MUSSOLINI IN ETHIOPIA, 1919–1935

The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War

ROBERT MALLETT

Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935

Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935 looks in detail at the evolution of the Italian Fascist regime's colonial policy within the context of European politics and the rise to power of German National Socialism. It delves into the tortuous nature of relations between the National Fascist Party and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), while demonstrating how, ultimately, a Hitler-led Germany proved the best mechanism for overseas Italian expansion in East Africa. The book assesses the emergence of an ideologically driven Fascist colonial policy from 1931 onwards and how this eventually culminated in a serious clash of interests with the British Empire. Benito Mussolini's successful flouting of the League of Nations' authority heralded a new dark era in world politics and continues to have its resonance in today's world.

Robert Mallett is an experienced academic researcher and author of six books on Fascist foreign and strategic policy, ideology and political religion theory. He has researched, taught and presented papers at the Universities of UWE Bristol, Hanyang, Seoul, Leeds, Cambridge, Birmingham, Wisconsin Madison, CUNY, Rome La Sapienza and the United States Naval Academy. He founded and edited the political science journal and book series *Totalitarianism Movements and Political Religions* (now *Politics, Religion and Ideology*) and organised major international conferences in the United States, South Korea, Italy and the United Kingdom. He has appeared on various radio and television programmes.

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For Jo, Ruby and Eleanor

Also for Geoffrey Warner, Steven Morewood and Stanley Payne

Great empires are not maintained by timidity.

– Tacitus

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Post-War Realities

Italy 1919

The Great War exerted a profound influence on Italy and Italian society. The post-war peace in particular helped to foment an atmosphere of national resentment and frustrated great power ambitions, and this in time gave rise to the era of Mussolini and *fascismo*. For in truth the pre-war Nationalist and left-interventionist dreams of a united and geopolitically successful Italy failed to materialise after the 1915–1918 war had ended. Instead, Italy fell victim to the post-war recession, a seemingly incurable domestic political malaise and a far from satisfactory peace settlement. The Great War had not 'made Italians' as the Nationalists had so eagerly anticipated in 1914. Rather, *La patria* remained as bitterly divided and at war with itself as ever.

The outcome of the post-war peace settlement did much to seal Italy's fate and paved the way for the later excesses of the Fascist regime in the field of foreign affairs, and ultimately disastrous overseas military policies. In 1919 Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando and Foreign Minister Sonnino arrived in Paris for the peace conference expecting Italy's allies to agree to all of the territorial handovers tabled by the *Entente* at the time of the Treaty of London in 1915. But instead, once at the peace conference, the two men were forced to contend with a new factor in international politics: the 'principled' approach of US President Woodrow Wilson based on his own Fourteen Points, effectively a new code of conduct governing international affairs which he had first set out in his speech to the US Congress in January 1918. Famously, Wilson worked tirelessly in Paris to introduce important new ethical innovations into international politics such as the 'self-determination' of individual peoples and a global security organisation, the League of Nations, which, while commendable in itself, was not to stand the test of time, largely because the US Senate failed to ratify the Versailles Treaty. At the Paris conference itself much of the work on delineating and agreeing the minutiae of the settlement was undertaken by specially convened committees, with the major decisions being taken

by a five-power directorate made up of Great Britain, France, the United States, Japan and Italy. In reality, Sonnino and Orlando secured a good measure of the territory agreed upon by the various Treaty of London signatories in 1915. The majority of the Italian gains came, as had been foreseen, from the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with the Istrian peninsula, the Trentino and the mostly German-speaking South Tyrol all becoming Italian possessions. Likewise, Trieste, for which the Italian armies in the Isonzo had of course been fighting between 1915 and 1918, became an Italian-controlled city, while northern Dalmatia was another concession secured by Sonnino and Orlando. But Wilson made it very clear to the two Italian statesmen that this was as far as he was prepared to go. He refused to agree to Italian claims on additional territory in Dalmatia, which he was determined should form part of the new state of Yugoslavia, and poured even more derision on the Italian demands for Fiume, the former Austro-Hungarian port on the Croatian coast.

Much has been made of these Italian failures, and more specifically those of Orlando, to secure the fully agreed terms of the Treaty of London at Versailles. Likewise, the fact that the outcome of the peace conference resulted in a widespread sense of failure within Italy, a sense of a 'mutilated victory' in fact, has also been laid at the door of the negotiating team. But, of course, the situation in Paris was rather more complicated than this. The real problem for Orlando and Sonnino was that the world of international politics had changed markedly between 1915 and 1919. The *realpolitik* approach that had underpinned the decisions of all of the signatories of the London agreement had been swept away by principles governed by Wilson's famous 'Fourteen Points', an attempt to create a new, open and accountable international political environment out of the secret diplomacy of old. The Italian demands tabled in Paris, or more especially those that pertained to territories designated for the new Yugoslav state, therefore collided headlong with the new Wilsonian concept of self-determination. Fiume, which had not even been included in the London agreement, was now destined to fall under Belgrade's direct control and not that of Rome. But the real bone of contention for Orlando, Sonnino, the Italian Nationalist factions and many parts of the wider population was that Wilson's prevailing ideas also prohibited any future Italian claims against Turkey or former German colonies in Africa. The Italian government was therefore left with a settlement based on a truncated version of its 1915 treaty with the *Entente*, and it was forced to accept that any plans to pursue territorial expansion would be met by the opposition of the British and French, de facto the predominant powers in the League of Nations, and therefore in world affairs.

Within Italy, the reaction to the Versailles settlement was, hardly surprisingly, less than enthusiastic. The Italian Nationalist Association rounded on Sonnino and Orlando and condemned them as weak failures that had brought shame and ignominy upon Italy, together with a botched victory that failed to justify Italy's participation in the war. The wider population, affected by the ending of wartime production and wartime wage levels, suffered badly in

the subsequent economic slump, leading to widespread resentment and political volatility. In June 1919, when Orlando and Sonnino left office in virtual disgrace, the new government of Francesco Nitti found itself contending with much serious social unrest over the outcome of the Paris peace conference and the very poor state of the Italian economy. The Nationalists and a good part of the Italian population deeply resented what they viewed as Wilson's self-righteous posturing at Versailles and were profoundly angered that Britain and France had used the conference to strengthen their own global imperial positions, and especially in the Mediterranean Sea of which they were now virtually the masters. But there was little that Nitti felt he could do about the current realities of Italian geopolitics, especially given that Italy remained reliant on the Allied powers for loans and staple raw materials such as coal. Labelled a 'coward' by right-wing poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, Nitti hardly improved his standing with the Italian right by his slashing of the military budget.[1]

The following September, right-wing militancy reared its head decisively and heralded what was to be a new pattern in Italian politics, namely the emergence of a strident and revolutionary form of right-wing nationalism. D'Annunzio and a band of Italian army deserters and mutineers punctuated by a smattering of anarchists, syndicalists, futurists and Nationalists converged upon the city of Fiume and 'captured' it for Italy. D'Annunzio and his 'legionaries' acted very much as the prototypes for the Fascist movement that was slowly taking shape in the turbulent Italy of 1919. He established the Fiume League, an anti–League of Nations movement, thereby echoing the sentiments of many right-wing Italians as regards the new ideas of collective security enshrined by Wilson's new vision of the world. But d'Annunzio's fifteen-month spell in command of Fiume also came to symbolise far more of what was wrong with contemporary Italy and, more importantly, how these ills could be remedied. The *Commandante*, as he was known, developed a new kind of mass politics, a system of corporations to run the economy and the sense that vigour and risk-taking were now needed if Italy were ever to find its international 'place in the sun'.

THE RISE OF THE *FASCI ITALIANI DI COMBATTIMENTO*

It fell to Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini, the son of a left-wing activist from Italy's Emiglia Romagna region, to spread the appeal of revolutionary nationalism within Italy during those turbulent post-war years. At the time Mussolini was invalided out of the Italian army following a mortar explosion on 23rd February 1917 that left him with over forty shrapnel wounds; he remained at least outwardly bound to what was left of interventionist Socialism, indeed the Socialist idea in general. His newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, loudly proclaimed the initial February Bolshevik uprising as 'The Victorious Russian Revolution

[1] H. J. Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period* (Praeger, London, 1997), pp. 3–7.

Against the Reactionary Germanophiles' across its front pages, and once he had recovered, Mussolini, too, spoke in glowing terms of Lenin and his 'liberation' of the Russian people.[2]

But despite his glowing accolades for Lenin and his revolutionary vanguard, between August 1914 and the latter months of 1917 Mussolini had undergone a gradual ideological transformation. The true nature and, for that matter, the time frame of this important change in the young ideologue's perspective have influenced key scholarship on the origins and nature of Fascism by, among others, Stanley Payne and Renzo De Felice. De Felice makes use of Mussolini's published output in *Il Popolo d'Italia* to show that until the Battle of Caporetto in October 1917, he remained closely connected to Socialist ideology and only transformed his views as a result of the Italian rout that ensued on the Isonzo front.[3] Stanley Payne, on the other hand, sees Mussolini's transformation from pro-interventionist Socialism to Nationalism as being much more immediate and a product of the Great War experience as a whole. Mussolini believed the war to have 'given many Italians a new sense of national identity and pride', and came to view his main goal as creating a movement that was at the same time Socialistic and Nationalistic. This, Mussolini claimed, was the only way to finally unite all Italians along not only provincial but also class lines.[4]

In reality, Mussolini's was a steady transition from internationalism through pro-interventionism into an increasingly revolutionary Nationalistic political outlook. Certainly he watched with great interest, if not outright envy, as Russia's revolutionaries made use of the turbulence generated by a war Tsarist Russia had lost to bring about seismic political change at home, the very aspiration which Mussolini and the left interventionists had been expressing since 1914. But as the war drew to its close, Italy had moved no nearer its own left-wing revolution and Mussolini, for one, had to consider new potential routes to political power, by now his predominant objective in life. Among these routes the pursuit of Italian imperialism and greater geopolitical influence became future goals that he believed could best be achieved by a united and focused Italian nation, and a nation imbued with a clear vision of its own destiny. By 1916 and 1917 that destiny, for Mussolini, lay in securing control of and dominating the Trento-Tyrol regions to 'block the path of a German invasion for all time', but also in ensuring complete Italian control of the Adriatic through the annexation of Dalmatia.[5]

By 1917 Mussolini's strong conviction that Italy should secure all of the territories agreed upon by the Treaty of London – in fact rather more than

[2] *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* (*OOBM*), VIII, 'Cartelle Clinique' (La Fenice, Florence, 1951) p. 277; R. De Felice, *Mussolini Rivoluzionario* (Einaudi, Turin, 1965), p. 345.

[3] R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Rivoluzionario, 1883–1920* (Einaudi, Turin, 1974) 392 ff.

[4] S. G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1996), p. 87.

[5] *OOBM*, IX, 'Il terreno dell'intesa Italo-serba', p. 269.

had been agreed with the *Entente* in 1915 – began to assume a decidedly anti-Yugoslav if not anti-British tenor. In a number of key articles in *Il Popolo d'Italia* Mussolini moved from taking a conciliatory line between the excessive territorial demands of the Italian Nationalists and those of their Yugoslav counterparts, at this time attempting to map out the geography of their new, post-war country, to one where he directly accused the British press of attempting to deny any of Italy's claims in the Adriatic.[6] Flexing his nationalistic muscles, Mussolini refuted the arguments of Yugoslavia's future leaders that key urban areas such as Gorizia and Trieste had predominantly Slav populations and roundly denounced their assertions that Italy had no rights whatsoever in the wider Adriatic region. Gorizia did have a predominantly Italian population even if the Yugoslavs and their friends attempted to deny it, Mussolini emphasised. And 'Trieste would become Italian', he added, refuting the view from London that Yugoslav control of the city would mean that it could never fall into German hands. Responding to what he regarded as a clear British slight, Mussolini stressed that 'Italy would deal with this and deal with it well', wondering in conclusion what the government in Rome were doing to challenge and refute such ridiculous claims.

The failings of the Italian ruling class to resolve the resurgent and pronounced divisions within Italian society, together with Orlando's and Sonnino's poor handling of the Paris negotiations, contributed directly to the rallying of the various 'patriotic' movements in Italy. Just as had been the case in 1914, when an eclectic band of ideologues first formed their interventionist *fascio*, now once again a new force was born in Italian politics, the *Fasci italiani di combattimento*. Founded on 23rd March 1919 at a meeting in the *Piazza San Sepulcro* in Milan, the new 'antiparty', as Mussolini baptised it, promised to abandon the sterility and inflexibility of conventional politics in favour of a perpetual and violent revolution aimed at overturning the ruling order in Italy. Mussolini left his audience in no doubt that this ideological revolution would extend to Italy's overseas policies, and would be highly nationalistic and imperialistic in nature. As he put it during his inaugural speech as leader, 'Imperialism is the fundamental basis of life for every people that aims to expand economically and spiritually', a sentiment he was to express even more clearly in *The Doctrine of Fascism* many years later. Clearly Mussolini's conversion to an extreme form of Italian nationalism was pretty much complete. He wanted to see an Italy that was strong, united and vibrant, and not one, as he put it, whose 40 million inhabitants remained locked within geographical boundaries that barely contained enough land for agriculture and industry. As the leader of the *Fasci* elaborated with stark clarity, Italy's land mass of 287,000 square kilometres paled in comparison with the 55 million of the British Empire and the 15 million of the French Empire. So why was Italy denied the fruits of empire

[6] *OOBM*, VIII, 'Italia, Serbia e Dalmazia', pp. 260–264; *OOBM*, IX, 'Megalomania Jugoslava', pp. 38–41.

by Woodrow Wilson's selective use of 'self-determination'? Why had Wilson created the League of Nations if its main purpose was to be 'a solemn con trick on the part of the wealthy nations played out against the proletarian nations'?[7]

Over the course of some five years, a modified and transformed version of Benito Mussolini had begun to emerge. The 'new' Mussolini still regarded himself as an outsider, and a man who continued to believe fundamentally in the need for wholesale political and social upheaval in Italy. But now the nature of his ideological convictions had patently shifted away from internationalist Socialism towards revolutionary nationalism. His own changing beliefs altered the intrinsic nature of the domestic revolution he believed to be so necessary for his country's future place in the world. Although he had once been closely bound to the left-wing revolutionary ideas of Emilia Romagna, his birthplace, and in particular to his father's brand of populist, anarchic Socialism, now his world view had changed as a consequence of the Great War experience. Certainly Mussolini remained characteristically individualistic, solitary and aggressive in spirit, as well as instinctively intolerant of any form of discipline and imposed order. However, while he rejected external authority comprehensively, he now viewed the future of the Italian revolution as best directed by a nationalist élite which, led by him, would mobilise the masses and sweep away those decaying socially conservative institutions – the Church, the Monarchy, the democratic parliamentary process and so on – that were, in his opinion, holding Italy back. By March 1919 Mussolini was determined that the Great War and Italy's war dead would not constitute a target for the opprobrium and derision of Italian Socialism, and he vowed that his new movement would 'Defend the dead. All of the dead', at no matter what cost.[8] This was to be one of many axioms assumed by the *fascio*, which Mussolini used to unite all former interventionists, ex-soldiers, nationalists and syndicalists, making them the vanguard of the new Italy to come. Led by him, Benito Mussolini, these men would attempt to create an entirely new type of imperialistic mass society, indeed a wholly new form of civilisation that would wholeheartedly reject the old order, at home and abroad.

[7] *OOBM*, XII, 'Atto di nascita del Fascismo', p. 323.

[8] *OOBM*, XII, 'Contro la bestia ritornante', pp. 231–233; B. Mussolini, *La mia vita* (Rizzoli, Milan, 1999), p. 70.

2

A Mutilated Peace

Italy, 1919–1929

THE NEW ITALY

Italy's participation in the Great War yielded a degree of the territorial expectations that stemmed from the 1915 Treaty of London, although the final peace terms resulted in considerable ill feeling from many within the Italian society. Many, such as the Italian Nationalists, criticised the failure of Italy's political leadership to secure the full extent of the concessions originally agreed upon by Great Britain and France and pressed home demands for greater Italian influence in the south-eastern regions of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea itself.[1] The immediate post-war premierships of both Francesco Nitti (1919–1920) and Giovanni Giolitti (1920–1921) were characterised by a rising tide of resentment and hostility against Italy's 'mutilated victory'. Nationalists, left-interventionists, other political militants and many within the mainstream Italian society openly condemned what they saw as Woodrow Wilson's self-righteous and sanctimonious attitude towards Italy at Versailles. They spoke out strongly against the manner in which Great Britain and France had, as many in Italy saw it, used the peace conference to strengthen their own global empires and the way in which they now dominated the new experiment in international peace keeping, the League of Nations.[2] Mussolini, by mid-1919 an important voice within the ranks of the extreme Nationalist right, was among the most vocal of all critics. In a speech given at the most controversial of all venues, Fiume, in May 1919, he openly declared that eventually this new world order would be challenged vigorously by a more militant Italy of the future:

[1] M. Knox, 'Fascism and Italian Foreign Policy', in Knox, *Common Destiny* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 115–117.

[2] M. Clark, *Modern Italy 1871–1982* (Longmans, London, 1985) p. 204.

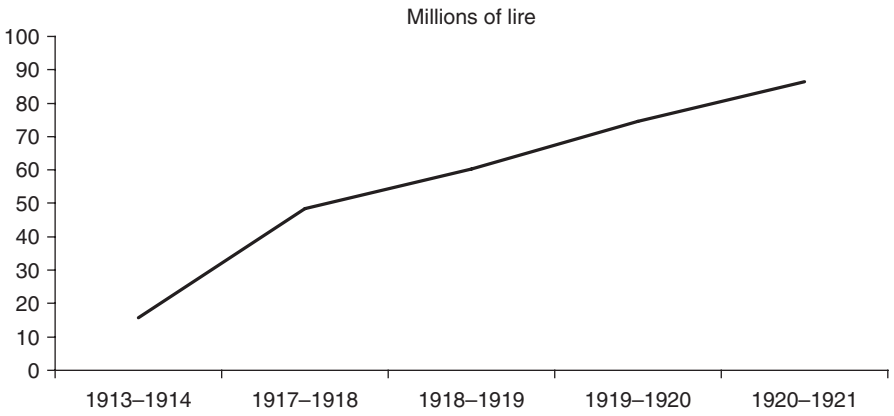

FIGURE 2.1. Italian national debt: 1913 to 1921.
Source: F. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche, volume I* (Milan, Garzanti, 1953), p. 44.

Italy's hour has not yet rung, but fate decrees that it surely will. The Italy of Vittorio Veneto feels the irresistible attraction of the Mediterranean which will itself open the way to Africa. A two thousand year old tradition calls Italy to the shores of the black continent whose venerated relics are reminders of the Roman Empire.[3]

Such statements were only too easy in the desperate political, economic and social climate of early 1920s Italy. Yet any attempt at challenging the Versailles status quo as Mussolini and others suggested, not to mention confronting Anglo–French dominion over the coveted lands of the Mediterranean and Africa, would mean significantly strengthening Italy's economic position in order to rebuild and totally modernise the Italian armed forces. Such wealth in those first years after the Great War was not only non-existent but also wholly unlikely to materialise in the foreseeable future. Italian governments had borrowed heavily to finance a war that had offered up such modest territorial returns and, as a consequence, the budget deficit had risen from 2.9 billion lire for the financial year 1914 to 1915, to 23.3 billion lire for 1918–1919. Reckless and unlimited government borrowing meanwhile took the Italian national debt to catastrophic levels rising from 15.8 billion lire in 1914 to 86.5 billion lire by 1919 (Figure 2.1). The entire Italian economic situation was already precarious when it became clear that neither the Nitti nor the Giolitti government had the first idea about making the tricky transition from wartime to peacetime economic conditions. Nationalists and various key Italian industrialists argued strongly in favour of keeping strict wartime controls over economic life in place, believing that Italian industry could never compete in an entirely free market economy. But the politicians disagreed and the wartime regulations were removed, leaving Italy at the mercy of the volatile international markets.

[3] *OOBM*, XIII, 'L'Adriatico e il Mediterraneo', p. 143.

The effects might easily have been predicted. Major Italian companies such as the shipbuilder Ansaldo and munitions producer Ilva went out of business by the end of 1921, as did various key banks along with Lloyd Mediterraneo, the shipping firm. Male unemployment, especially among former conscript soldiers, climbed to two million by early 1920, inflation rose steeply and the value of the lire fell from 30 to the pound sterling in March 1919 to 50 in December of that same year. Middle class savings were totally wiped out as were the wages and pensions of many public sector employees. Even Fiat, Italy's biggest and best known commercial enterprise, was beginning to feel the pressure of the economic squeeze by 1921.[4]

Not all the blame for Italy's worsening economic situation between 1919 and 1921 could be placed on governmental incompetence and mismanagement however. International overproduction in both the agrarian and industrial sectors had led to saturated markets and to greater unemployment in other parts of Europe as well as in the United States and Latin America in the immediate post-war period. Moreover, the principal victors of the Great War, Great Britain and France, equally felt the economic strain, both being deeply indebted to the United States to the tune of $4,600 million and $3,405 million respectively.[5] But it was in Italy that the tough and unrelenting economic climate generated widespread and sustained social unrest, thereby creating the ideal conditions for revolutionary right-wing nationalism to flourish and present itself as the only political force now capable of saving Italy from the threat of a Bolshevik style revolution. In 1919, around one million workers went on strike in Italy and still more stayed away from work throughout the following year, during a period of serious industrial and agrarian disruption known famously as the *biennio rosso*. Trade union membership rose dramatically, and food riots and factory lockouts became widespread as Italy descended into a vortex of violence and political militancy for which the government had no immediate answer. When the Giolitti administration attempted to buy off popular working class discontent by making key concessions the middle classes, in turn, became disgruntled and increasingly felt disenfranchised. By late 1921 the widespread social upheavals within the Italian society had generated a climate that was poisonous and vendetta ridden. Italy, it seemed, stood on the precipice of disaster.

THE FASCIST SOLUTION

The social and political crisis that gripped Italy in the aftermath of the Great War both transformed the nature of Mussolini's *Fasci di Combattimento* movement and directly contributed to its rapid expansion and rise to power in October 1922. At its inception the Fascist movement had been a small and

[4] Clark, *Modern Italy*, p. 206.

[5] F. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche, volume I* (Milan, Garzanti, 1953), pp. 34–38.

predominantly urban organisation that had fared poorly in the November 1921 general elections. However from late 1920 onwards, a newer, rural form of Fascism emerged, largely beyond Benito Mussolini's direct control, whose violent and brutal anti-Socialist, anti-Union ideology appealed to many within the Italian agrarian society. This emerging movement within the Fascist movement became known as *squadrismo*, and its rise marked a time of orchestrated squad violence and the murder of left-wing political opponents by the more brutal rural *Fascisti*. Amid a dramatic rise in the annual Italian homicide rate, Mussolini struggled to control the various black-shirted squads, and only barely managed to do so by transforming his burgeoning movement into a party – the National Fascist Party (the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*) (PNF) – in November 1921. By early 1922 Mussolini had been able to impose a national command structure on this lawless paramilitary force, which became legitimised once he had won power later that year. But by then it had already fulfilled its task of terrorising the Italian left into submission.

The PNF, led by a central committee of nineteen and an executive committee of eleven headed by its *Duce* Mussolini, proclaimed itself to be a 'revolutionary militia' at the service of the Italian nation and bound thereby to instil 'order, discipline, hierarchy' among all its members. The new party was ruthless and ambitious, and at its first national congress promised that under its governance Italy would be ruled over and organised by a strong Fascist state. The PNF would be comprised of three principal political units, namely the broad membership of the Party, which by that point stood at 220,000, the *squadristi* and the newly formed Fascist trade unions whose principal task would be to break any collectivist spirit in Italian society.[6] As Mussolini put it in a major speech to the Italian Chamber of Deputies on 1 December 1921, the Party's chief task was now to quickly bring to an end 'our internal warring' in order to focus the mind of the Italian people as a whole on those evolving events 'that are destined once again to transform the map of Europe'. The dilemma, as the *Duce* saw it, was very simple: 'either there will be a new war, or we will have treaty revision!'[7]

Such overt bellicosity was echoed loudly in the Fascist programme published by Mussolini in *Il Popolo d'Italia* in late December 1921. The PNF leadership had no time whatsoever for the League of Nations or its principles, which, they argued, clearly favoured the few over the many. Italian imperialism figured heavily in the document, Mussolini declaring rather cautiously that the new Italy had every right to its former (Imperial Roman) historical and geographical unity, and to cultural domination of the Mediterranean littoral. Equally prominent were PNF demands that treaty revision and modification should lead to fairer international trade and a greater share in raw materials resources, of which Italy was desperately bereft. Italy under Fascism

[6] Payne, *A History of Fascism*, pp. 102–103.
[7] *OOBM*, XVII, 'Per la vera pacificazione', p. 300.

would ensure that the future Italian empire would be stable and that all colonies would be economically and culturally developed to the maximum of their potential.[8] It was for these reasons that Italy under the PNF would present itself to the world as 'compact, free from internal disorders', so as to commence this new, radiant epoch in its long history.[9]

A little under a year later Mussolini's *fascisti* 'marched' on Rome and the 39-year-old *Duce* was appointed prime minister of Italy by King Victor Emanuel III. This was a startling achievement for a Fascist movement that had been in existence for a mere thirty-one months, and had made its name through murder, violence and terror. But Italy in 1922 was a nation in deep crisis and as Adrian Lyttelton noted, 'Mussolini's rise to power was made possible by the crisis of confidence in the Liberal regime.'[10] A series of weak and unstable post-war governments had generated both a political and an economic crisis in Italy that invariably resulted in popular demands for a strong and decisive government. Social unrest in the guise of left-wing militancy only further served to confirm for many, and the Italian middle class in particular, that the Liberal age was over. When Mussolini and his 'Quadrumvirs' finally decided to converge on the Italian capital on the night of 27th/28th October, the King, uncertain about the ultimate loyalty of the army, refused to order a state of martial law and have the Fascist show of force crushed. The only politician in any position to form an alternative government to the imminent Mussolini ministry, Luigi Facta, bowed under pressure from Milanese industrialists loyal to the *Duce*. By the morning of 30th October Mussolini arrived in Rome by a sleeper train, and fresh from a good night's sleep, met with the King and agreed to form his first government.

GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC HORIZONS

Just weeks before seizing power in a well-executed bloodless *coup d'état*, Mussolini made a series of declarations to the effect that any Fascist government would in time expel all 'foreigners' from the Mediterranean. He spoke openly of pursuing an expressly anti-British policy, of 'demolishing the British Empire', of banishing the 'parasites' who currently dominated that sea and turning it into 'our lake'. Imperial Rome had developed successfully from a tiny state that first dominated Italy and then large areas of the Mediterranean basin. Now, on the verge of political power, Mussolini wanted his Fascist Italy to become as great, both materially and spiritually, by emulating Rome's former achievements.[11] But while historians seem frequently intent on spelling

[8] Ibid., p. 336.
[9] Ibid., p. 300.
[10] A. Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power, Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2nd edition, 1987), p. 77.
[11] *OOBM*, XVIII, 'Insegnamenti', pp. 430–432; 'Dal Malincolio Tramonto Liberale all'Europa Fascista della Nuova Italia', p. 439; 'Il Discorso di Napoli', p. 457.

MAP 2.1. Post Great War Europe.

out the aggressive spirit that characterised Mussolini's public statements at this time, the obstacles that prevented the realisation of his great goal throughout the 1920s were formidable. Quite simply, British and French dominance of European, Mediterranean and League of Nations affairs by virtue of their enormous political, economic and strategic power rendered all but mere angry rhetoric totally pointless.[12]

The French, compelled to agree to battleship parity with the Italians after the Washington Naval Conference of 1921, rapidly altered their political approach after Fascism's rise to power and strenuously expressed their determination never to be at the mercy of a superior Italian fleet.[13] Senate discussions on the future of French naval policy stressed that France was 'a great Mediterranean power that needed a free Mediterranean in order to communicate with its North African empire'. There could simply be no question of ever accepting further limitations on French naval power up to and including the scrapping of submarines, an idea which France totally rejected.[14] Aside from its crushingly superior relationship with Great Britain, France possessed a lengthy stretch of Mediterranean coastline that housed important naval bases such as Marseilles and Toulon, as well as North African colonial territories in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. At the eastern end of the Mediterranean, the target for many of Mussolini's geopolitical ambitions, France had secured mandates in Syria and Lebanon following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Politico-military agreements with Czechoslovakia (1924), Romania (1926) and Yugoslavia (1927), completed French geopolitical predominance over Italy, and illustrated the level of Italian encirclement in both Europe and the Mediterranean region.

For all Mussolini's bluster and threatening language he was acutely aware of French political and military supremacy. As John Gooch has recently argued, the *Duce* came to fear the possibility of a lasting rapprochement between Paris and Berlin soon after assuming the prime ministerial office, and beyond that was acutely aware of the far-reaching nature of French power. French 'credits and loans' that supplemented the military spending of Poland and the other nations of the eastern *Entente* inevitably acted as a major deterrent to any future Fascist plans to attack the new Slav state of Yugoslavia, one of the regime's earliest objectives.[15] By 1926 Mussolini regarded France as being the main obstacle to all of Fascism's territorial ambitions *per se*, from Albania to Ethiopia. Hence, although the Fascist regime had become one of the arbiters of European security following Mussolini's adherence to the Locarno Treaty in

[12] Knox, 'Fascism and Italian Foreign Policy', pp. 117–120.

[13] J. Blatt, 'The Parity That Meant Superiority: French Naval Policy towards Italy at the Washington Conference, 1921–1922', *French Historical Studies*, Volume 2 (1981).

[14] Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Affari Politici: Francia, busta 1105, fascicolo 48, 'Discussione al Senato del bilancio della Marina per il 1926', Italian Naval Attache, Paris to Naval Intelligence Division, Rome, 19 April 1926.

[15] J. Gooch, *Mussolini's Generals* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 9.

