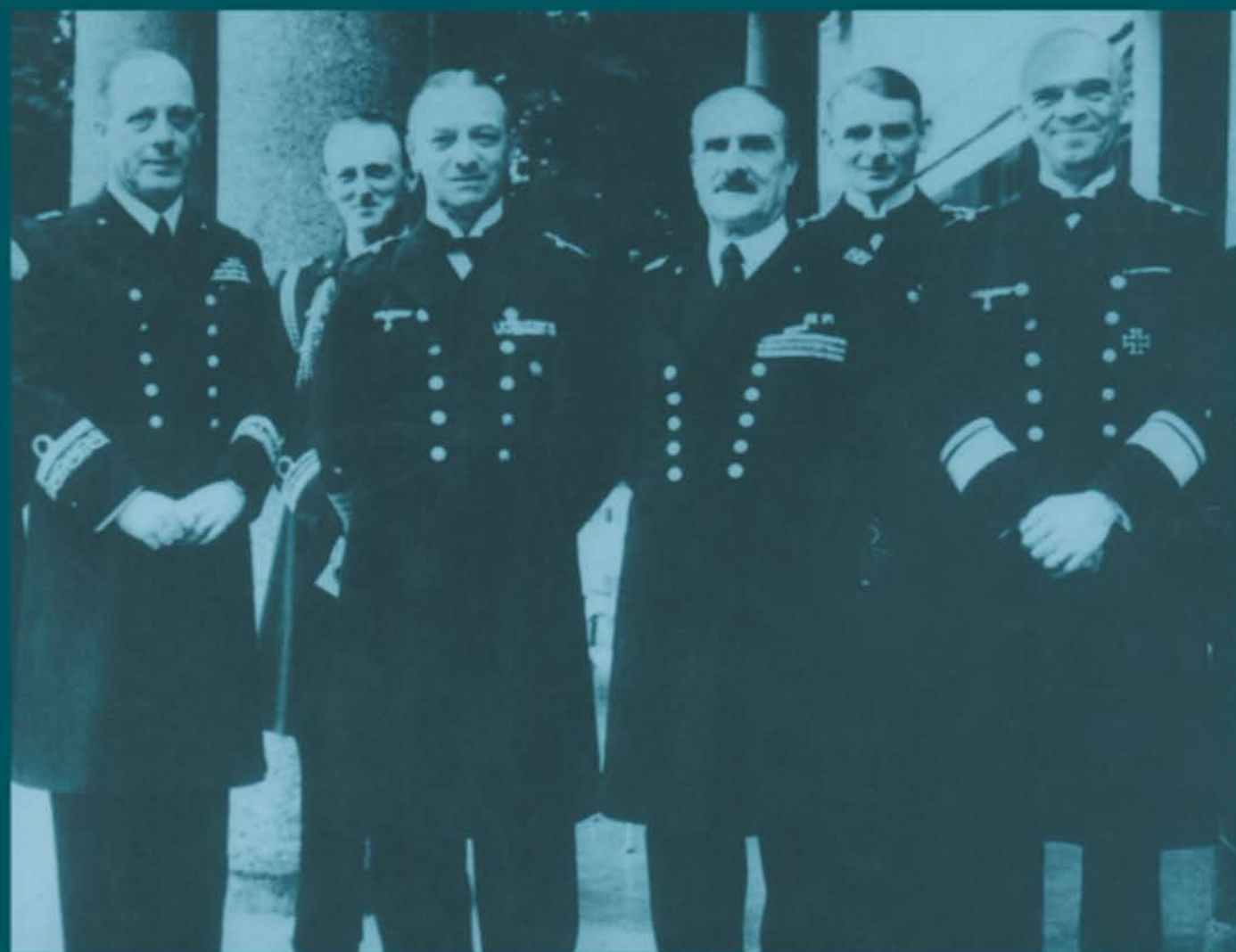


The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism 1935–1940



Robert Mallett

THE ITALIAN NAVY AND
FASCIST EXPANSIONISM
1935-1940

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AND FASCIST
EXPANSIONISM
1935–1940

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Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Foreword by John Gooch	vii
Series Editor's Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
Abbreviations	xiii
Glossary of Terms	xiv
Map of the Key Strategic Points in the Mediterranean	xvi
Introduction	1
1 Crisis in the Mediterranean	7
2 Plans for Expansion	48
3 Tension in the Mediterranean	92
4 Peace and War	130
5 War	166
Conclusion	191
Appendices	197
Archival and Documentary Sources	218
Bibliography	221
Index	235

List of Illustrations

(between pages 112 and 113)

1. Admiral Domenico Cavagnari
2. The battleship *Conte di Cavour*
3. The battleship *Giulio Cesare*
4. The battleship *Conte di Cavour*
5. The battleship *Vittorio Veneto*
6. The battleship *Vittorio Veneto*
7. The heavy cruisers *Pola, Zara, Gorizia* and *Fiume*
8. The heavy cruisers *Fiume, Zara, Pola* and *Gorizia*
9. The heavy cruisers *Fiume* and *Zara*
10. The heavy cruiser *Trieste*
11. Italian warships at Naples
12. Italian submarines at Naples
13. The Italian fleet at Naples
14. The naval base at Taranto
15. Italian cruisers and destroyers at sea
16. A special motor torpedo-boat

Foreword

From the moment of its demise – and that of its *Duce*, Benito Mussolini – Fascist Italy’s history has been the subject of controversy. Fierce debates still rage over the essential questions of Italian foreign policy, especially in the period after 1933, and over the manner in which it entered the Second World War: over whether Mussolini had a predetermined imperial programme that hinged on dominating the Mediterranean, which he had nursed at least since 1922 if not before, or whether he merely improvised policy according to the turns of events, and whether his forays on the European political scene after 1934 were merely the expression of a *politica del bluff* or were based on calculation – or miscalculation. Force clearly played a part in all this, and so the history of the policies pursued by the three armed forces under Fascism, and of the relationship among them and the designs of Mussolini, must lie close to the heart of any such enquiries. And yet detailed, archivally based and scholarly studies of these issues written by Italians are few and far between, and in English they have hitherto been virtually unknown. Now, at least as far as naval history is concerned, that lacuna exists no longer.

