards Poland.

On April 5, Goering was dispatched to Rome by Hitler to give an account to Mussolini of the state of German preparations for war and of the confidence with which the German Government faced the solution of the Polish problem. Goering deliberately gave the Italians the impression that Germany intended to keep the peace. Ciano, however, sensed that the Polish question was still very much alive. "I was impressed not so much by what he said, but by the contemptuous tone he used in talking of Warsaw," the Italian Foreign Minister noted. "The Germans should not think that in Poland they will make a triumphant entrance as they have done elsewhere; if attacked the Poles will fight."<sup>7</sup> The

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5 Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, p. 40.

6 Ibid., 50.

7 Ibid., 67.

8 Ibid., 81.

Duce was as much disturbed by Goering's tone as Ciano. Attolico's reports from Berlin continued to be alarming and on May 19 Ciano noted: "This morning I found the Duce very nervous and concerned about the international situation."<sup>8</sup> Von Ribbentrop's assurance on May 21 that Germany desired a period of peace for at least three years did not allay Mussolini's fears.

Mussolini was sincerely anxious to preserve peace for the moment, and proclaim as he might that "whenever Germany finds it-self necessary to mobilize at midnight, we shall mobilize at five to twelve," his instructions to Ciano were in a decidedly peaceful spirit.<sup>9</sup> Attolico's reports from the Italian Embassy in Berlin were still, however, largely neglected in Rome:

After reading the report [July 27], the Duce decided to postpone his meeting with Hitler and I think he did well. I telephone Attolico, who is still trying to kid us. This time Attolico missed the boat. He was frightened by his own shadow and probably...was trying to save his country from a non-existent danger.<sup>10</sup>

But Bernardo Attolico knew well what the Germans were up to in Poland. Soon Ciano, too, discovered that Hitler had already decided upon war and became aware "how little we are worth in the opinion of the Germans."<sup>11</sup> As Nazi pressure upon Poland increased during the summer of 1939, Mussolini tried to repeat his achievement in Munich as mediator and suggested a world peace conference. Hitler curtly dismissed such ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, p. 114.

<sup>11</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 110.

Ciano's anti-German sentiments were now coming to the fore. "The persistence of Attolico makes me doubtful," he wrote. "Either he has lost his head completely or he sees and knows something of which we have no inkling."<sup>12</sup> And Ciano very much feared the latter. Thus, on August 13, the Italian Foreign Minister went to see von Ribbentrop to insist upon the necessity of postponing military action and of calling a European conference, or at least to discover Germany's real intentions. When Ciano explained, with the aid of a map, that Italy believed that a conflict with Poland would not be restricted to that country, but would grow into a general European war, von Ribbentrop told a shocked Ciano that Germany did not want the Corridor or Danzig alone, but wanted war.<sup>13</sup> The German Foreign Minister, of course, denied this at the Nuremberg trial. Von Ribbentrop protested,

That is completely untrue. I said to Count Ciano, at that time, "The Fuehrer is determined to solve this problem one way or another."  
...That I should have said we want war is absurd, for it is clear to any diplomat that one would say nothing of the kind, not even to one's best and most trusted colleague, and certainly not to Count Ciano.<sup>14</sup>

Whether von Ribbentrop made the remark or not, Ciano returned to Rome "completely disgusted with the Germans, with their Fuehrer, with their ways of doing things," and certain that Hitler wanted war.<sup>15</sup> "Now they are dragging us into an adventure,"

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<sup>12</sup> William L. Shirer, End of a Berlin Diary (New York, 1947), p. 242.

<sup>13</sup> J. J. Heydecker and Johannes Leeb, The Nuremberg Trial (New York, 1958), p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> Heydecker and Leeb, The Nuremberg Trial, p. 186.

<sup>15</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 111.



Ciano bitterly remarked "which we do not want and which may compromise the régime and the country as a whole."<sup>16</sup> The Pact of Steel had never been popular in Italy but the Nazis' Polish attack would make it hated.

All through August Attolico pleaded with Ciano to tell the Duce that he could consider himself freed of the obligations of the Pact of Steel by Hitler's arrogant and one-sided interpretation of it. Ciano needed little prodding, for he had been infuriated by the Fuehrer's treatment of him at Salzburg on August 13. At the Salzburg meeting, Hitler had insisted that the British would not fight. Ciano took the opposite view, with the result that the Fuehrer lost his temper and called him an "ane" (ass).<sup>17</sup> When, after the meeting, Hitler arbitrarily published a statement that Italy was in complete agreement with Germany's aspirations, this was the final insult for Ciano. He went to the Duce and told him bluntly that "the Germans are traitors and we must not have any scruples in ditching them;" that we should not play "the none-too-brilliant rôle of second fiddle."<sup>18</sup> Mussolini's reactions were varied. At first he agreed with Ciano, but then he meekly decided that "honor compels him to march with

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., III.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, Ventures In Diplomacy, p. 231.

<sup>18</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. III.

Germany."<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the month of August was an eloquent testimony to Mussolini's equivocal, floundering state of mind. He changed his mind day by day, from the conviction that Italy must march with Germany to bitter resentment of the German behavior toward Italy.

The dictator's mind was finally made up for him by his military advisors, who informed him of the actual state of military unpreparedness. The Albanian affair had reinforced Mussolini's view that he would need at least three years to prepare for war. "Never in fifty years," said General Fanagrossa, "had Italy been so weak, and she was not even ready to fight a colonial war."<sup>20</sup> This unpreparedness was not only apparent in the three armed services, but also in Italian industry and administration. Even Mussolini admitted privately that Italy had been better prepared for war in 1915 than in 1939.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, this was a painful acknowledgement for the Duce. "Now he has had to confront the hard truth," Ciano wrote. "And this, for the Duce is a great blow."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Ciano persuaded Mussolini to write to Hitler informing him that Italy's support, unless immediate supplies of

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19 Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, p. 120.

20 Smith, Italy, p. 468.

21 Ibid., 467.

22 Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, pp. 129-130.



equipment and raw materials were made available by Germany, would have to be restricted to political and economic assistance, since, as the Duce wrote, with an intended rebuke, "the war was envisaged for after 1942."<sup>23</sup> Attached to Mussolini's letter, which Attolico took great pleasure in delivering, was a list of supplies which, as Ciano remarked, "were enough to kill a bull--if a bull could read."<sup>24</sup> These demands, Ciano and Mussolini knew, obviously could not be met. Although Hitler had little respect for the Italian military, Mussolini's note temporarily unnerved him and he grumbled that "the Italians are repeating the game of 1915."<sup>25</sup> His reply, however, was temperate. Late on August 26, the Fuehrer sent a message which accepted Italy's non-belligerency and asked only for three things: that Italy's decision should be kept secret as long as possible, that Italy would do all she could to bully the British and French, and that Italy should send industrial and agricultural labor to Germany.<sup>26</sup> Hitler said: "I respect the motives and influences determining your resolution, Duce. Perhaps it will nevertheless be for the best."<sup>27</sup> The bitter pill of sending Hitler a list and staying out of the war, despite the pledges of solidarity and thanks for past and future support,

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23 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 113.

24 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 397.

25 Villari, Italian Foreign Policy Under Mussolini, p. 230.

26 Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 176.

27 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 114.



revealed only too clearly to the Duce where the greater strength lay. In confessing Italy's weakness rather than insisting on the consultation clause of the Pact of Steel, Mussolini placed himself in a position of subservience from which he was never able to escape.

When news of the Berlin-Moscow non-aggression pact (signed August 23) reached Mussolini, he was embarrassed and angered. Needless to say, the Italians had been kept completely in the dark about the German-Russian plans and von Ribbentrop could not find time to see Attolico before he left again for Moscow on August 27 to sign the "Fourth Partition of Poland."<sup>28</sup> "Mussolini," according to his wife Donna Rachele, "was very surprised, not by the pact itself (he had always urged Hitler to seek a modus vivendi with Russia as part of a peaceful co-existence policy between Western Europe and the Soviet Union) but because, as he told me, he clearly saw 'that the pact is nothing but a pretext for war."<sup>29</sup> Greater, moreover, was the effect of the non-aggression pact on Count Ciano, who gave a speech in the Fascist Chamber in which he cleared Italy of the charge of not fulfilling her obligations and in which he accused Germany of treachery. "Hitler had let Mussolini down, Mussolini had not failed his ally," Ciano stated.<sup>30</sup> The wonder was that Il Duce should have swallowed this insulting treatment, but he did.