October 1925, underlying tensions with France had already reached simmering point even while the agreement was being signed.[16]

By mid-1926 a ferocious anti-French press campaign in the state-censored Italian press, together with a series of demonstrations within Italy and its existing African colonies, pushed the temperature to boiling point. The press attacks, which the French blamed on 'official sources', accused government circles in Paris of trapping Fascist Italy within Locarno Treaty arrangements which prohibited it from finding new territorial outlets for its growing population. In March a puzzled but deeply angered French Premier Aristide Briand demanded an explanation for the anti-French diatribes as well as an immediate end to the media campaign. Mussolini initially refused to budge, and shortly afterwards rumours began to circulate of French military and naval preparations for a war against Italy.[17] Faced with both sustained French fury at the language being used by Fascist newspapers and the unavoidable fact that a war against France, according to the Fascist Chiefs-of-Staff, was simply unthinkable, Mussolini gradually backed down.

In late June Mussolini, now *de facto* dictator of all Italy after the murder of Socialist deputy Giacomo Matteotti prompted him to seize full governmental powers, purposefully sang the praises of the French military in an interview with *Armée et Marine*. He described the French army in particular as 'a magnificent military machine' that had written so many brilliant pages in the history of Europe.[18] Later in the year, as war rumours again intensified in both countries, Mussolini hastily assured the French ambassador to Rome that he had reined in the Fascist press, punished those responsible for violent attacks on French Consular buildings in Italy and also promised to make a conciliatory statement in public at the earliest opportunity.[19] The difference in tone between a nervous Mussolini's apology to the French ambassador and the aggressive hostility of his and the Fascist press' anti-French, and for that matter anti-British polemics, could not have been greater.

While Mussolini's political manoeuvring in Europe did very little to bring Italian Fascism into conflict with Great Britain during the 1920s, his claims that he would one day oust the British from the Mediterranean could only be achieved by virtue of a full aero-naval confrontation with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. In the austere climate of the 1920s this ambition, while arousing the ardour of Mussolini's audiences at home during his tempestuous speeches, was a total impossibility. Britain's imperial assets included India and the Dominion states which alone yielded such vast financial and material

[16] S. Marks, *The Illusion of Peace* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2003), pp. 76–78.

[17] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 1104, fascicolo 1, 'Rapporti Italo-francesi', Romano to Foreign Ministry, 23 March 1926 and 'Relazioni franco-italiani', Bogetti to Naval Intelligence Division, 11 May 1926.

[18] *OOBM*, XXII, 'La situazione militare in Italia', pp. 158–160.

[19] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 1105, fascicolo 48, 'Colloquio con S.E. Mussolini con Ambasciatore di Francia circa incidenti contro Consolati etc', 7 November 1926.

income that the Fascist regime could never hope to match British technological innovation and its scale of armaments production. In the Mediterranean itself, the British ruled supreme by virtue of 'a chain of formidable strongholds that surround and can blockade Italy', as one Fascist commentator aptly put it.[20] Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Alexandria, Aden along with the major base facilities of their World War I ally, the French, meant that Britain enjoyed uncontested mastery of not only the Mediterranean but the Red Sea too. Under these circumstances should Fascist Italy attempt any war against Yugoslavia, Turkey or Ethiopia it would be faced with the crushing naval and air power of the League's principal powers and the real risk of an economic blockade.

The true extent of British political and naval power was brought home very clearly to Mussolini during the second half of 1923. On 27th August, the Italian General Enrico Tellini was leading a three-man squad engaged in the demarcation of the frontier between Greece and Albania, when unknown assailants attacked and murdered them on Greek soil. Furious, Mussolini immediately demanded the execution of the assassins and fifty million lire in damages from the Greek government. When the Greeks, still reeling from their recent defeat at the hands of Turkey, denied responsibility for the crime and threw out a number of the Fascist demands, Mussolini ordered the Italian navy to bombard the island, killing around fifteen civilians before ordering its permanent occupation. In a newspaper interview on 3rd September the *Duce* claimed that the Fascist occupation of Corfu was designed simply to ensure that the unreliable and untrustworthy Greeks paid financial compensation for the murder of a high-ranking Italian general. He did not trust the Greeks, he added, and was even prepared to withdraw from the League of Nations should it ultimately side with Athens. Such violent revenge and extortion were certainly not uncharacteristic of Benito Mussolini. However, given the constant Italian wrangling with the western powers over the future of the Adriatic and Fiume that had characterised their relations for so many years, the Fascist assault on Corfu can also clearly be seen as an attempt by Mussolini to strengthen Italy's strategic position in the region. It was to prove a short-lived triumph for the *Duce*. When the specially convened Conference of Ambassadors succeeded in extracting the indemnity from the military regime in Athens, and after the Geneva Assembly strongly hinted that British naval power would be used to remove the Italians if they did not leave voluntarily, Fascist forces withdrew. Mussolini, chastened and humiliated, would refrain from similar demonstrations of bravado for many years to come.[21]

The Fascist occupation of Corfu, in reality a barely concealed attempt to exert regional power in a stretch of sea regarded as an 'Italian lake' by the

[20] Attilio Tamaro, 'L'Italia tradita nell'Adriatico', *Politico* (January 1920) cited in Knox, 'Fascism and Italian Foreign Policy', p. 118.

[21] Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, pp. 67–68; L. Salvatorelli and G. Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel period fascista* (Milan, Einaudi, 1964), pp. 296–297.

many regime zealots, very swiftly made Mussolini aware of the nature of Mediterranean geopolitics. The British Royal Navy was *de facto* master of the entire area, and, if necessary, could call on the French and a host of other smaller nations to support it in the event of war. Mussolini disguised his shock and embarrassment at the British response as disappointment. In a mid-September interview with the British *Daily Mail* he claimed that 'When I took power in Italy, I was determined to maintain good relations with England. I saw in your country our natural friend, as opposed to a mere natural ally of Italy.' Instead he had met only with a very lukewarm response by official London following his rise to power in October 1922. Worse still when the time came for British leaders to show their friendship towards Italy they had failed to do so. Both the reaction of the British public and the British government to recent events in Corfu had left him 'profoundly disillusioned', particularly so given that Britain had preferred to support the Greeks over Italy because of their potential need for Greek naval bases in the event of conflict. Why not turn to Italy for such support, Mussolini asked. If Britain were to place Italy on an equal footing and desist from further displays of aversion towards his country, such an arrangement would very easily become possible.[22]

The fact was that the British government was in no hurry to change the nature of their relationship with Mussolini's Italy simply in order to gratify the *Duce*. Although tensions and suspicions had always underpinned *Entente* relations, the British government much preferred to rely on its relationship with France forged amid the drama and carnage of the Great War. By the middle of 1927, with British suspicion over the true orientation of Soviet Russian policy at an all-time high, France remained an indispensible pillar of support for British overseas policy. Given the French need for reciprocal British backing in the event of a much feared and anticipated German revanchism, it was clear that their mutually beneficial relationship was pretty much set in stone. As the Italian military attaché in London noted on 13 June 1927, aside from guaranteeing support for France against Germany, the British would also safeguard its Mediterranean lines of communication and its North African colonies while ensuring that any Fascist plans for aggression in the region remained purely theoretical. Britain would always remain on very good terms with the French, the attaché concluded, thereby very clearly spelling out that in his opinion Italian encirclement was likely to remain a feature of European politics for many years to come.[23] But still, Mussolini could draw some satisfaction from his January 1924 agreement with Yugoslavia, which saw Fiume finally pass under Fascist Italian control and without a murmur from Geneva.[24]

[22] *OOBM*, 'L'amicizia anglo-italiana e l'atteggiamento inglese', pp. 15–17.
[23] ASMAE, Ambasciata di Londra, busta 644, fascicolo 2, 'Notiziario politico', Military Attaché London, to Army High Command, Rome, 13 June 1927.
[24] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia*, p. 297.

AGGRESSIVE MILITARY INTENTIONS

The *Fasci di Combattimento* rose to political prominence and power in Italy on a tide of violence, brutality and murder. From the very start Mussolini had organised *squadristi* terror along military lines, and indeed prominent among his squads were former *arditi*, the élite shock troops from the Great War who played a major part in this frontline force against the Italian left. Once the *Duce* had secured power in October 1922 the squads were rapidly converted into a revolutionary militia, the *Milizia Voluntaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (the *MVSN*), while the PNF readily adopted the 'armed nation' concept – a policy based on ensuring that Italian manpower and industry would be ready for war at all times. Talk of war, of the 'glorious' war dead and of the need for Fascism to ensure that Italy remained militarily strong and prepared, were never far from Mussolini's lips. As he informed the Chamber of Deputies in January 1926:

> We want our Army to be morally and materially fully efficient; we want all our armed forces to be morally and materially fully efficient. We want peace. I have been to Locarno and I would happily return; but while talk of peace flashes across the horizon, I have to nevertheless ensure that the skies are filled with large numbers of aircraft while large numbers of new warships enter the seas.[25]

Along with Mussolini many of the Fascist *gerarchi* were former Great War combatants who, much like the German *Freikorps*, lived life as an extended *avventura violenta*, and readily accepted their tasks as *squadristi* in much the same way that they had accepted military orders at the front. Men such as Dino Grandi, later Mussolini's foreign minister and subsequently ambassador to London at the height of the Ethiopian crisis, had fought throughout the entirety of the war in the north eastern Alpine regions of Italy and claimed to relish the camaraderie and danger of life at the front. As Grandi put it in his memoirs, 'I cannot but conclude that those years of my youth, lived with the daily threat of death, were and will remain the best days of my life.'[26] Others such as the former *ardito* Italo Balbo spoke glowingly of the 'win or die' mentality of the Alpine escarpments, placing great emphasis on the fact that among the Italian troops 'the moral climate' was governed by one single maxim: 'complete dedication to the religion of the Patria'.[27] Once the war was over this fanatical devotion to militaristic virtues and the willingness to kill in order to resolve political problems characterised not only the squads but very many within the Fascist Party as well. There was no distinction to be made between 'politicians' and 'warriors' within the PNF, for most of the Party's prominent figures were *squadristi*, and many local Party secretaries also commanded the squads. This new generation of 'political warriors' shunned 'traditional'

[25] *OOBM*, XXII, 'L'ordinamento dell'Esercito alla Camera dei deputati', pp. 64–65.
[26] D. Grandi, *Il mio paese* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1985), p. 86.
[27] C. Segrè, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), p. 28.

TABLE 2.1. *Italian raw materials imports/exports (in millions of lire).*

	1909–1913	1922	1923	1924	1925
Imported raw materials	1,274.9	5,507.2	6,942.7	8,259.8	10,798
Exported raw materials	316.1	1,142.9	1,219.0	1,545.0	1,842.8

Source: Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche*, p. 107.

political values in favour of courage, passion and a dedication to violence. To them life was a battle to be fought to the death between two mortal enemies.[28]

But killing Socialists and trade unionists in 1920s Italy was not the same as fighting and winning an armed conflict against those states Mussolini viewed as natural enemies of his new Fascist society. Although the *Duce* and the PNF faithful may well have been eager to wage a successful Fascist war throughout the first decade of Fascist rule, strategic encirclement at the hands of the *Entente* and severe financial and material deficiencies rendered any Italian military offensive, however brief, a non-starter. Furthermore, although Mussolini's entourage readily endorsed the *Duce*'s geopolitical ambitions, the military and naval high commands proved to be far less enthusiastic given their detailed knowledge of Italy's serious economic and raw material weaknesses, as well as the inherent inadequacies of the *forze armate* themselves. As Table 2.1 illustrates, the Italian economy remained heavily reliant on imported raw materials for its armaments industries during the first three years of Fascist rule.

Once Mussolini had established his one-man rule over Italy early in January 1925, it followed naturally that he would assume full control of the Italian military, which he did the following August. The *Duce*'s move, clearly designed to strengthen Fascist control over the military in order to ensure their compliance to the regime's strategic goals and objectives, was accompanied by two calculated, politically motivated new appointments. First, Brigadier General Ugo Cavallero, an excellent organiser and first-rate tactician, was brought back from retirement and appointed as Under Secretary of State for War, an appointment no doubt aided by his zealous and fundamental support for Fascism. Cavallero, who had served with distinction in the Great War as a key member of the Italian Supreme Command, was chiefly responsible for 'technico-political matters', and his new appointment signified both the trust Mussolini placed in him personally and his ascent to a position of real power within the ranks of the senior Fascist military. Cavallero's promotion in turn weakened the political position of Mussolini's other senior military appointment of that period,

[28] R. Suzzi Valli, *Le origini del fascismo* (Urbino, Carocci, 2003), pp. 88–89.

that of Pietro Badoglio, a veteran of the 1917 Battle of Caporetto disaster and a bitter enemy of Cavallero's. Initially exiled as ambassador to Brazil in 1922 after he had voiced stiff opposition to Mussolini's rise to power, Badoglio was brought back from the political wilderness to become army Chief-of-Staff as well as head of the combined Chief-of-Staff (the *Stato maggiore generale*).[29] Although charged with securing the final victory for a colonial army that had been combating the Senussi rebellion in Libya since 1921, a task in which Badoglio proved ultimately successful, his main brief was to ensure the war readiness of the *forze armate* and to coordinate their operational planning. But unlike Cavellero whose Fascist credentials were certainly not in any doubt, Badoglio was not regarded as highly sympathetic to the Mussolini regime and its overall objectives, and was, if anything, viewed as a staunch monarchist.

Suspicion about both Badoglio and the motivation behind his appointment to such a senior position, which many suspected had been influenced by King Victor Emanuel, not surprisingly meant that he was under the constant surveillance of *OVRA* (Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo), the regime's rapidly expanding internal security organisation. From the remaining *OVRA* records, which often rendered a less than flattering impression of the Marshal, it was clear that many within Fascist official circles detested him. One report from November 1928 claimed that senior figures in the PNF had not forgotten the Marshal's fierce words in October 1922 when he had declared that, 'with half an hour of rifle fire Fascism would have been finished off'.[30] Despite his lofty position, *OVRA* continued to claim that he still held a 'hostile attitude' towards Fascism, which was unlikely to be moderated. He could not be counted upon as a reliable Fascist, and should be kept under constant watch.[31] Even within the ranks of the army, of which he had been a member since 1892, Badoglio found no reprieve from the prevailing suspicion of a Fascist Party membership that openly hated him. Many army officers, *OVRA* reported, believed that Badoglio was nothing more than the King's stool pigeon and should never be trusted under any circumstances.[32] But whatever the Party ideologues may have felt about the Marshal this ultimately made no difference to his continued ascent within Italy's military hierarchy. In late 1935, having already successfully defeated the Senussi during the brutal Libyan war, Badoglio was appointed to command Fascist forces in Ethiopia and with further major success.

This mixture of rivalry and suspicion at the top of the Fascist military establishment did not augur well for Mussolini's determination to create a ruthless and all-conquering war machine during the 1920s. Severe budgetary limitations

[29] Gooch, *Mussolini's Generals*, pp. 73–75.

[30] Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero del Interno, Polizia Politica, 'Badoglio', busta 59, fascicolo 1, agent report, Rome, 8 November 1928.

[31] ACS, M.I.P.P., busta 59, fascicolo 1, agent reports, Rome, 12 November 1930 and 14 December 1930.

[32] ACS, M.I.P.P., busta 59, fascicolo 1, agent report, Rome, 21 August 1930.

did not exactly help either. During the inaugural meeting of the combined Chiefs-of-Staff on 18 June 1925, Badoglio announced that Mussolini had ordered him to have the *forze armate* ready for war within ten years. In order to achieve this very ambitious goal all expenditure on fixed defences, fortifications, roads and so on were to be reviewed and where possible suspended in favour of a rapid development of the army. As Badoglio put it 'there is no point in organising our terrain, if we do not have an Army with which to make use of this organisation'. On top of the army's budgetary allocation of 2,129 million lire for the financial year 1925/1926, Mussolini had in addition released 300 million lire of extraordinary expenditure to ensure this rapid development. But there could be no disguising the fact that times were financially very lean, and that the new money authorised by the regime was to ensure adequate defence against any German attempt at an *Anschluss* with Austria, as opposed to any Fascist wars of conquest. In both the meeting of 18th June and the subsequent sittings of the Chiefs-of-Staff that year Badoglio made it very clear that spending on armaments would be severely restricted in favour of rapid improvements to the Italian rail network in the Alto Adige region and a major strengthening of the frontier defences in the area. As Mussolini put it in his major speech on foreign policy at the Italian Senate on 20th May, an *Anschluss* was totally unacceptable from the regime's point of view. The Brenner was and would remain an irrevocable frontier and 'the Italian government would defend it at all costs'. Mussolini simply would not accept that an expanded Germany would again become the most powerful nation in Europe.[33] In time, Mussolini would, of course, come to modify this view substantially.

The *Duce*'s determination to ensure that the Alto Adige remained safe from Austro–German aggression did not, in reality, detract him from his appetite for short, cheap wars of aggression within Europe during the 1920s. The principal target for such a conflict during this period was the much hated state of Yugoslavia which Mussolini was determined to see broken up and dismembered owing, among other reasons, to its potential strategic threat to the Straits of Otranto at the southernmost end of the Adriatic. On the surface, Italo–Yugoslav relations seemed cordial enough after the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo and the peaceful handover of Fiume to the Italians in 1923. As Mussolini informed the Italian Senate in mid-May 1925, 'Our relations with Yugoslavia are cordial and I would say excellent; with our neighbours to the east I am continuing the policy we began with our treaty of friendship, and later formalised by our commercial agreements.'[34] But beneath the surface, the situation was considerably more complex and treacherous than appeared. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia formed in the immediate aftermath of the Great War was comprised of three principal ethnic groupings, the Serbs, Croats and

[33] *OOBM*, XXI, 'La politica estera al Senato', pp. 315–321; A. Biagini and A. Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale tra le due guerre mondiali* (Rome, USMME, 1997). Meeting of 18 June 1925.
[34] *OOBM*, XXI, 'La politica estera al Senato', pp. 315–321.

Slovenes, although the government of the country, renamed Yugoslavia in 1929, remained largely in Serbian hands. When in January 1925 the recently deposed King Zog of Albania returned to his homeland with Yugoslav assistance, Mussolini quickly won him over into an alignment with Fascist Italy and financed the establishment of a new Albanian state. Fascist financial support for the setting up of an Albanian state bank may well have satisfied Zog, but it infuriated Belgrade, thereby initiating a lengthy period of mutual Italo–Yugoslav tension.[35]

In 1925, once the *Duce* had secured Zog's friendship through various agreements, he also concluded a secret military treaty with Tirana that ensured Albanian backing for Italy in any war against Yugoslavia in exchange for the ethnic Albania province of Kossovo, then under the direct control of Belgrade. But it was the conclusion of the Italo–Albanian Treaty of Tirana in November 1926 that gave the best indication of future Fascist intentions towards Yugoslavia, and also raised Balkan and European temperatures to boiling point. The Yugoslavs reacted with fury to the main military clauses of the Treaty, which gave Rome the right to deploy troops to Albania in case of further anti-Zog uprisings or any form of foreign interference as defined by the *Duce*. Not surprisingly, the concentration of large numbers of Italian troops across the Italo–Yugoslav frontier a month later generated not only a war scare, but also the conclusion of yet another defensive treaty, this time between Paris and Belgrade. Mussolini's plan to surround Yugoslavia with two hostile states – Italy and Albania – had backfired. His constant antagonism of the French government during this period, and his less than subtle attempts to threaten Yugoslavia from both Italy and Albania, had ultimately led to Italy's own further encirclement. Now, the Fascist armed forces faced the real possibility of a conflict on two fronts, east and west, and even the risk of an additional threat to the Alto Adige from Germany–Austria once any war had begun.

By early 1927 the heightened state of tension that existed between Rome and Belgrade compelled Mussolini to pressurise Badoglio and the Chiefs-of-Staff into planning for imminent aggression against the Yugoslavs. At a meeting of the *Stato maggiore generale* on 28th February, Badoglio warned that the *Duce* had expressed serious concern about the anti-Italian tenor of the Serb-dominated government which, he stressed, had now placed its armed forces on a state of high alert. A report from the military attaché in Belgrade, Colonel Mario Berti, confirmed that 'fear' and 'nervousness' prevailed there, while the influence of the 'profoundly egotistical' Yugoslav military High Command on the central government made the likelihood of war with Italy very great. Fascist Italy had an excellent chance of winning such a war, Badoglio stressed, even if certain operational aspects could prove difficult to overcome. However, while

[35] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia*, pp. 690–692.

a single-handed war with the Yugoslavs was one thing, a two-fronted conflict involving their French allies was altogether another. It would be virtually impossible for Italy to fight a two-front war, Badoglio warned to everyone's general agreement. Only if Mussolini could make another attempt to isolate Yugoslavia politically, this time successfully, could *Ipotesi est* (the 'Eastern hypothesis') be seriously contemplated.[36]

Aside from improving Italian relations with both Hungary and the anti-Yugoslav government in Bulgaria, Mussolini was unable to undermine and break down the unity of the *Petite Entente*. In practise this meant that despite the considerable efforts of Badoglio and the senior Fascist military, the conditions for a single-handed confrontation aimed at knocking out Yugoslavia never materialised. Italian operational planning during the 1920s continued to face the challenge of potential conflicts on three fronts, possibly simultaneously. Any clash with Germany over Austria gave Badoglio and his colleagues less cause for concern given that under the Locarno arrangements French military support, or at least French neutrality, was almost certainly guaranteed.[37] But the prospect of war with France or, worse, France and Yugoslavia in combination was rather more than the *Stato maggiore generale* could hope to consider. As the army's operational planning department noted in October 1928, 'If this military hypothesis should become a reality, it is obvious that the forces we currently have at our disposal would be wholly insufficient to withstand offensives by two enemy armies.' The most that Italy could hope to achieve under such circumstances would be the defence of its metropolitan frontiers.[38]

THE GERMAN QUESTION

Germany, with its significant raw materials resources, industrial might and latent military potential was, as far as Mussolini was concerned, central to the future of Europe. Like many of his contemporaries among Europe's politicians Mussolini at one and the same time feared and suspected future German intentions, believing that the time would come when a resurgent Germany would once again dominate the continent. In Fascist Italy's case, the German threat was very specific and widely feared. As Mussolini put it on the eve of coming to power,

> We are now at the Brenner and we intend to remain at the Brenner! We have no intention of occupying Innsbruck; but do not for one second imagine that Germany and Austria can ever again occupy Bolzano!

[36] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale*, meeting of 18 July 1925. See also subsequent discussion on the subject of a single-handed war with Yugoslavia in the meetings of 13 January 1928, 14 January 1928, 16 January 1928, 21 January 1928, 22 January 1928, 22 October 1928, 20 December 1928, 16 January 1929 and 17 January 1929.

[37] Ufficio storico dello stato maggiore del Esercito (USSME), H-6, racc. 2, Army Plans Division, 'Memoria preliminare per il piano di operazione alla frontiera austriaca – Piano 1 A, 1927.

[38] USSME, H-6, racc. 2, Piano P 3, Conflitto con Francia e Jugoslavia insieme', Army Plans Division, 28 October 1928.

and accordingly early Fascist military planning focused extensively on forestalling an *Anschluss*, and any attempt to re-annexe the Alto Adige.

Following his first visit to Berlin in March 1922, Mussolini was left with the lingering impression that the Weimar Republic was not destined to last long, and that the German national character, as he judged it, would very soon assert itself. At that moment, he informed readers of *Il Popolo d'Italia* that Berlin gave the impression of being a defeated city, 'grey, monotonous, heavy handed both in terms of its people and its mood'. A day in Berlin could be felt like 'a monstrous punch to the stomach', while a heavy pall of defeat and defeatism hung depressingly over the city. But beneath this surface reality Mussolini could detect that German society, in many respects, had not altered much since the Versailles settlement and only with much grudging reluctance accepted the existence of Germany's new constitutional arrangements. Although few Berliners would admit it openly, Mussolini suspected that sympathy for the departed Kaiser was still widespread given that no motor vehicle, of whatever description, ever drove through the central archway of the Brandenburg Gate, formerly for the exclusive use only of Wilhelm himself. A republican government was, as Mussolini put it, 'completely and historically alien to the soul of the German people', and was palpably 'destined to fail'. No one liked the republic, neither the militarists and Nationalists of the extreme right who wanted the return of the Kaiser nor the extreme left who wanted 'Soviet style' government in Germany. Weimar was 'tolerated', and 'grudgingly accepted' among the German population as a whole, but no more.[39]

Mussolini viewed Weimar as a 'mask' that served to hide the true face of Germany. The real Germany, as he saw it, was not democratic or pacifist but a nation that had been forcibly disarmed and made to accept the peace terms dictated by the victorious *Entente*. The majority of Germans held the conviction that their nation had not suffered defeat on the battlefield, and had not lost the war. Only the Allied blockade and the resulting starvation had broken the German people, while the Treaty of Versailles had heaped misery and servitude on an already desperate population. As one senior German official had angrily told Mussolini during his visit:

> At one time wars were bilateral affairs: after Versailles it became clear that war can also be unilateral, that is waged by one single belligerent against a helpless people. The Versailles agreement established that this was not a peace treaty at all but a treaty for war: waged by way of territorial occupation and destined to endure for decades to come.

Not surprisingly, Mussolini quickly drew the conclusion that many Germans were hungry for revenge and that hatred of France, the principal architect of the harsh penalties imposed at Versailles, was widespread and growing day by day. 'Germany', Mussolini concluded in another lengthy feature for *Il Popolo*

[39] *OOBM*, XVIII, 'Germania del dopoguerra', pp. 93–97.

d'Italia, 'is not republican and can never be pacifist', and Italy, together with the other victorious powers, must ensure that Germany never found the opportunity to go on the offensive in Europe. But at the same time, he warned, the peace terms were too harsh, and Germany should also be given some respite.[40]

By the time Mussolini had secured office in October 1922 the German question was very much on the European political agenda. Although Weimar politicians were certainly angered by the extent of the disarmament imposed upon their country by the Versailles agreement, the focus in late 1922 was very much on reparations which, as one German official bitterly complained, were simply 'the continuation of the war by other means'.[41] With Mussolini in power the arguments raged back and forth across Europe, as Berlin attempted to sow division among its former enemies on the question of reparations payments in an effort to derail the entire agreement. The British government, who had always regarded an economically restored Germany as the key to a stable Europe, had been reluctant to support the hard line pursued by the French at Versailles and now favoured an extended moratorium to give the German economy some breathing space. But the French government, under Raymond Poincaré, refused to compromise and remained intransigently reluctant to grant Berlin any concessions without some guarantee that sustained payments would continue to be made.

Mussolini was no doubt eager to make the right impression as, among other offices he held, Italy's new Fascist Minister for Foreign Affairs, especially so now that the urgent matter of how best to deal with the German problem had once again resurfaced. But when in early January 1923 the *Entente* powers and Germany met in Paris to discuss the various options for reparations payments, it was plain that Mussolini felt ill at ease among Europe's senior statesmen. Whether he suffered from an inferiority complex at that time or whether he feared stiff anti-Fascist demonstrations in the French capital, Mussolini cut an awkward and uncertain figure, who, for all his past anti-German posturing, seemed uncertain whether to back the British or the French reparations plans. Ultimately the *Duce* backed the French, and just over a week later also endorsed Poincaré's plan to occupy the Ruhr region in order to extract coal supplies on which the German government had defaulted. Mussolini informed the Italian Council of Ministers of his decision on 23rd January, claiming that whereas the French and Belgians had despatched troops to the Ruhr region, he had sanctioned only technicians to participate in the mission.[42] But for Mussolini, the French and the Belgians the occupation proved ill fated and hugely unpopular. Both the German government and population at large, already incensed at French vindictiveness at Versailles, reacted with fury and there followed a lengthy period of 'passive resistance'. Public opinion elsewhere proved equally

[40] Ibid., 'Maschere e volto della Germania', pp. 119–124.
[41] Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, p. 52.
[42] *OOBM*, XIX, 'Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri', pp. 104–110.

negative, and many countries openly sided with the campaign of 'passive resistance' orchestrated by the new government of Gustav Stresemann. Worse still, Mussolini's decision to back French policy put him in direct confrontation with London. It was not the most auspicious start to the *Duce*'s career in international affairs, and damaged relations with Berlin and Stresemann for some time to come.[43]

THE NAZI DIMENSION

Germany's own far right political movements were already adding their voice to the social discontent that prevailed in their country by the time of Mussolini's March 1922 visit to the Weimar Republic. Organisations such as the German National Peoples' Party (the DNVP), the official party of post-war German Nationalism, ex-combatant groups such as the *Freikorps* and extremist elements such as the German Workers' Party (the DAP) all deeply hated the Versailles Treaty and were equally hostile to the Weimar constitution. But even though the revolutionary right in Germany remained electorally insignificant during the early post-war period, many German citizens agreed with its anti-Versailles, anti-Weimar rhetoric and experienced the same sense of national shame felt by these movements' disgruntled and frustrated members. As historians have indicated, the first Weimar elections in 1920 proved that Weimar was a 'Republic without republicans', a verdict which may well have been an exaggeration, but which nonetheless illustrated the feelings of a great many Germans towards their constitution.[44] German society merely needed a focal point, a catalyst with which to galvanise all its resentment against the peace terms and their consequences.