Fascist Italy was never a totalitarian state, but Mussolini’s political control over his generals and admirals was broadly secure. In Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, his chief of naval staff, he had a reliable functionary whose career outlasted that of his fellow heads of service: Cavagnari took up his post as professional head of the navy in May 1934 and remained at his desk until November 1940, when he was unseated as a result of the disaster at Taranto. As this book makes clear, Cavagnari bore a personal responsibility for a number of crucial decisions that shaped the Italian naval inventory and thus greatly influenced its fighting capabilities in 1940. A ‘battleship admiral’ with something of a fixation on Jutland, he may well have played the decisive role in blocking the construction of aircraft carriers, thereby exposing the fleet to the full consequences of the limitations of the Italian Air Force. Nor did he have any time for the *mezzi insidiosi* – human torpedoes and MAS torpedo-boats – that might have enabled Italy

to compensate for its over-all naval inferiority in the Mediterranean. His apparent ability to hold to a political view that directly conflicted with the basic postulates of the strategic planning for which he was responsible, as was the case in the spring of 1935, suggests that Cavagnari's limitations went beyond matters to do with battleships and bases.

Like many of his fellow officers, Cavagnari embodied the mixture of caution and ambition which seems to have been one of the defining characteristics of the armed forces' high command under Fascism. The reasons for caution were well founded: Italy's was always the weaker navy when confronting Great Britain – with or without France – and its geo-strategical position in the Mediterranean (mirrored by its position in the Red Sea) meant that it was confined to a sea whose exits it did not control. The consequences, laid out for the first time here in detail, were that the Italian Navy, aware of its many limitations, sought to avoid a direct confrontation with the Royal Navy at the height of the Abyssinian crisis in 1935, and again in 1939–40. As a consequence of his detailed exploration of the strategic situation during these years, Robert Mallett is able to demonstrate that the Italian Navy would almost certainly have been worsted had it fought in the summer of 1935, or at the time of the Czech crisis in the summer of 1938.

Mussolini's embrace of National Socialist Germany, presented here as the defining feature of his foreign policy from 1936 onwards – if not before – helped pose the strategic task for which the navy had to make provision but offered no tangible benefits. As a means of escaping from the coils of economic weakness and permitting Mussolini to challenge Anglo-French hegemony, it failed to provide any direct compensations, because the Germans were unwilling to enter into a substantive relationship with their Italian allies before war began. In this respect, as in others, the navy found itself facing heavy demands as a result of Mussolini's chosen course without the means to shoulder them. The result of all these factors was that, when war came into sight and the navy issued its operational directives in May 1940, a paralysis of will was reflected in a defensive posture that sought only to protect and defend Italy's position in the Central Mediterranean – the unavoidable outcome of five years in which Mussolini led and Cavagnari sought to follow as best he could.

Robert Mallett's path-breaking study of these issues will be as welcome to political and diplomatic historians as it will to specialists in naval and military affairs. His diligent research – only made possible as a result of the confidence reposed in him by the Italian naval authorities – has opened up a dimension of Italian history that has hitherto been almost entirely neglected. Our knowledge of the inner world which lay behind the facade of Fascism is the richer for it.

John Gooch

Series Editor's Preface

Fascist Italy is enjoying a revisionist renaissance. With the notable exception of MacGregor Knox's 1982 work, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939–1941*, scholars both in Italy and in the Anglo-Saxon community would have us believe that Benito Mussolini was a benign ruler, bent more on bluster than on expansion. From Renzo De Felice to Gaetano Salvemini, and from Denis Mack Smith to James Sadkovich, we are now being assured that Fascist Italy sought closer ties to Britain and France than to Germany, that it pursued no policy of imperial expansion, and that the Italian navy actually 'won' the war in the Mediterranean. In some bizarre manner, this line of argument seems to be a 'logical' counterpoint to the continuing revisionist claims that Adolf Hitler in 1941 launched a 'pre-emptive' strike against the Soviet Union in order to save Europe from 'Asian barbarism'.

Robert Mallett will have none of this. Rather, on the basis of solid research in the hitherto-classified records of the Italian naval staff at the Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare in Rome, he traces Mussolini's close ties to Adolf Hitler, the *Duce's* full-blown imperial programme, and the Italian navy's concrete and direct strategic planning against Great Britain in general and the Royal Navy in particular. Specifically, Mallett shows that on the eve of Hitler's 'seizure of power' in January 1933, Mussolini had already laid down new programmes of naval expansion designed to 'drive the British from the eastern Mediterranean'. The formation of the Rome–Berlin 'Axis' (as well as its extension to Tokyo) further stimulated Italian naval planning for war in the Mediterranean and Red Seas. By 1935, on specific orders from Mussolini, the Italian navy redirected its strategic planning away from war with France and/or Yugoslavia and towards a confrontation at sea with Britain. By the following year, it had become a central tenet of Italian planning that this war was to be conducted alongside the German navy. That the Italian navy was woefully unprepared for war in 1939 was the result of financial, material and command weaknesses – not of a lack of desire to confront Britain in the self-proclaimed *mare nostrum*.

THE ITALIAN NAVY AND FASCIST EXPANSIONISM, 1935–40

In the face of tired and unconvincing revisionist apologies, Mallett's work and conclusions are fresh and powerful: that Mussolini did in fact have a clear and predetermined programme for war against the Western powers alongside Nazi Germany; that the purpose of this war was to drive Britain and France from the Mediterranean; and that their place would be taken by a reconstituted imperial Rome in the form of a new Mediterranean and Red Sea empire. As the author shows convincingly, Mussolini's geopolitical ideas had been set by the time that he led the 'march' on Rome in 1922. It is Mallett's great contribution to have returned scholarship to that simple fact. That he has done so on the basis of a masterful mining of the Italian naval records is an added bonus.