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<sup>28</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 176.

<sup>29</sup> Rachele Mussolini, My Life with Mussolini, pp. 102-103.

<sup>30</sup> Macartney, One Man Alone. The History of Mussolini and the Axis, p 15.

What enraged Hitler far more than Mussolini's military defection--which did not affect Nazi plans--was the latter's insistence upon the possibility of a political solution. The Duce was more than willing to do what he could to localize the German-Polish conflict and he was not alone in this desire. The French Right press and the London Times and other organs of the Munich forces soon began to plead for a resumption of "peaceful negotiations" and to argue that "Danzig, after all, was not worth a war."<sup>31</sup> At 12:35 p.m. August 31, Count Ciano therefore summoned François-Poncet, recently transferred from Berlin to Rome as Ambassador, and said:

Signor Mussolini offers, if France and England agree, to invite Germany to a conference which will take place on September 5 with the object of examining the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles which are the cause of the present trouble. The invitation to Germany will be sent to the latter only after France and Great Britain have given their assent.<sup>32</sup>

Ciano requested that an immediate reply be made for fear that the hostilities might begin in the meantime.

Both the British and French Governments were favorable to the proposal when it first reached them.<sup>33</sup> But Mussolini mistook his timing on this occasion, for the German invasion had

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<sup>31</sup> Schuman, Night Over Europe, p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> The French Yellow Book 1938-1939 ( New York, 1940 ), p. 349.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, p. 276.



already begun and British public opinion took charge. British Foreign Secretary Halifax, "swinging as usual with the national mood," insisted that the conference could be held only if Germany withdrew from all Polish territory.<sup>34</sup> The Italians knew that this condition was a hopeless demand to place before Hitler and they dropped the idea of the conference. When the war began, Mussolini was again in a fit of agonized indecision. At one moment he became warlike and talked of "armies and attacks" and at another moment he would approve his declaration of non-belligerency.<sup>35</sup>

On October 3, the wavering Mussolini told Ciano "that he is somewhat bitter about Hitler's sudden rise to fame" and that he was jealous of the glory which Hitler was winning.<sup>36</sup> He would be pleased, Mussolini said, if Germany should meet with some setback. And a few months later he took this to the ridiculous point of warning Holland and Belgium when the Germans confidentially gave him advance notice of their invasion, for he hoped that this might help to administer such a check. Ciano's diary, however, makes it quite clear that Mussolini's outbursts of irritation and anti-German sentiments were shortlived; Mussolini always returned quickly to his pro-German course.

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34 *Ibid.*, 276.

35 Lewis Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude* (London, 1948), p. 327.

36 Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943*, p. 155.



Despite the brilliant successes of the German armies in Poland, Mussolini still hesitated to enter the war. "It's impossible to keep out of this war," he told his wife, "and even more impossible and dangerous not to enter it on Germany's side. The Russo-German Pact makes Germany unbeatable by any other power or coalition."<sup>37</sup> But the dangers of entering what might be a long war held him back.

Although Great Britain still credulously hoped that Mussolini was too sensible or too timid to join Hitler, the Duce had already decided the other way. Mussolini was ready to hold out promise to the West, but not performance. He knew that Italy had made gains in the past by balancing itself between the two sides and he imagined that he himself was still free to follow such a policy.<sup>38</sup> His dream of an independent course was never realized and maybe it was not more than a dream. Chester Wilmot aptly described the Duce's predicament before Italy's entry into the war:

As events developed, Mussolini found himself ousted from the driving seat in the Axis chariot [In 1936 he assumed he would direct], and yet whirled along as a bewildered footman, now tempted to leap off and risk the lacerations when he feared it was heading for disaster, now clinging more firmly and leaning over to urge the driver on when prospects of quick and easy booty stretched ahead, and even seeking to take over one rein himself.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 115.

38 Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, p. 126.

39 Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York, 1952) p. 62.

But once Benito Mussolini had taken the step of placing himself at the Nazis' side, his fate was bound up with Hitler's. He could not bring himself to flee Germany's embrace.

CHAPTER VIII: A MATTER OF A "FEW THOUSAND DEAD"



On November 23, 1939, Count Ciano noted that "Mussolini himself is still impressed by Germany's might and has not yet given up the idea of entering the struggle at Germany's side."<sup>1</sup> In spite of the Duce's admiration for and jealousy of Germany's military capacity, his mind was still filled with doubt. Beneath a façade of bravado and rhetoric, the Italian dictator was in reality impressionable and easily swayed, highly sensitive to criticism and afraid of it. His whole attitude during 1939-1940, although his constant and violent changes of policy were often accepted on his own valuation as clever strokes of Machiavellian deceit, was, in truth, a manifestation of vacillation.

Except for a minority of the Fascist hierarchy, among them Dino Alfieri and Roberto Farinacci, the Italians were violently anti-German. In some cases they were so only because they feared that Germany would drag them into a war for which they knew Italy was ill-prepared. But in most cases they objected to Nazi Germany out of simple humanity. In addition, within the Fascist party, as in Catholic circles in Italy, Hitler's pact with Russia had rendered the Nazis most unpopular. This feeling turned into extreme indignation in November, 1939, when Russia attacked Finland.

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<sup>1</sup> Ciano, The Ciano Diaries, 1939-1943, p. 91.

Since Mussolini's decision to enter the war with Britain and France was forever changing, Ciano and Attolico, who was to be replaced in May by Dino Alfieri, a staunch supporter of the Axis, had already been at work to unite the neutral nations in a league over which Italy would preside.<sup>2</sup> They seemed to wish simply to make use of Italy's non-belligerency to increase her influence and even Mussolini agreed with them on occasion. "The Germans should allow themselves to be guided by me," the Duce often remarked, "if they wish to avoid unpardonable blunders. In politics it is undeniable that I am more intelligent than Hitler."<sup>3</sup> Resent Hitler and his success as he did, the Duce on one point did not vacillate: all along he intended to come into the war on Germany's side at what seemed to him the opportune moment. The very idea of neutrality repelled him as a sign of weakness. Every time a foreign newspaper suggested that Italy was repeating her behavior in the last World War Mussolini became furious and each time was tempted to throw all caution to the wind.<sup>4</sup>

But Hitler's condescending attitude towards Italy irritated him as much as the charges of the foreign press. When Count Ciano on December 16, 1939, gave a distinctly anti-German speech,

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<sup>2</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Roman Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall (New York, 1956) p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 178.

his words were acclaimed enthusiastically throughout Italy as "the funeral march of the Axis."<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly enough, Mussolini publicly agreed with him. In a burst of indignation and independence the Duce took the opportunity to inform Hitler that everything that Ciano had said expressed his own views precisely. His letter to the Fuehrer on January 4, 1940, a solid rebuke of Hitler's policy toward Russia, was one of the most forceful letters he had ever written:

But I who was born a revolutionary and have not modified my revolutionary mentality tell you that you cannot permanently sacrifice the principles of your revolution to the tactical requirements of a given moment....I would also add that any further step in your relations with Moscow would have catastrophic repercussions in Italy, where the unanimity of anti-Bolshevist feeling is absolute, granite-hard and unbreakable....Permit me to think that this will not happen.<sup>6</sup>

This astonishing manifesto was the high point reached in the attempted "liberation" of Mussolini's spirit from that of Hitler; in this fashion, uninterrupted by the endless monologues of the Fuehrer, he could tell the German dictator what he thought. But the effort to assert himself proved too great for Mussolini. He soon continued at Hitler's side, arguing that "we cannot change politics because after all we are not prostitutes."<sup>7</sup> His reaction was perhaps inevitable, rather as if "he had tried to force

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<sup>5</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>7</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 384.



himself to take a cold bath, then, shivering, had turned on the hot tap further and further."<sup>8</sup>

To Mussolini, the man of action, the nine months in which Italy took no active part in the conflict were a torment. When the war had begun, the Duce was careful and dogmatic in maintaining that Italy was following a policy of non-belligerence, not neutrality. As this policy was explained by the German Foreign Office to the German press:

It was reserved to the Fascist régime to coin in the present conflict a new concept which hitherto was not in use in a state of war, "non-belligerency;" a concept which is not easy to render in German and which indicates approximately the position of a State which does not participate directly in war but which, nevertheless, has already decided which side to range itself.<sup>9</sup>

Mussolini, however, found even the term non-belligerency embarrassing and felt humiliated "to remain with our hands folded while others write history."<sup>10</sup>

Vexed, then, by Italian non-belligerency in 1939-1949, Mussolini surely must have recalled the article he had written in 1932 on the political and social doctrine of Fascism for the Encyclopedia Italiana and published in all Italian newspapers. In the article the Duce maintained:

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<sup>8</sup> Wiseman, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 188.