Adolf Hitler, a native Austrian and corporal in the German army, joined the German Workers' Party in Munich on 12 September 1919. A gifted orator and propagandist, the new addition to the Party's ranks soon assumed the full levers of control and spewed forth relentless, violent attacks on Weimar, the atrocity that was the Versailles Treaty, German Jews and Germany's political left. Very quickly the thirty-year-old Great War veteran decorated for bravery on the Western Front established himself as the major attraction of the Munich DAP. His very first appearance as main speaker attracted a crowd of some two thousand, and throughout 1920 he continued to draw similar-sized crowds at meeting after meeting. A major turning point for Hitler's campaign to rid Germany of the 'Jews and Bolsheviks' who had, he insisted, stabbed his country in the back by agreeing to the armistice of November 1918, came with Mussolini's march on Rome. Fascist success proved both to him and to the renamed National Socialist German Workers' Party (the NSDAP) that a

[43] Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, pp. 52–62.
[44] I. Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936 Hubris* (London, Penguin, 1999), pp. 136–137.

nationalist crusade against all the perceived ills of modern society could succeed. As Nazi journalist Hermann Esser proclaimed at the time,

> What he (Mussolini) knew how to achieve in Italy, that is to put together a band of men filled with animosity, we can also achieve here in Bavaria. We also have our own version of the Italian Mussolini: his name is Adolf Hitler.[45]

But while Hitler, with the direct assistance of Erich Ludendorf, formerly joint head of the German armed forces during the Great War, succeeded in making official contact with Mussolini in October 1922, neither Mussolini nor senior Fascists proved anything like as reciprocal in their own views of the 'Austrian corporal'. As soon as he assumed office Mussolini became fully aware of the precarious and volatile situation that prevailed in Germany, and of the potentially serious consequences for Italy. For one thing, by mid-October 1922 Italian diplomatic staff in Berlin reported that Germany appeared on the cusp of a civil war following the failure of Weimar's political parties to form a governing coalition. Two broad political blocs had formed in Germany and if agreement was not immediately reached the situation would soon become, as one official put it, 'highly dangerous' if not 'catastrophic'.[46] Italy and, for that matter, Europe could never be immune from the fallout. Beyond the political dangers for Italy Mussolini's diplomatic staff also warned of potentially grave economic dangers ahead should Germany's internal instability persist. Should Germany dissolve into factionalised infighting, the Berlin Embassy warned the Italian prime minister in mid-November, the closure of its national borders would have devastating effects on the Italian agricultural export market as well as the employment prospects of southern Italian migrant workers. Any collapse in the value of the Reichsmark would gravely exacerbate the situation and lead to potential problems for the Italian lire, leading to untold complications for the future of the still weak Italian economy.[47]

Aside from the political and economic crises that prevailed in Germany in late 1922, there were other reasons why Mussolini would not have wished to engage too readily with Adolf Hitler. Munich and Bavaria in general were governed by fiercely anti-Socialist, counter-revolutionary men such as Gustav Ritter von Kahr, governor and later (1923) state commissioner for the region, which effectively rendered it a hot bed for the revolutionary right. Groups such as the Organisation Council led by Captain Hermann Erhardt accordingly used their mandate to link up with similar groups from across Germany, in order to carry out around 354 political murders between 1919 and 1922. Kahr

[45] J. Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini: La difficile alleanza* (Editori LaTerza, Bari, 1975), p. 17.

[46] Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1135, Berlin Embassy to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome, political reports 18 October and 10 November 1922.

[47] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1135, 'La dissoluzione finanziaria della Germania in rapport alla politica estera e alla economia italiana', Berlin Embassy to Mussolini, 11 November 1922.

in particular hated all that Weimar stood for and orchestrated considerable anti-government feeling throughout the whole of Bavaria. While Bavarians in general were at this time enduring much economic and social distress, leading to a growing hatred and mistrust of both the Weimar government and all foreigners, what would have bothered Mussolini more was the level of deep antagonism felt by many of its citizens towards the Italian presence in the Alto Adige. Mussolini's strident declarations about Italian sovereignty over the area, and his less than subtle policy of 'Italianisation' had generated deep ill-feeling across Germany and Austria, within right-wing Bavaria in particular.[48]

By late 1922 the volatile Bavarian political situation within which Adolf Hitler was emerging as a key figure had begun to generate more than a little concern for Mussolini and his diplomatic staff in Munich. Reports from Italian Consular officials in Bavaria had been warning the *Palazzo Chigi* for some time that Bavarian separatist groups led by the National Socialists had been plotting, albeit unsuccessfully, to break away from the Weimar government and to restore the German monarchy. Many Bavarian separatists also held deep-seated ill-feeling towards Italy over its annexation and domination of the Alto Adige. As a Fascist intelligence agent warned Mussolini in December 1922 tensions between native Germans and Italians living in the Tyrol were already running high over Fascism's forced 'Italianisation' policies. This tension had invariably spread into Austria and Bavaria and the situation was now so volatile that Mussolini must find a solution to it without any delay. For the time being the French had stopped their pro-Bavarian separatist activities in the region; so now was an excellent time to calm the situation down before it became uncontrollable.[49]

Towards the end of November 1922 Mussolini received a detailed report on Bavarian separatism sent by Adolfo Tedaldi, the Italian Consul General in Munich. Tedaldi, who was exceptionally well acquainted with Bavarian politics and its key personalities, warned Mussolini that the majority of the Bavarian population and political class were pro-separatist, although it remained unlikely for the present that they would challenge Berlin's authority in any direct way until circumstances permitted it. Cardinal Michael Faulhaber, the Catholic Bishop of Speyer and later a fierce opponent of the Hitler regime, summed up the mood among many in the region. As far as the Cardinal was concerned he did not wish to see Bavaria breakaway from greater Germany, although he did believe that this would in due course become inevitable if it was to avoid being dragged into the 'abyss' by Berlin. To Mussolini's undoubted relief Faulhaber also confirmed that in his view the Alto Adige should remain in Italian hands, adding that he doubted anyone in Bavaria would challenge Fascist sovereignty

[48] Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, pp. 202–203, 291.

[49] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1135, 'Situazione locale', Consular Office, Munich to Mussolini, 16 November 1922 and 'Political Bavarese', Intelligence report, Munich to Mussolini, 9 December 1922.

over the region, provided of course that the German-speaking population were permitted their own cultural identity on a permanent basis. In turn, Tedaldi's report placed great store on the views of Hitler and the NSDAP. The Consul General regarded Hitler as 'youthful', a 'Latin' by temperament and an emerging political figure with avowedly pro-separatist ideas. But crucially, the Nazi leader had equally strong views about the future of the Alto Adige. During the course of a meeting with Tedaldi Hitler had placed considerable emphasis on both Bavaria's and the NSDAP's need for sustained Italian support, which, in turn, could only mean one thing. There was no point, he stressed, seeking the 'liberation' of 200,000 'well treated Germans' when many millions of Germans elsewhere outside greater Germany were being oppressed. Therefore, he informed Tedaldi unequivocally, 'for us the Alto Adige question does not exist, and never will exist'.[50]

While Hitler's alleged declarations about the Alto Adige may have resonated positively in Rome, it was at the same time clear that many Fascists, and Mussolini in particular, did not take him or his movement seriously. Hitler, Italian diplomats regularly informed Mussolini, had few if any original ideas and most of these had been indiscriminately purloined from Italian Fascism. Fascist scepticism about the NSDAP and its ideology was more than matched by the doubts of the Bavarian government. As an Italian Consular official informed Mussolini in March 1923, Hitler's inflammatory views had failed to inspire almost all of Bavaria's serving ministers who, during a specially convened conference in Munich, had unenthusiastically endured a two-hour speech by the Nazi leader. The majority present at the meeting judged Hitler to be a 'less than serious minded fanatic', and expressed outright astonishment at his claims that he was not after all anti-Semitic. His attempt to explain away his frequent anti-Jewish outbursts as simply a method for ensuring total obedience from his NSDAP members hardly helped his credibility.[51]

But what truly came to define Hitler in the eyes of Mussolini in those early years of Fascist government in Italy were his botched attempts to foment rebellion and a separatist uprising in Bavaria. Throughout early 1923 Hitler and the NSDAP staged a number of rallies during which the Party leader had given very violent speeches designed, as one Italian official noted, to keep the level of agitation in Bavaria at fever pitch. Repeatedly, Hitler iterated his belief that the NSDAP now demanded 'war at the point of a knife against those Jews and Marxists who had corrupted the people and against France', who had recently

[50] ASMAE, Rome, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, Tedaldi to Mussolini, 17 November 1922; for evidence of the great political difficulties the Hitler movement faced during this period, see also ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, Italian Consular Office, Munich to Mussolini, 3 February 1923.

[51] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, 'Segreta conferenza Hitler', Italian Consular General, Munich to Mussolini, 10 March 1923.

occupied the Ruhr.[52] By mid-April 1923 the Bavarian Interior Ministry had received sufficient intelligence on Hitler's intentions to warn Italian Consular staff that the NSDAP would shortly stage 'a demonstration of force against the Republic', and turn Munich into their military headquarters. At that moment, Hitler was merely playing for time and waiting for the right occasion to unleash his fanatical hordes, although the ministry stressed that there was no doubting the fact that the Bavarian militia and police would remain totally loyal to the state government.[53]

The situation across Germany as a whole was of serious concern to the Mussolini government, and by October the Berlin Embassy was again warning of serious political instability, although for the moment the new coalition government of Gustav Stresemann was successfully fending off the attacks of both Nationalists and Communists. But the situation in the wake of the Ruhr occupation earlier in the year remained very tense as an Embassy report dated 13th October noted. Although there could be no doubt that a Nationalist movement with true 'moral strength' once installed in power in Germany was very desirable from the Fascist point of view, at that moment such a movement did not exist. The DNVP were intensely hated by the Social Democrats, and should they ever secure power the internal revolt against them would be so devastating as to warrant direct intervention by the French military.[54]

With the Weimar Republic at risk of widespread civil unrest and Stresemann's 'passive resistance' to the Ruhr occupation in tatters as the value of the Reichsmark fell calamitously, Hitler continued to watch and wait. Across Germany as individual savings disappeared overnight, pensions and insurance policies became worthless and politics continued the trend towards polarisation, a palpable sense of impending doom prevailed. On 26th September the Bavarian government responded to the crisis and to the ending of the resistance campaign by announcing a state of emergency, and by appointing Gustav von Kahr as State Commisar in order to crush the increasing influence of Hitler and the NSDAP in Bavaria. When Kahr banned a Nazi rally scheduled for 27th September Hitler reacted furiously and was effectively placed in a position where he and his movement either responded or lost all face.[55]

The triumvirate that governed Bavaria composed of Kahr, Colonel Hans von Seisser and General Otto von Lossow strongly believed, by October 1923, that Hitler now fully intended to seize power in Munich before marching on Berlin and establishing a Nationalist dictatorship. At the beginning of

[52] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, 'Discorso pronunciato dal Signor Hitler', Consular Office, Munich to Mussolini, 28 February 1923.

[53] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, 'Agitazioni patriottiche in Baviera', Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, 18 April 1923. For more on this, see also R. De Felice, *Mussolini e Hitler. I rapporti segreti 1922–1933* (Editori Laterza, Rome, 2013), chapter 2.

[54] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, Berlin Embassy to Mussolini, 13 October 1923.

[55] Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, pp. 200–202.

November the triumvirate despatched Seisser to Berlin to present its plans for a Nationalist take over in Munich and subsequently Germany, and was informed by General Hans von Seeckt, head of the *Reichswehr*, that he would support a well-organised insurrection, but not a hastily improvised plot. Just a few days later, on 7th November, Hitler decided that the political circumstances in Bavaria required that he act without delay, and he ordered the NSDAP to be ready for action by 8:00 P.M. the following evening. The official report from the Italian Consul General's offices in Munich claimed that on the night before Hitler's attempted seizure of power Nazi activists were very confident that their plan would succeed. The next day Hitler would march to the *Bürgerbräukeller* in central Munich, interrupt a speech Kahr was scheduled to give there to some 3000 people and declare that the existing government of Bavaria was deposed, to be replaced by one headed by him.

On the evening of the intended seizure of power in Bavaria a member of staff from the Italian Consulate rushed along to the *Bürgerbräukeller* on hearing that the putsch was underway, and immediately found that access to the enormous hall was barred by armed NSDAP paramilitaries. Having made the guards aware of his identity the Italian diplomat pushed his way through the throng, and into a beer hall filled with armed guards sporting swastika arm bands. After some considerable time he finally encountered Hitler and asked him what his intentions now were, having just announced the seizure of power in Bavaria. Hitler appeared 'extremely pale' and tense with his face contorted into a fixed frown but all the same remained courteous and polite. He informed the Italian that there was nothing he could say, that all communications were for the time being prohibited and that at that point only a few of the government offices in Munich had been occupied by NSDAP men. But unbeknown to either Hitler or the Italian official events were about to take a negative turn for the putschists. Called away to deal with problems facing the uprising elsewhere in the city Hitler left the other principal protagonist of the revolution, Erich Ludendorf, in charge of the beer hall. Ludendorf foolishly allowed Kahr, von Lossow and von Seisser – who had agreed to serve in the new Hitler government of Bavaria and were present that evening – to leave the beer hall. However, once outside it was clear that the three men were far from committed to any Hitler administration, and the members of the triumvirate instead gave immediate assurances to the Weimar authorities that they did not support it at all. Shocked and bemused at this turn of events, Hitler and Ludendorf chose to stage a demonstration march in central Munich at 8:00 A.M. the next morning, the 9th November. As the Italian account of events shows, this was precisely the wrong thing to do.

When Hitler, Ludendorf and their entourage arrived at the agreed meeting point in *Odeonsplatz* on the morning of 9th November, they found that a detachment of German Federal Militia had already cordoned off the area. Hitler and around a hundred of his own men attempted to break through the cordon, which resulted in scuffles during which a number of gun shots were

heard. Hitler, wounded in the arm, leapt into a waiting car and fled the scene, leaving Ludendorf to surrender to the German militia alone. With that, the Consular official noted scornfully in his official report for Mussolini, 'the tragicomedy ended, leaving around fifteen people dead' and Hitler's 'revolution' in complete disarray. That night Hitler and Ludendorf were arrested. Even though many in Munich, including the daily *Muenchener Zeitung*, continued to support the ideas behind the failed putsch, it was all over. The formal Italian report on the debacle was damning in its conclusions. Hitler's haste and incompetence had, it concluded, led the NSDAP into a disaster which had severely damaged its reputation. Disorganisation was plainly the principle cause of the failure but 'thoughtlessness, recklessness, lack of loyalty and courage, a lack of energy and of style' on the part of the Nazi putschists also played their part. The author concluded that the *Duce* had been right about Hitler and the NSDAP: they were nothing more than 'buffoons'.[56]

The trial for high treason of Hitler and his co-conspirators did very little to change the views of those Fascist officials in attendance. As one Consular official noted, the hearing in Munich had unmasked Ludendorf's 'intellectual decadence', while Hitler had emerged as self-serving, fanatical and as a 'demagogue' who may well have enjoyed a degree of prestige, but who lacked the 'physical characteristics that were indispensible for the role he had chosen for himself'. When the verdicts were handed down on 1 April 1924, few Fascists familiar with Bavarian politics were even remotely surprised. Ludendorf was absolved of any blame and discharged largely because of his status within German society. Hitler and the other chief conspirators were sentenced to fines of 200 Gold Marks and five-years incarceration, which in Hitler's case meant a far shorter sentence served in the less than exacting confines of Landsberg Prison. As the Italian Consul General noted 'the whole trial had really been nothing more than a judicial farce', with key prosecution evidence deliberately omitted and an obvious connivance to rig the verdict on the part of the accused and the court itself. More than anything else, his lengthy report concluded, the Munich trial had demonstrated what the 'spirit of a large part of Germany society actually represented', namely a powerful and terrifying force which could in future reach out from Munich and devour the whole of Germany.[57]

In the aftermath of the disastrous Munich putsch Mussolini found himself at the centre of considerable attention and flattery from the NSDAP leader. After Hitler had been released from prison he reorganised the Nazi Party and published *Mein Kampf*, a work which openly spoke of Germany and Italy as being inevitable allies in the great conflicts to come. Between 1927 and 1928 the *Führer* of National Socialism made repeated requests for a personal meeting

[56] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1139, 'Putsch Ludendorf-Hitler e situazione politica in Bavaria', Italian Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, 13 November 1923.

[57] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta: 1142, 'Processo Hitler Ludendorff', Italian Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, 4 April 1923.

with Mussolini, and in doing so heaped every form of flattery upon him. This ranged from sending signed personal portraits of himself to Mussolini, to issuing further guarantees of the Alto Adige, to promises that a Germany led by him would fight 'an increasingly petulant and aggressive' France alongside Fascist Italy.[58] But Hitler's much requested meeting with the *Duce* did not materialise. Moreover, claims that Mussolini funded Hitler's party in the run up to the disastrous 1928 elections – during which the Nazis polled a mere 2.6 per cent – and even supplied it with arms, remain unsubstantiated and unproven.[59] If anything, Mussolini at this juncture was still attempting to forge a closer bond with Gustav Stresemann's Germany, before he came to the conclusion that the German chancellor was nothing more than 'a saturated free mason and a "parliamentarised" political merchant'.[60] By 1929, with the whirlwind of global economic collapse fast approaching, Mussolini's Italy remained unable to fulfil its leader's ambitious imperialist design.

[58] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1174, Italian Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, reports dated 27 April 1927, 13 May 1927, 17 May 1927 and 7 July 1927.

[59] Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 24–25. The author wishes to thank Professor Sir Ian Kershaw and Professor Michele Abbate of the Italian Foreign Ministry for their help in clarifying the question of Fascist financing of the NSDAP.

[60] Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, p. 21.

3

The Darkening Horizon 1929–1932

The sudden and massive falls in the New York Stock Exchange on 'Black Tuesday', 29 October 1929, brought an end to the wealth and prosperity of the 'Roaring Twenties'. After reaching a high of 381.17 in early September, the Dow Jones Index dramatically crashed amid falling real estate values in the United States and a precipitous drop in share values that lasted over a month. The post-war boom was over and the myth that 'Stock prices have reached what looks like a permanently high plateau' as espoused by America's first celebrity economist, Irving Fisher, sounded hollow as country after country experienced the devastating effects of the fallout. Yet a full economic depression did not follow immediately in the wake of the market crash, and in the period up to April 1930 share prices began a gradual recovery reaching a level 30 per cent below their high point of September 1929. Therefore, the convenient explanation that the 'Great Depression' led inevitably to historical catastrophes, such as the sudden change in Nazi electoral fortunes in the autumn of 1930, has rightly been contested by historians such as Sally Marks. Marks points out that the Depression, caused principally by depressed consumer confidence and deflationary pressures in the United States, was 'a slowly creeping miasma' that took some time to impact on the global economy. As the German election campaign went into full swing during the summer of 1930, all major economies were in recession, but not yet full depression. It was not until late 1930 that the vicious depressive cycle started, bottoming out as a full-blown economic meltdown in March 1933, two months after Hitler had won power in Germany.[1] And with Hitler firmly in power in Germany some, such as Benito Mussolini, stood to gain. For after a decade in power, the *Duce* could at long last foresee a real challenge to the French strategic stranglehold in Europe.

[1] Marks, *The Illusion of Power*, p. 120.

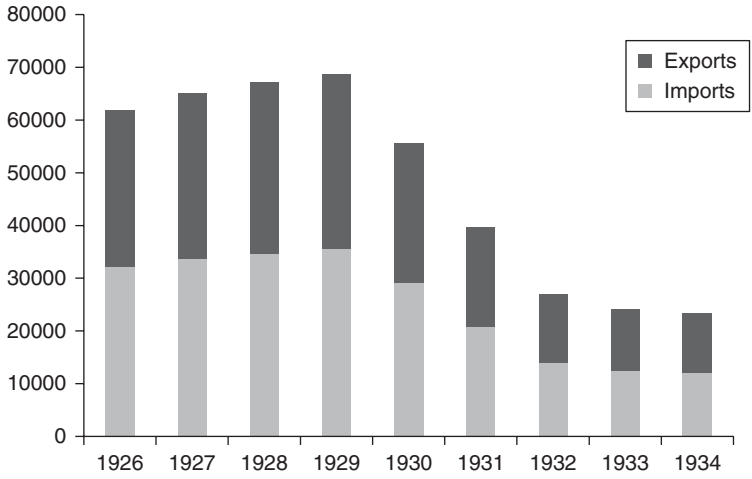

FIGURE 3.1. Italian balance of trade 1926–1934 (figures in millions of gold dollars). *Source*: Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche tra le due grandi guerre: Volume I 1918–1935*, p. 182.

ITALY – REALITIES AND MYTHS

While the Fascist Italian economy did not suffer the same levels of economic devastation that afflicted a Germany already in serious difficulties over reparations and excessive foreign borrowing, the effects of the slump were nevertheless keenly felt. Between 1929 and 1930 Italy's foreign trade shrank by some 40 per cent followed by further dramatic shrinkages in the subsequent four years (see Figure 3.1).

Italy's was in reality a modest economy heavily dependent on imported staple raw materials such as coal, oil and iron ore and which was still dominated heavily by artisan and agricultural production. As markets for Italian exports rapidly vanished after 1929, production dropped by over a third, leading to a threefold increase in unemployment and a serious general rise in levels of poverty, and especially at the lower end of the social scale. Although in the first months of the crisis, the prices of daily commodities such as bread, electricity, gas and public transport all dropped, it became clear by 1931 that the financial calamity facing the nation was grave in the extreme and required urgent and drastic measures.[2]

As recession turned into economic catastrophe, Italian banks which had made heavy, long-term investments in national industries such as armaments and ship building suddenly experienced a shortage of capital. Major financial institutions such as the *Banca Commerciale Italiana*, *Credito Italiano*, the *Banca di Roma* and the *Istituto Italiano di Credito Marittimo*, linked closely

[2] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel period fascista*, pp. 543–544.

as they were to Italy's key industrial concerns, were plunged into a deepening financial crisis. Reckless and speculative investments based on excessive optimism on the true state of world markets prior to the global downturn left Italian banks without the means to carry out even the most basic financial transactions. Now with overseas credit having all but disappeared, it was abundantly clear that only extreme measures could salvage the Italian economy. Beginning in November 1930 the Mussolini regime lowered all Italian wages by 12 per cent and encouraged as many companies and business interests to merge, or form consortia as possible. Not for the first time in Italian history, government funded public works programmes were expanded dramatically, and in 1931 the first major innovation in state intervention in the economy, the *Istituto Mobiliare Italiano* (the IMI), began its task of buying up shares in Italy's failing banks, leading ultimately to full or indirect Fascist control of the country's banking assets. By 1933 the Fascist Corporate state, established in July 1926 as an organism for the 'organisation, coordination and control' of all of Italy's economic forces, further extended its influence on daily life by setting up the *Istituzione per la Ricostruzione Industriale*, or the IRI.[3] As Mussolini saw it, crisis or not, control of all aspects of Italian life, including economic life, were simply part of the new Fascist civilisation. As he put it in the Doctrine of Fascism, published in 1932:

> We are, in other words, a state which controls all forces acting in nature. We control political forces, we control moral forces, we control economic forces, therefore we are a full-blown Corporative state. We stand for a new principle in the world, we stand for sheer, categorical, definitive antithesis to the world of democracy, plutocracy, free-masonry, to the world which still abides by the fundamental principles laid down in 1789.[4]

Mussolini regarded such new organisations not as a means of salvaging 'decomposed' Italian economic interests, but rather as the mechanism for 'energetically reigniting the Italian economy and taking it in a fully corporatist direction'. While private property and private enterprise were to be respected, Mussolini stressed in a speech in December 1931 that these too had to be fully integrated into the Fascist state in order to 'protect, control and revive them' following the great economic upheavals of late.[5] Hinting that these were no mere short-term measures to help Italy ride out the worst of the Depression, Mussolini suggested that they were intended to be permanent features of the corporatist economic landscape. The IRI comprised an Immobilisation Section with responsibility for liquidating all negative assets and liabilities, and a Financing Section which made use of State funds to provide loans to Italian industrial enterprises in need of capital. Shortly after its establishment, the IRI

[3] On the mechanisms of the Fascist state and corporativism, see A. Aquarone, *L'organizazzione dello stato totalitario* (Einaudi, Turin, 1995), especially pp. 467–468.

[4] B. Mussolini, *La dottirina del fascismo* (1932).

[5] *OOBM*, XXV, 'Per l'Istituto Mobiliare italiano', 6 December 1931.

was able to eliminate virtually all worthless industrial stocks and shares in the hands of the major Italian banking houses, with the end result that by 1934, after much painstaking effort, the worst of Italy's financial crisis was deemed to be over. Overall both the IMI and the IRI succeeded in better delineating the map of financial responsibility within Fascist Italy, leaving banks free to invest more wisely in national economic production on a frequent basis while the two new institutions held credit reserves for more long-term investment. But ultimately it was the IRI that was destined to play a major role in running the Fascist economy, and beyond that it became one of Italy's largest and most important post-war conglomerates. Under Mussolini it gradually became the largest national shareholder in, and provider of loans for, virtually all of Italy's biggest industrial concerns, including its ship builders and armaments manufacturers. Thereby the IRI became Fascism's mechanism of control over both Italian high finance and every aspect of industrial production.[6]

In much the same fashion, Mussolini gradually tightened his control over all areas of Italian life after 1925. Political power became the exclusive domain of the PNF after late 1926 at which point Mussolini banned all other political parties in Italy following a series of attempts on his life. The *legge fascistissime* (the ultra-Fascist laws) passed in the wake of the Matteotti Crisis further increased Mussolini's stranglehold on practically every area of Italian life. Law number 2263 of 24 December 1925 made Mussolini the uncontested Head of Government responsible only to the Head of State, King Victor Emanuel. Other draconian legislation quickly followed including new laws limiting press freedoms and banning the right to strike. Thereafter the only recognised Unions in Italy were the Fascist ones that helped make up the new corporatist structure of society, all others were completely outlawed. Finally Mussolini, who had established the Fascist Grand Council in 1923 as a PNF body made it an instrument of government in 1928. In theory all legislation had to be passed and ratified by the Council, although in reality it had no direct power to do so without Mussolini's express authorisation. Meanwhile, the Fascist security Police, *OVRA*, and the organisation's vast network of paid informants ensured that no one complained about or attempted to subvert the new order of things in Italy. Members of now banned political parties such as the Socialist Party or the *Partito Communista italiano* were placed under round the clock surveillance by *OVRA* agents, and effectively cut-off from dissident exiles in North Africa attempting to foment a counter-revolution in Italy [7]

But what made Mussolini's rule in Italy unprecedented both within that country and within the context of modern European History as a whole, was the regime's deliberate construction of a personality cult – the cult of the *Duce* of Fascism – as a means of encouraging popular devotion, subservience and

[6] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel period fascista*, pp. 542–557.

[7] Payne, *A History of Fascism*, p. 116; M. Canali, *Le spie del regime*, (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004), pp. 299–310; M. Franzinelli, *I tentacoli dell'OVRA*, (Bollati Boringheri, Turin, 1990), p. 229.

total obedience. In practice, the Fascist regime in the form of PNF secretaries Augusto Turati (1926–1930) and Achille Starace (1931–1939) helped reincarnate a new spirit of Imperial Rome, or *Romanità*, with the cult of the all seeing and all powerful *Duce* at its heart. As Turati and Starace developed the cult of Mussolini so did the religious dimensions of Fascism become more central, along with the sense that the *Duce* of Fascism was creating a new Mediterranean civilisation set, in time, to dominate that entire littoral of that sea. This was the religion of *Ducismo*, the creation of a belief system focused on Mussolini alone and which presented him as incomparable to anyone else alive and as someone set apart from the rest of humanity. Throughout the later 1920s and beyond, the Fascist propaganda machinery thus continually reiterated themes of Mussolini's great and unmatchable stature. He was at one and the same time 'prophet, saviour, guide of the nation', as well as 'statesman, legislator, philosopher, writer, artist, universal genius … messiah', destined to lead Italy to a bright and glorious future. Such demagoguery and officially sanctioned megalomania ran counter to the liberal democracy prevalent throughout so much of Europe, and set the precedent for the terror and excesses that were to set the entire world ablaze just a few years later. Within Mussolini's new society there was no tolerance of any opposition, no room for any individual thought. What mattered in Fascist Italy was total obedience to the *Duce*, or as Augusto Turati put it, 'the thousand hearts of Fascism all yell the same words, love, devotion, discipline, faith even to the ultimate sacrifice.' Mussolini had always to be humbly obeyed, and at all times.[8]

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF ADOLF HITLER

There was no doubting what type of government Benito Mussolini wished to see running Germany. As he informed the Italian Consul General's office in Munich in April 1925, the best outcome for Italy in the forthcoming Weimar presidential elections would be a victory for former military supremo Paul von Hindenburg and the German right. But even such a victory contained hidden dangers as far as the *Duce* was concerned. On the one hand and in anticipation of a Hindenburg victory, Mussolini claimed that he would be taking 'precautions' within Italy in the event that the new president might attempt a restoration of the Hohenzollern dynasty in Germany, and with all the concomitant dangers that might result from this. On the other, the Italian dictator was equally aware that Hindenburg had been guilty of 'crimes against humanity' during the Great War, and that he would therefore remain very cautious about establishing close ties with him for political reasons.[9] But although Mussolini followed events in Germany 'with great attention' as he put it, this

[8] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel period fascista*, p. 410.

[9] ASMAE, Affari politici: Germania, busta 1157, 'Circa elezione Presidente Germania', Mussolini to Consular Office, Munich, 28 April 1925.

did not extend to Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP. As the Munich Consul General Giulliano Cora noted during the course of the presidential campaign, 'Hitler has not yet made his decision (on whom to support) but his stance is of no particular importance anyway.' The recent elections held in Germany in December 1924 had been characterised by 'the rapid decline' of Hitler's party, while his own personal activity was now limited only to countering the severe measures taken against him by the Bavarian government. Hitler was an outcast, a political exile within Bavarian politics and destined to vanish into obscurity amid indifference and scorn.[10]

And yet Hitler and the NSDAP simply refused to die out and disappear from the world of German politics, while the Nazi leader continued to press for formal ties with Mussolini and the PNF in the years after his release from incarceration. In his dark, melodramatic opus *Mein Kampf* Hitler had identified both Mussolini's Italy and the British Empire as firm allies of a future National Socialist Germany. As he put it:

> On soberest and coldest reflection, it is today primarily these two states, *England and Italy*, whose most natural selfish interests are not, in the most essential points at least, opposed to the German nation's requirements for existence, and are, indeed, to a certain extent, identified with them.[11]

For Hitler there could only ever be two possible allies for his National Socialist cause, albeit allies with diametrically opposing interests in the Mediterranean and Red Sea. But the Nazi leader did not recognise this oversight in his geopolitical calculation, and throughout the later 1920s he actively sought to win the *Duce* over to his vision for the future, an Anglo-German-Italian political configuration that would dominate Europe. For instance in April 1927, with Hitler's ban on participating in future Weimar elections due to expire and a federal election scheduled for the following year, the Nazi leader went on a 'propaganda offensive' with the aim of showcasing his grandiose vision of Germany's future under Nazi rule. Addressing a huge and enthusiastic crowd in Munich, Hitler argued that Germany was confronted by two implacable foes in France and the Soviet Union, and that only Britain and Italy could ever be counted on as reliable allies for the future. Fascist Italy like Germany had a rapidly expanding population and had a great need for territorial expansion to remedy this. And as was the case with Germany, Italy found an obstacle to the pursuit of such needs in the 'ever spiteful French'. The one problem that stood in the way of a rapid improvement in Italian–German relations was still the South Tyrol, Hitler continued, but, he added, 'who today had the nerve to sacrifice 300,000 Germans to save 170,000?' A National Socialist Germany could never expect to find true friends among peoples unwilling to combat 'Jewish

[10] ASMAE, Affari politici: Germania, busta 1157, 'Elezioni presidenziali', Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, 14 April 1925.