Holger H. Herwig
Series Editor

Acknowledgements

Academic research on the diplomacy and strategic policy of Mussolini's Italy has to date suffered from the general paucity of reliable archival material. I therefore remain privileged that during my research periods in Rome over the period 1993–96, I was permitted to examine among the most important documentary evidence yet to emerge on the Fascist era.

Principally, I am most indebted to the Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare, who granted me special access to the hitherto-classified papers of the Italian naval staff. Detailed scrutiny of these documents allowed me to piece together the major developments in Italian naval policy and planning on the eve of the Second World War. The results will, I trust, demonstrate the true nature of Mussolini's relationship with Hitlerian Germany, as well as the full extent of the *Duce's* over-ambitious imperial objectives. None of this would have been possible without the support and kindness of signorina Margherita Carducci of the Italian office of defence and naval attaché, London, who paved the way for the entire research project. In turn, I am equally indebted to Admiral Renato Sicurezza and Admiral Mario Buracchia of the Ufficio Storico for their warmth, generosity and continued enthusiasm. Nor can I omit the staff of the archive itself, in particular dottoressa Ester Pennella, whose patience, understanding and good humour made many long hours of painstaking work pass so pleasurably. I also thank them for the photographic evidence contained in this book.

Rome's other archives also proved supportive. The Archivio Storico Diplomatico at the Italian foreign ministry proved to be a treasure store of invaluable diplomatic accounts of the later interwar years. I am grateful to professoressa Silvana Quadri for her help in gaining access to the archive and to dottoressa Stefania Ruggeri for patiently aiding my research. Again, I would also like to thank members of staff both at the archive and in the foreign ministry library for their warmth and expert assistance.

I might briefly mention three of Rome's other archives, where, despite the comparative brevity of my visits, support and assistance proved equally

forthcoming. The Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito kindly provided me with key documents that filled important gaps. I am especially grateful for having seen key memoranda written at the time of the Mediterranean crisis (1935–36), and for the overall Italian strategic blueprint – *PR12* – issued in March 1940. The staff of the Italian state archive – the Archivio Centrale dello Stato – readily and enthusiastically discussed my research ideas with me, and helped me to locate naval ministry papers as well as microfilmed fragments of Mussolini's personal papers. Finally, I wish to thank the Archivio del Museo Centrale del Risorgimento for their kind permission to use the private papers of Alfredo Dall'Olio, head of Mussolini's commissariat for war production.

Although in the main this book is based on Italian materials, a substantial amount of research was also undertaken in the United Kingdom. I would like to express my gratitude to the staff of the Public Record Office, London, for their helpfulness and their kindness. I am also indebted to David Brown and Gus Macalloon of the Naval Historical Branch, London, for furnishing me with Eberhard Weichold's unpublished report on 'Axis' naval policy, David Brown's stimulating paper on Malta, as well as with important primary and secondary sources. I would equally like to express my gratitude to the following institutions and individuals: the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the London School of Economics Library; the University of Bristol Library; and Philip Powell of the Imperial War Museum.

During four years' research activity many people offered important printed materials, advice, assistance with translation and much appreciated support. In wishing to keep this Preface brief, may I thank each of the following for their particular contribution to this book: Admiral Gino Birindelli, Rear-Admiral Luigi Donini, professore Mariano Gabriele, Dr Eric Grove, Professor Holger Herwig, Andrew Humphrys, Dr Elisabeth Joyce, Professor Ian Kershaw, Dr Christian Leitz, Professor MacGregor Knox, Professor Brian Sullivan, Dr Geoff Waddington, Dr John Whittam and the academic staff of the School of History at the University of the West of England, Bristol. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Professor John Gooch, who supervised the original PhD dissertation with tireless patience and effortless expertise, and has since become a highly valued friend. I offer my thanks to my parents and parents-in-law for their enthusiasm and very welcome encouragement. Finally, I express the deepest gratitude of all to my wife Jo, whose friendship and understanding helped me overcome many difficulties, and to whom this book is dedicated.

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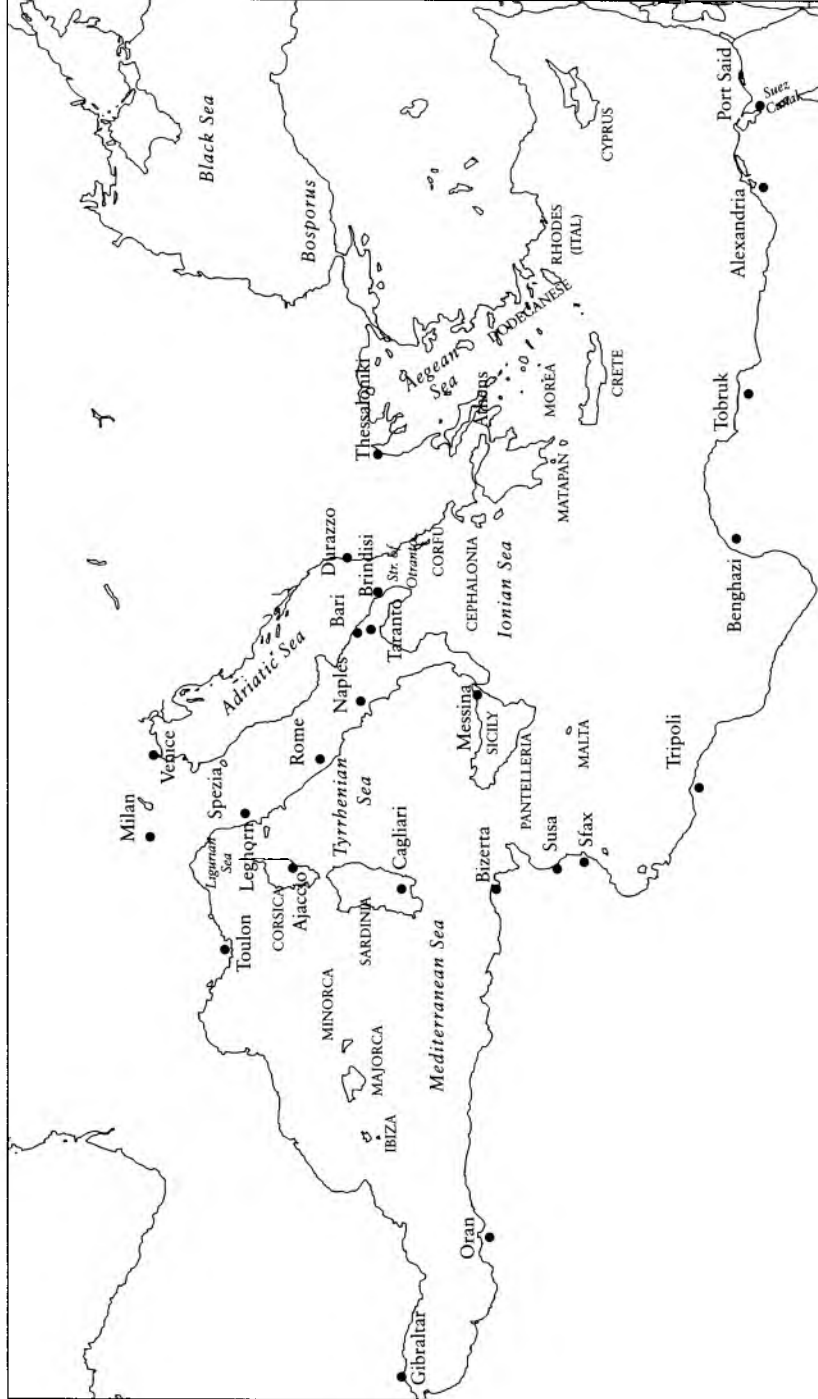
Abbreviations

ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato
APCD	<i>Atti Parlamentari – Camera dei Deputati</i>
ASMAE	Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri
B DFA	<i>British Documents on Foreign Affairs</i>
<i>Cogefag</i>	<i>Commissariato generale per le fabbricazioni di guerra</i>
DBFP	<i>Documents on British Foreign Policy</i>
DDI	<i>I documenti diplomatici italiani</i>
DGFP	<i>Documents on German Foreign Policy</i>
JAIA	Joint Allied Intelligence Agency
MAS	<i>Motoscafo Anti Sommersibile</i>
MCRR	Archivio del Museo Centrale del Risorgimento
OOBM	<i>Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
SIM	<i>Servizio Informazioni Militari</i>
SIS	<i>Servizio Informazioni Segreti</i>
SM	<i>Savoia Marchetti</i>
USMM	Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare
USSME	Ufficio Storico del Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito

Glossary of Terms

<i>Africa orientale italiana</i>	Italian East Africa
<i>Commissariato generale per le fabbricazioni di guerra</i>	General commissariat for war production
<i>Commissione suprema di difesa</i>	Supreme defence commission
<i>Direzione generale degli affari di Europa e del Mediterraneo</i>	Department of European and Mediterranean affairs (foreign ministry)
<i>Maricosom</i> (August 1935)	Naval submarine command
<i>Maricost</i>	Naval shipbuilding division
<i>Marinarmi</i>	Naval armaments division
<i>Maristat</i>	Naval staff headquarters
<i>Ministero degli Affari Esteri</i>	Foreign ministry
<i>Ministero dell'Aeronautica</i>	Air ministry
<i>Ministero dell'Africa italiana</i>	Ministry for Italian Africa
<i>Ministero della Guerra</i>	War ministry
<i>Ministero della Marina</i>	Naval ministry
<i>Ministero delle Colonie</i>	Colonial ministry
<i>Norme di Diritto Marittimo di Guerra</i>	Regulations for war at sea
<i>Regia Aeronautica</i>	Royal Italian air force
<i>Regia Marina</i>	Royal Italian navy
<i>Regio Esercito</i>	Royal Italian army
<i>Servizio Informazioni Aeronautica</i>	Italian air force intelligence
<i>Servizio Informazioni Militari</i>	Italian military intelligence
<i>Servizio Informazioni Segreti</i>	Italian naval intelligence
<i>Stato Maggiore generale</i>	Italian supreme high command
<i>Stato Maggiore della Marina</i>	Naval staff
<i>Supermarina</i> (May 1940)	Central naval command
<i>Ufficio piani d'operazioni</i>	Naval war plans office

For Jo



Map of the Key Strategic Points in the Mediterranean

Introduction

Benito Mussolini's belief that Italy should 'banish foreigners from the Mediterranean, beginning with the English', espoused at Fiume in 1919, represented much more than a mere continuum of the expansionist ideas prevalent among Italian nationalists and the post-war liberal governments that pre-dated Fascism.¹ What separated the eventual foreign policy of the Fascist regime from that of its predecessors, was its belief both in revolution at home and in war as a means of fulfilling Italy's imperial destiny. By 1925, the point at which Mussolini proclaimed his dictatorship, the *Duce* iterated that the nation should become 'fascistised' in order to ready it for the eventual confrontation with Italy's principal Mediterranean and Red Sea rivals, Britain and France. Duly, after Italy's ill-fated attempt to capture Corfu in 1923 illustrated the disparity between the British and Italian navies, Mussolini increased Italian military spending (from 2.6 per cent of the overall budget in 1923 to 5.6 per cent by 1931), while at the same time awaiting the alliance with Europe's principal continental power – Germany – which he believed would truly enable Italy to challenge for Mediterranean hegemony.²

In the past, Gaetano Salvemini and, more recently, Denis Mack Smith have offered historical assessments of Fascist foreign policy that conclude that no such predetermined imperial programme existed at all. Rather, they argue, Mussolini was simply a blustering opportunist with no clear foreign-policy aims. The interpretation offered by Mussolini's Italian biographer, Renzo De Felice, argues over various volumes that from the mid-1920s onwards the dictator sought agreement with France, and later Britain, and not alliance with Germany in order that his expansionist goals, which mirrored the traditional territorial aspirations of liberal Italy and the House of Savoy, might be secured. In pursuing a foreign policy based on the admittedly unscrupulous notion that Italy would make either one side or the other pay for Italian help, Mussolini simply mirrored the 'policy of the decisive weight' pursued by liberal administrations.³

Much of the available evidence does not support either view. On the

contrary, it suggests that Mussolini did indeed have a predetermined programme for war against the Western powers alongside Germany, a war whose ultimate objective was to wrest control of the Mediterranean from Anglo-French hands. If anything, this goal formed the basis of Mussolini's thinking even before he assumed control of Italy; at the moment that he led the march on Rome in 1922, in fact.