<sup>9</sup> Macartney, One Man Alone, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 402.

Fascism rejects pacifism. Pacifism conceals an escape from struggle. Pacifism is cowardice in the face of sacrifice. War alone brings all human energy to its highest pitch and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it. All other trials are substituted which never put men into the position in which they must make the great decision--the alternative between life or death. Thus, any doctrine which is founded on the postulate of peace is hostile to Fascism.<sup>11</sup>

Having observed with dismay the sigh of relief which had greeted the declaration of non-belligerency in Italy, Mussolini soon set to work to establish a more martial enthusiasm among his people.

"L'action," the Italian dictator wrote, "existait avant la théorie."<sup>12</sup>

Slogans were displayed to arouse a fighting spirit among the Italian people, but Fascism's martial exterior never penetrated very deep.<sup>13</sup> To the disgust of the Duce the disparity between theory and practice was evident: Italy remained a peace-loving country.

In March, despite the apathy of the people towards the war, Mussolini decided that he could not put off a declaration of war much longer. On March 31, 1940, the Duce sent the following memorandum to King Victor Emmanuel, an outspoken opponent of the Axis and of the war, concerning the impending declaration:

That left the date, the most important problem to settle in connection with the tempo

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<sup>11</sup> Salvemini, Prelude to World War II, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> Roux, Mussolini, p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> Phillips, Ventures in Diplomacy, p. 192.

of a war. This date had originally been fixed for the spring of 1941. After the easy conquest of Norway and the domination of Denmark, I had already brought this date forward to early September 1940. Now, after the conquest of Holland, the fall of Belgium, the invasion of France and the resultant situation, I have brought the date still further forward, and consider that any day from June 5 next is suitable for entering the war.<sup>14</sup>

Disturbed by the possibility that the Germans would defeat France before he could declare war and seize a share of the spoils, it was imperative, the Duce felt, to enter the conflict soon. Although Mussolini told the King that his decision to declare war on France and Britain was based on the fact that "it is not in our moral code to strike a man when he is down," this was, in fact, the motive behind his decision.<sup>15</sup> Mussolini was convinced that the war would be short and he wished to move the date of attack up so as not "to give Germany the impression of arriving after the fait accompli, when the risk is slight."<sup>16</sup>

Sumner Welles arrived in Rome on February 25 with a long personal letter from President Roosevelt asking the Duce to maintain Italy's non-belligerency. Mussolini received Welles with an alarming frigidity which disappeared when the American mentioned his hope for a negotiated settlement by suggesting that Roosevelt might be willing to fly half-way across the Atlantic to meet him for a conference which could not fail to have world-wide repercussions.<sup>17</sup> This appealed greatly to the Duce's desire to be

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<sup>14</sup> Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>17</sup> Noneill, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 183.



once more in the spotlight. Welles's hopes were raised more, however, by Ciano's very evident anti-German feelings. Ciano spoke at considerable length with Welles about Italo-German relations. He made no effort to conceal his hearty detestation of von Ribbentrop and his bitter resentment of Hitler's lack of proper consideration for his Axis partner with regard to German policy.<sup>18</sup> While Ciano did not hide his anxiety in so far as Italy was concerned with regard to Nazi Germany and his fear of her military power, neither did he show the slightest predilection toward Great Britain.<sup>19</sup> During Welles's interview with Mussolini, the latter had remarked, "You may wish to remember that, while the German-Italian pact exists, I nevertheless retain complete liberty of action."<sup>20</sup> Welles mistakenly understood this to mean that Italy might, if sufficient concessions were given by France and Great Britain, be enticed to remain neutral in the conflict.

In the long run, Sumner Welles's visit probably changed nothing, but it profoundly agitated Hitler and von Ribbentrop, who feared that his Italian ally's tendencies towards peace-making would be encouraged. After Welles's visit, Hitler wrote to Mussolini on March 8 the long awaited letter defending his position and maintaining "the destinies of our two States, of

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<sup>18</sup> Sumner Welles, The Time for Decision (New York, 1944), pp. 80-81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>20</sup> Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 183.

our two Peoples, of our two revolutions, and of our two régimes are indissolubly linked."<sup>21</sup> By March 10 Mussolini was once more securely back in the German camp. On that day von Ribbentrop, anxious to counteract any reservations about the German alliance which the American envoy might have aroused in Mussolini's mind arrived in Rome and described the triumphant successes of the German armies. The idea that the Germans might win the war single-handed was unbearable for the Duce. Hence, by April 21 Mussolini had become "more warlike and more pro-German than ever" and determined that Italy must enter the conflict before France collapsed.<sup>22</sup>

During his visit to Rome, Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop had requested a meeting between Mussolini and Hitler at the Brenner. Ciano, who still hoped to deter Mussolini from any attack on the West, commented gloomily to Ambassador von Hassell: "It cannot be denied that the Duce is fascinated by Hitler, a fascination which involves something deeply rooted in his make-up. The Fuehrer will get more out of the Duce than Ribbentrop was able to."<sup>23</sup> When the meeting took place on March 18, it was another of Hitler's verbal marathons. As Ciano had foreseen, Hitler handled Mussolini with skill. Back in Rome the Duce grumbled at the way in which Hitler talked all the time, but face to face

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<sup>21</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 197.

<sup>22</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Ulrich von Hassell, The Von Hassell Diaries (New York, 1947), pp. 220-221.

with him, he was unable to conceal an anxious deference.<sup>24</sup> The impression of German strength which Hitler created and the confidence with which he spoke stirred Mussolini's old fear of being left out at the division of the spoils.

When the Duce had a chance to speak he first of all agreed with everything Hitler had said. He then stated that Italy's entry into the war at Germany's side was inevitable; it was simply a matter of choosing the right time. "The Duce had been swept off his feet," Filippo Bojano said of the Brenner meeting, "by Hitler's megalomania."<sup>25</sup> Although Italy did not actually go to war until some months later, her non-belligerency virtually ended with the meeting at the Brenner on March 18, 1940.

Although Great Britain had since September, 1939, continued in markedly friendly language to try to hold Italy to her neutral course, there is no evidence that the Italian Government was influenced in determining its policy by such enticements. Count Ciano personally strove to maintain complete Italian non-belligerence with a policy of fundamental neutrality, but he was overruled by the Duce. On May 13 Mussolini told his foreign minister that he would declare war on France and Britain within a month. His official decision to declare war on any date suitable after June 5 was imparted to the Italian Chiefs of Staff on May 29, 1940.<sup>26</sup> To make his position even more explicit, Ciano was

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<sup>24</sup> Bullock, Hitler, p. 533.

<sup>25</sup> Bojano, In the Wake of the Goose-Step, p. 146.