[11] A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (London, Pimlico, 1992), p. 566.

Masonic internationalism', Hitler warned, only stridently nationalistic nations like Italy could be trusted to do that.[12]

But what was Mussolini's view of Hitler during this period? Did Mussolini see in the fledgling NSDAP the mechanism for unlocking a European strategic situation dominated principally by the French? Historians have been at pains to stress that PNF funds and even Italian weapons were sent on the *Duce*'s orders to many right-wing groups in Germany including the NSDAP at this time.[13] German newspapers such as the *Berliner Tageblatt* certainly picked up on the allegedly 'close' bond being supposedly formed between the PNF and the NSDAP, and spoke of money and arms flowing northwards from Rome to Munich.[14] Throughout the remainder of 1927 and into 1928, Hitler's charm offensive continued unabated as he gave speeches and talked to Fascist Italian officials about the same constant theme, the inevitability of a future Nazi alliance.[15] Rome's alleged financing of a Bavarian weekly current affairs magazine entitled *Nord-Sud Korrespondenz*, extracts from which regularly appeared in the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*, further added to speculation that Nazi–Fascist ties were strengthening. Even German Embassy officials in Rome concluded that Hitler and Mussolini enjoyed a close and cordial relationship.[16] However, to date there has been no conclusive proof of either funds or arms being sent to the NSDAP by Mussolini, and ultimately for all Hitler's flattery, Mussolini rejected any idea of an encounter with the Nazi leader on the very eve of the federal elections in May 1928.[17] On 20 May the election results demonstrated precisely why Mussolini remained sceptical if not still largely dismissive of the Nazi Party. The NSDAP won a derisory 2.6 per cent of the total vote and seemed destined for imminent political obscurity. In reality, Hitler was of little real use to Mussolini.

But despite their poor showing in the May 1928 federal elections, the NSDAP, contrary to the claims of many Germans at the time, was very far from finished. In the difficult winter months of 1928–1929 Hitler focused heavily on winning as much broad appeal within German society as possible, and certainly the crowds thronging to hear his speeches denouncing Versailles, the international Jewish conspiracy and the Versailles Treaty continued to grow in size and diversity. As Ian Kershaw has noted, Hitler's reorganisation of the NSDAP after his release from prison gradually resulted in an increase

[12] ASMAE, Affari politici: Germania, busta 1174, Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, 1 April 1927.

[13] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia nel period fascista*, p. 721; Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, p. 24.

[14] ASMAE, Affari politici: Germania, busta 1174, 'Articolo sui rapporti tra S.E Mussolini e Hitler', Aldrovandi, Berlin to Mussolini.

[15] ASMAE, Affari politici: Germania, busta 1174, 'Dichiarzioni del signor Hitler', Italian Embassy, Berlin to Mussolini, 14 December 1927.

[16] Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, p. 24.

[17] ASMAE, Affari politici, Germania, busta 1176, 'Adolfo Hitler – Incontro con Vostra Eccelenza', Italian Embassy, Berlin, to Mussolini, 12 May 1928.

in party membership, while better organisation, particularly in terms of the dissemination of propaganda, slowly began to win more Germans over to the tenets of Nazi ideology.[18] Even so progress was painfully slow. Local elections in Saxony (May 1929) and Mecklenberg (June) increased the Nazi share of the vote only to around 5 per cent, hardly a major breakthrough. Meanwhile, Hitler's direct involvement in the DNVP's 'Reich Committee for the German People', an attempt to derail the Young Plan initiatives to reduce German reparations payments, also proved to be another frustrating exercise in failure. When the DNVP plan to reject the Young Plan was presented to the German people by way of a plebiscite in December 1929 only 13.8 per cent voted in favour.

Despite such setbacks, the Nazi leader continued to press hard for a closer relationship with Mussolini's PNF and insisted on the need for a close alliance between Fascist Italy and Germany. As Hitler emphasised in the pages of Nazi propaganda organ *Völkischer Beobachter* in the early summer of 1929, he had been frequently accused of having betrayed the South Tyrol in exchange for 'Italian money'. While not denying that any sums had changed hands, Hitler emphatically denied that he intended to abandon the Germans of the Alto Adige. A close working partnership with Mussolini and the PNF would, he stressed, do much to relieve any existing tensions over this vexed question. Surely the goal was not the resolution of comparatively minor territorial matters but the 'rebirth of Germany in great style'. Only Fascist Italy, itself surrounded by enemies on all sides, could help the German people achieve this.[19] Certainly at this time Hitler was the subject of frequent reports in the Fascist controlled press, some of which openly declared him to be 'the true face of Germany'.[20] But the idea of an alliance with Germany was never touched upon in any of the Italian dailies at this time, while anti-Hitler newspapers in Bavaria such as the *Bayerischer Kurier* openly poured scorn on the idea. The Italian–German alliance, the paper noted in May 1929, was nothing more than a Nazi illusion, 'a castle in the skies that should not be taken seriously'.[21] Similarly, both Nazi Party zealot Robert Ley and Hitler himself found their requests to visit Italy indefinitely deferred by the PNF in Rome. Mussolini, it seemed, remained largely unconvinced by either Hitler or his movement.[22]

[18] Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, pp. 307–309.

[19] ASMAE, Affari politici: Germania, busta 1181, 'La perorazione di Adolfo Hitler', 8 May 1929.

[20] *Popolo d'Italia*, 18 May 1929.

[21] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1181, 'Italia e Germania – Illusioni Nazionalsocialiste', Consul General, Munich to Mussolini, 31 May 1929.

[22] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1181, 'Viaggio di deputati hitleriani in Italia', Aldrovandi, Berlin to Mussolini, 3 January 1929 and 20 March 1929.

THE 1930 REICHSTAG ELECTIONS

By the early 1930s, the Germany which Mussolini claimed would be a useful counterpoint to overwhelming French superiority in Europe had already begun its journey into the abyss. With the voice of common sense that was Gustav Stresemann now gone after his untimely death on 3 October 1929, strident right-wing nationalism in the form of the DNVP, the *Stahlhelm* and Hitler's NSDAP increasingly clamoured for an end to all German 'war guilt', the cancellation of all reparations and the return of the Saar region. When on 30 June 1930 French troops finally evacuated a Rhineland region occupied by the Allies since 1919 in exchange for Stresemann's adherence to the Young Plan, it was the Nationalist right who rejoiced most loudly. A proclamation issued by President Hindenburg's office the next day made no mention of the late German chancellor but spoke only of the need to honour Germany's war dead. The *Stahlhelm*, the group Hindenburg most closely associated himself with, staged loud and triumphant demonstrations of joy along the French and Belgian frontiers with the Rhineland region in the days that followed.[23] By September 1930 the unexpected and dramatic improvement in the NSDAP's electoral performance further proved, if proof were needed, that the shrill voice of aggressive nationalism had once again come to prevail in Germany. Mussolini and his PNF sycophants watched with quiet interest.

The German political crisis that began in earnest after the death of Stresemann proved instrumental in catapulting Nazi electoral fortunes upwards. The slow demise of the Weimar Republic contributed directly to the circumstances surrounding Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933, and in due course provided Mussolini with the militant German regime, albeit led by Adolf Hitler, that he needed to be in power if he was ever to launch his much trumpeted campaigns of overseas aggression. It began in the first three months of 1930 at which point Stresemann's replacement as chancellor, Hermann Müller of the Social Democratic Party (the SPD), encountered major difficulties in forcing increases in worker contributions to insurance schemes through the Reichstag. Although the Italian ambassador in Berlin Luca Orsini claimed that Müller had received outward support for his new measures from Hindenburg, in reality the president had already decided to dispense with the SPD and end their involvement in government. Hindenburg refused to grant Müller emergency powers available under Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, which would have enabled him to propel the measures through parliament by presidential decree. The result was a political crisis that led to Müller's resignation on 27th March. The overall result, Orsini claimed, was a further erosion of public confidence in the German political system and a marked increase in support for extremist parties such as the German Communists (the KPD) and Hitler's Nazis. Hitler in particular represented the

[23] Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, p. 114.

'greatest threat' to the Weimar system, the ambassador warned, given that a large number of ex-German officers had now swung behind the NSDAP cause, and that rumours of a Hitler-led putsch abounded throughout Germany.[24]

As the Weimar Republic fell deeper into chaos and anarchy throughout 1930, the NSDAP began to grow stronger, seemingly on a daily basis. In mid-February the first tangible signs of Fascist interest in the geopolitical views Hitler had elaborated in *Mein Kampf* became evident when the Nazi leader was invited to a private and very confidential meeting at the offices of the Italian Consul General in Munich. Of greatest interest to Mussolini, who was immediately sent an account of the meeting, was Hitler's affirmation that a Nazi-led Germany could, alongside Fascist Italy, smash French encirclement of both their countries in Europe. Once 'French hegemony' had been swept aside for good, the German and Italian peoples could dominate their respective spheres of interest – in eastern Europe and the Mediterranean respectively – free from the iniquity of French interference. Such an alliance, Hitler stressed, would become even more potent and all encompassing once the British abandoned their French allies and joined forces with Nazism and Fascism.[25]

Hitler and his NSDAP cohorts were by no means the only far right organisation in Germany interested in cultivating Mussolini's friendship and support as the Weimar Republic slowly began to disintegrate. By early February 1930, Fascist sources in Germany were fully aware that the *Stahlhelm*, the ex-combatants organisation made up of around 700,000 members, was equally interested in forging ties with the PNF. The 'Steel Helmets', ostensibly a non-political organisation, had distanced itself from the NSDAP and bore an increasing resemblance to the early PNF. Unlike the Nazis they relied less on public parades and rather more on placing individual cells within Germany's public services, in order to deal as effectively as possible with the likelihood of widespread strike action, according to Fascist officials in Berlin.[26] Mussolini, at least during the first half of 1930, found them an interesting proposition and liked their approach to strengthening German–Italian ties enough to authorise his emissary, Giuseppe Renzetti, to stay in close contact with the organisation. Unlike the NSDAP, the *Stahlhelm* was much more in favour of closer economic ties with Italy as opposed to military ones and also unlike Hitler claimed to have connections within the *Reichswehr* which would prove very useful should the organisation elect to seize power forcefully. It spoke volumes about both the *Duce*'s view of Hitler and his view of the potential value of Germany as an ally, that he readily endorsed a visit to Rome by senior *Stahlhelm* leaders in

[24] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1183, 'Situazione interno-parlamentare', Orsini to Grandi, 3 March 1930 and on Hindenburg's refusal to back Mueller see Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, p. 323.

[25] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1183, Capasso, Munich to Grandi/Mussolini, 14 February 1930.

[26] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1183, 'Situazione interna in Germania', Foreign Ministry, Rome to Moscow, Warsaw, Paris, London Embassies, 1 February 1930.

late April 1930. Not surprisingly Hitler did not like the movement and strongly disapproved of the support given to it by senior Nazis such as Josef Goebbels and Herman Goering, given that it threatened to derail his attempts to win Mussolini over after so many years of trying.[27]

However, while the DNVP were, by the spring of 1930, also speaking very stridently of the value of a full alliance with Mussolini's Italy, fate decreed that it was Hitler who was destined to make the political breakthrough in Germany.[28] As Hitler personally informed Renzetti when the two men met in Berlin in mid-April, he foresaw a far better performance from the NSDAP in the next Reichstag elections. Hitler, who expected the Nazis to win between thirty and thirty-five seats, was at great pains to emphasise yet again his 'profound admiration and liking for Mussolini and Fascism', informing Renzetti that he was more than happy to put the Nazi press at his disposal. Renzetti tactfully kept his own counsel and, as he put it, promised nothing while awaiting instructions from the *Duce*.[29] In the following months it became clear that the Nazi Party was indeed winning over ever greater numbers of the German voting public. As the Consul General in Munich Capasso noted in the early summer, Hitler's reorganisation of NSDAP propaganda so as to strengthen its appeal to each social class on its own terms was paying off. In Bavaria, he noted, the bourgeoisie in particular were flocking to support the party because they feared increased working class militancy amid Weimar's imploding political system. The result was that around 250,000 Germans were now card carrying members of the NSDAP, and many more within German society now expected the party to substantially increase its share of the vote in the next Reichstag elections.[30]

Throughout that fateful summer of 1930 it was clear that disillusion and discontent with the Weimar political system was widespread throughout Germany. As Orsini warned Mussolini and his new Foreign Minister Count Dino Grandi in July, the German people, never wholly enthusiastic about the Weimar system, now totally rejected it. 'Disgust against the Reichstag was widespread and profound,' he wrote, and 'this disgust when united to ill feeling, and to the widespread suffering of many as a result of the deepening economic crisis, constitutes the most potent breeding ground for National Socialism'. Duly, when the government of Heinrich Brüning of the Zentrum Party also failed to reform state finances and cut public expenditure, even by threatening the use

[27] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1183, 'Elmetti d'acciao', Orsini to Grandi/Mussolini, 28 April 1930.

[28] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1184, 'Invocazioni nazionaliste per l'alleanza italo-tedesca', Capasso, Munich to Grandi/Mussolini, 29 March 1930.

[29] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1184, 'Partiti germanici di destra ed 'Elmi d'acciaio', Orsini, Berlin to Grandi/Mussolini, 14 April 1930.

[30] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1183, 'I progressi del partito socialnazionalista', Capasso to Grandi/Mussolini, 8 June 1930.

of Article 48, he was left with no choice but to ask Hindenburg to dissolve the Reichstag and call for fresh elections on 14 September.[31]

Even before Hindenburg had announced elections for that September it was clear that Nazi political fortunes were already changing in their favour. A Landtag (state assembly) election in Saxony that June had demonstrated that the political process in Weimar had become polarised given the successes of both far left and revolutionary right-wing movements, and Hitler's Nazis in particular. As Orsini pointed out, Saxony had for sometime been a stronghold for the *Deutsche Volkspartei*, a party which had successfully forged governmental ties with various centre ground movements while Stresemann had been chancellor. But this time around, at a moment when Germany was reeling from the effects of both economic and political turbulence, the KPD had polled 13 per cent and the NSDAP a stunning 14 per cent, leading to claims by some papers that '"Fascism" had made a great leap forward' in that society.[32] In Rome Mussolini largely kept his own counsel and appeared more than a little reluctant to place any confidence in Hitler and the NSDAP. That spring he had declared to a secret meeting of the Fascist Grand Council that, 'personally I have the highest regard for Germany and remain firmly convinced that the Reich would regain all its power and grandeur'. But the German establishment's net rejection of the great Fascist idea meant that there was 'no possibility of any political cooperation' between the two countries. As he informed the *Berliner Tageblatt* in May he did not 'recognise any Fascists outside of Italy', a clear hint that he did not see Hitler securing power anytime soon.[33]

When the German election results were announced on 15th September, the outcome shook the whole world, taking even Hitler and his entourage by surprise. Earlier that year even Hitler's forecast, made to Renzetti, of between thirty and thirty-five Reichstag seats had seemed an exaggeration given that the NSDAP managed a mere twelve, some 2.6 per cent of the vote, two years earlier. But when the election results were announced it was beyond any doubt that amid the chaos, disorder and widespread unemployment of the Weimar Republic, the NSDAP had truly emerged as a force to be reckoned with in German politics. The Nazis polled 18.3 per cent of the total votes cast and won 107 parliamentary seats. Displacing the main centre ground parties the DNVP and the *Deutsche Volkspartei*, both of whom saw half their support evaporate away, the Nazis became the second largest party in Germany behind the SPD. In Rome, Hitler's success, not surprisingly, generated considerable surprise and led to a total re-evaluation of Fascist policy towards Germany. Fascist periodicals such as *Gerarchia* declared the Nazi success to be a truly personal triumph

[31] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1183, 'Partiti e crisi parlamentare in Germania', Orsini to Grandi/Mussolini, 18 July 1930.

[32] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1184, 'Risultato elezioni sassoni. L'ascesa nazional-socialista', Orsini to Grandi/Mussolini, 26 June 1930.

[33] Mussolini cited in Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, p. 36 and *OOBM*, XXIV, 'Intervista con il 'Berliner Tageblatt', 14 May 1930.

for Hitler, and a development that would comprehensively alter Italy's position in the European geopolitical status quo:

> we Fascists are satisfied that another great European country has rebelled with millions of democratic votes against the crumbling myth of democracy, and it benefits us as Italians that Italy now enjoys greater international freedom of manoeuvre after any idea of an unnatural Franco-German entente as developed by Briand and Stresemann is at last dead … The great Fascist idea is truly making great progress in the world.[34]

Fascist diplomats in Germany endorsed the general idea that the Nazi surge would fundamentally change the European political landscape. It was no exaggeration, Capasso noted from Munich, to claim that the election results 'heralded the defeat of democracy in Germany'. The nine million or so German voters who had voted against democracy in 1928 through their support for the DNVP and the KPD, had now become fifteen million who had helped launch the NSDAP on the road to power. Their reasons for making this choice were, on the whole, straightforward. For many the Weimar parties had kept the German people in a 'state of depression' for twelve years, and had presided incompetently over grave political and economic crises while demonstrating no real capacity for resolving them. What the September election had served to demonstrate was that the German people were heartily sick of this state of affairs, which had ultimately served only to reawaken 'its national spirit'. The question was how much would Germany change, and how this would affect Italian interests?[35]

Given the many reservations about Hitler and his movement that had prevailed in Fascist circles up until very recently, it was not altogether surprising that the Nazi electoral surge equally generated many misgivings in Italy. Fascist intellectual Asverio Gravelli, for one, continued to pour criticism on the Nazi Führer whose Nazi Party was the subject of an intensive 'investigation' in Gravelli's own journal *Antieuropa* for many months after the Reichstag elections. The journal's enquiry concluded that 'any points of contact between Italian Fascism and Hitlerism are purely external', and that there could never be any genuine relationship between either the two parties or the two leaders.[36] In the pages of *Gerarchia*, Mussolini's own journal, further questions were asked about the true extent of any affinity between the two movements. An article published in November 1930 by German diplomat Werner von der Schulenberg outlined the many perceived differences between Nazi and Fascist ideology, before heavily criticising Hitler's anti-Semitism, his considerable demagoguery and the excessively rigid nature of his ideas.[37] Mussolini remained sceptical about Hitler's future prospects as a potential leader of Germany. He

[34] G. Bevione, ''Il trionfo di Hitler', *Gerarchia*, September 1930.

[35] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 1184, 'I risultati delle elezioni politiche', Capasso to Grandi/Mussolini, 16 September 1930.

[36] *Antieuropa*, March-September 1931.

[37] *Il trionfo di Hitler* in *Gerarchia*, November 1930.

continued to take Hitler less than seriously, viewing him as coarse and lacking in any standing as a statesman. However, at the same time he could not fail to overlook the rising tide of Nazi fortunes, and by all accounts began to consider some sort of *modus vivendi* with the NSDAP in the months after the September election. Nazi revisionism, of the Versailles Treaty in particular, and Hitler's ruthless and exaggerated pan-Germanism were potential dangers that the *Duce* simply could not overlook, although of course he remained acutely aware of the effects they would have on French hegemony, as well as that of the British.

THE ROAD TO AGGRESSION

Even as Hitler and the Nazi Party basked in the warm glow of political success in Germany, Mussolini continued to seek opportunities for conflict, primarily with the ever troublesome Yugoslavs. His overt aggression and bellicosity, very clearly expressed for instance in his infamous '*Discorso di Firenze*' of May 1930, remained as acute as ever even if the foreign policy pursued by Dino Grandi between 1929 and 1932 positioned Italy as the final arbiter, the '*peso determinante*' in European geopolitics. As Grandi recalled in his memoirs, he had felt it essential that Italy remain the '*peso determinante*', the determining power within the realm of European diplomacy. Diplomatic negotiations leading to a final resolution were the way things had been done in European politics for time immemorial, 'because everything in life was based on compromise, even love and war'.[38] While in ministerial office, Grandi could with some degree of honesty claim that he had tried hard to improve the crucial Italian relationships with Great Britain, France, Germany and the United States, all of them vital to the future stability and well-being of the entire European continent. He could also claim that he had attempted to strengthen Fascist Italy's position as the arbiter of political affairs. But the main problem was that Mussolini intensely disliked Italy's 'traditional' role, and hated any idea of orthodox diplomatic processes. The *Duce* had not travelled abroad since the signature of the Locarno Treaty in 1925, an occasion which he had detested given his strange mixture of arrogance, a sense of inferiority, timidity and egocentricity. According to Grandi, Mussolini's hatred for the League of Nations stemmed from this same odd concoction of factors, although one might add that the democratic proclivities which prevailed there would have done very little to change the dictator's fanatically driven perspective. During his time as *Duce*, Mussolini insisted on strictly one to one negotiations with foreign diplomats and officials, and remained adamant that these should always take place in Rome.[39]

[38] Grandi, *Il mio paese*, p. 272.
[39] Ibid., pp. 270–272.

But beyond his idiosyncratic approach to political relations with other states, Mussolini had no time at all for talk of peace and cooperation between nations. This had never been a component of Fascist ideology at any time over the previous twelve or so years, and only economic, geopolitical and strategic expediency had prevented the dictator from waging war against Yugoslavia. In other words, Mussolini held no genuine desire to seek a working arrangement with Fascist Italy's Balkan neighbours. The *Duce* may well have felt that Grandi's diplomatic smokescreen, namely a pretence at peaceful Italian intentions within the framework of European politics via the mechanisms of orthodox diplomacy, was the right approach in a French-dominated Europe, but his mind was truly elsewhere. In truth he remained, after over a decade in power, the same Mussolini, aggressive, warlike and determined at some point soon to wage war. As he told his audience at the *Palazzo Vecchio* in Florence, he had recently authorised a new programme of naval building designed to destroy the final 'Gordian knot' that hemmed the Italian people in its imprisonment by the two key Versailles Powers within the waters of its own sea. These same powers, Mussolini added with characteristic sarcasm, had 'organised themselves into a cooperative designed to exploit life's immortal principles', namely the League of Nations. In reality they had merely connived to create a colossal swindle designed simply to isolate Italy, and prosecute a war against an Italian people guilty only of identifying itself with 'the regime of the Littorio'. Fascist Italy was ready for such an eventuality, and any country that attempted such an ignominious assault on Italy's frontiers would be taking a 'mortal risk'. 'Words are truly beautiful things', Mussolini famously concluded, 'but rifles, machine guns, ships, aircraft and cannons are even more beautiful'. Fascism's enemies should choose between precious friendship or brutal hostility with Mussolini's Italy.[40]

But as had been the case since 1922, Mussolini's bellicose rhetoric did not correspond to the military realities confronting Fascist Italy and was designed, at least in part, as an exercise in deception and bravado aimed at enemies such as Yugoslavia and its French ally. Throughout 1930 and 1931, even as the worldwide recession gradually worsened, Mussolini was still urging Badoglio and the Fascist military to launch a conflict against France and Yugoslavia on two fronts. But in the four years since Mussolini had first tabled the idea of such a war with Badoglio, the position of Italy's military and naval infrastructure had barely improved. At meeting after meeting of the *Stato maggiore generale* and the Supreme Defence Commission, a starkly negative picture of Italy's national defence capability emerged, which demonstrated that a Fascist war in Europe was out of the question. In Chiefs-of-Staff meetings held during late 1930 and into 1931, the deficiencies and shortages facing the regime's military were laid bare by frustrated Italian commanders. Army Chief of Staff Bonzani faced serious shortages in all types of hand-held weapons, artillery – the existing state

[40] *OOBM*, XXIV, 'Discorso di Firenze', 18 May 1930.

of which he described as 'qualitatively speaking leaving much to be desired' – munitions and machine guns, new designs of which would not enter service until December 1932. Work on the French frontier defences was set to continue up until 1936 at a total cost of 258 million lire, although as Bonzani swiftly added, the French Army was currently spending 10 million lire per kilometre on its own military construction projects.[41]

The usual financial constraints now aggravated by the deepening economic emergency facing the Italian economy added further impediments to any expansion of Fascist naval and air power. As Naval Chief-of-Staff Burzagli informed Badoglio and the other service chiefs, the *Regia Marina* currently had only three fully operational bases for use in any two front conflict – La Spezia, La Maddalena and Taranto – and even then Maddalena could be considered of 'limited importance' because of its vulnerability. Italian surface fleet operations whether in the Western Mediterranean theatre against French shipping, or in the Adriatic in support of amphibious landings in Zara and Albania, needed full air support if success was to be assured, Burzagli warned. Ominously recent operational assessments had overwhelmingly concluded that any extensive use of naval power required the full support of aircraft carriers – which Italy at present did not have – operating with the fleet, as opposed to an excessive reliance on land-based air units, a view with which Badoglio immediately agreed. Just a few years later this question of the use of air power in support of naval operations came to haunt the Italian naval establishment with a vengeance, in spite of Burzagli's recommendation that the matter be investigated more deeply. As Air Chief Giuseppe Valle pointed out, the *Regia Aeronautica*'s ability to support any land or naval operations in the immediate and medium-term future was also severely restricted by the grave financial limitations affecting Italy. Effectively the Italian Air Force had little or nothing by way of reserve units, a state of affairs which Valle correctly identified as 'extremely grave' given that very little real improvement in the situation could be expected given the limitations of Italian industry. Once the proposed conflict with Yugoslavia and France had begun, he warned, aircraft production could only increase to 200 per month after the first three months of war, and rising to 600 a month only after six months. Beyond this stark revelation, Valle also confirmed that the *Aeronautica* had at present only a month's worth of ordnance, a shortage of fuel storage facilities while its network of radio communication stations required a complete overhaul. Under the circumstances, Badoglio could only conclude that Mussolini's ambitious two front war strategy was nothing short of a 'catastrophic' conception, and Italy's military position in Europe as a whole 'tragic'. A year later, Badoglio finally talked Mussolini out of the whole idea, focusing the armed forces instead on a wholly defensive war against France and an offensive assault against the Yugoslavs. But even this undertaking, by Badoglio's own admission, was likely to prove difficult for the Fascist military.

[41] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale*, meeting of 23 October 1930.

The initial operational plans that finally surfaced in 1932 quite clearly set out Italy's precarious superiority over the Yugoslav military, not to mention the fact that the entire enterprise was contingent on a permanent state of French neutrality.[42]

With war against France and Yugoslavia shelved indefinitely after pressure from Badoglio and the military, Mussolini was forced to look elsewhere for the successful war of conquest which he believed would cement Fascist virility and military prowess. It did not take the *Duce* long to decide, as past Italian leaders had done, that the African continent, or more specifically East Africa, offered a good opportunity to demonstrate both the power of the new Italy, while also avenging the defeats of the past or more specifically the catastrophic defeat at Adowa of 1896.

In 1932 the regime was already fighting a murderous if obscure war of 're-conquest' against native tribesmen in the north Italian colony of Libya. The lengthy ten-year war against the Senussi rebels in Cyrenaica (merged with Tripolitania to form Libya in 1934), formally came to an end on 24 January 1932 when Governor General Badoglio declared that 'the rebellion in Cyrenaica is completely and definitively crushed'. Although the Fascist Colonial Army commanded by the ruthless career soldier General Rodolfo Graziani had proved ultimately successful in its brutal crushing of the indigenous rebellion, it had not resulted in any new territorial gains for the Mussolini regime, merely a consolidation of Italy's existing possessions.

But all that was set to change. Throughout the later 1920s Mussolini's regime embarked on a further campaign of 'pacification' against another unruly Italian colony, Italian Somaliland on the Horn of Africa. By 1927 the commander of Fascist forces in the region, the hot headed PNF zealot Cesare Maria de Vecchi, had subdued all resistance in the colony, killing many thousands of Somalis in the process. Mussolini, who later criticised de Vecchi's heavy handed tactics, at the same time quickly realised that two wholly subjugated Italian colonies in Somaliland and Eritrea offered great potential for future regional expansion. Gradually, throughout 1932, the *Duce* and his regime ideologues came to believe that Italy's existing East African possessions could be used to launch simultaneous assaults against the neighbouring state of Ethiopia, thereby bringing about revenge for the defeat at Adowa and more importantly adding another piece to the Fascist imperial jigsaw. On 10 July 1925 even while the colonial wars in Libya and Somalia were raging on, Mussolini ordered the Minister of Colonies Pietro Lanza di Scalea to prepare for a future offensive against the independent Ethiopian Empire. In his directive, the *Duce* ordered 'military and diplomatic' preparations to be made so that Italy could gain maximum advantage from any eventual 'break up' of Ethiopia's Empire, ordering all Fascist officials to work in silent collaboration with the British

[42] Ibid., meetings of 23 October 1930 and 5 November 1931; USSME, H-6, racc. 5, 'Piano 6, Army Plans Division, 1932.