Examination of the geopolitical ideas prevalent within the Italian naval high command in the period immediately prior to Fascism's rise to power provide an insight into the origins of Mussolini's view – much trumpeted throughout the 1920s and 1930s – that Italy remained 'imprisoned' within the Mediterranean, and should strive to secure free access to the world's oceans. Prior to the Washington Naval Conference of 1922, the then-minister for the navy, Eugenio Bergamasco, stressed that in any war with Italy's principal Mediterranean competitor, France, the Italian strategic position would swiftly become untenable. Italy, he noted in a memorandum to Alfredo Acton, who later became the navy's chief-of-staff under Mussolini, remained reliant on sea-borne imports and in a future war would thus become a victim of any blockade imposed at Gibraltar and Suez. What Italy needed was a fleet composed of both submarines and light surface ships as well as capital ships that the navy could then pit against the enemy at a tactically favourable moment.⁴

Other naval theorists, while on the whole agreeing with this broad geopolitical prognosis, have argued that in any Mediterranean sea war one of the few options open to Italy would be that of taking control of the Sicilian Channel in an attempt to disrupt the Gibraltar–Port Said shipping route – an action which would inevitably provoke a conflict not only with the French, but the British as well. Such a struggle against the overwhelming might of the world's premier maritime nation would, from the Italian point of view, be an unthinkable prospect. Consequently, many within the navy argued that 'Italy's maritime problem could only be solved through political means'.⁵

However, the rise to power of a compatible National Socialist administration in Germany, long anticipated by Mussolini, offered the *Duce* the opportunity slowly to forge an anti-Western alliance with Adolf Hitler, which he duly did from 1935 onwards. In the meantime, the effects of the Nazi rise to power in January 1933 on Italian naval policy were all too visible; Mussolini authorised new programmes of Italian naval building designed not simply to compete with France but also to 'drive the British from the eastern Mediterranean'.⁶

The 1934 programme of naval building focused principally on expanding and modernising Italy's battleship nucleus. The *Littorio*-type battleships laid down, and the remodernisation programmes begun in October 1934, represented confirmation that those in command of the navy believed in the continuing supremacy of the capital ship. In short,

INTRODUCTION

this type of vessel represented for the naval leadership the means whereby Italy would become not simply independent of its traditional relationship with Britain, but a great sea power in its own right. Such thinking neatly meshed with Mussolini's belief that the Italian nation should shatter the chains that 'imprisoned it in its own sea', thereby securing a Mediterranean and Red Sea empire of its own.⁷

The question remained, however, of whether a battleship-heavy fleet would be the best way of striving for great power status. Expert opinion within the Italian navy remained divided. After the First World War there emerged in Italy three principal naval schools of thought, each of which challenged for control. The first, the so-called '*innovatori*' ('innovators'), argued that during the recent conflict the large surface fleets operated by the main naval powers had proved worthless in vital operations such as attacking enemy traffic and preventing offensives against native coastal areas. Furthermore, seeking a decisive naval engagement against a foe unwilling to commit its battle fleet had proved more or less impossible. Far preferable was a navy made up of light vessels and submarines supported by air units, which could then launch attacks against the enemy. A second group, the 'evolutionists', also claimed that Italy's past emphasis on the importance of the battleship had been greatly exaggerated. Yet, they by no means believed that this type of vessel had become obsolete. On the contrary, 'evolutionary' thinkers such as the renowned naval strategist Romeo Bernotti felt that new, well-protected and heavily armed capital ships should form the nucleus of a balanced fleet composed of submarines, cruisers, light surface units and aircraft carriers. Italy should also develop a naval air arm based on land.

A third and fundamentally conservative grouping, made up of senior members of the naval staff and including Admiral Thaon di Revel, hero of the Great War and Mussolini's first minister for the navy, did not believe that the days of the capital ship were over. Rather, the so-called 'die-hard' faction remained both tied to the primacy of this class of vessel and, even more significantly, in control of the navy. Certainly, they failed fully to appreciate the lessons that might have been learned from the First World War in terms of aeronaval co-operation and guerrilla tactics. Nor did the position change after Mussolini assumed the naval portfolio, indeed for all the key Italian ministries, in 1925. In August of that year he acceded to the views of his conservatively minded admirals' committee, which argued that Italy did not need aircraft carriers. Thus, a pattern was set whereby the naval high command continued more or less uninterrupted to prepare for a 'Mediterranean Jutland' which the Italian fleet would fight in the waters of the central Mediterranean. In other words, the naval leadership prepared for a decisive encounter involving the deployment of capital ships supported by land-based air units at the most propitious moment in the war.⁸

THE ITALIAN NAVY AND FASCIST EXPANSIONISM, 1935–40

Yet, even if the supremacy of the battleship remained central to the policy of the navy throughout the interwar period, one of the main problems confronting Mussolini's ambitious programme was financial. Although the Italian representatives at the Washington Conference skilfully negotiated Italian battleship parity with France, Italy's naval budget did not, as we have seen, permit construction of any new vessels of this type until the mid-1930s, partly as a consequence of the global economic downturn of 1929. Despite the belief of those in command of the navy that the battleship constituted 'no mere symbol, but real power', the Italian fleet had only four operational ships of this type, all of which dated from before the Great War. Until 1934, therefore, Italian naval estimates permitted a substantial quantitative increase in fleet strength in terms of cruisers, light surface units and submarines, but the naval ministry announced no battleship building or remodernisation programmes. Fatally, as events in 1935 and during the Second World War were to illustrate, neither had the navy satisfactorily addressed the question of air support for the fleet, at least partly owing to lack of money.⁹