<sup>26</sup> Winston S. Churchill, Their Finest Hour, (Boston, 1949), p. 122.



instructed by the Duce to tell the American Ambassador, William Phillips, on May 27 that "any attempt to prevent Italy from fulfilling her engagements is not well regarded."<sup>27</sup>

On May 29, Ambassador Ulrich von Hassell noted in his diary that "In Italy official and inspired voices shriek wildly for war, despite the opposing sentiments of the Throne, the Vatican, and popular opinion."<sup>28</sup> The Italians were, in fact, hostile to the Second World War from the start. Admiral Franco Mauerl wrote of the lack of enthusiasm for entering the war by most Italians:

From Victor Emmanuel down to the humblest peasant and factory worker we wanted no part of the war on the side of Germany. We had nothing against Britain. And we certainly had no love of our Nazi allies....Our complacency and moral cowardice in letting ourselves be led into the bottomless pit are indefensible. For that we have no one to blame but ourselves. But the fatal decision to enter the conflict was not the will of the Italian people.<sup>29</sup>

With a kind of numbed, apathetic resignation and a hope that the war would be over when they entered it, the Italian people accepted the approach of war. "Had they been free that day [of the declaration of war],"<sup>30</sup> Paolo Monelli says, "to express their real feelings, they would have said that if it was necessary to hate someone, it would be the Germans."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> James W. Gantenbein, editor, Documentary Background of World War II (New York, 1948), p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Von Hassell, The Von Hassell Diaries, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> Franco Mauerl, From the Ashes of Disgrace (New York, 1948), pp. 3-4.

<sup>30</sup> Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 14.

Yet, when Mussolini declared war on June 10, 1940, he felt that he had brought off the master stroke of his career. Because of the German thrust against a France on the verge of collapse and a Britain which might yet yield to appeasement, there was, for Mussolini, little time to lose. Further delay in declaring war, the Duce correctly ascertained could mean that Italy would only be allowed by Germany to filch a very small share of the spoils and a war against Great Britain and France at this juncture would be, he assumed, a cheap and profitable undertaking.<sup>31</sup> "There are still idiots and criminals in Italy," he remarked, "who say that Germany will be defeated, but I tell you that she will win."<sup>32</sup> Certain of German victory, he did not want to be absent from Hitler's triumph. His decision was "not a question of war, it's a question of not being absent at the division of the cake."<sup>33</sup>

From the first the war went badly for Italy. It became immediately apparent that the country--although for eighty years more than half the State expenditures had been applied to military purposes--was shamefully ill-equipped to conduct a major war.<sup>34</sup> While the Duce's capacity for self-deception and disregarding his

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31 Macartney, One Man Alone, p. 56.

32 Monelli, Mussolini, p. 181.

33 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 122.

34 Ibid., 127.

advisors was limitless, Mussolini was, in fact, well aware of Italy's condition of unpreparedness. Ciano wrote in April, 1939, that "He [the Duce] believes that beyond appearances more or less carefully kept up, there is little underneath."<sup>35</sup> Aware of the lack of adequate military and economic readiness for war, he simply ignored it, believing that since the war would be short Italy's weakness would not be disclosed. Nor did Mussolini make any precise arrangements with Hitler on the conduct of the war. Italy, the ally of Nazi Germany, in the Duce's mind was to fight "not with Germany, but at the side of Germany--in a parallel war."<sup>36</sup>

As in 1914-1915 the Italian Government had delayed as long as it had dared and then, on a mistaken hypothesis about the war's duration it suddenly threw the nation into a conflict for which Italy had little to gain and much to lose. But Mussolini did not enter his war soon enough. When on June 18 Hitler and Mussolini met at Munich, the Duce had little cause to boast. The French Alpine positions proved impregnable and the major Italian effort towards Nice was halted in the suburbs of Mentone. The armistice with France of June 21 spared Italy probable severe reverses, but it did nothing to fulfill his expectations of "the few thousand dead" he needed "in order to be able to sit at the peace conference as a belligerent."<sup>37</sup> Although Mussolini was invited to Munich to discuss the terms of the armistice, Italy

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<sup>35</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 128.

<sup>36</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 409.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 411.



Italy got nothing. Hitler, as far as one can judge, for all his magnanimous phrases about Italy and the Mediterranean, cared very little about the Duce's aspirations. The Fuehrer wanted a pro-Axis France facing Great Britain, and this objective could be achieved only by neglecting the claims of the late-comer.

Thus, Mussolini's "few thousand dead" failed to achieve the Duce's purpose. "History was repeating itself, only this time the fascists made the mistake of choosing the wrong side."<sup>38</sup> Mussolini was now engaged in a conflict which he did not want, a war which held little promise for Italy and increased Italy's dependence on Germany. Mussolini was soon to discover the truth of François-Poncet's response to Ciano's announcement of the declaration of war by Italy, "You too will find the Germans are hard masters."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Smith, Italy, pp. 474-475.

<sup>39</sup> Churchill, Their Finest Hour, p. 129.

CHAPTER IX: THE SILENCE OF FRUSTRATION: AXIS RELATIONS DURING THE WAR

At the armistice conference in Munich Mussolini, believing the conflict virtually at an end, advanced the widest claims on the French empire. On the other hand, Hitler showed a certain moderation in the armistice terms. He held the Duce back, partly because Mussolini had been such a Johnny-come-lately and partly because if Germany pressed France too hard not even the Pétain government would accept the terms of peace. Mussolini himself felt angry and humiliated by his own rôle in the war since Italy's record in its single week of fighting against France had been only mediocre. Thus, Hitler saw no reason to give his tardy ally any substantial reward and merely allowed the Italians to remain in the small area of southwestern France they had occupied in June, while postponing indefinitely a decision upon the areas Mussolini really wanted -- Nice, Corsica, and Tunisia.<sup>1</sup>

On September 12, 1940, the Italian armies advanced into Egypt but made little progress. Piqued and humiliated by his poor military showing and by Hitler's cavalier treatment of him at the armistice conference, Mussolini wanted some Italian triumph to match the spectacular German victories. The Duce was so enraged against his ally and his relegation to a subordinate position that he decided to attack Greece in

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, Contemporary Europe: A History, pp. 316-317.



October in spite of Hitler. "Hitler always presents me with a fait accompli," Mussolini complained after Germany's sudden occupation of Rumania. "This time I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the papers that I have occupied Greece. In this way the equilibrium will be reestablished."<sup>2</sup> This unheralded initiative, a weak attempt to prove that Italy could pursue a strong policy of her own, was in flat contradiction to Hitler's wishes and both Mussolini and Ciano, who encouraged him, knew it.

In the middle of August the Germans had explicitly warned Rome against any adventures in Yugoslavia or Greece.<sup>3</sup> For the moment, Mussolini scrapped his plans for a Balkan conquest, but the prospect of a quick, easy conquest of Greece, which would compensate to some extent for his partner's military successes, proved too great a temptation for the Duce. On October 22 he set the date for a surprise assault on Greece for October 28. Hitler and von Ribbentrop, however, got wind of the Duce's plans while they were returning from special conferences with Marshal Pétain and Franco. At the Fuehrer's orders the Nazi Foreign Minister immediately telephoned Ciano in Rome and urged a meeting of the Axis leaders without delay. When Hitler alighted from the train at Florence on October 28, Mussolini, his chin up and his eyes full of glee, greeted him with: "Fuehrer, we are on the march! Victorious Italian troops crossed

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<sup>2</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 815.

the Greco-Albanian frontier at dawn today.<sup>4</sup> Hitler was furious, but somehow managed to control his rage and spoke only of the solidarity of the two régimes.

Hardly had the Fuehrer returned to Berlin before the need to act further was impressed upon him by what quickly turned into an Italian fiasco in Greece. Mussolini's army was completely stymied by the gallant resistance of the Greeks under General Metaxas.<sup>5</sup> Within a week, the Italian troops were retreating along the entire front. The Greek campaign had been immaturely conceived from the start and when Hitler wrote a sharp criticism of Italian operations to the Duce, Mussolini told Ciano, 'This time he [Hitler] has really slapped my fingers.'<sup>6</sup> At first Mussolini felt he might have to make peace with the Greeks since his Under-Secretary of War told him that Italy would have to ask the Greeks for an armistice.<sup>7</sup> While he was spared at least the humiliation of asking the Greeks for peace, the Duce was forced to rely on German help to extricate himself from his predicament, and that was an indignity almost as bitter.

After the unfortunate Balkan adventure, Italy was unquestionably the lesser of the Axis partners. Henceforth the Germans scarcely bothered to conceal their contempt for Italy's fighting ability. Mussolini's attack

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4 Ibid., 816.

5 T. L. Jarman, The Rise and Fall of Nazi Germany (New York, 1956), p. 281.

6 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 133.