(if this were possible) in order to 'chloroform' Ethiopian officialdom. In the meantime no Ethiopian tribesmen were to be supplied with any arms – as had tragically occurred at the time of Adowa – and the two existing rail links from Somaliland and Eritrea to the border where to be improved so as to be able to transport troops and large amounts of war material.[43]

The following year Badoglio despatched General Giuseppe Malladra to Eritrea to assess the potential effectiveness of defences in the Italian possession, and report back on the forces required to stage an invasion of Ethiopia. Malladra reported that 160,000 Italian troops and 30,000–40,000 Askaris could carry out a successful offensive from Eritrea, supported by units of the *Regia Aeronautica* armed extensively with chemical munitions. What was significant about Malladra's report was that it constituted the first concrete attempt by the Mussolini regime to plan for its war of revenge against Ethiopia, a war that it clearly had every intention of prosecuting as soon as political circumstances permitted it.[44] The problem for Mussolini was of course that no war of any description was easily possible in a Europe dominated by French and British influence, and a world still dominated by the efficacy and ethics of the League of Nations, of which Ethiopia was a member. It was only with the sudden and dramatic increase in support for the NSDAP among German voters between 1930 and 1932 that the Anglo-French stranglehold over European geopolitics began to look more precarious, and hence only from the early 1930s that a more precise *politica coloniale* could be seriously developed by regime ideologues. Following unsuccessful attempts by Corrado Zoli, the governor of Eritrea, to pursue a more assertive regional policy based on extensive economic penetration of Ethiopia between 1928 and 1930, Fascist policy finally became fixed on the idea of a full invasion of the country at some point in the near future.[45]

But it took rather more than a unilateral decision by Mussolini's policy advisors to make the reality of an Italian annexation of a fellow League of Nations member state become reality. What it took in practise was active French encouragement of Mussolini to proceed with the enterprise. Sensing that the relentless rise of Hitler and the NSDAP now heralded a threat to French security, Pierre Laval, a former Socialist Deputy and a wealthy businessman who, as a conscientious objector during the Great War, was no stranger to controversy, floated the idea of a Franco-Italian alliance to Grandi and Mussolini in July 1931. On Grandi's suggestion that it would be a good idea if this alliance were linked to some genuine relief of 'our legitimate inquietude', Laval quickly interrupted with the phrase 'like Ethiopia for example …' Laval's hint set in motion a chain of events that culminated in his infamous Accords with Mussolini of January 1935, and generated instant and enthusiastic activity on the part of

[43] ACS, Carte Badoglio, scattola 4, Mussolini to Lanza, 10 July 1925.
[44] A. Del Bocca, *La Guerra d'Etiopia* (Longanesi, Milan, 2010), pp. 69–70.
[45] ACS, Carte Badoglio, scattola 4, Ruggero, Addis Ababa to SIM, Rome, 10 December 1930.

Rafaelle Guariglia the director of the European, Middle Eastern and African Department at the *Palazzo Chigi*. Just a few short weeks after Laval's 'offer', Guariglia produced a long and detailed report on what the Fascist regime could hope to gain from such an arrangement, given that it was now clear that French hegemony in Europe could not be expected to last 'because of the fact that eighty million Germans, by weight of numbers alone, made it impossible'. This fact, Guariglia claimed, now made it possible at long last to obtain real territorial concessions like a complete Fascist annexation of the independent state of Ethiopia. As Guarliglia's memorandum put it:

> It is certain that Abyssinia is the only demographic and economic outlet that remains open to us.
>
> In order to penetrate it we will need money – to conquer it will almost certainly require a war. But nothing is ever gained without effort and toil. If we want an Empire we have to earn it.[46]

Mussolini's conquest of Ethiopia, one of the great controversies of the entire interwar period and one of the twentieth-century's defining moments was about to begin, and with calamitous and far-reaching consequences.

[46] ASMAE, Fondo Lancelotti, busta 222, 'Francia'.

4

The Impending War of Revenge

Europe and Africa, 1932

The year 1932 was to prove a seminal year in the history of Mussolini's regime and indeed the whole of the existing international order. On the one hand, the economic crisis that turned from recession to depression during 1931 deepened, generating further social and political turmoil in its wake. Mussolini, keen to demonstrate that the 'visionary' measures he had taken in the depths of the economic crisis really were working, encouraged the Italian people to believe that the end was in sight, that there were signs of growth in the national economy.[1] But it took further considerable intervention on the part of the Fascist state to pull Italy and Italian society successfully through the worst period of the depression, namely the period between 1931 and 1933. Throughout 1932 therefore wages in Italy remained low, mergers between all types of commercial concerns continued and cartelisation became increasingly widespread while spending on public works programmes such as road building doubled. Together with innovations such as the *Istituto Mobiliare italiano* and the *Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale* the Fascist government's measures duly allowed Italy to emerge from the Great Depression in rather better shape than many other states, particularly of course Weimar Germany. Between 1929 and 1933 gross national product in Italy fell by 5.4 per cent, with industrial production dropping particularly sharply at 22.7 per cent. But when compared to the average for the western European economies of 7.1 per cent and 23.2 per cent respectively, it is clear that increased intervention in the Italian economy by the Fascist state saved Italy from total economic meltdown. However, as was the case with so many other afflicted nations the aftershocks of depression continued to be felt in Italy for some time. An annual per capita income growth of just 1.5 per cent clearly demonstrated the inherent weaknesses in the

[1] *OOBM*, XXV, 'La nuova economia italiana', speech to the Confederazione dell'industria, 2 April 1931, p. 5.

Italian economy, weaknesses which only massively expanded arms production for the planned assault on Ethiopia temporarily redressed.[2]

On the other hand, beyond the economic catastrophe that had befallen more or less every country aside from the Soviet Union by 1932, international political events further exacerbated the pervading sense of doom that year. In the Far East the Imperial Japanese army, acting outside the control of the civilian government in Tokyo, demonstrated that the new international order enshrined within the machinery of the League of Nations could be successfully subverted. Imperial Japan's interest in the Chinese province of Manchuria had been on the increase since its successful war against Russia in 1904–1905. One outcome of this interest had been that the Japanese government claimed all Russian interests and rights in China as their own, including full operational control of the South Manchuria Railway and its surrounding areas. Thereafter, the Railway Zone was guarded and patrolled by regular Japanese Imperial Army troops who often staged military exercises and manoeuvres in the region, and without any noticeable resentment on the part of Chinese authorities.

This situation changed dramatically in 1930 when the Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek's bid to eradicate Communism from China and win full control of the country left the Japanese military fearful that their position in Manchuria would soon be threatened. The result was a plot by senior Japanese army officers in Manchuria to orchestrate a full scale invasion of the province, using the pretext of an 'assault' on the railway which would be blamed on Chinese Nationalist elements. On 18 September 1931 an explosive device set by Japanese troops rocked a section of the railway north of Mukden. The local Imperial Army commanders immediately blamed Nationalist troops and skirmishes quickly broke out between Japanese and Chinese forces. As the conflict deepened and Chiang Kai-shek ordered his troops to act with extreme caution, the weak government in Tokyo rapidly lost any control it had over the worsening situation and the aggressive Japanese Imperial Army had conquered the whole of Manchuria by February 1932. Despite the Chinese government's referral of the Japanese aggression to Geneva the previous September, the diplomatic world proved too preoccupied with the deepening economic turmoil to care. Western politicians dissuaded Chiang Kai-shek from invoking Articles 10 and 16 of the League of Nations Charter, because to do so would have required immediate international military intervention to halt the Japanese invasion. The truth was that no one seemed prepared to supply troops or ships to defend Manchuria, especially not the British and French governments, the chief powers at the Geneva Assembly. The latter were far too concerned with the fallout from the Depression and the relentless ascent of Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP to bother with events on the other side of the world.[3] Plainly, the League of Nations, so hated by Mussolini since it had been established in

[2] Clark, *Modern Italy*, pp. 264–265.

[3] Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, pp. 131–133.

1919, had failed to prevent aggression against one of its member states, and in much the same way that it had failed to halt Bolivian aggression against Paraguay in the same year. For the *Duce* the implications could not have been clearer. Collective security, which had prevented a Fascist annexation of Corfu in 1923, could no longer guarantee the territorial integrity of League member states a mere nine years later. As he told a large crowd gathered in the *Piazza del Plebiscito* in Naples in October 1931, the time was now clearly right for Italy to stake its own claim by extending its own revolutionary dynamic to include expansion overseas:

> The plutocracies that govern so many nations have too many difficulties at home to be seriously interested in our matters and in the new developments that we want to give to our own revolution. But if there are elements who plan to disrupt the direct communion between the regime and people, whether they are made up of groups or individuals, we, in the supreme interest of the nation, will break them into tiny pieces.[4]

Nearer home, 1932 also witnessed further dramatic developments in the political meltdown of Weimar Germany watched, as ever, very closely by Fascist diplomatic staff. As the economic crisis worsened throughout 1931 and 1932 American proposals that led to the Hoover Moratorium on German war debt repayments, a scheme designed to freeze all European loan repayments to the US Treasury for one year including reparations, also quickly foundered in the stormy international financial waters. The result proved to be a catastrophe for Germany if not the world. Shortly after the Moratorium was implemented it was clear that even this drastic measure could not reverse the fortunes of German credit, and consequently two of Germany's major banks collapsed, generating widespread financial panic as a consequence. Very quickly, the latest German financial crisis spread far outside that country's borders, and neither Britain nor France nor the United States could provide loans to shore up the rapidly collapsing German economy. Heinrich Brüning, Germany's beleaguered chancellor, was left with no choice but to rule by presidential decree and to impose ultimately disastrous financial measures on his people at a time when so many of them were already struggling to survive. In an attempt to demonstrate that Germany could no longer meet the reparations demands of the Allied powers, Brüning froze wages and salaries and dramatically restricted access to credit while also lowering prices. The inevitable outcome was that political support for his *Deutsche Zentrumspartei* from the other Weimar parties evaporated, while the depression in Germany deepened still further, leading to greater numbers of business failures and further increases in unemployment. Brüning's increasing reliance on Article 48 (presidential decree) as his only real mechanism for government served only to centralise the rule of his increasingly unpopular cabinet, and ultimately to isolate him. Germans, angered by

[4] *OOBM*, XXV, 'Al Popolo Napoletano', 25 October 1931, p. 50.

what they judged to be Brüning's ineptness and sickened by the whole Weimar democratic 'experiment', now looked elsewhere for a solution to their nation's seemingly intractable problems.[5]

By the last months of 1931 it was clear that the principal beneficiaries of the German crisis would be Hitler and the NSDAP. Although in Rome many within the PNF hierarchy continued to harbour serious misgivings about Hitler's leadership capabilities, it was clear that as Weimar Germany continued to descend into anarchy and disorder Nazi popularity was on the increase after the successes of its September 1930 electoral campaign. In late September local elections in the port city of Hamburg saw the Nazi Party win 26 per cent of the vote, coming ahead of its main rivals, the KPD, and slightly behind the Socialists. In November further elections in the central-western state of Hessen produced even greater gains for the Hitler movement, which secured an astonishing 37.1 per cent of the vote, more than both the KPD and the SPD combined. These results, coming as they did in the wake of the June 1930 Nazi 'surge', did much to generate enthusiasm for Hitler from Mussolini's press. In early December major Italian newspapers such as *Il Messaggero* and *Il Popolo d'Italia* published an interview with Hitler's henchman Herman Goering in which the latter expressed 'considerable contempt' for Brüning and his government. Shortly afterwards other dailies openly supported the idea of Hitler becoming German chancellor, with *Lavoro Fascista* urging the Nazi leader to seize power by illegal means if necessary.[6] Undoubtedly, the dramatic improvement in Hitler's political prospects did much to strengthen ties between the NSDAP and the PNF. Between 1930 and 1932 Nazi Party members who were resident in Italy could organise themselves into official groups for the first time, while during the same period Mussolini authorised the setting up of an NSDAP political office in Rome. Further signs that a new era in Nazi–Fascist relations was underway came with the visit of various senior Nazis to Rome, leading to the first official encounter between Mussolini and Goering in 1931. While, as some scholars have argued, Mussolini retained an interest in other German far right groups such as the *Stahlhelm* at this time, by 1932 it was Hitler and his continued success in the German elections of that year that most grabbed the *Duce*'s attention.[7] With the NSDAP in power the Fascist leader knew that the political map of Europe would alter dramatically and that French hegemony in Europe, a permanent feature since 1919, would be seriously threatened. At that point the possibility for Fascist Italy to embark on a far more ambitious foreign policy than it had been able to pursue to date would plainly present itself.

[5] Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, pp. 127–128.
[6] J. Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini: La difficile alleanza, 1933–1936* (Laterza, Rome, 1975). p. 48.
[7] R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Duce: Gli anni del consenso* (Einaudi, Turin, 1974). pp. 430–435.

THE FIGHT FOR A NATIONAL SOCIALIST GERMANY

Fascist intellectuals harboured grave misgivings about both Adolf Hitler's personality and Nazi tactics for winning power in Germany until the very last days of the Weimar Republic. Prominent journalist and thinker Curzio Malaparte, like so many of his Fascist cohorts a Great War veteran who had participated in the March on Rome, was especially critical of Hitler in his late 1931 book *Il colpo di Stato* (*The Coup d'Etat*). Like many of Mussolini's diplomatic staff in Germany Malaparte regarded Hitler as incapable of ruling the German people with the same ruthless rigour that Mussolini used to govern Italy. Hitler was, Malaparte commented acidly, merely 'a caricature of Mussolini', and 'a dictator who could never become a real dictator'. But aside from the author's personal attacks on Hitler and the NSDAP, *Il colpo di Stato* took specific issue with Hitler's tactics for winning power. Malaparte argued that the NSDAP's paramilitary arm, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), believed in a violent revolutionary takeover of power in Germany that involved the crushing of all left-wing opposition by force. But Hitler, 'the opportunist revolutionary' fearful of the consequences of such an approach, preferred 'individual violence', namely targeted attacks against key personalities rather than against German trade unions and other working class centres of power. Malaparte claimed that Hitler had missed the boat. Now only 'machine guns' could pave the way for Hitler's seizure of power.[8]

Malaparte's book generated considerable irritation within the upper ranks of the NSDAP upon its publication, largely because the author's scathing attack on Hitler's methods corresponded with similar criticisms from within the Nazi leader's own Party.[9] Certainly, Nazi opponents made good use of Malaparte's work by creating banners that included selective anti-Hitler quotations taken from it, and displaying them provocatively during the German election campaigns of 1932. Mussolini, made fully aware of Nazi displeasure by his own personal press secretary, quickly moved to repair the damage done to Nazi–Fascist relations. After Hitler personally lodged fierce complaints with the Italian Embassy in Berlin Malaparte's book was immediately banned in Italy, and the enraged *Führer* was assured that the author held no official position, and therefore had no real influence. Later, Malaparte was arrested on Mussolini's orders and convicted of anti-Fascist activities abroad. After the war he continued to insist that it was pressure from Hitler that had led to his harsh treatment, although this was never ultimately confirmed. At the time Malaparte was widely regarded as one of Fascist Italy's most exciting journalistic talents, and *Il colpo di Stato*, like every publication in Mussolini's Italy, would have had to get past the State censors. Moreover, Malaparte himself was

[8] Malaparte cited in Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 99–101.

[9] On criticisms of Hitler from leading Nazis such as Goebbels see Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, pp. 326–327.

not only an original Fascist but was also deeply admired by the *Duce*. It is difficult to imagine that such a book from a prominent author with journalistic sanction from the *Duce* himself had not received at least a degree of approval for his published works.

In reality there was little to stop the dark force that was German National Socialism as it viciously tore apart the heart of the Weimar Republic en route to absolute power. Although Mussolini's envoy to Germany, Giuseppe Renzetti, had attempted to form a broad front made up of the nation's far right political groups including the *Stahlhelm* and the NSDAP, the idea quickly foundered. Renzetti had discussed the possibility of forming a so-called National Front with the various right-wing party leaders during the course of 1931, as a means of securing a new type of government in Weimar that would benefit Italy. But almost immediately friction between Hitler's Party and the other prospective members of the Front made the project seem more than a little ambitious. By early 1932, with Hitler having contemptuously rejected any idea of the *Stahlhelm* securing the reins of power in Germany through electoral success, the Front had already fallen apart. From that point on Hitler emerged very quickly as the true standard bearer for Germany's revolutionary right, and Renzetti swung fully behind him and his campaign to become first president of the Republic and, shortly afterwards, chancellor.

Hitler's first opportunity to capitalise on the NSDAP's stunning electoral gains of September 1930 came with the expiry of Hindenburg's seven-year term as president of the Republic, due to come to an end in May 1932. Earlier, in January, a now beleaguered Heinrich Brüning persuaded the reluctant Hindenburg to stand for re-election, but without any need for a troublesome electoral campaign. Brüning correctly believed that any such campaign would open up still greater political schisms within Weimar society, thus adding considerably to his own mounting political difficulties. However, before the German chancellor could reconfirm Hindenburg as president without the statutory requirement of national elections, he needed to obtain permission for a constitutional amendment from two thirds of the *Reichstag*. This for Brüning was where his problems really started, and where the death knell of his chancellorship was sounded in earnest. Hitler, called to a meeting with senior government officials in early January, refused to agree to Brüning's proposals. Shortly afterwards he rejected them outright on the advice of senior Nazis who had warned that this manoeuvre would only serve to strengthen the chancellor's ailing position.

As Orsini at the Italian Embassy in Berlin was very quick to point out to Mussolini and Grandi, Hitler's decision to veto Hindenburg's automatic reappointment as president of the German Republic provoked a bitter storm of controversy. Hitler had summed up his reasons for rejecting Brüning's proposals in a memorandum consigned on his behalf by Herman Goering on 16th January. In it, Orsini reported, Hitler had challenged the German chancellor on constitutional grounds. First, Hitler argued that the *Reichstag* was not competent enough to decide on whether Hindenburg's term of office could be extended

in this way and, in fact, he had cleverly made use of ideas prevalent among German constitutional experts who were arguing much the same thing. The second part of Hitler's letter claimed that Brüning and his cronies had employed this tactic only as a means of blocking the NSDAP's path to power, which rendered it fundamentally undemocratic. Finally, Orsini pointed out rather sarcastically, the Nazi leader had condemned the 'morality' of Brüning's plan on the grounds that the Nazis had for years been deemed 'enemies of the State' and 'second class men' in their own country. Yet, now this same political underclass was being called upon to save Germany from the failings of the Weimar system. Not surprisingly, Hitler's arguments were met with the scorn and derision of the pro-Brüning press, which claimed that it was scarcely believable that someone with Hitler's unscrupulous outlook could even remotely care about 'constitutional principles'. The centre-left press was also very quick to argue that Hitler had initially approved Brüning's proposal before later rejecting it on the advice of his own Party. Notwithstanding this reaction Nazi papers were now 'bitterly attacking' Brüning and demanding his immediate resignation. The battle for the soul of Germany was truly heating up.[10]

Although both far left parties such as the KPD and the German centre right fielded candidates who ran in the presidential election of 13 March 1932, the outcome was always likely to be decided between Hindenburg and Hitler. As Ambassador Orsini noted, the mood within the Hitler camp was one of supreme confidence in the days immediately before Germany went to the polls. Senior Nazis were certain that the general discontent that prevailed throughout Germany at that time would lead to 'as big an electoral success' for the NSDAP as the one of September 1930. The NSDAP propaganda machine accordingly went into overdrive as the election campaign gained momentum, and a 'gigantic' effort went into presenting Hitler as the ideal strong leader, the only man capable of replacing the Great War veteran Hindenburg. The National Front now seemed a distant and forgotten memory as Hitler strove for total power in Germany, while his competitors in the presidential race, the *Stahlhelm*, declared him to be nothing more than a megalomaniac armed with 'enthusiasm' but very little else useful for the good governance of Germany. But Orsini by no means ruled out the possibility of a major Nazi success when polling finally ended. Youth in Germany, many of whom would be voting for the first time, saw the Great War as a distant memory and Hindenburg not as a Great War hero but as the president who had approved unpopular legislation in Germany in recent years. This youth, Orsini noted, had become 'essentially radicalised' along with many others within the German electorate. Inevitably, this would have considerable bearing on the outcome of the elections.[11]

[10] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 5, fascicolo 5, 'Epilogo delle trattative per la rielezione di Hindenburg', Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 19 January 1932.

[11] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 5, fascicolo 5, 'Campagna per l'elezioni Presidenziale', Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 7 March 1932.

Election day dawned with a complete police crackdown across Germany and severe restrictions imposed on the activities of the campaigning parties; such was the mood of tension and barely repressed violence that dominated every town and city. In the bars, cafés and beer halls of major cities such as Munich the talk was only of who would win, Hitler or Hindenburg?[12] Hitler, exhausted by weeks of frantic campaigning, waited anxiously like everyone else for the final results. When the outcome was announced few Nazi activists and voters could truly declare themselves satisfied with Hitler's performance. Although by no means an absolute disaster for the NSDAP the 30 per cent of the vote it won was nowhere near enough for an outright victory. Neither did Hindenburg's 49 per cent give him an outright majority, which meant inevitably that the two men, together with the KPD candidate Ernst Thalmann, would have to fight it out in a second round of voting to be held on 10th April. One thing was certain – Hitler had now completely distanced himself from the fleeting exercise in far right unity that had been the National Front, and backed by a powerful Nazi Party machine and Renzetti's political experience and advice, was set on securing total control over Germany. The Front was now totally defunct and its former members split into embittered and feuding factions. As Orsini reported in the aftermath of the first round of the election the *Stahlhelm*, initially so cultivated by Renzetti on Mussolini's orders, were out of the running and angrily blaming Hitler for destroying the real possibility of a far right victory in Germany. But, he added, the Nazi leadership no longer cared and indeed viewed the *Stahlhelm* as a spent force in German politics that would very soon be absorbed into the SA.[13]

For once Nazi Party confidence, so often in the past derided by Mussolini and PNF officials as mere arrogance and bombast, was matched by the facts following the second round of presidential elections. On 10th April, after his spectacular and unprecedented airborne electoral tour of Germany, Hitler expected a significant improvement in the Party's performance, and this time he got it. Political reports for Mussolini forecast a significant increase in the Nazi share of the vote in the second round which, although not likely to be enough to sweep Hitler to power, strongly suggested the 'existence of a phenomenon never witnessed in Germany before, namely of a great mass of people all following one political leader'. As Orsini pointed out, this enormous mass of people were hugely dissatisfied with the current German state and demanded radical change.[14] This 'phenomenon' was to play a decisive card in German society in the fateful months ahead.

[12] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 5, fascicolo 5, 'Fisionomia delle elezioni presidenziali in Baviera', Pittalis, Consul General's Office, Munich to Mussolini/Grandi, 15 March 1932.

[13] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 5, fascicolo 5, 'Preperativi elettorali', Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 21 March 1932.

[14] ASMAE, Affari Politici, Germania, busta 5, fascicolo 5, Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 2 April 1932.

If Hitler and his entourage had emerged crestfallen from the first round of voting they came through triumphantly in the second. Thalmann of the KPD managed to secure a mere 10 per cent of the vote, and both Hitler and Hindenburg were the beneficiaries of the collapse in support for the Communist Party. Hitler secured 37 per cent, thus confirming Orsini's understanding of the level of Nazi support within Germany, while Hindenburg was the outright winner of the election with 53 per cent. Adolf Hitler, the man mocked and derided by his ideological brothers in Fascist Italy throughout so much of the 1920s, had secured an astounding thirteen million votes, an increase of two million from the first round. The real loser had been Thalmann who, according to Orsini, had suffered a draining away of his own Communist voters in favour of the NSDAP. But then even Hindenburg's victory had not, according to the Berlin Embassy, been that convincing. The president had been widely expected to win by all parties involved in the election but his supporters had been surprised that it had gone to a second round, and that his vote had been lower overall than they had expected. Although Orsini cautioned against attaching too much significance to the Nazi success, claiming that many who voted Hitler this time around would not do so in the next elections, he was to be proved categorically wrong.[15]

In the wake of the dramatic presidential campaign of the spring of 1932, events moved at breathtaking speed in the months leading up to Hitler's controversial appointment as chancellor in January 1933. By early May it was becoming abundantly clear that the highly unpopular Brüning chancellorship was doomed. As Orsini wrote in a report for Mussolini on 6 May the sense of crisis enveloping Brüning and his government was deepening with each day. Already Brüning's beleaguered Minister of Economics, Hermann Warmbold, had been forced to resign after only a few months in office following serious disagreements with other cabinet ministers over how to handle the worsening financial crisis. As Orsini put it, Brüning's chief anxiety now was that Warmbold's resignation might be the catalyst for setting off the 'latent state' of 'general crisis' within his government, an observation which proved more than a little prescient. Outside of his immediate political inner circle Brüning's problems were equally as serious, and therefore Orsini's suspicion that he was now living on borrowed time did not appear at all unrealistic. Orsini claimed, and hardly without justification, that the NSDAP electoral successes were now placing Brüning under enormous pressure, while serious disputes between pro-Nazi Reichswehr commanders in Prussia such as Major Kurt von Schleicher and the hapless Interior Minister Wilhelm Groener, were intensifying the pressure on the chancellor. So strong did Hitler now feel following his gains in the various German electoral campaigns that he had demanded Groener's resignation after the latter's outlawing of Nazi paramilitary

[15] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 5, fascicolo 5, 'Campagne elettorali in Germania', Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 13 April 1932.

organisations. Clearly Hitler's confidence was now extremely high, especially so given the alleged plans by Schleicher to include various NSDAP leaders in his planned military government. Would Brüning, Orsini wondered, stand before the *Reichstag* the following week and pronounce his judgement 'on this web of intrigue'?[16]

It was the impossible situation in which Brüning had placed himself that was to pronounce judgement on him and his ill-fated chancellorship. His deflationary policies had plunged an already desperate German economy into total freefall, and on 30 May he finally resigned as chancellor after twenty-two difficult months in power amid an ever more volatile political climate. As Count Lerchenfeld, a former prime minister of Bavaria, informed the Italian ambassador in Brussels Brüning had failed to cultivate the right individuals in German political life, especially Hindenburg who had been less than courteous in accepting his resignation. Brüning, it seemed, had also fallen foul of powerful alignments made up of Nazis, senior military figures and the *Junkers* of eastern Prussia. But it was not as if Brüning's replacement, Franz von Papen, was anymore popular or well regarded than he had been. As the report from the Brussel's Embassy noted, Hindenburg's decision to appoint von Papen was a strange one. No one liked or admired this former career soldier, and indeed many on the German right hated him for his past efforts to forge better Franco–German relations. Moreover, the report continued, no one had as yet mentioned his expulsion as persona non grata from the United States in 1915, where he had orchestrated a number of acts of sabotage against American railway lines. Antipathy for von Papen and his unsavoury past could be used to mount a campaign of hatred against Germany.[17] His massive unpopularity also created a serious vacuum in the fathomless waters of Weimar political life.

Von Papen and his 'Cabinet of Barons' never stood any realistic chance of winning a ruling majority in the *Reichstag*, and were effectively compelled to govern by presidential decree in much the same way that Brüning had done. But this did not stop von Papen from trying. The new chancellor dissolved the *Reichstag* immediately after his appointment and called for a further round of elections to be held on 31st July in an attempt to win a governing majority, thereby bringing to an end the rise in popularity of the NSDAP and with it pressure to offer Hitler a cabinet post. But from the very beginning it was clear that von Papen's tactics were not likely to succeed. In local elections in the early summer the NSDAP polled 48.4 per cent of the vote in Oldenberg and 49 per cent in Mecklenberg-Schwerin, before moving on to secure another impressive victory at Hessen where it secured 44 per cent support from the voters.

[16] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 6, fascicolo 2, 'Politica interna', Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 6 May 1932.

[17] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 6, fascicolo 2, 'Situazione in Germania', Martin-Franklin, Italian Embassy Brussels to Mussolini/Grandi, 9 June 1932.

Yet, however impressive the Nazi electoral performances continued to be by the summer of 1932, Fascist observers still voiced their scepticism about Hitler's chances of winning outright power in Germany in their reports for Mussolini. Even in Bavaria, Hitler's main centre of power in Germany, there was considerable opposition to Nazism and its ideology among politically centre ground Catholics, a very sizeable proportion of the German electorate as a whole. The source of this information was none other than a senior clergyman from one of Munich's principal dioceses, a Monsignor Hofstein, and the report was deemed to be significant enough to be sent directly to Mussolini. Clearly Hofstein himself disliked Hitler intensely and described the Nazi leader as nothing more than a poor imitation of Mussolini who, by contrast, he greatly admired. But more importantly the report warned Mussolini specifically that the existing Pope, Pius XII, who had served as Papal Nuncio in Germany between 1920 and 1929 and whom Hofstein knew personally, also disliked Hitler and the NSDAP. In short, the anonymous report concluded, 'It remains only to be said that the Vatican is openly anti the Nazi movement', a fact which by implication, placed a significant element of the German electorate beyond Hitler's reach.[18]

As 31st July drew nearer more doubt was poured on Hitler's chances of winning the requisite 50 per cent of the votes required to win control of the *Reichstag*, this time by Orsini in Berlin. The ambassador, by now a seasoned observer of both the National Socialists and German politics in general, believed that no one was in any position to predict the outcome of the imminent election. Von Papen for one most certainly did not enjoy a significantly strong position. Following an unfortunate gaffe uttered at the Lausanne Conference on German reparations to the effect that Germany would pay a million marks upfront if the rest of the reparations arrangements were cancelled, the chancellor was met with howls of criticism and now, according to Orsini, his position was 'badly shaken'. However, the tactless von Papen was viewed positively by the Pope and the Vatican in general, which meant that there existed a strong likelihood that he would pick up a sizeable proportion of the Catholic vote in Germany. Hitler and the NSDAP meanwhile faced the perpetual problem of increasing their own share of the vote enough to win power, and there was little chance of the Nazis winning enough of the electorate over to secure an 'absolute majority'.[19]

In July, after Germans went to the polls for the fourth time in two years, the NSDAP improved on its previous performance in the *Reichstag* elections by winning 37.4 per cent of the vote. Von Papen's tactic of trying to break the NSDAP had obviously failed, although he could take comfort from a slight

[18] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 6, fascicolo 1, 'Movimento hitleriani e Situazione politica in Germania', Political Affairs Department to Mussolini/Grandi, 28 June 1932.