By 1935, the breach with the West that Mussolini had anticipated since at least 1919 having come over the dictator's determination to conquer Ethiopia, the stage was finally set for the creation of an Italo-German alliance, the vehicle whereby Italy would challenge the 'avarice' of the leading European democracies, Britain and France. In the years that were to follow, ideas of Italian naval might and imperial expansion in the Mediterranean and Red Sea developed further as the Rome–Berlin relationship became stronger, and the Italian navy, under the stewardship of its pro-Fascist chief-of-staff, Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, expanded accordingly.¹⁰ In the first instance, this book examines the nature of Mussolini's relations with Hitler's Germany during the period 1935–40 in order to demonstrate the effects the dictator's pro-German policy were to have on naval policy and planning. Second, it examines the evolution of both Italian naval policy and planning for the anti-British and anti-French Mediterranean war which Mussolini envisaged, and ultimately assesses their overall effectiveness.

NOTES

- 1 S. Morewood, 'Anglo-Italian Rivalry in the Mediterranean and Middle East, 1935–1940', in R. Boyce and E. M. Robertson (eds), *Paths to War: New Essays on the Origins of the Second World War* (Macmillan, London, 1989), p.177; R. J. Bosworth, *Italy: The Least of the Great Powers* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979), pp. viii–ix; A. Cassels, 'Was there a Fascist Foreign Policy? Tradition and Novelty', *International History Review*, 5, 2 (1985), pp. 255–7; M. Knox, 'Il fascismo e la politica estera italiana', in R. J. Bosworth and S. Romano

INTRODUCTION

- (eds), *La politica estera italiana, 1860–1985* (Il Mulino, Bologna, 1991), pp. 288–91.
- 2 On these points see Knox, 'Il fascismo e la politica estera italiana', pp. 293–305; on the Corfu incident and the naval confrontation with Britain see J. Barros, *The Corfu Incident of 1923* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1965).
 - 3 G. Salvemini, *Mussolini Diplomatico* (Laterza, Bari, 1952); D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (Paladin, London, 1983), pp. 112–13 and p. 197. R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce, II: Lo stato totalitario, 1936–1940* (Giulio Einaudi, Turin, 1981), pp. 359–79.
 - 4 The memorandum by Bergamasco is cited in G. Bernardi, *Il disarmo navale fra le due guerre mondiali, 1919–1939* (Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare [hereafter USMM], Rome, 1975), pp. 45–8; on the navy's role in influencing foreign policy see also M. Pizzigallo, 'La Regia Marina e il petrolio: un lungimirante progetto del 1919', *Rivista Marittima*, 109, 10 (1976), p. 62.
 - 5 M. Gabriele, *Operazione C3: Malta* (USMM, Rome, 1965), p. 7.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10. On Mussolini's need of a German alliance to fulfil his Mediterranean ambitions see J. Petersen's seminal *Hitler e Mussolini: la difficile alleanza* (Laterza, Bari, 1975), pp. 434–44.
 - 7 W. Polastro, 'La Marina Militare italiana nel primo dopoguerra, 1918–1925', *Il Risorgimento*, 3 (1977), pp. 154–5. By 1926 the dictator's notion of his country's imperial destiny, and the navy's concept of Italy as a powerful maritime nation, had become welded into a much-quoted and powerfully succinct geopolitical axiom underlined by him for his service chiefs in the autumn of that year: 'A nation which does not have free access to the sea cannot be considered a free nation; a nation which does not have free access to the oceans cannot be considered a Great Power; Italy must become a Great Power', cited in B. R. Sullivan, 'A Fleet in Being: The Rise and Fall of Italian Sea Power, 1861–1943', *International History Review*, 10, 1 (1988), p. 115.
 - 8 Polastro, 'La Marina Militare italiana', pp. 129–33 and, on the pre-eminence of the conservative naval faction, pp. 153–5; L. Ceva, *Le forze armate* (Unione Tipografico Editrice Torinese [UTET], Turin, 1981), pp. 200–1. The author is grateful to Professor Brian Sullivan for letting him have a copy of his pre-publication paper on renowned Italian naval thinker and strategist admiral Romeo Bernotti, which discusses the question of the Italian naval and air support. Henceforward, B. R. Sullivan, 'Introduction', in R. Bernotti, *Fundamentals of Naval Tactics and Fundamentals of Naval Strategy* (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1998), p. 23. See also Bernardi, *Il disarmo navale*, pp. 272–3; G. Rochat, *Italo Balbo: aviatore e ministro dell'Aeronautica, 1926–1933* (Italo Bovolenta Editore, Ferrara, 1979), p. 91; A. Santoni, 'La mancata risposta della Regia Marina alle teorie del Douhet', in *La figura e l'opera di Giulio Douhet* (Società di Storia Patria, Caserta, 1988), pp. 258–9.
 - 9 On the Italian success at Washington *vis-à-vis* capital ship parity with the French see Bernardi, *Il disarmo navale*, pp. 70–3; J. Blatt, 'The Parity that Meant Superiority: French Naval Policy towards Italy at the Washington Naval Conference, 1921–22, and Interwar French Foreign Policy', *French Historical Studies*, 12, 2 (1981); B. R. Sullivan, 'Italian Naval Power and the Washington Disarmament Conference of 1921–1922', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 4, 3 (1993). On the Italian inability to commission new ships see Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare (hereafter USMM), *La Marina italiana durante la seconda guerra mondiale. XXI: L'organizzazione della Marina durante il conflitto, tomo I – efficienza all'apertura delle ostilità*, (Rome, 1972), p. 20. A. Fraccaroli, *Italian Warships of World War II* (Ian Allan, Shepperton, 1968).