7 Ibid., 133.

on Greece, however, throws a revealing light on Axis politics and exposes one of the fundamental flaws of the Pact of Steel. The two dictators were ever at pains to present to the outside world a formidable façade of solidarity, but in reality there was little genuine consultation, less joint planning and no common policy.<sup>8</sup> However fraternal the phrases in which they addressed one other, their relationship was poisoned by mistrust, suspicion, and a conflict of ambitions.

Although Mussolini refused to face Hitler after the Italian disgrace in Greece, Ciano wrote a letter to Dino Alfieri, Italian Ambassador in Berlin, rather in the vein of the Duce's letter of August 25, 1939, instructing the Ambassador to request raw materials from Germany. Hitler told Alfieri, "Yes, I will come to your help but I will not send you raw materials without knowing how they will be used; you will send thousands more of your workmen to Germany and I will deliver finished products to you according to the advice of my economic experts who will visit Italy to see what to give you and on what conditions."<sup>9</sup> This interview was a landmark in the history of the Axis, for it was an important stepping-stone to a German occupation of Italy. From now on German economic experts and all the Gestapo and military agents who chose to appear in the guise of "economic experts" took up key positions in Italy, and the Italians soon were no longer masters in their own house.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe, p. 62.

9 Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 243.

10 Ibid., 243.



In 1941 Hitler pressed Italy's subordination to a position which Mussolini bitterly referred to as "the taillight" of the Axis.<sup>11</sup> In February, 1941, Hitler finally realized that Spain was not going to enter the war -- the failure of the Greek campaign had given Franco doubts about the invincibility of the Axis. In any case, Italy, not Spain, was the key to defeating Britain in the Mediterranean, but the Duce's weak empire was not equal to the task of doing it alone. The Germans, moreover, wondered if the men and materials they were sending to Libya were not being wasted, unless the Italian forces were placed under German command. This was precisely what the Italian dictator wished to avoid. But in a letter of February 22, 1941, Mussolini accepted the Fuehrer's proposal to put the Italian armoured and motorized divisions under General Rommel in order to assure unity of action. On April 5, 1941, Hitler, commenting on the need for coordination of Italian and German military action, wrote his Italian ally:

To this end I would like to propose to you, Duce, that you be willing to agree that I send directly to you, in the form of "recommendations" and "wishes," the general points of view needed for the totality of the operations. Then you, Duce, as supreme commander of the Italian army would... give the necessary orders.

And Mussolini replied:

I completely agree with you concerning the unified conduct of operations according to the formula you propose.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>12</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, p. 420.

Thus, by Mussolini's consent, the Fuehrer was confirmed as the master of the Axis and its supreme strategist of the war. The attempt to prove that Italy could conduct a campaign on her own had failed so miserably that by now Hitler's "recommendations" and "wishes" were, of course, as good as orders. Mussolini was little more than Hitler's messengerboy.

At the conference at the Berghof in January, 1941, however, Hitler was as friendly as ever while Mussolini was so ashamed that he had twice postponed his visit in hope of some Italian military victory. "The Fuehrer was polite, friendly and understanding," the Duce remarked. "Too much so," he added.<sup>13</sup> Mussolini remained silent and allowed Hitler to do all the talking. He listened to the Fuehrer with that earnest display of concentration which so often concealed a deep embarrassment and only rarely intervened in the discussion. On this difficult occasion Hitler seems to have managed the Duce with great skill.<sup>14</sup>

But in June Hitler showed what he really thought of his Axis partner. At 3 o'clock in the morning on June 22, a mere half hour before the German troops invaded Russia, Ambassador von Bismarck awakened Ciano in Rome to deliver Hitler's announcement of the attack, which the Italian Foreign Minister then telephoned to Mussolini at Riccione. Thus, the Duce learned

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<sup>13</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, pp. 136-137.

<sup>14</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 250.

that Hitler had broken his treaty with Russia and was crossing her frontier. Mussolini was caught unaware -- he had received only the vaguest hints of the German plans against Russia -- and was, in fact, in the midst of diplomatic negotiations for a commercial treaty with the Soviets. It was not, however, the first time that the Duce had been wakened from his sleep by a message from his Axis partner and he resented it. "Not even I disturb my servants at night," he lamented to Ciano, "but the Germans make me jump out of bed at any hour without the least consideration."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, he declared war on the Soviet Union. He was now completely a prisoner of the Germans; he knew it and resented it.

When Mussolini learned of the German attack on Russia, he turned to his wife and said: "They're mad! It means ruin to us! I don't believe Russia would ever have attacked us. Germany knows how to make war but nothing about politics."<sup>16</sup> Hitler's letter which arrived the next day, in which he described his great feeling of relief at having finally made up his mind about Russia, did not convince Mussolini:

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<sup>15</sup> Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 851.

<sup>16</sup> Rachele Mussolini, My Life with Mussolini, p. 111.



....Let me say one more thing, Duce. Since I struggled through to this decision, I again feel spiritually free. The partnership with the Soviet Union, in spite of the complete sincerity of our efforts to bring about a final conciliation, was nevertheless often very irksome to me, for in some way or other it seemed to me to be a break with my whole origin, my concepts and my former obligations. I am happy now to be relieved of these mental agonies.<sup>17</sup>

Such hypocrisy did not fool the Duce. He knew the invasion of Russia was a mistake, but again he did not want to be excluded from the spoils of a possible victory.

Late in July, 1941, therefore, he insisted that more Italian troops be sent to Russia -- the Duce's reason was that Italy's contingent could not be smaller than Slovakia's.<sup>18</sup> But as the Eastern campaign continued the Russians displayed unsuspected strength. Throughout this period the Duce's mood was variable, changing sharply and swiftly with events. Reverses in battle left him indignant and pessimistic, even hoping for a German defeat. "Note in your diary," he once told Ciano, "that I foresee unavoidable conflict arising between Italy and Germany....I feel this by instinct, and I now seriously ask whether an English victory would not be more desirable for our future than a German victory."<sup>19</sup> Small successes, on the other hand, elated him disproportionally, but when they did not bring immediate change in the situation, he once more became bitter and pessimistic.

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17 Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 851.

18 Fermi, Mussolini, p. 417.

19 Ibid., 417.

In spite of growing Nazi influence in Italy -- about which the Italian people made no attempt to conceal their hostility -- the Nazi leaders were worried, with good reason, that Mussolini's régime was weakening. "The Italians have already cost us considerable sympathy in the world," Goebbels wrote.<sup>20</sup> But the collapse of the Fascist government in Italy would be a disaster that not even the clever Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda machine could cover up. After his transfer from Rome, Ulrich von Hassell was repeatedly advised by his friends in Italy that no one was behind Mussolini after his foolish enterprise in Greece and that the Duce would probably be overthrown by the military in the winter of 1941-1942.<sup>21</sup> Although no such coup occurred, German sources knew that public opinion did not support Mussolini or Germany and that the popularity of the monarchy was greater than the dictator's and was increasing. The Italians, even many of the Fascist leaders, were either not serious about the Axis crusade or utterly opposed to it.<sup>22</sup> When the war went badly for the Duce, he blamed the Italians and was actually pleased when Naples was bombed, for "it'll toughen the race."<sup>23</sup> It is no wonder that the Germans and the Duce in his Germanophile moods despised the Italian people with their sense of humanity and revulsion against the cruelty of the Nazi war machine.

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20 Joseph Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries (London, 1948), p. 17.

21 Von Hassell, The Von Hassell Diaries, p. 16.

22 Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 269.

23 Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 187.