[19] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 7, fascicolo 1, 'Politica interna', Orsini to Mussolini/Grandi, 7 July 1932.

improvement in the fortunes of his own *Zentrum* Party. Fascist reaction to Hitler's latest success was, on the surface of it, enthusiastic. Diplomatic staff reporting on the new political panorama in Germany stressed that National Socialism represented for very many the best 'expression of a political mentality more in tune with new social needs', yet still definitely in touch with the country's 'national traditions'.[20] But despite Hitler's popularity and the incredible upturn in its fortunes since the days of political obscurity just a few years earlier, the NSDAP could not secure the reins of power in Germany. For many within official Italy this remained the fault of Adolf Hitler. As one report later put it, many within Italy were 'stunned that Hitler had not yet arrived in power in Germany', blaming his foolhardy attempt to win the Presidency from Hindenburg as the principal reason. But this had not been by any means the Nazi leader's only political error. Had Hitler attempted to improve his image among the centre ground of Germany's Catholics and, better still, sought an alliance with Germany's Catholic Centre Party he would no doubt have won a parliamentary majority. But then Hitler was not Mussolini, and the Nazi Party was not the PNF as the report concluded. Only when the NSDAP was able to emerge fully from the shadow of Fascism and cultivate a greater sense of its own original identity would it stand any chance of winning power in Germany.[21]

ITALY MUST BECOME A GREAT AFRICAN POWER

As Hitler struggled to secure the chancellorship in Weimar Germany Mussolini finally shifted the strategic focus of the *forze armate* away from mainland Europe to East Africa during the second half of 1932. Largely negative high command assessments of Italian prospects in a war against the French and/or the Yugoslavs prompted Mussolini to drop the idea, and he never seriously considered it again for a number of years. Instead, the *Duce* and Colonial Ministry ideologues focused on Fascist Italy's position in Africa, and on the possibility that they might find greater opportunities for colonial expansion on a continent already heavily colonised by the main European powers, but where one independent nation still remained, Ethiopia.

The first signs that a new Fascist colonial policy was taking shape came with the publication of the *Doctrine of Fascism* included as part of the new *Enciclopedia Italiana*. The *Doctrine* was authored largely by the *Enciclopedia*'s mastermind the philosopher Giovanni Gentile, although Mussolini did pen at least some of it characteristically signing it off as his own work. Towards the

[20] ASMAE, Affari Politici: busta 7, fascicolo 1, 'Elezioni tedesche', Consul General's Office, Cologne to Mussolini, 5 August 1932.

[21] ASMAE, Affari Politici, busta 7, fascicolo 1, 'Hitler e la Situazione politica tedesca', Political Affairs Department to Mussolini, 22 September 1932.

MAP 4.1. East Africa 1932.

end, after a series of fairly detailed statements about the nature and goals of Fascism in Italy, the authors set out the importance of imperial expansion to Mussolini's Italy. Clearly, Mussolini believed that the Fascist imperial idiom was one that necessarily invoked the powers of the Italian nation as a whole, and which would be challenged aggressively if opposed by other nations in the form of the League of Nations. As the Doctrine put it:

> But imperialism implies discipline, the coordination of efforts, a deep sense of duty and a spirit of self-sacrifice. This explains many aspects of the practical activity of the regime, and the direction taken by many of the forces of the State, as also the severity which has to be exercised towards those who would oppose this spontaneous and inevitable movement of 20th century Italy by agitating outgrown ideologies of the 19th

century, ideologies rejected wherever great experiments in political and social transformations are being dared.[22]

It was clear that aggression and imperial expansion were firmly part of the Fascist ideological canon. Mussolini, after a decade of regime consolidation and diplomatic caution, was ready to pursue wars of expansion overseas, beginning in Africa:

> Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit – i.e. in the tendency of nations to expand – a manifestation of their vitality. In the opposite tendency, which would limit their interests to the home country, it sees a symptom of decadence. Peoples who rise or re-arise are imperialistic; renunciation is characteristic of dying peoples. The Fascist doctrine is that best suited to the tendencies and feelings of a people which, like the Italian, after lying fallow during centuries of foreign servitude, is now reasserting itself in the world.[23]

But the chief problem was that no colonial *consciousness* existed in Italy in 1932. The crushing Italian defeat at Adowa in 1896 remained a painful memory for those Italians old enough to remember it, but much work needed to be done by the regime in order to instil the 'importance' and 'value' of colonial aggrandisement among the wider, younger Italian public. Between 1930 and 1932 Fascist intellectuals commemorated the tenth anniversary of the regime by publishing extensively on key themes such as the Cult of the *Duce* and the greatness of the 'new' Italy. Gradually, a third strand of Fascist propaganda began to take shape that dealt with notions of *romanitá*, the present day meaning and significance of Italy's Roman Imperial legacy as well as the colonial idea in the contemporary world. Among the principal studies that emerged amid a flurry of pro-imperialist works published during the course of 1932 and 1933, were Angelo Piccioli's magnum opus *La Nuova Italia oltremare* and Dante Tuninnetti's *La politica coloniale del regime*, both of which elaborated further on the burgeoning colonial policy of the Mussolini regime.[24] But it was in a special issue of Mussolini's own journal *Gerarchia* that the regime hierarchy slowly allowed its confidential deliberations on the projected Fascist colonial programme to seep out into the public domain. An illustrious array of Fascist intellectuals and senior regime figures such as Alessandro Lessona, Italo Balbo, Emilio De Bono and Guido Corni carefully put the case for a new policy of national expansion overseas. De Bono, although selective in his use of language, declared that war and conquest were once more the destiny of the Italian people. It was through 'the increasing of our number of colonies we sense will lead to the future greatness of our

[22] B. Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*, 1932.

[23] Ibid.

[24] A. Piccioli, *La nuova Italia oltremare* (Mondadori, Milan, 1933); D. Tuninnetti, *La politica coloniale del regime* (Pinciana, Rome, 1933).

nation', although like Mussolini he warned of the sacrifices that this would invariably incur.[25]

The Undersecretary of State for Colonies, Alessandro Lessona, in his own article on European colonisation, also warned of the difficult 'systematic and tenacious' work that lay ahead for Italy in its bid to compete with the colonial achievements of the British and the French. This task had been made harder, Lessona argued, by the 'injustices of Versailles' although he fundamentally believed that Italy could, in time, overcome these too so as to 'modify its colonial inferiority'. Like De Bono Lessona stressed that only war could bring such significant change to the imperial balance of power, and that Italy was already preparing its existing East African colonies for the great conflict to come. Although Lessona's article did not refer directly to Ethiopia as the future target for Fascist aggression, it did not require much imagination on the part of the reader to understand the principal thrust of his argument.[26] Guido Corni, the former Governor of Italian Somaliland, contributed still further to the argument that Fascist Italy should in due course militarily conquer the Ethiopian Empire, before carving out a 'true Southern Europe' in the lands of the 'Black Continent.' Given that Italy was already the nation most heavily involved with Ethiopia it seemed logical that the Italians, the 'masters of civilisation', should increase their influence there significantly. Italy, Corni added in conclusion, 'above all wishes to be and must also become a great African power'.[27]

But realising this Fascist imperial vision was never going to be either simple or straightforward in an interwar political environment, characterised by considerable suspicion, and the real risk of European instability and conflict. For one thing there was the question of Ethiopia's membership of the League of Nations. Shortly after Mussolini came to power the Ethiopians, or more precisely the Crown Prince of Ethiopia Ras Tafari Makonnen, applied for membership of the League of Nations as part of his country's ongoing attempts to modernise. Once the application had arrived at Geneva it was debated by the League General Assembly, which almost immediately split into two distinct and diverging groups over how best to deal with it. The French delegation strongly supported the Ethiopian case, arguing that the Ethiopian Empire possessed all of the requisite qualities for it to be admitted into the League. The British, however, were less keen. Despite Ethiopian promises to eradicate the slavery which was still widely practised in that country, Britain's delegates, backed by Australia, Holland, Norway, Switzerland and Fascist Italy, argued instead that Ethiopia was a backward and barbaric country that needed more time to complete its 'civilising' process. Mussolini was expressly hostile to any

[25] E. De Bono, 'Ieri e Oggi in Colonia', *Gerarchia*, no. 7–8, (1932), pp. 525–532.
[26] A. Lessona, 'Le Colonie italiane nel quadro europeo', ibid, pp. 543–553.
[27] G. Corni, 'L'Impero d'Etiopia', ibid., pp. 617–621 and also G. Corni, *Problemi coloniali*, Tipografia del *Popolo d'Italia*, Milan, 1933, p. 45.

idea of Ethiopia's admittance into the League, and ordered Italian delegates at Geneva to 'stay in close touch with the British representative' in order to block Ethiopia's application. Ras Tafari responded by demanding that both Mussolini and British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin explain their hostility towards the Ethiopian nation, a reaction which by all accounts took the *Duce* totally by surprise. The result was that Mussolini contradicted his carefully constructed persona of uncompromising politico and immediately backed down and reversed his decision. Instructing the *Palazzo Chigi* in Rome to investigate how it was that Tafari had come to believe Italy so hostile to Ethiopia's League application, Mussolini performed a *volte face* and threw the full weight of his support behind it. A month later, in August 1923, Ethiopia was admitted to the League of Nations and with full Italian backing. Twelve years later Mussolini's eccentricity, diplomatic inexperience and weakness during those League discussions created a highly troublesome thorn in Fascist Italy's side.[28]

The very fact that the Ethiopia of Ras Tafari (renamed Haile Selassie upon becoming Emperor in 1930) had been admitted into the League of Nations meant that Mussolini's decision to invade the independent African nation, finally taken during the course of 1932, had to take into account some serious political considerations. Most obviously any aggression by Fascist Italy against Ethiopia, one of four permanent members of the League of Nations' Council, would most probably result in the invoking of Article Sixteen of the League Charter. Under the terms of Article Sixteen any Italian invasion of Ethiopia would mean that a state of war would exist between Italy and all of the League of Nations' member states, who were legally empowered to impose economic sanctions and, if required, military ones in order to bring the conflict to a peaceful conclusion. However much the Fascist leader detested the League and the whole notion of 'collective security', and continued to view it as merely an organ for the permanent preservation of the existing geopolitical status quo, a full confrontation with Geneva was clearly something to be avoided at all costs. Making matters even more difficult for the future course of Fascist colonial policy was the fact that the same powers, Great Britain and France, were not only the most influential and militarily powerful within the League framework but also the biggest investors in terms of Africa colonial possessions.

Given the nature of international political circumstances it was therefore not surprising that senior regime officials such as Raffaele Guariglia, the Director General of Political Affairs at the *Palazzo Chigi*, and later Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, Chief-of-Staff of the Italian navy among many others, strongly advised Mussolini to seek prior British and French approval before undertaking his planned annexation of Ethiopia. Guariglia, who had served as a special envoy to the Royal Ethiopian Court in 1927, was a firm believer in Italy's right

[28] Angelo Del Boca, *La Guerra d'Etiopia, L'ultima impresa del colonialismo* (Longanesi, 2010), pp. 75–77.

to a sphere of influence in the Mediterranean and Africa, including Ethiopia. But he remained adamant that any policy of colonial expansion in East Africa had to be accompanied by complete Anglo–French assent. As he noted before becoming ambassador to Spain in August 1932,

> Italy cannot take on the Ethiopian question alone, whether because of the general European situation and the dangers deriving from it, or because of the insidious political and military situation in that region. It would be impossible to undertake such a policy in the face of French and British opposition, and indispensible to undertake it in agreement with them.[29]

Guariglia's experience as a senior diplomat working at the very heart of Mussolini's foreign ministry clearly rendered his judgement of crucial importance when the key decisions were taken about the manner in which to pursue Fascism's new colonisation policy. In 1932 the European political and strategic situation was volatile and uncertain, and Guariglia's recommendation that the full endorsement of Paris and London be secured in advance of any assault on Ethiopia was, from the Italian perspective, sensible and prudent. For one thing – and Mussolini was of course suitably aware of this – Great Britain and France dominated the entire Mediterranean and Red Sea region by virtue of their territorial possessions, naval and air bases, joint ownership of the Suez Canal and crushing aero-naval superiority. Such overwhelming strength on the part of Italy's former World War I allies, more than matched by their vast imperial possessions and superior financial and material resources, meant that both had to be kept firmly onside. Then of course there were the potential dangers presented by a Nazi-run Germany and the future risks it might pose to both the Alto Adige and Austria once Hitler had come to power. Guariglia, insightful as ever, placed equal emphasis on the fact that any Italian operations in East Africa should take place only once Italy's European borders and key interests were secure. In short, it would be unwise to proceed with a war of aggression against East Africa if there was to be any risk of an Austro–German *Anschluss* once large numbers of Fascist troops had been deployed overseas.[30]

Throughout the 1920s Mussolini, like Hitler, repeatedly attacked the League of Nations, claiming it to be nothing more than a fraudulent Anglo–French mechanism for denying Italy its territorial rights in the Mediterranean and Red Sea. Now, in 1932, in the *Doctrine of Fascism* he set out his deep-seated and fundamental rejection of that institution's principal ideals:

> Fascism does not, generally speaking, believe in the possibility or utility of perpetual peace. It therefore discards pacifism as a cloak for cowardly supine renunciation in contradistinction to self-sacrifice. War alone keys up all human energies to their maximum

[29] R. Guariglia, *Ricordi (1922–1946)*, Napoli, 1949, p. 769.

[30] A. Del Bocca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale: II. \la conquista del impero* (Mondadori, Milan, 2001), pp. 173–174.

tension and sets the seal of nobility on those peoples who have the courage to face it. All other tests are substitutes which never place a man face to face with himself before the alternative of life or death. Therefore, all doctrines which postulate peace at all costs are incompatible with Fascism. Equally foreign to the spirit of Fascism, even if accepted as useful in meeting special political situations – are all internationalistic or League superstructures which, as history shows, crumble to the ground whenever the heart of nations is deeply stirred by sentimental, idealistic or practical considerations. Fascism carries this anti-pacifistic attitude into the life of the individual.[31]

Clearly, a major shift was happening in Fascist policy and one that would be marked by a more confrontational, uncompromising approach towards pursuing Italian national interests, especially where this involved any dealings with the hated Geneva Assembly. The principal factor underpinning this marked policy shift was of course the impending rise to power of Hitler and the NSDAP. By the latter half of 1932 Mussolini had gradually come round to the idea that Hitler and the NSDAP might soon come to power in Germany, and accordingly the *Duce* assumed full control of both the colonial expansion programme and Fascist foreign policy. An immediate consequence of this was the removal, in July, of the pro-League Dino Grandi as foreign minister, a role which Mussolini took for himself. In despatching Grandi to his new post as ambassador to London he was to place him in the hot seat at the point – in mid-1935 – when the threat of impending aggression against Ethiopia brought Italy to the brink of war with Great Britain. It was clear that Grandi's removal had much to do with his excessive involvement with the League of Nations, at a time when Mussolini was clearly pursuing policies that foresaw a potential confrontation with the Geneva machinery. As he later put it, 'By frequenting Geneva so assiduously, he (Grandi) had for some time camouflaged himself within that perfidious environment. His policy was, by then, "League-ist." (…) He was considered by rather too many to have democratic tendencies.'[32]

By the spring of 1932 Emilio De Bono, one of the 'quadrumvirs' at the time of the March on Rome and now Minister for Colonies, had emerged as the main player in the planning process for Fascism's future war against Ethiopia. In a memorandum for Mussolini in late March De Bono warned that Haile Selassie's government was strengthening their military capability in a manner that would soon seriously alter the regional balance of power in East Africa. As he put it, 'Abyssinia is an unknown albeit not troublesome entity, but it could become troublesome' if Selassie continued to pursue his policy of military expansion. Only a Fascist war against the Ethiopian Empire could bring this situation to an end and stabilise Italy's position in the region. Like Guariglia, De Bono emphasised to Mussolini the importance of securing Anglo–French approval for the venture given that they, together with Italy,

[31] Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*.
[32] *OOBM*, XXXIV, 'Storia di un anno', p. 401.

were joint signatories of the 1906 Tripartite Agreement on Abyssinia. Under the terms of the pact Britain, France and Italy were obliged to 'maintain intact the integrity of Ethiopia', which clearly meant that any question of the country's future sovereignty had to be agreed upon by all three.[33]

Although De Bono's memorandum for Mussolini had been largely cautious and prudent, warning that the political and financial costs for such an enterprise would be enormous, Mussolini soon ensured that he modified his outlook. The *Duce* had come to see a successful conquest of Ethiopia not as an ultimate objective but as the first stage in a Fascist expansionist drive that would initially link Italy's existing East African territories of Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. Provided the 'European situation' permitted this it would be followed by the conquest of the Anglo–Egyptian Sudan and Egypt, thereby connecting Italy's East African Empire with Libya and establishing a substantial North-East African Empire.[34] With Mussolini determined to take Italian Fascism to the heights of imperial greatness, and having for so long been impeded in his endeavours by French predominance in Europe and the threat of League interference, De Bono now had either to fall in line or risk losing his post as Colonial Minister. Once the dictator had fully absorbed Guariglia's August memorandum on the necessary preconditions for a pre-emptive war against Ethiopia, he ordered De Bono to ready Eritrea and Italian Somaliland for an offensive war against the Ethiopian Empire. Dismissing an earlier Army High Command operational plan which foresaw the deployment of a mere 60,000 indigenous troops and a further 22,000 men from metropolitan Italy, De Bono instructed Luigi Cubeddu, commander of Italian forces in Eritrea, to draw up a more dynamic plan of operations.

By 29th November De Bono had incorporated Cubeddu's considerations into a detailed memorandum for Mussolini and Badoglio, which outlined Italian requirements in any East African war. Beefing up the number of ground forces by a recommended deployment of 35,000 metropolitan troops to fight alongside the 50,000 indigenous men, De Bono also placed great store on the aggressive use of Italian air power. The *Regia Aeronautica*, De Bono informed the Air Ministry, 'should bring terror to the capital and the principal inhabited areas of the Empire', and 'bombard and machine gun the masses' while fleeing from the Italian offensive. De Bono recommended that

[33] De Bono to Mussolini, 22 March 1932 cited in G. Rochat, *Militari e politici nella preparazione della campagna d'Etiopia* (Franco Angeli, Milan, 1971), pp. 26–27. For greater details of the early phases of Fascist Italian planning in English see E.M. Roberston, *Mussolini as Empire Builder: Europe and Africa 1932–1936* (Macmillan, London, 1977), chapters 2 and 8. For a recent attempt at explaining Fascist colonial policy see G. Bruce Strang, '"Places in the African Sun":Social Darwinism, Demographics and the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia', in G. Bruce Strang, *Collision of Empires: Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact* (Ashgate Publishing, Burlington VT, 2013), chapter 1. R. Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933–1940* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 6–7.

[34] Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War*, pp. 6–7.

the whole of Tigre Province be captured before any Ethiopian mobilisation had begun, but it was clear that the plan was merely provisional and that De Bono was seriously underestimating both the Ethiopian armed forces and the costs of such an enterprise. But one thing was now certain. Mussolini planned to attack and conquer Ethiopia at the earliest opportune moment and despite any opposition from the 'talking shop' in Geneva. It was simply a matter of timing.[35]

[35] ACS, Carte Badoglio, scattola 4, 'Preparazione militare in Africa Orientale', De Bono to Mussolini/Badoglio, 29 November 1932 and 'Predisposizioni per l'invio di una brigata aerea in Eritrea, De Bono to Air Ministry, 29 November 1932.

5

Containing the *Führer*

1933–1934

The political turmoil that plagued Germany after the death of Gustav Stresemann in 1929 showed no sign of abating as 1932 drew to a close. Unable to form a working majority, and under fire from all sides of the *Reichstag*, the beleaguered Chancellor Franz von Papen called for further *Reichstag* elections on 6th November. Hitler seemed confident of emerging, finally, as Germany's new chancellor, and set off on the campaign trail with his customary vigour and energy. But since the previous elections in July the mood of the German public had begun to change, and a fickle electorate began to show signs of uncertainty in the face of Hitler's claims that only he could lead the German nation to greatness.

Hitler and Josef Goebbels both feared that this time around the NSDAP would lose votes for the first time since September 1930's remarkable Nazi breakthrough at the polls. As the electoral campaign got into full swing the Nazi press published endless articles claiming, as usual, that Hitler was packing out conference halls right across Germany with his rousing speeches. But the reality was that in November 1932 the Nazi leader was addressing half-filled auditoria, and it dawned on many Party activists that support was falling away. The election results confirmed the worst. The electoral turnout in November dropped to 80.6 per cent, and the total Nazi vote fell with it, by some two million. Hitler's share of the votes cast fell from its high of 37.4 per cent of July to 33.1 per cent, and the Nazi presence in the *Reichstag* also shrank from 230 seats to 196.[1] Reports from Mussolini's diplomatic staff in Berlin insisted more than ever that Hitler's personality and his tactics for winning power were the main problem facing the Nazi Party. As one put it, 'If Hitler wishes to secure totalitarian power as Mussolini did, then he will need that same faith and

[1] Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, pp. 390.

courage if his own ideals are to triumph, possibly through the use of force.'[2] In Rome, German Ambassador Ulrich von Hassell, who was to remain in post for some years after Hitler won power, noted that there existed considerable criticism of Hitler and the NSDAP's tactics among the upper ranks of the PNF. By the end of 1932, as the political crisis in Germany deepened following von Papen's resignation, he detected 'a growing disillusion' with Nazism among senior Fascists. In particular, von Hassell stressed that it was Hitler's 'intransigence' that had led many in Italy to believe that he would never secure power in Germany. The new chancellor, former professional soldier Kurt von Schleicher, had repeatedly attempted to offer Hitler a place in the government only to be met with the Nazi leader's net refusal. This was not only preventing Hitler from actually getting into power in Germany, but also impeding the reconstruction of Germany, which many leading Fascist figures regarded as absurd. Even Mussolini, who viewed Hitler as 'a strong man' and 'a great demagogue', allegedly felt his racial ideas to be wholly counterproductive and 'an absurdity'.[3]

On 17th November von Papen, unable to secure any support for his government from within the *Reichstag*, resigned, thus catapulting Weimar Germany headlong into what was to be its final political crisis. After Hitler made further attempts to secure the Presidency from Hindenburg on the basis that he was certain he could form a strong and effective government for Germany, the Great War hero instead appointed Schleicher. The latter made it his immediate priority to 'deal' with Hitler, and in a bold move appointed Hitler's right-hand man, the 'left' Nazi Gregor Strasser, to a post in his new cabinet. As Mussolini's new man in Berlin Vittorio Cerruti suggested, Strasser's defection could not have come at a worse time for the Nazi Party. The recent election results had provided a strong indication that Nazism's popularity in Germany may have peaked, and this had aroused concern among senior Party figures such as Strasser that, as many PNF members were arguing, the NSDAP would now never secure power. Hitler's blunt refusal to enter any coalition government had more or less ensured that the Nazi Party would play no future part in the running of Germany, and there was now virtually no question of it governing Germany in its own right. Strasser, clearly having already made these calculations himself, had drawn his own conclusions about the likely destiny of the NSDAP and accepted Hindenburg's and Schleicher's offer of the vice-chancellorship and the portfolio of Prussian Minister of the Interior. He hoped – in vain as it transpired – that he could now persuade Hitler to approve his new roles while at the same time permitting him to maintain his high profile in the NSDAP.

[2] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 7, fascicolo 1, 'Elezioni Reichstag – Situazione interna', Berlin Embassy to Mussolini, 25 October 1932.

[3] Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 104–105.

Cerruti's stark report created the impression of a Nazi Party in freefall in late 1932. Hitler, furiously adamant that there were to be no deals struck between the Nazis and any of the other Weimar parties, forced Strasser to reject the offer or surrender all of his Party offices. Believing that Hitler could not be toppled, and disillusioned with the lack of Nazi support for his decision to join the government, Strasser eventually resigned from the NSDAP on 8th December. The timing of the resignation could not have been worse. In Prussia, the NSDAP was already encountering difficulties given that it could only govern through collaboration with the *Zentrum*, which had no intention of cooperating with it. This general state of crisis, Cerruti claimed with some justification, had begun to eat into Party morale. The poor November election results, the subsequent political stalemate that afflicted the NSDAP and the Gregor crisis had only been further compounded by an additionally poor local election performance in recent weeks. In Thuringia, in early December, the Nazi share of the vote plunged dramatically by 40 per cent, leading Goebbels to bemoan the 'catastrophic' state of the Nazi position in Germany. Attacks by Hitler and other NSDAP leaders against Hindenburg and the behaviour of Nazi Party members during a recent KPD strike in Berlin had led many to completely lose faith in Hitler and his party. By late December 1932 the Party, which had made such dramatic progress in recent years, was in some difficulty. Party subscriptions were being cancelled, there was open revolt within the SA about the direction being taken by the leadership and its debts were spiralling out of control. As Cerruti put it, Hitler's excessive 'bureaucratisation' of the Nazi Party now combined with the various ills confronting it to create a widespread 'sense of disquiet among National Socialists', which made all of Hitler's decisions increasingly difficult to make. If, as the Nazi Party was again demanding, the *Reichstag* was to be dissolved prior to yet another round of elections, it would hardly be worth Hitler's while fighting them.[4] It was hardly surprising that in Rome arch Fascist zealot and later fervent pro-Nazi Roberto Farinacci declared Hitler to have failed, and the NSDAP star to be firmly in its 'descent'.[5]

Kurt von Schleicher's comparatively auspicious start as Weimar Germany's last chancellor was not to last for long, and soon, amid the doom, unemployment and misery of those dark winter days, calls, led by von Papen, for him to step down grew increasingly louder. In the final days of 1932 leading German financiers such as Kurt von Schröder had begun openly lobbying Hindenburg to appoint Hitler as chancellor, and throughout the tense weeks of January 1933 von Papen, the Nazi leader and their various entourages met to discuss the possibility of an NSDAP-led cabinet. In Berlin, Mussolini's unofficial representative in Germany, Giuseppe Renzetti, a firm supporter of the Nazi

[4] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 12, fascicolo 1, 'Situazione politica della Germania', Cerruti to Mussolini, '31 December 1932.

[5] R. Farinacci, *Il Regime Fascista* cited in Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 104–105.

cause after previous abortive attempts to forge a united right-wing front in Germany had failed, was as ever well informed about the rapidly developing situation. Von Papen, Renzetti informed Mussolini, was central to the drive to make Hitler chancellor, given that he was able to 'wield considerable influence among Hindenburg's inner circle', including the latter's son Otto. So involved with the ensuing developments was Renzetti that he was even able to send a provisional draft of the new Hitler cabinet to an anxiously waiting Mussolini some days before it became official. Most noteworthy about the composition and nature of the new cabinet was the fact that the small number of Nazi members, and Hitler himself, were to be, in theory, 'boxed in' and thereby controlled by von Papen and his cronies. The absurdity of von Papen's miscalculation was soon to become apparent, and certainly neither Renzetti nor Mussolini had any doubts that Hitler would soon be running Germany alone. On the eve of Hitler taking the chancellorship, Renzetti wrote of the many congratulations he had received from senior Nazis for his work in uniting the German right, and helping bring Hitler to power. For him it was a personal success of considerable magnitude.

THE MARCH OF REVISIONISM

Throughout the 1920s Adolf Hitler frequently repeated his intention to forge a relationship with Mussolini's Italy. As part of any arrangement with Mussolini, the Nazi leader promised to abandon any claims against the Alto Adige, a decision taken in the belief that a close German–Italian alliance would pose a formidable threat to French hegemony in Europe. But the very alliance that Hitler proposed was characterised by complexities, tensions and a number of competing Italian–German interests which, while largely latent until 30 January 1933, became serious problems once Nazi foreign policy began to make its influence felt across Europe.

Economic and political competition in Central Europe and the Balkans was one area of Italian–German friction that existed before Hitler's rise to power, and which persisted in the years that followed it. In particular, during the opening phase of Mussolini's war against Ethiopia launched on 3 October 1935, the Nazi government ruthlessly exploited the important Yugoslav market to Italy's detriment and generated difficulties for Fascism thereafter. Shortly afterwards, in November 1935, Yugoslavia, like most other League of Nations' members, agreed to the imposition of collective economic sanctions against Fascist Italy in response to its aggression against the Ethiopians. The result was that Italy lost trade to Germany in a vitally important region, and at a time of considerable economic vulnerability. The long-term problems for Italy proved equally as acute once Hitler's designs on Austria gradually led to greater Nazi pressure on the country.[6] Indeed, it was the toxic question of Austria's future status that

[6] Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche II*, p.72.

was to bring tensions between Rome and Berlin to fever pitch at a time, 1934, when the Fascist military had begun substantial planning for their impending assault on Ethiopia in earnest.

In his meetings with Fascist diplomatic staff soon after winning power, Hitler emphasised the extent to which Nazi Germany's foreign policy would make its presence quickly felt in Europe, and just how far the Italians could place their trust in him personally. Vittorio Cerruti's report of 21 February 1933 should have proved edifying reading for Mussolini in that Hitler freely declared that his priority was to bring an immediate end to the predominance of one power – France – and its network of *Petite Entente* alliances in European affairs. This, Hitler stressed, was where Italy and Germany almost certainly shared a great commonality of purpose. Similarly, Hitler confirmed that he intended to pursue a Mussolini-inspired crushing of Marxism within Germany, a policy which would undoubtedly endear him further with the *Duce* who had, by then, to all intents and purposes suppressed the Italian left completely.[7]

But in spite of such declarations of comradeship what preoccupied Mussolini most during the early stages of planning his war against Ethiopia was ensuring that no 'complications' arose in Europe, or more specifically Austria, once significant numbers of Fascist troops were committed in East Africa. In a meeting with his Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Fulvio Suvich and Count Luigi Vinci, the new ambassador to Addis Ababa, on 3rd January, Mussolini made it clear that he needed Italy's position to be secure in Europe before he gave Badoglio and De Bono authorisation for the Ethiopian campaign to get underway. It was vital, the dictator told the meeting, that Italian preparations remained cloaked in complete secrecy, adding that 'our operations in Ethiopia could succeed only provided that we are completely free of complications in Europe'.[8] Given the determination of Hitler to incorporate his homeland into the new Nazi Reich, what realistic chance was there that Mussolini's policy would succeed? Cerruti, at least, had gained a favourable enough impression of the *Führer*, claiming that he had come across as 'very frank, loyal and without any obvious hidden agendas'. Mussolini, however, was unlikely to take Hitler anymore at face value now than he had done in the previous ten years. His concern about potential difficulties in Europe was rooted primarily in his suspicions about Hitler's claims against Austria and his belief that the Nazi leader would pursue these claims with considerable vigour now that he was in power, regardless of Italian sensibilities. Over the next two years containing Hitler's European ambitions and pursuing his own African ones simultaneously were to become more than a little problematical for the *Duce* of Fascism.