THE ITALIAN NAVY AND FASCIST EXPANSIONISM, 1935–40

- 10 Knox, 'Il fascismo e la politica estera italiana', p. 304. After the Second World War Cavagnari categorically denied that the navy had ever considered or planned for an anti-British war in the Mediterranean and Red Sea. See, D. Cavagnari, 'La Marina nella vigilia e nel primo periodo della guerra', *Nuova Antologia*, 357 (1947), p. 374. This fundamental political and strategic premise also underpins the more recent work of James Sadkovich. Sadkovich confidently argues that 'during the years prior to 1936, the RMI [the *Regia Marina italiana*] had precluded war with England, assuming that it would have to face only France ... Even after 1936, there was no reason to believe that war with Britain was imminent, nor even probable.' This view is totally erroneous. Sadkovich ignores the substantial evidence to the contrary, including the published accounts of the Cavagnari–Raeder conversations of June 1939, in which the two men discussed the forthcoming 'Axis' war against Britain and France, and which Sadkovich himself cites. J. J. Sadkovich, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1994), p. 5, pp. 11–12 and p. 17.

Crisis in the Mediterranean

The established view that Fascism's recourse to war over the question of Italian claims in East Africa followed – and resulted from – socio-economic decline at home has been challenged from two principal directions.¹ On the one hand, historians have interpreted Mussolini's decision as forming part of a longer-term ambition to conquer Ethiopia – and for that matter an Italian Mediterranean and Red Sea empire dating from at least 1919 – which by 1925 he had identified as a clear objective.² On the other, it has been suggested that Italy's position within the European balance of power explains the logic of the dictator's motives. In short, Mussolini calculated that he could conquer Abyssinia, the limit of his colonial aspirations, with only minimal opposition from Britain and France, and before a rearmed Germany threatened Austria. Afterwards, Italy might then return to its traditionally pro-British and anti-German foreign policy.³

A third school of thought argues that attributing single causal factors to Mussolini's reasoning does not adequately explain his rationale. Politico-economic realities played their part, but so too did pressure from certain sections of Italy's ruling class, who believed in overseas expansion. Only when the international configuration favoured it – and when the extent of Italy's economic crisis suggested that territorial aggrandisement might relieve pressure at home – did he take the decision to attack.⁴

As has been exhaustively documented, Mussolini's decision to annex Haile Selassie's East African empire brought Italy to the verge of war with Britain. The strategic dimensions of the resulting Anglo-Italian crisis over 1935–36 were such that any possible confrontation between the two powers would primarily involve the Italian navy. Thus, study of the naval high command's planning to meet this potential conflict offers an additional perspective on the evolution and nature of Mussolini's policy between January and September 1935, the eve of the Italian assault on the Ethiopian empire. In other words, analysis of the navy's role both before and during the Mediterranean crisis permits an assessment of the correlation between the dictator's foreign policy and Italian strategic

planning, while at the same time allowing an examination of the naval dimension of the crisis in the Mediterranean.

Interpretations of the strategic balance in the Mediterranean during 1935–36 have resulted in sharply divided opinion. British global over-extension, and London's consequent reluctance to countenance hostilities with Italy, for fear of incurring losses in an albeit victorious war, have formed the basis for a number of important studies. Recently, although agreeing with this broad view, Steven Morewood has maintained that Britain's regional commanders were far from pessimistic about their prospects given the genuine weaknesses of the Italian armed forces, which if engaged would not have offered any serious challenge to British military capability.⁵

Others argue that Britain was in fact in no position to win a bilateral Mediterranean conflict in 1935, and faced the real possibility of defeat at the hands of Italian armed forces, particularly as the Royal Navy remained vulnerable to submarine and air attack. This thesis has recently evolved into a notion of Italy's being able to exploit British debility to coerce London into moderating its political opposition to the conquest of Abyssinia.⁶

This chapter tests Renzo De Felice's thesis that Mussolini planned limited colonial expansion following agreement with Paris and London, and ordered Italian operational planning merely as a precaution against British aggression during the summer of 1935. It also questions the argument that Italian military planning simply constituted an attempt to bolster a diplomatic policy that aimed to 'coerce' Britain into a political agreement. Finally, the nature and capabilities of Italian naval and air power will also be addressed. Analysis of Italian policy here turns on two issues: the extent of Mussolini's awareness of the naval implications of an aggressive, expansionist Mediterranean policy; and the likely effectiveness of the operational planning that emerged. This chapter will argue that Mussolini had planned to conquer Ethiopia militarily as a whole – even if doing so met with London's opposition and resulted in an Italo-British war, which the Italian naval high command appeared reluctant to contemplate. It will subsequently support the argument that in the crisis with Britain that resulted, the Italian naval and air threat was far less serious than had been considered at the time.

The Background to the Mediterranean Crisis

The root causes of the Italo-Abyssinia war pre-dated the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini by some 25 years. Italian attempts at colonial expansion in East Africa had led to a war with Abyssinia in 1895, after the initial landings in the Red Sea in early 1885. The outcome of this

CRISIS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

conflict saw the Ethiopian armies, under the command of Emperor Menelik, resoundingly defeat the Italians at the battle of Adowa in 1896. Thereafter the territory remained the only African nation free of European colonisers, while the Italians nurtured a simmering desire for revenge for what they regarded as a national humiliation.⁷

The belief that Italy should 'avenge' Adowa in order to restore national pride eventually developed into a stock-in-trade of the Fascist government, for whom inherited notions of colonial expansion and imperialism were central tenets. As early as 1919, Mussolini evoked a new Italian Mediterranean hegemony by announcing at Fiume that 'the first thing to be done is to banish foreigners from the Mediterranean beginning with the English'. By the time he assumed power in 1922, the idea that Italy remained 'imprisoned' within its own sea, whose doors were Gibraltar and Suez, was an established component of the *Duce's* geopolitical thinking.⁸