Mussolini's resentment over the Germans' dominant rôle in the Italian theater of war did not disturb the Fuehrer. Hitler remained understanding and friendly towards him personally. Whatever contempt he held for the Italian people, his respect for their Duce was as yet not dimmed. The German dictator sincerely felt his ally "deserves a better people than the ones he now has."<sup>24</sup> Goebbels in his diary recorded a conversation with Hitler concerning his friendship for Mussolini:

The Fuehrer is very much attached to Mussolini and regards him as the only guarantor of German-Italian collaboration. The Italian people and Fascism will stick to our side as long as Mussolini is there. The Fuehrer had intended to present him with a new Condor plane, but is not going to because he knows that Mussolini will immediately take the controls, and if anything happened to him, he would never forgive himself....<sup>25</sup>

Hitler was quite correct in believing that Mussolini was the only force that kept "only half-Fascist" Italy, (if it were even that) to her alliance with Germany.<sup>26</sup>

Mussolini's life in those three years of war was a see-saw of exultation and depression, of optimism and disillusionment. Nor did Mussolini, a vainglorious man humiliated, manage to preserve even his self-respect. He had come to hate Hitler and the Germans; yet he continued to serve them like a lackey, a comparison, incidentally, relished by Allied

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<sup>24</sup> Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>26</sup> Adolf Hitler, Hitler's Secret Conversations (New York, 1953), p. 41.



propaganda. He resented the Fuehrer's victories and power and felt degraded by Hitler's help and friendship. Although he blamed the Germans for his own plight and wished them ill, he knew that their defeat would be his end. As early as June 10, 1941, he told Ciano:

I've had my fill of Hitler and the way he acts. These conferences called by the ringing of a bell are not to my liking: a bell is rung when people call their servants. And besides what kind of conferences are these? For five hours I am forced to listen to a monologue which is quite fruitless and boring. He spoke for hours and hours...but...he did not go to the bottom of any problem, or make any decisions....<sup>27</sup>

These outbursts of frustration and resentment over his "servant"<sup>28</sup> standing in the Axis were still, however, concluded with a realization that "for the time being there's nothing to be done. We've got to howl with the wolves."<sup>28</sup> Even his capacity for delusion could not hide the painful fact of his subordinate rôle.

It would be inexact to say that towards the end of the third year of the war Mussolini was unpopular; it would be truer to say that he was virtually forgotten. People talked of Hitler, of Churchill, Roosevelt, and even of the Emperor of Japan, but despite the incessant clamour of the press and radio, no one talked any more of Mussolini. The closer Italy's relations with Germany became, the more Italians admired German skill and

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<sup>27</sup> Namier, Diplomatic Prelude, p. 490.

<sup>28</sup> Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, p. 7.

the deeper became the Italian fear and dislike of Germans personally. Hundreds of thousands of Italian workers were drafted into labor service in Germany to replace Germans sent to the front and were often treated there like prisoners of war or another of the Nazis' subject races.<sup>29</sup> Italy gradually became a dependency and almost a Land of the Reich and even the Duce had no love for the Germans, especially when he heard of the treatment of Italian laborers in camps in Germany. With a certain air of injured pride and delusion, Mussolini declared:

These things are bound to produce lasting hatred in my heart. In the end I shall square this account. I can wait many years to do so, but I will not permit the sons of a race which has given humanity Caesar, Dante, and Michelangelo to be devoured by the bloodhounds of the Huns.<sup>30</sup>

But he knew, despite all that he said, that he had no future apart from his Nazi ally.

Nonetheless, Mussolini would often rant against the Germans during the war years, not only to members of the Government but even to comparative strangers. Dino Alfieri, Italian Ambassador to Berlin after 1940, said that it even came to the knowledge of Hitler, who was always kept well informed of current gossip by the German Embassy in Rome.<sup>31</sup> But the few men that came near him during the war years found him totally lacking in will power.

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29 Smith, Italy, p. 479.

30 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 147.

31 Monelli, Mussolini, The Intimate Life of a Demagogue, p. 145.

He tired easily and talked disconnectedly, as though he could not follow a logical train of thought, often contradicting himself. Hitler twice summoned him to discuss events during 1943, and he went off declaring his intention to speak his mind, "with the grim determination of an employee who has braced himself to demand a raise."<sup>32</sup> But like the timid employee in front of the boss, Mussolini confronted by Hitler did not dare to open his mouth.

When Hitler, after the disaster of Stalingrad, wanted a meeting with Mussolini to inspire him with bellicosity, the meeting was put off until the second week in April because of the Duce's illness. Mussolini was still so sick when they met at Salzburg that Goebbels noted in his diary: "When he got out of the train on his arrival, the Fuehrer thought he looked like a broken old man."<sup>33</sup> While the Italians came determined to urge peace with Russia and the final withdrawal of the Italian armies from abroad to defend Italy, in his poor state of health, the Duce crumpled even more easily than usual in his talks with Hitler.<sup>34</sup> Russia must be fought, von Ribbentrop and Hitler, declared, and it was made clear "that there can be no other salvation for him except to win or die with us."<sup>35</sup> Giuseppe Bastianini, the successor to Ciano as Minister for Foreign Affairs, nevertheless made it clear that Italy could not continue the war. Although Hitler

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>33</sup> Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries, p. 275.

<sup>34</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 296.

<sup>35</sup> Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries, p. 275.



thought he had braced up Mussolini at Salzburg, the meeting was a fiasco and "one might well say that the Axis broke here."<sup>36</sup>

No doubt the Duce would have tried to extricate himself had he not been completely a vassal of the Fuehrer and had the alliance with Germany not been the last prop of his personal dictatorship. Only the German armies held the country together and now disaster was about to break on the broken, aged Fascist dictator. For two years from 1941 to 1943, Benito Mussolini rode the crest of the Nazi wave, but even in those years he was little more than "a storm-battered fish."<sup>37</sup> When the Nazi tide began to recede, he was left stranded on the Italian beach, with faint resemblance to the dynamic young revolutionary of the 1920's.

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<sup>36</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 296.

<sup>37</sup> Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, p. x.

CHAPTER X: "ONE SINGLE DAY AS A LION"

Although Fascism was a manifestation of extreme nationalism in Italy, it had been constructed on a very narrow ideological basis, and the Duce always encountered considerable difficulty in defining that basis. He was too intelligent not to realize that in organizing the Fascist party on the leadership principle he was identifying it completely with himself, for Fascism was Mussolinism. Consequently, it was not surprising that as he grew older, the movement lost its youthful energy and appeal. The masses, in fact, abandoned Fascism even earlier than the Fascist leaders, for the war had been unpopular from the start. Mussolini realized that both he and the Fascist movement were losing ground and did all he could to revitalize it. But it was not enough.

Exactly one month before his meeting with Hitler at Feltre (July 19, 1943), Mussolini presided over the last Cabinet meeting to be held during his tenure of the Premiership in a Fascist government of Italy. The Cabinet met in the shadow of the Allied occupation of Pantelleria. The loss of this island was a heavy blow to Italy, since it had been strongly fortified and Axis propaganda had declared it to be impregnable, indeed "the Italian Malta."<sup>1</sup> As always, at the end of the session, he ended on a note of unshakable conviction that in the end the picture would change

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<sup>1</sup> Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, p. 3.



and the Axis would be victorious. As a rule his ministers did not discuss the Duce's reports, but on this occasion, Vittorio Cini, Minister of Transport, asked permission to speak:

Duce, you can no longer allow yourself to be overtaken by events, as you were three years ago. If we are to continue the war, let us do so to the best of our possibilities, giving it a national character and entrusting the command and the responsibility to those to whom it belongs. If we are to make peace--for you must think of that too, to avoid being taken by surprise as you were by the war--we must create favorable conditions for making peace. We must enter into indirect negotiations and not slam the door behind us, but leave ourselves a way out....Don't let us wait till the twelfth hour!<sup>2</sup>

Here was the first clear indication of the growing discontent within his Government.

During the month before the Feltre conference, Italy's military situation went from bad to worse. On July 9, Allied forces landed in Sicily and in a few days the German and Italian resistance was broken. The Italian soldiers, who hated their German ally more than the enemy, fought badly or not at all.<sup>3</sup> As General von Thoma described the Italian military to the Fuehrer: "The Italians are good workers, but they are not fighters. They don't like noise."<sup>4</sup> The Italians seemed incapable of holding their own in Italy.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>4</sup> B. H. Liddal Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York, 1948), p. 158.

On the night of July 18 Hitler received an alarming report from the south. Things were going so badly on the Italian front that the entire program of the German High Command could be seriously endangered. Thus, on Sunday, July 18, the German Ambassador in Rome, Baron Hans Georg von Mackensen, transmitted an urgent invitation for Mussolini to meet Hitler in a conference which, the Ambassador warned, might last three days.<sup>5</sup> The thirteenth conference of the dictators was held at Feltre on July 19, 1943. The Feltre meeting was, in a sense, a battle between Hitler and the Italian General Vittorio Ambrosio over the tired body of Mussolini.<sup>6</sup> It was Hitler's last chance to reinflate the Italian leader; it was also the last chance for Ambrosio--and indeed for Italy--to induce Mussolini to tell Hitler that he must make peace. Ironically, neither Hitler nor the Italian general could sway the Duce.