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles made it clear that attempts to unify Germany and Austria were prohibited. Article 27 of the Treaty stated that the

[7] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 12, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio Hitler-R. Ambasciatore Cerruti', 21 February 1933.

[8] P. Aloisi, *Journal* (Plon, Paris, 1957), p. 45, 3 January 1933.

August 1914 frontier separating the two states, stretching from Switzerland to the newly created territory of Czechoslovakia, was to remain permanently unchanged. Mussolini was determined that these frontier arrangements should indeed remain fixed, especially once large numbers of Italian troops had been deployed in East Africa. But then, his determination to ensure Austria's independent status was nothing new. Even during the 1920s the Fascist military had taken no chances, and operational planning focused extensively on thwarting any German attempt at an *Anschluss*. But problems with the Austrian state itself persisted throughout the latter part of the decade, especially so in March 1928 when Mussolini savaged Vienna's criticism of his Italianisation policies in the Alto Adige during a speech to the Chamber of Deputies.[9] Determined to head off any Austrian interference in the internal affairs of the German-speaking province, Mussolini warned the Austrian Chancellor Ignaz Seipel that in future such criticisms would be resolved not by words, but by actions, at which point he promptly withdrew the Italian ambassador to Vienna.[10]

In due course the relationship between Italian Fascism and its northern neighbour slowly improved by the time Hitler won power in Germany. At the end of 1929 the period of greatest Austrian resistance to Italy's policy in the Alto Adige, the threat of an *Anschluss* and the strong influence of the Social Democratic Party gradually receded with the appointment of Johann Schrober of the right-wing Christian Social Party, an instinctively conservative politician who steered his country away from confrontation with Mussolini's Italy. But it was the appointment of the 39-year-old Englebert Dolfuss in May 1932 that was to lead to Mussolini committing himself fully to the defence of Austrian independence. Dolfuss led a coalition of political forces made up of his own Christian Social Party, the *Landbund*, a right-wing agrarian party and the political wing of the Austrian paramilitary right, the *Heimwehr*. This broad coalition was not only politically sympathetic to the PNF, but Dolfuss himself remained steadfastly opposed to any idea of a future unification with Germany. The new chancellor's firm stance improved relations between Rome and Vienna and, for Mussolini, confirmed that Austria for the moment had no intention of seeking any union with its German neighbours.

But Mussolini's anxieties over a possible *Anschluss* did not end with the appointment of Dolfuss. During 1933 Mussolini became aware that Hitler's principal objective was a Nazi takeover of his Austrian homeland. In September, a report from the Fascist military attaché in Berlin, Giuseppe Mancinelli, warned Mussolini that the frantic pace of German rearmament was designed to achieve Hitler's territorial ambitions as quickly as possible, beginning with the absorption of Austria into the Reich. It was simply a matter of time, Mancinelli emphasised.[11] Once it became apparent from Fulvio

[9] *OOBM*, XXIII, 'Per L'Alto Adige', speech to Chamber of Deputies, 3 March 1928, pp. 116–123.
[10] Salvatorelli and Mira, *Storia d'Italia*, p. 727.
[11] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 13, fascicolo 1, 'Il programma politico-militare della Germania', Mancinelli to Mussolini/SIM, 20 September 1933.

Suvich's December visit to Nazi Germany that Hitler wanted Dolfuss removed from office and Austrian Nazis installed in the Vienna government, alarm bells quickly sounded in Rome.[12]

There can be no doubt that Mussolini, who had endured years of French dominance in Europe, had every interest in seeing Germany under Hitler rearmed in order to successfully pursue his own foreign policy objectives. In August 1932, in the wake of the successful July Nazi electoral campaign, the dictator very openly supported Germany's right to secure parity of armaments with the Versailles powers, although he did attach an important caveat. As he told a crowd gathered at the main piazza in Gubbio in northern Umbria, Germany must be allowed parity in armaments or it would boycott the Geneva disarmament talks. Germany would need to exercise considerable 'moderation' in the event that it reached equality in armaments terms, and German leaders had to demonstrate 'great wisdom' in order to avoid repeating the errors of the past. Germany, Mussolini assured his audience, could not be prevented from rearming; to believe otherwise was little more than a 'ruinous illusion'.[13] However, the pace at which Germany had begun rearming after Hitler secured power and Mancinelli's reports for Mussolini on Hitler's strategic priorities perturbed the Italians. As the new Germany became visibly dominated by a culture of militarisation, endless marching, Nazi banners, uniforms, parades and a palpably militaristic national lexicon, the French, too, watched the new nationalist militancy over their eastern border with growing concern.

As it transpired, for Mussolini an improvement in Italian relations with the French, first discussed with Pierre Laval in July 1931, gradually became the mechanism for securing the consent of Paris for his planned annexation of Ethiopia, and ensuring that Austria remained independent. Given that the Versailles Treaty fixed Austria's national boundaries and its independent status on a permanent basis, it was clear that any attempted revision of this arrangement by Hitler was of interest to both Rome and Paris. Initially, in order to deal with this and other issues, the *Duce* attempted to establish a four-power directorate to determine European affairs, made up of Italy, France, Britain and Germany in March 1933. But the Four Power Pact, as it became known, was soon mired in misunderstandings and arguments, and Fascist Italy's attempts at slowing the pace of Nazi rearmament and covering its own back in Central Europe simultaneously came to nothing.[14] Nevertheless, fears in Paris and Rome about Hitler's future intentions grew in the early months of 1934, and bilateral relations, bitterly hostile since the moment of Mussolini's appointment as prime minister in 1922, slowly thawed. Mutual need and Mussolini's dogged determination to see through his expansionist drive in Africa thereby

[12] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 13, fascicolo 2, 'Colloquio fra Ministri Goring, von Neurath, Sottosegretario di Stato Suvich e Ambasciatore Cerruti', 14 December 1933.
[13] *OOBM*, XXV, 'Parita di Diritto', speech at Gubbio, 26 August 1932.
[14] Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War*, p. 21.

brought together two countries previously implacably hostile to one another. It was to prove a controversial and deeply acrimonious relationship.

Hitler's ruthless political decisions in the autumn of 1933 would certainly have helped galvanise Mussolini's shift towards an Italian–French alignment. Furious at the British refusal to consider German demands for parity in armaments at the Geneva disarmament talks, Hitler decided that the time for dialogue was over. By 4th October, exasperated with the whole negotiation process at Geneva, the *Führer* took matters into his own hands. His actions shocked the whole of the international order including Mussolini himself when they were announced a few days later. After listening to the views of senior advisors such as Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath and Minister of Defence General Werner von Blomberg, who stressed that nothing more could be obtained through negotiation at Geneva, Hitler promptly elected to end all German participation in international disarmament. Believing that Germany, as a Nazi state, should no longer involve itself in collective international politics either, Hitler also took the decision that Mussolini had so far baulked at, and walked out of the League of Nations. What made the Nazi decision even harder to bear for the Italians was the fact that they, as fellow Fascists, had been given no prior notification. On 5th October, the day after Hitler's decision, von Hassell had given Suvich assurances that the Germans were not about to play foul on the disarmament question, and were in fact relying on Italian mediation to resolve the dispute with the British negotiators. But by then, Hitler already had made his mind up, and with no prior discussion with his much admired Italian comrade Mussolini. Even worse, during a conversation with an unnamed but highly eminent personage in Berlin Italian Senator, Francesco Salata, discovered that despite Hitler's supposed admiration for Mussolini a deliberate decision had been taken to not inform Rome of any of the German plans. With an equal display of chauvinism it also became clear that Hitler had rejected Mussolini's Pact of Four on the grounds that it constituted nothing more than a 'constraint on Germany's freedom of action'.[15]

The French government had already taken steps towards negotiating an alliance with Fascist Italy earlier that year. On 9th June, and then again a month later, the French ambassador to Rome, Henri de Jouvenel, a veteran of Verdun, announced to Mussolini that his government sought a 'definitive' resolution to the difficulties that had soured bilateral relations between their two countries for so long. To improve their relationship both governments needed to develop joint policies designed to keep the peace in Europe. With this broad outcome in mind, de Jouvenal suggested a four-point plan of action for Mussolini and the *Palazzo Chigi* to consider which set out the basis, according to the French government, for a new understanding with Italy. Not surprisingly, top of the

[15] Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, p.493; ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 11, fascicolo 2, 'Colloqiuo con l'Ambasciatore di Germania', 5 October 1933 and 'Politica della Germania nei riguardi del Disarmo', Cerruti to Mussolini, 18 October 1933.

Quai d'Orsay's priorities was to ensure that both countries agreed to shelve all 'territorial ambitions' in Europe, a veiled reference to Mussolini's recently discarded plans to wage a two-front war. Second, and of vital importance to Italian plans against Ethiopia, the French stressed the importance of safeguarding Austria's independent status on a permanent basis, and third of ensuring that Vienna entered a new understanding with Hungary and the *Petite Entente* powers as a means of safeguarding its independence. Finally, the French proposed an agreement on Nazi rearmament based on consenting to German parity, provided that a strict system of controls and a 'trial period' could be agreed upon.

But despite French enthusiasm for a new bilateral relationship between the two countries, Mussolini appeared to be in no immediate hurry. By early 1934 the dictator watched with interest as first the Stavisky Crisis and then widespread far right agitation threatened to engulf French political life. Amid the chaos and uncertainty Mussolini was unlikely to agree to any new relationship with Paris, and preferred instead to begin serious planning for his vaunted Ethiopian venture. That venture faced a number of difficulties, not least of which was a bitter dispute between the Colonial and War Ministries over who was to take overall command of the logistical and operational aspects of the war. Up to that point Colonial Minister Emilio De Bono had taken charge of the military aspects of the operation, although Badoglio and Army Chief of Staff Alberto Bonzani demonstrated every intention of seizing full control from him at the earliest opportunity. The bitter dispute, which lasted for many months, did much to hinder effective planning for the offensive.

This De Bono–Badoglio dispute became obvious to Mussolini on 20th January when a memorandum from the latter, freshly returned from Libya, set out the many problems facing the operation and suggested, less than subtly, that De Bono was probably not the best person to lead it. Badoglio warned Mussolini that the war with Ethiopia should on no account be considered 'the usual colonial adventure' because it was this type of thinking that had resulted in the humiliating defeat in 1896. The situation facing Italy was in fact very complex and hazardous, not least because the co-signatories of the 1906 agreement, Britain and France, would expect some form of agreement to be in place in advance of any Italian invasion. Failure to secure any prior agreement would only 'aggravate' the progress of an already difficult military campaign on challenging foreign terrain, by leaving open the possibility of unwanted and unnecessary 'international complications'. Badoglio was equally sceptical about Italian levels of readiness. The Ethiopian army was currently four times bigger than it had been at the time of Adowa. Therefore, given its sustained progress in terms of organisation and armaments, and given the modern training much of its officer corps would have received in French military academies, the only conclusion possible was that Ethiopia's army was now 'first rate'. To defeat this force of around half a million troops would by no means be easy. Fascist Italy would be outnumbered by enemy forces facing it in East Africa, and any operations against Ethiopia would mean setting up logistical support

along currently very poor roads and rail communications. Moreover, to protect Italy's two existing regional possessions new lines of fortification would need to be built along the current frontiers with Ethiopia in Eritrea and Somaliland, all of them heavily armed with artillery. Preparing for all of this would take time and prove very costly, particularly so given that the two colonies had remained militarily undeveloped since the time of the Adowa defeat. Badoglio concluded by suggesting that he travel to Eritrea as soon as possible to begin making preparations, a clear sign that he intended to oust De Bono from his position of overall command.[16]

By February 1934, after months of hesitation and reflection, Mussolini appeared finally ready to give the final go ahead for his colonial war. Throughout that month French demands for an alliance with their Italian neighbours, led by Louis Barthou, finally convinced the *Duce* that he might be able to count on a 'pacified' Europe while at war in Africa after all. The French ambassador to Rome, Charles de Chambrun, had given specific assurances to the Italians that leading French figures such as Joseph Boncour, the Minister for War, and controversial intellectual Bertrand de Jouvenal among others were strongly in favour of a new bilateral agreement.[17] A little later Barthou, who was assassinated in Marseilles that October, informed Ambassador Morano Pignatti that he firmly believed a binding accord was now possible, holding the possibility of British participation in it as an additional temptation for Mussolini.[18] Having hesitated for long enough, Mussolini finally decided that the time was right and summoned De Bono, Badoglio and Suvich to the first meeting dedicated to planning the attack on Ethiopia. He had, he told the gathering, decided to proceed with his colonial war, and provided 'Europe remains quiet' operations would begin the following year, 1935. After approving Badoglio's visit to the region in March in order to begin the planning process proper, Mussolini also considered and later accepted De Bono's offer to spend the rest of the year in Eritrea, preparing the colony logistically. Although financing for the war was not to be approved for a further two months, the Fascist dictator had set in motion a conflict that was to have the gravest international impact, and on relations with the British particularly.

A STORMY PASSAGE

Once the February political turmoil in France had died down, the French government renewed its overtures for a permanent new understanding with Mussolini's Italy. As reports continued to reach the War Ministry and the

[16] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Questione abissina', Badoglio to Mussolini, 20 January 1934.
[17] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio con l'Ambasciatore di Francia', Suvich to Mussolini, 16 January 1934.
[18] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Conversazione col Ministro Barthou', Pignatti to Mussolini, 30 March 1934.

Palazzo Chigi of significant planned increases in German military capability in the year ahead, it became clear to the Fascist government that the French could be expected to make significant concessions in exchange for Italian backing against the Nazi menace. But then, Mussolini's inner circle also feared that new programmes of Nazi rearmament had the likely objective of achieving geopolitical goals equally as sensitive to Italian interests, such as the *Anschluss* with Austria for instance. By late January 1934 one official in particular, military attaché to Berlin Giuseppe Mancinelli, had begun making stark predictions about the expansion of German military might. Mancinelli warned the dictator that Hitler planned to expand the *Reichswehr* from its current strength of 100,000 troops to 300,000 in the forthcoming months. Despite French fears that the new intake would quickly be trained to professional levels, Mancinelli insisted that the German army did not have this level of capability at present. In fact, the *Reichswehr* leadership were only too aware of the actual weakness of their position vis-a-vis the French army at this time, and were under orders to do nothing to provoke any sort of French reaction. Nevertheless, by the spring of 1935, and in direct contravention of the Versailles arrangements, Germany would be well on its way to having a 300,000-strong, well-equipped army plus large numbers of SA paramilitaries available for front-line service. This was a stark fact that no one in Europe could afford to ignore.[19]

Almost as soon as Mussolini received Mancinelli's earlier warnings of Nazi intentions against Austria in September 1933, he had decided to step up Fascist planning designed to block the threat of an *Anschluss*. By late November 1933 the army's plans department had revamped its strategic contingencies for operations designed to crush any Austrian Nazi insurgency, and restore order in Carinthia with the support of the Austrian army. After mobilising across the Austrian–Italian frontier, an Italian expeditionary force would enter Austria and, with its Austrian counterpart, put down any Nazi insurrection by force. Clearly, the army's planners foresaw some form of German military intervention in neighbouring provinces such as Styria, Tyrol and Salzburg, and anticipated possible German incursions into the Tarvisio region as well as the Alto Adige, a fact that more than betrayed the Fascist regime's lack of trust in Hitler.[20] By early February, as the opening of conversations with the French stalled and became subject to delays, the army leadership stressed that Italy alone could not prevent any potential *Anschluss*. In a letter to the Undersecretary of State for War, Federico Baistrocchi, Bonzani insisted that other 'interested' states, principally Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, should also contribute forces towards the occupation of Austria and that agreements along these lines be drawn up between the respective Army High Commands.[21]

[19] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 21, fascicolo 1, 'Armamenti in Germania', Mancinelli to Mussolini 31 January 1934.

[20] USSME, H-6, racc. 5, 'Piani operative 1933', 'Piano 34, Direttive', Army High Command, Operations Department, 30 November 1933.

[21] USSME, H-6, racc 6, Bonzani to Baistrocchi, 4 February 1934.

But a month later it had become clear that the continued hostility between Rome and Belgrade ruled out any such agreement, while any discussions with the Czechs proved fruitless. Any potential Fascist Italian military intervention in Austria would be undertaken by Italian troops alone, Bonzani informed his commanders in early March.[22]

As tension grew over Austria that spring, the Fascist military expanded their intelligence gathering operation there, in order to gather as much information about Nazi intentions there as possible. The existing Servizio Informazioni Militari – Italian military intelligence (SIM) headquarters in Verona would, if Mussolini gave the order to occupy Austria, significantly increase its intelligence gathering activities across the border by setting up new intelligence gathering centres.[23] As the Fascist military were all too aware, Austria was in a state of turmoil by February 1934. Pressure from Mussolini and Austrian far right paramilitary group the *Heimwehr*, whom the *Duce* had backed as the mechanism for wrecking any burgeoning relationship between Dolfuss and the Austrian Nazi Party, brought a government crackdown on the Social Democratic Party. Amid the turmoil and street violence, Nazi German propaganda targeted at the civilian population continued relentlessly. In Verona, as military planners finalised the operational directive – Plan 34 – for an emergency invasion of Austria, Bonzani and the designated army commanders held a crisis meeting to assess the situation. Bonzani warned his senior generals that the Nazi government in Berlin was gearing up its propaganda offensive in Austria in order to increase support for National Socialism there. According to SIM some 50 per cent of Austrians were pro-Nazi and anti-Dolfuss, especially so in the key province of Tyrol. Although the regular Austrian army seemed, on the whole, steadfastly loyal to the existing state, SIM estimated that around 30 per cent of its troops were also pro-Nazi, while the 'Police were rather less secure.' Clearly, the German and Austrian Nazi movements were in close contact and were watching events, Bonzani warned. If an opportune moment presented itself the General did not doubt that there would be an attempted Nazi coup in Vienna, or at the very least in the Tyrol. At present no support was anticipated from any other power in preventing any such insurrection. The army had to be in a full state of readiness in the event that the *Duce* activated Plan 34.[24]

The complex tensions developing over the border in Austria soon exerted their influence on the embryonic planning process for the war against Ethiopia. As Bonzani had noted, any intervention in Austria would pit 'fascists against fascists', and the outcome of any such confrontation could not easily be predicted, especially if it resulted in an armed confrontation between Italy and Germany. The implications for any Italian war effort in Africa were made

[22] USSME, H-6, racc 6, 'Piano 34', Bonzani to Expeditionary Force Commanders, 8 March 1934.
[23] USSME H-6, racc. 6, 'Organizzazione del Servizio informazioni in caso di attuazione del Piano 34', SIM directive, 28 February 1934.
[24] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Appunti sulla riunione tenuta a Verona', 2 March 1934.

expressly clear that spring. Early discussions on the level of air power to deploy to the region carried the proviso that aircraft could only be sent if Britain's attitude were to be 'benevolent', and if a state of total calm prevailed on continental Europe. If neither were to be the case it was inconceivable that Italy could spare any air units for East Africa.[25] Bonzani fully agreed. Writing to Baistrocchi in mid-March he denounced the superficial and adventurous planning of De Bono, who seemed to be taking no account whatsoever of events unfolding just a few hundred miles north of Rome.

The fact was, Bonzani argued, that existing force strengths in Eritrea were 'insufficient', and any strengthening of the colony in the event of European complications was out of the question. Besides, the Ethiopian armed forces had been modernised and strengthened in recent years, and it was difficult to see how De Bono's projected force of 25,000 men could realistically defeat Hailie Selassie's 500,000-strong army. Within the broad strategic framework of war in East Africa Bonzani, like many others within the regime hierarchy, placed great store on French support for the Fascist war effort. Men and materials could more easily flow into the Eritrean theatre of operations through Djibouti, while reinforcements from Libya could also arrive far more rapidly via this route. Despite his criticism of De Bono Bonzani did, however, feel positive about the overall outcome of the Ethiopian war. It was vital, he wrote, that the Eritrean port of Massawa remained in Italian hands, because even if parts of Eritrea were to fall to the enemy it was highly likely that during the key months of February and March they would be retaken. The war was winnable, provided Italy remained free of international complications.[26]

While Bonzani placed considerable store on the need for French benevolence in the coming Ethiopian conflict, he did not mention the equally important value of winning British backing. This was surprising given the nature of the tripartite treaty over Ethiopia and the regional dominance of the British Empire in the Red Sea region. But the importance of both France and Great Britain as benevolent bystanders to Mussolini's coming war was not lost on Mussolini. As Minister of Foreign Affairs, it would be left to him to negotiate the type of agreement that would give Fascist Italy its indispensible 'free hand' in Ethiopia. As De Bono discovered in late March, the Army High Command viewed the European situation as 'disturbing', although Mussolini gave confident reassurances to all concerned that he was 'taking care of it'.[27] Later in the year, in September, it was clear that the service chiefs were operating under the understanding provided by Mussolini that the British and French would help block any attempt by Hitler to annexe Austria.[28] Extending the support of

[25] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta, n. 32, 'Memorandum by Colonel Magliocco', 4 April 1934.
[26] Bonzani to Baistrocchi, 17 March 1934, cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, appendix 10, pp. 309–313.
[27] *Diario De Bono*, 28 March 1934, in *Realtà Illustrata*, 17 October 1956.
[28] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale*, meeting of 3 September 1934.

both to a full-blown Fascist invasion of Ethiopia would be altogether another matter.

In view of Fascist Italy's need to secure great power support for its ambitious enterprise in East Africa, while simultaneously securing backing in the event of difficulties in Austria, Mussolini began the process of cultivating the French government in the spring of 1934. On 17th March, after the *Duce*, Dolfuss and Hungarian President Giulia Gömbös signed the Rome Protocols (thinly disguised designed as a defensive mechanism against German encroachments in Austria), Mussolini pledged support for Austrian independence before touching upon the thorny issue of Italian–French relations. 'In general terms', Mussolini declared during the course of a key address to the Quinquennial Assembly of Fascism, 'relations with France have undergone a general improvement'. But, he added, 'practically all of the major issues that existed between the two countries, whether 'great or small', had as yet not been resolved. The ongoing Italian–French rapprochement would therefore lead to 'additional developments' in this vitally important relationship.[29] Two weeks later, Mussolini directly informed Barthou that he was ready to enter dialogue with the French government. In their meeting of 29th March Pignatti emphasised on Mussolini's great satisfaction with the recent improvement in bilateral relations to the French foreign minister, adding that the dictator's expectation was that the two countries could reach important agreements on a number of key European issues. Barthou fundamentally agreed, and after some brief discussion about the ongoing question of disarmament, declared that a binding agreement between France and the Italians was very possible.[30]

For over a month there were few developments in Franco–Italian relations. It was only on 30th April that Suvich broached the possibilities for a permanent agreement with the French with Ambassador Chambrun. Clearly nervous about the rising power and militancy of Hitler's Germany and the increasingly uncertain Austrian situation, it was Chambrun, presumably on the orders of Barthou, who took the initiative. Meeting with Suvich in the latter's office at the *Palazzo Chigi*, the ambassador began by emphasising how well received Mussolini's recent pro-French speech had been in Parisian governing circles, and how determined the *Duce* seemed to be to strengthen mutual ties. It now remained to be clarified whether the Fascist government really wanted 'a treaty of friendship between their two countries'. Chambrun then went on to request Rome's permission for Barthou to visit Italy officially in order to meet Mussolini. He was sure that such a meeting would resolve all outstanding

[29] *OOBM*, XXVI, '*Sintesi del regime*', Mussolini speech, Rome Quinquineal Assembly of Fascism, 16 March 1934, pp. 185–193.

[30] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Conversazione col Ministro Barthou', Pignatti to Mussolini, 30 March 1934.

matters. Suvich, as ever cautious, agreed, adding that it was a question of 'choosing the right moment'.[31]

With the internal situation in France more stable than it had been during the scandals and disturbances earlier in the year, the moment seemed opportune for the Italians to strengthen their bonds with their former bitter rivals. On 25th May, now satisfied that Mussolini's new found empathy with Paris was to a good degree legitimate, Barthou spoke to the French Chamber of Deputies and declared that it seemed to him highly probable that France and Italy would not reach a formal and binding agreement in the coming months. Two weeks later, addressing the League Assembly at Geneva, Barthou announced that it was his intention to meet with Mussolini as soon as he had completed his forthcoming official visits to Belgrade and Bucharest. The basis for his conversations with the *Duce* would be colonial questions, a phrase which would no doubt have been music to Mussolini's ears.[32]

Given the history of bitter hostility that had characterised Franco–Italian relations ever since Mussolini's rise to power, suspicions about each country's true underlying motives in seeking a rapprochement were never far beneath the surface. Just three days after Barthou's public affirmation of his country's new friendship with the Italians Chambrun, in Rome, had begun asking probing questions about Fascist motives in other areas of policy. In particular, it was clear that the French government had obtained information to the effect that the long delayed meeting between the *Duce* and Hitler was soon to take place, and Chambrun wondered what this meant for the new arrangements shaping up between Paris and Rome. For some time SIM had been receiving a steady flow of informant reports indicating that they suspected direct German involvement in the anticipated Austrian Nazi insurrection, expected at anytime over the border. Hence there is little reason to suspect that Suvich's reply contained any sophistry or dishonesty about the current state of Nazi–Fascist relations. These, in May 1934, could best be described as tense and filled with suspicion. As Suvich, rightly pointed out, despite considerable pressure from the Nazi Party the regime had been putting off the meeting with Hitler for quite some time. However, given the ideological ties that undoubtedly connected the PNF and the NSDAP, there was simply no possibility that Mussolini could open up any dialogue with Barthou before meeting the *Führer*. He assured Chambrun that Rome's policy towards Hitler's Germany was so clear and concise that there was no possibility of any 'surprises' for any third party. Although Chambrun accepted Suvich's assurances, he took the precaution of warning him that any deviation from the now stated official Fascist line towards Germany could have serious ramifications in Paris.[33]

[31] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio con l'Ambasciatore di Francia', Suvich report, 30 April 1934.

[32] Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini Il Duce – Gli anni del consenso 1929–1936* (La Terza, 1974), p. 509.

[33] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio con l'Ambasciatore di Francia', Suvich, 28 May 1934.

Fascist officials were paying more attention to the words and deeds of the Nazi Reich than ever by the spring and summer of 1934, and with good reason. Throughout that critical period SIM reports provided constant intelligence on the activities of both the Austrian Nazis and their German supporters, as they prepared for their anticipated coup d'etat against the Dolfuss government. In early March Fascist military intelligence noted that within National Socialist circles in Austria a good deal of anti-state foment was now in evidence, while on the other hand the *Heimwehr* had joined regular army units in reinforcing the border regions with Germany.[34] Within Austria itself the situation was tense and uncertain, a state of affairs chiefly influenced by the direct threat of German Nazi intervention in Austrian affairs. According to SIM agents operating in Vienna the situation there 'still appeared uncertain', and large bands of armed patrols had begun patrolling the city demanding to see the identification documents of all those they deemed suspicious elements. Meanwhile, Dolfuss had ordered the reinforcement of the Brenner region in view of the constant stream of 'Hitlerian propaganda' pouring across the border. In Bavaria, the risk came principally from Austrian Nazi exiles operating over the border who had formed themselves into 'action squads', and were now awaiting events along the Austrian–Bavarian frontier.[35] However, SIM headquarters in Verona were fully aware that it was not merely propaganda and safe harbour for Nazi dissidents that Hitler's Reich was providing. Reports dating from Munich in March spoke of large shipments of arms and ammunition being stored in the city, the gift of an American benefactor, and ready for imminent shipment by the Nazi authorities into Bavaria. In future, they had learned, in order to forestall counter-operations by Austrian forces, all supplies and propaganda materials would be shipped from Berlin to Austria via Yugoslavia. It was hardly surprising that no Italo–Yugoslav agreement over the *Anschluss* had ever been reached.[36]

If German activities on the ground suggested that a Nazi seizure of power in Austria was imminent, and just as serious planning for Ethiopia was getting under way, public statements by senior Nazis did little to assuage Italian concerns. Hitler's major speech in front of thousands of NSDAP faithfuls in Munich that March clearly indicated that as far as he was concerned the borders of the new Reich would not remain static for long. At the gathering, SS chief Heinrich Himmler had spoken of a Nazi revolution that would last not for hundreds but thousands of years, before Hitler laid down an ominous statement about the future direction of Nazi foreign policy. 'Look back to the map of two or three hundred years ago and notice what changes came about', Hitler began:

[34] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Austria – Notiziario', SIM, 3 March 1934.
[35] Ibid., 'Austria – Notiziario', SIM, 6 March 1934.
[36] Ibid., H-6, racc. 6, 'Austria: Notiziario no. 15', SIM, 16 March 1934.

If someone comes to me and says that our map must remain as it is now, we will reply as follows: My dear sir, while you may yourself be sterile, the German people truly are not. The German people already lives and understands our objectives, and therefore proceeds with them so that the map of our Great Reich will continue to move and shift until it has been joined together in unity.[37]

Precisely where the Fascist regime was to figure in the great Nazi scheme of things as regards Austria and beyond became somewhat clearer during the course of Goering's state visit to Hungary in late May. Badoglio and the Army High Command were, by this point, already in the advanced stages of drawing up the major mobilisation plans needed to stage the entire Ethiopian venture. Under direct orders from Mussolini, Badoglio and his staff had planned the deployment of far greater numbers of men and equipment than De Bono's original plan had done, and increased troop numbers, for instance, to around 100,000. While such a heavy deployment would, the *Duce* believed, reduce the risk of a second Adowa in East Africa, it greatly limited Italian force strengths in Europe as tensions over Austria worsened. During his trip to Budapest, Goering told Hungarian premier Gömbös that Germany had no intention whatsoever of annexing Austria, but equally had no intention of standing by as Austrian Nazis were ill treated by the Dolfuss government. In this Goering clearly expected full Fascist Italian support. As Gömbös put it, 'I am convinced that, as regard the question of Austrian independence, it is possible to arrive at a profound collaboration between Germany and Italy.'[38]

Rome's firm stance on Austria's independence and Hitler's already well-stated intention to incorporate his homeland within the boundaries of the new Reich were only likely to generate bilateral tension. Over the summer and early autumn months of 1934 they did precisely this. Although Dolfuss had attempted to strengthen the position of his own government by merging the Christian Social Party with the *Heimwehr* and other nationalist groups, he had secured neither stability nor consensus in Austria. The result was, a SIM report of early May 1934 claimed, that Socialist and Communist activists were successfully spreading discontent and a sense of uncertainty across the country. The Austrian Nazis, on the other hand, had put their propaganda to good use greatly to increase the number of Party members, many of whom had deserted the ranks of the Social Democratic Party. For the moment, the Austrian Nazi Party was content to display its superiority in numbers, and had so far managed to avoid following orders from Berlin, demanding a full confrontation with national security forces. But the Nazi Party in Austria had organised its paramilitary forces well, just as Hitler had done in the 1920s, the report added. In the Tyrol there were now six battalions (around 3,200 men), formed into *Sturmabeitlung* units, and two new commands in the regions of Landeck

[37] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 22, fascicolo 1, 'Le manifestazioni socialnazionalista a Monaco e i discorsi del Cancelliere', Pittalis to Mussolini, 22 March 1934.