The Ethiopian empire offered one avenue for the realisation of Mussolini's expansionist goals. A successful Italian conquest would at one and the same time serve to 'coalesce' the Italian population into a 'cohesive' national unit, while simultaneously illustrating that 'proletarian' Italy now demanded its place in the world alongside the 'rich nations'. Similarly, it would also mark the first step in Italy's 'march to the oceans'. From 1925 onwards, the idea of establishing an imperial foothold in East Africa took root. By 1932, Emilio De Bono, the minister for colonies, had already begun concrete planning for possible offensive operations against Abyssinia. At the end of December 1934, Mussolini issued his famous directive ordering the 'destruction of the Abyssinian armed forces and the total conquest of Ethiopia'. Over the year that followed, and despite claims that he was prepared to negotiate with Paris and London over Italian claims in East Africa, Mussolini pursued a policy that never lost sight of these specific aims.⁹

The general political and strategic situation in Europe, as well as the balance of forces within Italy itself, influenced Mussolini's decision as to the timing of his planned colonial war. After issuing instructions in February 1934 for the planning of a war of conquest against Abyssinia in 1935, the dictator secured at least the initial support of the colonial ministry, the navy and air force, as well as important elements within the ministry of foreign affairs, by promising to avenge the defeat at Adowa. Then, with French fears of a newly resurgent German Reich plainly in evidence – fears fuelled throughout 1933 by Adolf Hitler's rearmament demands and Germany's departure from both the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference – Mussolini obtained from Pierre Laval, the French foreign minister, a clear 'free hand' in East Africa in return for the promise of Italian support in maintaining Austrian independence.¹⁰

Although the government in Rome did not feel altogether immune

from the threat of German revisionism, and especially so after the attempted Nazi coup in Austria in July 1934, which effectively poisoned Italo-German relations until well into 1935, Mussolini was very much alive to the possibilities Nazi revanchism offered him. Even before assuming power in 1922, he believed that the ‘avarice of the Western powers’ would inevitably push Italy into an eventual alliance with Germany. In subsequent years, Mussolini regularly stressed that Italy’s moment of destiny, at which point it would become a world power, would come only when a new powerful and politically sympathetic German state arose from the ashes of the Weimar Republic. By late 1934 that moment was fast approaching.¹¹

Yet, on the eve of his Ethiopian campaign, it better suited the dictator’s purposes to exploit Franco-British fears of Hitler’s Reich than openly seek alliance with Berlin. In the first instance, such a policy would forestall any unchecked growth in German continental hegemony, which could create much internal alarm within Italy and hence jeopardise the Ethiopian venture. Second, it would secure French and British approval of his colonial plans in return for supposed Italian support against Germany. Put simply, Italy could not risk a war in Africa without French backing, which might in turn help convince the British, who, even if against Italian expansionism on the continent of Africa, remained unlikely to act alone.¹²

That Mussolini’s eventual agreements with Laval directly helped shape events in the Mediterranean and East Africa later in 1935 seems beyond doubt. The accords, concluded between 4 and 8 January of that year, covered a range of issues of interest to both countries, including Italian rights in Tunisia and new territorial arrangements in Libya and in Eritrea, one of Italy’s two existing East African territories.

But the pivotal decisions reached between the two men were those concerning joint consultation in the event of a German threat to Austrian independence, and the connected question of an Italian programme of colonial expansion in Ethiopia. Scholars have argued that Laval, eager to secure Italian support against Germany, offered Mussolini freedom of action in Ethiopia, which the French foreign minister later claimed had never extended as far as direct military intervention. Mussolini, on the other hand, deliberately or otherwise, chose to assume that France really would support Italy, and expressed anger at the French decision to join in the imposition of League sanctions later that year. More recently, historians have argued that in any case Mussolini regarded the Italo-French agreement as merely temporary. Having already privately stated his intention of establishing closer relations with Berlin once the accords with Laval had served their purpose, he informed De Bono that Ethiopia was but the first stage in a greater imperial design. There is much to be said for this argument. Outward Italian enthusiasm for the joint military agreements that followed the political ones lasted only until the successful

CRISIS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

occupation of Abyssinia in May 1936. At that point there were already 'some early signs of an Italo-German *rapprochement*'.¹³

So much for the political and diplomatic background to the Italo-Ethiopian war. But what of the naval policy being formulated by Rome at this critical juncture? In the period that immediately followed the rise to power of German National Socialism, the ideas of a new era of Italian naval power and imperial might were to move a step closer towards realisation. Over the years 1933–34 the primary importance of the battleship within the thinking of the naval staff was confirmed. In October 1933 the naval ministry announced that it planned radically to remodernise two of its four ageing battleships – the *Conte di Cavour* and the *Giulio Cesare* – originally laid down in 1910. The following month Admiral Gino Ducci, the naval chief-of-staff, issued the first of a series of memoranda for Mussolini on the question of future naval building. The current estimates, he began, amounted to some 855 million lire, of which 300 million should be allocated to additional remodernisation programmes for Italy's two other battleships, the *Andrea Doria* and the *Caio Duilio*. The remainder of the budget should go towards construction of a new class of battleship. The rationale behind the naval staff's thinking was clear:

The factors which justify our demands for new naval construction amounting to 555 million lire are based on the (extensive) shortages in certain types of ships currently being faced by our navy, and in particular shortages which become all too apparent when the Italian fleet is compared with that fleet – the French – which it is assumed will be our most likely future adversary.

Apart from a total absence of modern capital ships, Ducci added, the navy also lacked vessels 'considered vital in the defence of national communications in time of war'. Both questions should be addressed without delay. By March 1934, after sustained pressure from the new under-secretary of state for the navy, the avowedly pro-Fascist Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, and in view of the fact that the French had laid down the *Dunkerque* class in 1932, the navy had its way and Mussolini allowed work on two new 35,000 ton ships – the *Littorio* and the *Vittorio Veneto* – to begin immediately. Building started in October of that year, while work also began on a new programme to expand the submarine arm.¹⁴

However, the policy direction being taken by the naval high command during 1934 did not, of course, mirror the foreign policy being pursued by Mussolini, who, by early 1935, had concluded a political and military agreement with the French. Nevertheless, Domenico Cavagnari, by now chief-of-staff as well as under-secretary at the naval ministry, expressed himself in full agreement with the dictator's policy, and on 15 January