The shortness of Hitler's stay at Feltre was unexpected by Mussolini, for usually their conferences lasted two days and the Duce had been led to believe that this meeting might last longer. The unusual absence of von Ribbentrop and Goering emphasized the exclusively military concern of the Germans at the meeting. Hitler had come with his mind made up ready to dictate his terms, not discuss them. In Storia di un Anno Mussolini observed of this conference:

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<sup>5</sup> Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 399.

<sup>6</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 301.

The meeting was as usual cordial, but the atmosphere was difficult. As the Fuehrer had to return to Germany the same afternoon, the time had to be used to the best advantage.<sup>7</sup>

Mussolini's narrative, however, leaves the distinct impression that he wrote with restraint and deliberately abbreviated his story of the last meeting with Hitler before being dismissed from the Premiership. Furthermore, we must not forget that he wrote and published his book in the days of the Salò Republic, when he was substantially "a hostage in German hands."<sup>8</sup>

The meeting at Feltre was not really a conversation at all, for it took the form of another of Hitler's endless monologues. The Fuehrer opened the session "with some remarks on the war situation."<sup>9</sup> In a last effort to put new life into the alliance, Hitler talked for three hours before lunch. The Axis Powers must continue to fight on all fronts, Hitler said. Their tasks could not be left "to another generation."<sup>10</sup> There was only one course open to them, he told the Duce, and that was to fight and go on fighting with a fanatical will to conquer.<sup>11</sup> Despite Hitler's promises and boasts of victory, the atmosphere was still most depressing for the Italian dictator. The Duce's despair worsened when, during the meeting, reports came of the war's first heavy

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7 Raymond Klibansky, ed., Mussolini: Memoirs (London, 1949), p. 50.

8 Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, p. 10.

9 Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 402.

10 Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 996.

11 Bullock, Hitler, p. 647.



daylight air attack on Rome. The conference was over by four o'clock and when Mussolini emerged from it, Ercole Boratto, the Duce's chauffeur, was struck by the fact that "he [Mussolini] had difficulty in concealing his worry."<sup>12</sup> "On parting from Hitler I said to him," Mussolini recalled in his memoirs, "'Ours is a common cause."<sup>13</sup>

The Feltre meeting, however, was a failure for two reasons. Hitler not only failed to give Mussolini any comfort or any satisfactory reply to his request for material aid, but passionately attacked the Duce and Fascism for their inefficient conduct of the war. Hence, Mussolini was decidedly not buoyed up by the Fuehrer's continued optimism. Mussolini, for his part, had gone to Feltre specifically to ask Hitler for aid. The Duce, however, did not even get a promise of reinforcements from the Germans. "In the end he lacked the courage," Rachele Mussolini told the Italian Journalist Bruno d'Agostini after the war, "to demand anything from him."<sup>14</sup> Mussolini simply listened to Hitler; it was easier to be mesmerized by the Nazi leader's spell. The Germans were strong and it seemed simpler and safer to submit to them than to question their judgment. Nevertheless, back in Rome the next evening, Mussolini told Ambrosio that he had decided to write a letter to the Fuehrer declaring that Italy must make peace. But he never wrote it and Ambrosio asked to resign.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Klibansky, Mussolini: Memoirs, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, pp. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Wiskemann, The Rome-Berlin Axis, p. 302.

Moreover, when the Duce returned to the capital, he found more than just the aftermath of heavy bombing; at the convocation of the Fascist Grand Council, he faced open revolt from his own rebellious subordinates, led by Dino Grandi, Giuseppe Bottai and Ciano. For months such plots had been organized, but Mussolini had continued to ignore the reports he was given about them.<sup>16</sup> In April, Angela Curti went to tell him that the King was frequently receiving not only the dissident generals but anti-Fascist politicians as well. Mussolini, confident that the Court was completely out of touch with public opinion, replied that he had total faith in the King's loyalty to him.<sup>17</sup> Carefully concealing any anxiety which these repeated warnings may have given him and discounting the most alarming reports from the Minister of Commerce about the extensive strikes in the industrial North, Mussolini remained as indifferent towards his opponents as ever. "The political situation," he felt sure, "was entirely dependent upon the military one."<sup>18</sup>

By June, 1943, however, the Fascist party and the Fascist régime were visibly and rapidly disintegrating. The reins of government were increasingly slipping from Mussolini's hands. It was Vittorio Cini, as has been noted, who first brought the discontent to the Duce's attention and forced him to realize that

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16 Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 996.

17 Hibbert, Il Duce, p. 163.

18 Ibid., 164.

revolt had now spread to the higher ranks of the Party. But again Mussolini ignored the warning. Even on the eve of the meeting of the Fascist Grand Council Mussolini, although moody and gloomy, felt sure that he would prevail. For one thing, Hitler had once more mentioned the secret weapons which were being prepared for the destruction of Britain and the United States and these weapons, he felt, would surely reverse the present military situation.<sup>19</sup> Although Mussolini knew that Dino Grandi, formerly Italian Ambassador to the Court of St. James, was the moving spirit of opposition in the Council, he did not attach any great importance to Grandi's activities. When Clara Petacci, Mussolini's mistress, asked him if there was anything wrong on the day of the meeting, the Duce replied with perfect self-confidence, "I shall be strong and dominate the situation as usual."<sup>20</sup>

On July 24-25, the Fascist Grand Council, usually a rubber-stamp body controlled entirely by the Duce, convened. "I intended the meeting to be a confidential one," Mussolini wrote later, "in which everybody would have the chance of asking for explanations and receiving them."<sup>21</sup> For the first time, however, Mussolini found himself the target of violent criticism for the disaster into which he had led Italy.<sup>22</sup> Mussolini admitted that "at this moment,

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19 Dombrowski, Mussolini, Twilight and Fall, p. 15.

20 Ibid., 16.

21 Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 439.

22 Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, p. 997.



I am certainly the most intensely disliked or, rather loathed man in Italy," but this, he said, was due "to the terrible physical and moral burden of the "Liberator" raids and to the suggestions of the enemy."<sup>23</sup> Dino Grandi finally rose to read the text of his resolution, which was already known to most of the members present, and it was clear that its intention was to take the instruments of dictatorship out of the hands of the Duce. Grandi concluded his attack by reminding Mussolini of the catchword of 1924: "Let faction perish so that the Fatherland may live."<sup>24</sup> By a vote of 19 to 8, the resolution was carried demanding the restoration of a constitutional monarchy with a democratic parliament. It also called for the full command of the armed forces to be restored to the King. The Fascist rebels were able to do this because the monarchy continued to exist and the King provided an alternative symbol of loyalty. In broader terms, despite his longer period of rule, Mussolini's tenure had never been as secure as Hitler's.<sup>25</sup>

Although Mussolini's memoirs are in part apologia, in part propaganda for the Salò Republic, and in part an instrument of vendetta against those who were the immediate cause of his downfall, his account is accurate at many points. According to the Duce:

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23 Klibansky, Mussolini: Memoirs, pp. 55-56.

24 Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 443.

25 Hughes, Contemporary Europe: A History, p. 236.

The position of each member of the Grand Council could be discerned even before the voting: there was a group of traitors who had already negotiated with the Crown, a group of accomplices, and a group of uninformed who probably did not realize the seriousness of the vote. But they voted just the same!<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the Fascist rebels, with the possible exception of Dino Grandi, who had been in contact with the Court, do not appear to have had any idea of going further than restoring political authority to the Crown. The Fascist party was to remain. When the vote had been recorded, Mussolini rose and said: "You have provoked a crisis of the Regime. The session is closed."<sup>27</sup>

Mussolini curiously believed that, despite the long standing undercurrent of discord and lack of affection between Victor Emmanuel III and himself, that the King would support him.<sup>28</sup> The King, alone, not the Fascist Grand Council, had the authority to dismiss him. Mussolini soon realized, as he wrote later, that "the King was behind this plot" and that "for twenty years he had been awaiting a good opportunity."<sup>29</sup> When the Duce appeared at the Villa Savoia for his audience with the King the next day, the King dismissed him from office and had him arrested. He had already arranged for Marshal Badoglio to succeed the Duce as head of the Government.

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26 Klibansky, Mussolini: Memoirs, p. 63.

27 ibid., 63.

28 Charles F. Delzell, Mussolini's Enemies (Princeton, 1960), p. 173.

29 Klibansky, Mussolini: Memoirs, p. 47.

The fall of Mussolini was not as great a shock to the Nazis as might be imagined, for the Germans were well aware that the Duce's régime was unpopular and that it was in danger of collapse. Joseph Goebbels noted the fall of the Italian dictator with a certain contempt:

We received news to the effect that there was violent opposition in the Fascist Grand Council to Mussolini, his policies, and his conduct of the war. The main figures in this fight were Ciano and Grandi. ...The King, too, addressed an appeal to the public. The noteworthy thing in this appeal is a sentence stating that Italy remains true to her tradition and word....Personally I believe that, for the time being, at least, the end of Fascism has come....<sup>30</sup>

Hitler knew that the Italians had no intention of fulfilling their Axis obligations once the Duce had been removed. One thing was certain: the new Italian Government's promises of solidarity and loyalty to the Axis were false and the Nazis were not deceived.

In spite of his contempt for the Italian people, Hitler's admiration for the Duce was unfeigned. When Hitler heard of Mussolini's arrest, he immediately set to work to rescue his Italian comrade. Otto Skorzeny, summoned for a special mission to rescue the Duce, was told by the Fuehrer:

I have a mission of the highest importance for you. Yesterday Mussolini, my friend and our loyal partner in the struggle, was betrayed by his king and arrested by his own compatriots. Now I cannot and will not abandon the greatest of Italians in his hour of peril.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries, pp. 321-322.

<sup>31</sup> Otto Skorzeny, Secret Missions, (New York, 1950), p. 43.



Although Goebbels disapproved of the mission to liberate the Duce as "proof that our politics are still based too much on sentiment and too little on intellect," the Fuehrer was determined to prevent his friend from being turned over to the Allies by the King and Badoglio.<sup>32</sup> Hitler would not go back on his word: "Mussolini must be rescued and speedily."<sup>33</sup>

On September 9, 1943, only a few hours after they had announced the news of Italy's armistice with the Allies, King Victor Emmanuel III and his minister, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, fled from Nazi-threatened Rome. The inhabitants of northern and central Italy soon realized to their horror that instead of escaping the war, they now faced the ordeal of Nazi occupation. To make matters worse, Hitler restored the Duce, who was dramatically rescued by Skorzeny, to nominal power in northern Italy--the Duce whom the nation thought had been deposed forever on the Twenty-Fifth of July.<sup>34</sup>

When Hitler met Mussolini at Rastenburg on September 15, the Fuehrer urged the Duce to return to power immediately, to announce that the monarchy was abolished, and that the new Fascist state replaced it. An important point of disagreement between the two dictators, however, concerned the problem of how to deal with

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32 Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries, p. 358.

33 Skorzeny, Secret Missions, p. 43.

34 DeLzell, Mussolini's Enemies, p. vii.

the traitors of the Fascist Grand Council.<sup>35</sup> "Were I in your place," Hitler told Mussolini, "nothing would have kept me from taking justice into my hands."<sup>36</sup> Mussolini, now a broken and spiritless man, showed little interest in executing his enemies or in dealing with his son-in-law Clano as Hitler had dealt with Roehm in 1934. The Duce, however, did not understand his rôle in the new Italian government. As Goebbels wrote on November 9, 1943:

The Duce hasn't the faintest idea of his real position. He overestimates the power of the Fascist party. He is living a life of make-believe and struts around in a heroic pose that has no place in a world of realities.<sup>37</sup>

Hitler was disappointed that Mussolini did not execute the Fascist rebels. But the Fuehrer had made it clear in September that if the Duce disappointed him in carrying out his vengeance, he himself would order the executions to be carried out by the Nazis. Hence, the Republic of Salò established a special court in Verona to try the conspirators. Of the men who had voted in favor of Grandi's motion only five, including Clano and General de Bono, were in Fascist hands and would bear the consequences of a sentence. On January 10, 1944, with little enthusiasm on the Duce's part, the five defendants were sentenced to death.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Fermi, Mussolini, p. 438.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>37</sup> Goebbels, The Goebbels Diaries, p. 411.

<sup>38</sup> Fermi, Mussolini, pp. 445-447.

In reality Mussolini's new Italian Social Republic was a weak, powerless, organism--little more than a Fascist façade hiding a houseful of Germans. The Repubblica Sociale Italiana was, in truth, little more than a parody of earlier Fascism. Hitler had once described Mussolini as "a man made to the measure of the centuries" and while he truly, to use the Fuehrer's own words, felt "a deep friendship for this extraordinary man," Hitler had no intention of allowing Mussolini an independent rôle.<sup>39</sup> He was to be only the figurehead of the German occupation of northern Italy. The central figure of the Salò government was not even Mussolini, but Rudolf Rahn, who ruled Italy "by exploiting Mussolini and the Italian government" and whose aim was "to exercise the power with a minimum display of people."<sup>40</sup>

It is not surprising then, that the Salò Republic never achieved historic significance. Mussolini's heart was not in it. He was no more than the shadow of his former self. Even the Duce himself retained enough sense of reality to see that he was now merely a puppet of Hitler and had no power except what the Fuehrer gave him in Germany's interests. He knew, too, that the Italian people would never accept him and Fascism again. The title Duce was now without meaning.

In the twilight of his life, Mussolini no longer had any effective voice in Italian affairs and this was painfully obvious

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39 Adolf Hitler, Hitler's Secret Conversations (New York, 1953), p. 111.

40 Deakin, The Brutal Friendship, p. 619.



in the six hundred days of the existence of the Salò Republic. The last phase of his life was the most degrading of all, "the inglorious end."<sup>41</sup> In his younger days, Mussolini, in emphasizing his vitality and the need for violence, had liked to say, "Meglio vivere un giorno da leone che cento anni da pecora" (Better to live one single day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep).<sup>42</sup> Mussolini was no longer a lion; he was reduced to the rank of a puppet dictator and even despised himself. The fascination which Hitler had once exerted over him was turned only to hatred. Benito Mussolini had surrendered himself to Hitler and was no more than a Gauleiter of the Reich--if indeed so much.

Although Mussolini was theatrical, vain, hypersensitive, and withal skeptical too, he rarely stepped far outside traditional continuity. An opportunist, far from destroying the ideas and institutions which he found in existence he generally sought a compromise with them. His fate had been sealed when he indulged his whim of entering the war on the side of Germany. Yet Mussolini was surely not perverse, cruel, or hysterical as Hitler decidedly was. To charm Italian crowds he had had to be theatrical and it was by stimulating his lust for power and his fear of isolation

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<sup>41</sup> Femi, Mussolini, p. 448.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice Baumont, John H. E. Fried, and Edmond Vermell, editors The Third Reich (New York, 1955), p. 778.

that Hitler had subjugated Mussolini, and not by the gift of his friendship.

Mussolini at the end, when it came on April 28, 1945, was not granted a parting blaze of glory, or even the satisfaction of a last-ditch bunker, but the death of a terrified fugitive fleeing his own people. "No one understands him," wrote Fernando Mezzasoma of Mussolini during the last week of both their lives. "By turns a shrewd and innocent, brutal and gentle, vindictive and forgiving, great and petty, he is the most complicated and contradictory man I have ever known. He cannot be explained."<sup>43</sup> Benito Mussolini was a man who had known hours of triumph, the intoxication of power, and the hubris of personal glory. For twenty years he had been dictator of Italy, the Duce whom millions of people acclaimed and followed blindly. Yet one serious blunder sufficed to destroy him. Dazzled in Germany by the spectacle of Nazi might and carelessly scornful of the West, he succumbed to the temptation of war and conquest at Hitler's side and sacrificed both his power and his life in the catastrophe that followed.

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<sup>43</sup> Hibbert, Il Duce, p. vii.

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