[38] Ibid., busta 22, fascicolo 2, 'Visita Goering Budapest', Colonna to Mussolini, 28 May 1934.

and Saint Anton. Other Austrian Nazi forces were based across the border in Munich and in various other camps in Bavaria, although only a very small part of the weaponry at their disposal had so far been successfully transported over the border owing to rigorous Austrian army patrols. But something was definitely being planned, and there were many rumours circulating that the Austrian Nazi Party would attempt to seize power at some point in mid-May. It remained to be seen how well the Austrian SA and their German counterparts would perform together in any coup, given the 'often violent conflicts' that had broken out between them in recent months.[39]

By early June, PNF and Nazi officials had finally been able to agree to a date for the long-anticipated meeting between their respective Party leaders. The meeting was crucial for Mussolini in that military planning for the war with Ethiopia was making some progress, and he, therefore, needed to be sure that Hitler would not make any rash moves against Austria, at least for the next two years. Hitler, for his part, faced serious domestic difficulties in the form of old comrade in arms Ernst Röhm, commander in chief of the SA. Since the Nazis had secured power in January the year before Röhm and the SA, who regarded themselves as the vanguard of the past as well as spearheading the coming Nazi revolution in Germany, had watched with increasing rage as the old German élites eagerly joined the ranks of the NSDAP and clamoured for positions of influence and power. Röhm, far more 'left' leaning than Hitler, wanted a second purge of Germany analogous with the one that had eliminated the Communists and Socialists, so as to remove the old established order. But his demands fell on deaf ears and if anything the *Führer* seemed intent on dismantling the SA apparatus. The SA were, as Joachim Fest notes, 'the forgotten revolutionaries of an unconsummated revolution', and by early 1934 Hitler was openly stating that he planned to reduce the size of the paramilitary force by two thirds, assigning to them an 'educational' function rather than a security one.[40] Given such difficulties many would have assumed that the Nazi leader, too, would have wished to remain free of international complications. Surely, Hitler would never choose such a difficult moment in the history of his regime to encourage a Nazi takeover in his native Austria.

In the last weeks before the summit meeting was due to take place in Venice in mid-June, information from a number of sources informed Mussolini that German activities in Austria or close to the Austrian border seemed to be intensifying. Pittalis, the consul general in Munich, informed the Foreign Ministry earlier in the month that the German army's Alpine Corps had recently staged exercises along the stretch of Austrian–German frontier that lay between Bavaria and the small Austrian province of Vorarlberg. Although the manoeuvres were staged each year, this time there had been considerable concentration

[39] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Riassunto delle principali notizie sulla Situazione austrica', SIM, 4 May 1934.

[40] J. Fest, *Hitler* (Penguin, London, 1973), p. 450.

on the use of artillery against uphill targets. Unlike other military exercises of the past in the area, this time the Alpine units had focused extensively on the rapid scaling and descent of mountain sides under combat conditions. Clearly, German mountain groups were upping their game for a possible conflict in the region and, as Pittalis concluded, the overall results had proved very positive.[41]

Pittalis' report on the Alpine border exercises coincided with intelligence information, stemming from both Germany and Austria, warning of imminent Nazi action aimed at bringing down the Dolfuss government. SIM had collated identical information from Berlin, Munich, Innsbruck and Vienna claiming that at some point during the first fifteen days of June a 'vast National Socialist movement' would stage a mass demonstration, aimed at demonstrating popular support for the *Anschluss* throughout Austria. The objective of this massive show of force was to emphasise that de facto the Austrian NSDAP were the true governing power in Austria, and not Dolfuss who should step down by the following October at the latest. If SIM's information was accurate, then clearly the order's origins lay in Berlin, and more probably with Hitler who would most certainly have been the only Nazi with the authority to issue such a directive. Certainly, the leadership of the coup had received strict instructions to ensure that any paper trail leading back to Germany vanished without a trace, and that any and all directives should be issued from Budapest, Maribor and Ljubljana. Equally, the leadership had had it impressed upon them by senior Nazis that they should at all costs avoid provoking any incidents in the Tyrol which might 'upset Italian sensibilities', although given Mussolini's close relationship with Austria and his rigid attachment to its ongoing independence, this seemed a rather strange order. In addition to the mass Party action, Nazi 'terror groups' had now been organised in all major regions of Austria, SIM concluded, and political agreements struck with Hungarian pro-Nazi groups as well as with Yugoslavia, who would not move to challenge what was effectively an attempted coup d'etat. The information was to be passed on to the army's operational planning department immediately, in case the decision was taken to mobilise Italian forces in response.[42]

With tension mounting over the threat of a Nazi coup in Austria, Badoglio and Italian Chiefs-of-Staff urged that Mussolini exercise caution when it came to making any military decision. Given that the reports from SIM and various diplomatic sources now carried an increasing sense of urgency about German intentions against the Dolfuss government, Badoglio not surprisingly requested a suspension of all planning for the Ethiopian war. In a memorandum to Mussolini dated 12th May, just weeks before the Venice encounter between Hitler and the *Duce*, Badoglio warned that the costs to the Italian nation of

[41] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 22, fascicolo 3, 'Manovre del corpo alpino della Reichswehr', Pittalis to Foreign Ministry, 1 June 1934.

[42] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Situazione austriaca', SIM to Army High Command Florence/Operations Department, 4 June 1934.

such a conflict would be painfully high. The entire colonial war would require around nine milliard lire, equal to roughly a third of Italy's gold reserve, a figure which Italy's already fragile national economy would find hard if not impossible to sustain. As for the army it would face a 'dual crisis' as a consequence of the campaign. During any operations in such a distant theatre of war the substantial reserves required would have to be built up significantly in advance but would, in being depleted as a result of operations, take many years to replace, as had been amply demonstrated by the ten-year Libyan campaign. Badoglio's main anxiety concerned any 'instability on the political horizon' in Europe while Italy was tied down in East Africa. Any such difficulties on continental Europe could bring about a dramatic change in the situation, requiring Italy to be ready to deploy all of the means at its disposal at very short notice. Even under the best possible scenario, any conflict in Ethiopia would leave Italy weakened in Europe for years to come, and although it was very likely that the *forze armate* would defeat the Ethiopians, developing a new, large East African colony was simply beyond Italy's means. 'It really is the case', Badoglio concluded, 'to ask whether this entire enterprise is really worth the bother'.[43]

Whatever Hitler's territorial ambitions may have been in the early summer of 1934, it was not as if Germany's national economy or its armed forces were markedly better equipped to deliver them. Vittorio Cerruti's lengthy and highly confidential letter to Mussolini in the days before the Venice summit claimed that Nazi Germany was in something of a crisis. In political terms it was clear that Hindenburg was by now in a state of decline, although no single group or individual seemed in any position to suggest a candidate to replace him as president. Hitler, whose voice would have been the most influential of all, remained steadfastly silent. Meanwhile, the violent dispute that had broken out between the *Stahlhelm* and the increasingly unruly SA had been worsening of late, and without any indication that Hitler intended to resolve it. Neither had the *Führer* found any mechanism for dealing with the increasingly bitter rivalries that characterised relations between the SA and the *Reichswehr*, although unbeknown to Cerruti he very shortly would. Hitler, the ambassador noted, was under attack from all sides of the Nazi Party. Many noted with alarm his inability to intervene effectively in the various factional disputes currently characterising German political life, and believed that Hitler had 'exhausted all his personal energy' in the pursuit of power, even that he did not 'possess the qualities needed in a great Head of Government'.

Hitler aside, the Nazi government was, Cerruti continued, wracked with bitter inter-ministerial feuding that was doing the country little or no good. Within the Reich there were already growing signs of fatigue, disillusion and even outright opposition to Nazism among many sectors of the society. This general sense of malaise was, if anything, being made worse by Germany's continuing financial and economic woes. According to official sources, in Berlin's

[43] Badoglio to Mussolini, 12 May 1934 cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, pp. 57–58.

financial sector the Reichsbank at present held no more than a maximum of one thousand million marks of gold, while German reserves totalled around six thousand million. These meagre amounts would soon be exhausted, leaving Germany unable to pay its overseas creditors, and the Nazi government forced to assume 'Soviet style' economics as the only means of harnessing the nation's resources. Major German ports such as Hamburg were operating at a minimal level owing to the exceptionally low levels of exports leaving the country, while many industries were enduring serious difficulties of all types except, of course, for those working on the Nazi armaments programmes. Giuseppe Mancinelli had already warned that German rearmament and an army of 300,000 troops could well be a reality much sooner than many imagined, by 1938 in fact. The implications of the latter would most certainly not have been lost on Mussolini as he prepared to meet the Nazi *Führer* face to face for the first time.[44]

The Fascist propaganda films of the Venice meeting between the two leaders give the impression that the occasion was bright and productive and that Hitler's visit was a great political success. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although to be taken with a good degree of caution, the memoirs of Rachele Mussolini indicate that Mussolini was never especially 'obsessed with Hitler', a view certainly borne out by the mass of Fascist diplomatic reports on him dating from the mid-1920s.[45] Therefore, as Hitler's *Junkers* arrived at Venice airport on 14th June it most certainly was not a question of love at first sight on the part of the *Duce*. Dressed in a suit and overcoat and constantly fiddling with his felt hat the nervous German chancellor contrasted starkly with Mussolini dressed in a smart white uniform, and surrounded by other senior members of the PNF and military. If the *Duce* was not at all impressed with the figure cut by Hitler then he was even less so with the tone of the conversations which followed over the next two days. Ever the fanatic, Hitler attempted to force his point of views on Mussolini who no doubt felt angry and affronted. Hitler set out a six-point set of demands on the future of Austria that included an immediate end to Dolfuss' government, and fresh elections to be followed quickly by the appointment of Austrian Nazis to cabinet posts. Beyond these demands, which also included joint German–Italian management of Austria's economy, the Nazi leader also expected Mussolini to consider 'withdrawing the protecting hand that he had hitherto held over Austria'.[46]

In his keynote speech at the *Piazza San Marco* in central Venice on the morning of 15th June Mussolini gave a measured response to the outcome of his conversations with Hitler. He told the gathered crowd that their encounter had constituted an attempt to 'disperse the storm clouds that darkened the horizon of European political life', and was not designed in any way to

[44] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 22, fascicolo 3, Cerruti to Mussolini, 6 June 1934.
[45] R. Mussolini, *Mussolini: An Intimate Biography* (Philip Morrow, New York, 1974), p. 138.
[46] *Documents on German Foreign Policy (DGFP)*, Series C, Volume III, number 5, 'First Conversation Between Mussolini and Hitler', 15 June 1934.

'modify the political map of Europe'.[47] For his part, Hitler appeared delighted at the outcome of the talks with his Italian counterpart. On his return to Berlin he briefed senior officials at the *Wilhelmstrasse*, and announced that the visit 'went off with exceptional cordiality and most harmoniously'. But as ever, the truth lay in the small print. Hitler was forced to admit that the discussions on Austria had not gone especially well, and that even though he had elaborated on the future of Austria quite carefully, Mussolini had steadfastly refused to comment.[48] Mussolini, who rarely revealed his true thoughts to anyone, was certainly not afraid to give his wife his verdict on the encounter. His view of Hitler had changed little from the 1920s. In fact if anything, now that Hitler had secured power in Germany, he actively disliked him. Upon returning to Rome he confided to his wife that Hitler 'is a violent man with no self control, and nothing positive came out of our talks'.[49] As Austrian National Socialist activity continued unabated into June and Nazi 'terrorists' carried out attacks against state officials, public buildings and rail networks, the political situation reached boiling point. The smallest spark, it seemed, could ignite a conflict between Europe's two Fascist regimes. Mussolini's imperial ambitions in East Africa now hung in the balance.

[47] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Al Popolo di Venezia', Mussolini Speech at Piazza San Marco, 15 June 1934, p. 264.
[48] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, number 10, 'Circular of the Foreign Ministry', Berlin, 16 June 1934.
[49] R. Mussolini, *Mussolini*, p. 138.

6

Achieving an Empire

1934–1935

Nineteen thirty-four proved to be an eventful year in what was, by any reasoning, a highly turbulent decade. In the deepest recesses of the *Palazzo Venezia*, Mussolini's official residence in central Rome, a decision-making process was set in train early that summer, which was not only to bring Europe to the brink of conflict the following year, but in due course also provoked a series of events that permanently divided the European continent until the outbreak of World War II. On 7th May Mussolini summoned senior figures within the Fascist military to discuss potential operations against Ethiopia for the first time. In the subsequent meeting of 31st May Mussolini gave express orders that no mention of the planned operations was to be made to the British and French governments, an obvious sign that their support was for the *Duce* very far from a foregone conclusion, and that any misunderstandings could prove fatal.[1] The relationship between Rome, Paris and London was tense and edgy with plenty of suspicion still lingering on all sides. As he wrote in *Il Popolo d'Italia* earlier that spring there had been much talk in French newspapers recently about the so called 'Franco-Italian rapprochement', and how this would prove to be the mechanism for eliminating all differences between the two countries. Yet very little had come from this thaw in bilateral relations, and any improvement was largely theoretical. Was it not time to start this process in earnest by resolving the problem of Italian nationals living in French Tunisia?[2]

Nineteen thirty-four also witnessed the first dramatic signs that Adolf Hitler intended to incorporate Austria into the German Reich, as well as assume full and total control of Germany without the risk of any future opposition. By removing both the threat of Röhm's SA and through his ruthless subsuming of Hindenburg's presidential powers upon the latter's death in August, Hitler

[1] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale*, meetings of 7 May and 31 May 1934, pp. 293–295.

[2] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Spiegarsi con un esempio', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, p. 194.

took absolute power into his own hands leaving him with the freedom to act as he willed in all areas of national policy. The long-term consequences were to be catastrophic both for Germany and for Europe. Mussolini, of course, had a good deal less freedom of manoeuvre than his German 'comrade' given that King Victor Emanuel III, as Head of State, had the power to intervene in policy matters and even dismiss the *Duce* should he choose to. In foreign affairs the Fascist dictator had a degree more leeway than he possessed domestically, which meant that an enterprise such as the projected attack on Ethiopia remained largely his personal responsibility. Nevertheless, as events during the course of 1934 made abundantly clear, Mussolini's freedom of manoeuvre domestically did not automatically mean that he wielded unbridled power and authority in the world of international politics. For one thing, across Italy's northern frontier the Italian dictator faced the ongoing prospect of a Nazi insurrection in Austria that threatened to overthrow his erstwhile friend and ally Englebert Dolfuss, and replace his government with a militant National Socialist regime.

Within Italy such a development could only be seen by many, Mussolini included, to be bringing the dreaded *Anschluss* swiftly closer, meaning that Hitler's Reich would directly share its borders with Italy and concomitantly pose a real threat to the Alto Adige. Beyond this any German absorption of Austria would significantly strengthen Germany's dominance over Central Europe and the Balkans, where economic competition with Italy had been fierce since the 1920s. In short, Fascist Italy could find itself squeezed out of important Balkan markets by a Nazi regime bent on strengthening itself in readiness for Hitler's own wars of aggression. Then of course there was the ever-present Anglo–French hegemony in the Mediterranean and Red Sea, strengthened by the *Marine de Guerre*'s new programme of naval building announced that year and the ever-present power of the Royal Navy, all of which could be ranged against Italy in the event of League opposition to his colonialist plans. In the summer of 1934 Benito Mussolini faced stiff challenges ahead if he was ever to conquer the Ethiopian Empire.

MURDER INCORPORATED

From mid-summer 1934 onwards the question of Nazi designs on Austria, improved Italian relations with the French and Fascist planning for the attack on Ethiopia became intricately intertwined in a manner that amply illustrated the ill health of the League and Versailles. In Germany Hitler finally acted to resolve the problem posed by Ernst Röhm and the SA by violent means. As both Mancinelli and Cerruti indicated in their reports on Röhm's murder carried out on the orders of Hitler, the claims by Nazi officials that he and other SA men had been shot for treason were wholly false. As Cerruti put it, if the SA leaders had been guilty of high treason then why had the regime's propaganda focused so extensively on their alleged homosexuality? Moreover, why had

all the arrested men been summarily executed and not imprisoned and put on trial?[3] Mussolini proved highly critical of the bestial manner with which Hitler had resolved his problems with Röhm and the SA. At the time of the murders Mussolini, forgetting his own less than salubrious past, had denounced Hitler as little more than a mindless thug. Showing newspaper reports of the SA assassinations to his wife he again showed his contempt for Hitler and his regime. 'Look at this. That person makes me think of Attila the Hun. Those men he killed were his closest supporters, who raised him to power. It's as if I were to kill Federzoni, Grandi, Bottai, and the others with my own hands.'[4] Nazi officials were fully aware of Mussolini's vehement distaste for the Röhm murder although they were equally as quick to point out what they regarded to be the *Duce*'s hypocrisy. As von Neurath noted to Ambassador von Hassell in late July Mussolini was indeed 'extremely critical of all the happenings in Germany'. Maybe, he added, the dictator should in turn be reminded of how 'sensitive' he had been after the Fascist seizure of power as regards the many things that occurred in Italy which were not, 'done in a strictly legal manner either'.[5]

But Italian Fascism was rather more concerned with the crisis on its northern border in the summer of 1934 than the butchery and barbarism of the Nazis against even their own. Army planners, in finalising their operational plans for an occupation of their northern neighbour, stressed that French intervention was vital, especially so given that considerable anti-Italian feeling characterised large areas of Austria and southern Germany. Army intelligence reported that in the Tyrol anti-Italian hostility was already widespread given the ongoing controversy surrounding the Alto Adige. In Bavaria, meanwhile, where the *Esercito* planned operations aimed at capturing Munich, hatred for Italy was more subdued at present but by no means absent in a province that had always been 'the centre of German irredentism'.[6] Plainly, were Italy to take on Austrian Nazism backed up with possible military support from its German ally, it would soon find itself in a very difficult conflict and with no obvious outcome. As the crisis over Austria continued to mount SIM could only confirm their worst fears. The Nazi government in Berlin had established a headquarters in Munich whose objective was to orchestrate and coordinate the imminent Austrian Nazi uprising. In Austria proper it had helped organise a secret military centre and provided a base for Austrian Legionaries in Bavaria. War, it seemed, was imminent.[7]

[3] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 22, fascicolo 4, Cerruti to Mussolini, 2 July 1934 and 'Giudizi di un ufficiale dello Stato Maggiore germanico sulla situazione', Mancinelli to War Ministry/SIM, 11 July 1934.

[4] Mussolini, *Mussolini*, p. 138.

[5] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, Foreign Minister to Ambassador Hassell, 27 July 1934.

[6] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Piano K – Direttive', Army Operations Department, 20 April 1934.

[7] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Situazione austriaca'. SIM to Army Command Florence, 5 June 1934.

The Austrian Nazi uprising against the government of Englebert Dolfuss finally took place on 25th July. At around 12:50 P.M. Dolfuss and members of his cabinet were due to meet for their last session before the summer recess, when a large number of uniformed men stormed the Chancellery building. Disguised as Austrian soldiers Otto Planetta and a group of SS men occupied the upper floors of the building and immediately set about looking for Dolfuss. In a statement to Austrian police two days later Planetta strenuously denied having fatally shot Dolfuss, claiming that that his pistol had gone accidentally off amid the confusion of the moment.[8] But Dolfuss was mortally wounded and despite fighting for his life died just over an hour later. It was left to none other than Mussolini himself to inform the Austrian chancellor's wife who was a guest of his at the time at his villa in Riccione on the Adriatic coast. The *Duce*, livid with rage over the murder, immediately ordered an anti-Nazi press campaign to be launched by the Fascist media, and instructed the army to mobilise under its Plan K operational contingency. He had no doubt whatsoever who had been responsible for both the revolt and the assassination of Dolfuss. Later, speaking with Dolfuss' deputy, Ernst Starhemberg, he maintained that the Nazi government in Berlin had orchestrated the events as SIM had claimed:

> There can be no doubt that the National Socialist government had given the go ahead for the putsch. (…) Hitler is Dolfuss' murderer. Hitler is to blame; he is responsible for all these events.[9]

The failed Nazi coup and the murder of Mussolini's friend Dolfuss had an immediate and seismic effect within Fascist Italy. For one thing, the *Duce* was compelled to suspend all planning for an Ethiopian campaign still plagued by continual squabbling between Badoglio, the Army High Command and the Colonial Ministry, for the foreseeable future. Writing to De Bono two weeks after Dolfuss' assassination the dictator warned that 'The actual situation in Europe is so uncertain that all of the Italian armed forces must be kept in a state of high alert.' Any reduction of Italy's troop levels in Europe in the current climate could prove highly damaging to its national interests, Mussolini added. For now, Italy would stay quiet and carry on the pretence of friendship with the Ethiopians.[10] The Fascist regime's response to what many perceived to be Hitler's hand on the smoking gun showed no such restraint however. Two days after the murder von Neurath informed von Hassell that German relations with Mussolini were deteriorating by the hour. Already 'extremely critical' of the manner in which Hitler had handled the Röhm situation, Mussolini became even more agitated as a result of the events in Vienna on 25th July.

[8] For various statements by witnesses to the murder of Dolfuss including that of Planetta, see C. Fruttero and F. Lucentini, *Il giorno che uccisero Dolfuss* (Mondadori, Milan, 1967), pp. 52–59.

[9] Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, p. 324.

[10] ACS, Carte Badolglio, busta 4, Mussolini to De Bono, 10 August 1934.

The Nazi government, in appointing Franz von Papen to a special mission to Austria, were, Neurath claimed, trying to normalise relations with Austria, but Mussolini, who was now threatening a 'collective démarche' in Berlin, threatened to derail the entire process. Should Mussolini proceed with such a plan, Neurath warned, 'I have little hope for the future of our relations with Italy.'[11]

In fact, the relationship between the two regimes had already become colder even as von Neurath wrote his letter to the German ambassador in Rome. The Fascist government and its various Italian press organs placed the entire responsibility for the abortive coup on German Nazism. *Il Messagero* squarely blamed Berlin and accused the Nazi regime of recruiting criminals from the lowest levels of Austrian society to carry out its dirty work. *Il Corriere della Sera* was, if anything, even more direct in its criticism of Germany. 'Nazism', a front page feature thundered out, 'has used criminality as a political instrument in its efforts to wage destruction, murder and terror'.[12] Mussolini, fuming with rage at what he viewed as Hitler's treachery and beside himself at the prospect of having to indefinitely postpone the Ethiopian campaign, ordered the Fascist-controlled press to 'brand Germany' ruthlessly. Goering, Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg and Hitler himself were the subject of 'vitriolic *ad hominem*' attacks, as the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* put it, from Fascist journalists that went well beyond normal press protocols. Shortly after news of Dolfuss' murder reached him in Riccione, the Italian dictator also ordered an immediate if partial mobilisation of the army on the Austrian frontier. The mood was bristling with tension and menace. As an Army High Command directive of 28th July noted, should the *Esercito* cross the frontier into Austria they could well come into contact with both Czech and Yugoslav units. In the event that this should happen Italian units should only respond if fired upon first, and use 'considerable tact' in order to avoid incidents that might distract them from their 'principal objectives'.[13]

Mussolini's sudden and violent reaction to what he saw as Hitler's complicity in Dolfuss' death rattled both the Austrian Nazis and the Berlin government considerably. As SIM reported in mid-August in both Carinthia and the Tyrol the steam had been taken out of the revolt by the threat of Fascist intervention. While the *Esercito*'s mobilisation on the frontier had also greatly increased hatred and antipathy for Italy among many Austrians, it had served its purpose and helped bring the putsch to an end without the need for full military intervention, the report concluded. The Germans, meanwhile, had been equally shocked by Mussolini's order to send troops to the border, one consequence of which was their decision to dissolve the Austrian Legion immediately.[14] Another decision had been taken a few days earlier by Hitler, namely

[11] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, von Neurath to von Hassell, 27 July 1934.
[12] *Il Corriere della sera*, 28 July 1934.
[13] USSME, H-6, racc, 6, Army Operations Department to Verona/Udine/Florence/Bologna commands, 28 July 1934.
[14] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, 'Movimento nazionalsocialista in Austria', SIM report, 13 August 1934.

the recall of the German ambassador to Vienna and the closing of the border with Austria. With more than a hint of scorn a SIM report noted that both German decisions were nothing more than a veiled attempt to 'absolve themselves from any blame' for recent events.[15] Mussolini was satisfied enough that his prompt action had wrecked the attempted Austrian Nazi takeover in a matter of days, but less so with the weak reaction of Paris and London from whom, he told his wife, he might have 'expected a more energetic response'. But still his actions had paid off. As he told Rachele: 'As soon as Hitler realised I meant business, he disowned the murderers of Dolfuss, but I am still wary of him. He wants Austria, and he'll have it, especially if I'm the only one to march to the Brenner.'[16]

The botched Nazi coup against the Austrian government impacted very seriously upon Italian–German relations which remained damaged for some time afterwards. Hitler had been near hysterical upon hearing of the incompetence of the Austrian SS officers charged with seizing the Chancellery building, and raged at the huge embarrassment they had inflicted upon him personally. The headquarters of the Austrian Nazi Party were soon closed down as the Berlin government took every possible initiative aimed at disassociating itself from the failed coup. In Italy the press offensive continued, albeit with a slightly more moderate tenor, although Mussolini himself launched a further scathing attack on Hitler's ideology from the pages of *Il Popolo d'Italia* in late August. Having himself taken a Jewish mistress, the gifted and highly influential artist Margherita Sarfatti, Mussolini could not, at least at this time, be accused of harbouring any profound anti-Semitic sentiments. The same could not, of course, be said for Hitler whose own violent and brutal anti-Jewish views Mussolini claimed to find 'an embarrassment'. By 1929 Mussolini's view of Hitler and his ideas had already become fixed in the belief that the Nazi *Führer* 'was a narrow minded demagogue, mired in insane anti-Semitic fantasies'.[17] In his August 1934 article Mussolini expanded on this view. 'Is there a Germanic race?' Mussolini asked. No, 'a German race did not exist. (…) And it is not us who say it. Nor do the scientists say it. Hitler does', and he cited a passage from *Mein Kampf* in which the Nazi leader admitted that there was no racial unity in his new Reich. With considerable derision Mussolini concluded by claiming that it would take Germany 'six centuries' to purify its blood. 'We thus have all the time in the world to discuss it, calmly and coolly', he added.[18] It was small wonder that von Hassell could only conclude that Berlin must now anticipate a shift in Italian policy towards a closer alignment with the French.[19] Mussolini was hell bent on conquering Ethiopia at some point during

[15] USSME, H-6, racc. 6, "Movimento nazionalsocialista in Austria', SIM report, 26 July 1934.
[16] Mussolini, *Mussolini*, p. 140.
[17] P. V. Cannistraro and B. R. Sullivan, *Il Duce's Other Woman* (Philip Morrow, New York, 1993), p. 415.
[18] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Alla fonte', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 29 August 1934, pp. 309–310.
[19] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, von Hassell to Foreign Ministry, 8 August 1934.

1935, even if it meant entering an alliance with a nation he and most Fascists vehemently detested.

WINDS OF WAR

On 27th July, two days after the traumatic events in Vienna, Badoglio convened the Chiefs-of-Staff in order to discuss possible planning arrangements for the northern front in the impending attack on Ethiopia. The Head of Government, Badoglio began, had ordered that Eritrea be prepared logistically for the war of conquest, that the expeditionary army be gradually shipped down and that the country be made ready to house it. On no account, Badoglio concluded, should the Fascist forces do anything more than remain on an entirely defensive footing, attacking only if they were themselves attacked. Clearly, the *Duce* was only too aware of the risks he was running in authorising the war. The army would have to deploy at least four metropolitan divisions to Eritrea and, as discussed in the previous chapter, it was expected that the whole enterprise would drain approximately one third of national gold reserves. This suggested, Badoglio continued, that Italy's position in Europe would become 'precarious' for some time to come, and he went to repeat his belief that the whole enterprise was simply not therefore worth bothering with. But Mussolini was determined to proceed with operations as soon as possible and as soon as the tensions in Austria died down. The problem was that coherent plans of operations for both the Eritrean and Somali fronts had so far failed to materialise. As Colonel Visconti Prasca, head of Badoglio's secretariat, remarked, Italian military planning for the European theatre had produced a veritable surfeit of plans, many of which would most likely never be activated. But for the Abyssinian fronts, 'where hostilities might well be imminent, there has yet to emerge a concrete and complete plan of operations'. Neither had it been established precisely as to who should produce such a plan and who would be in charge of operations, logistics and fortifications and so on.

Naval Chief-of-Staff Guido Vanutelli only added further difficulties to the already complex discussions. Shipping the massive quantities of equipment plus large numbers of troops through the eastern Mediterranean and via the whole of the Red Sea would require a large number of ocean-going vessels, which would be spread far and wide across the world, the Admiral warned. The situation was further complicated by virtue of the fact that large ships capable of carrying troops would need to be substantially fitted out well in advance of their transportation to East Africa, which meant that all necessary vessels would need to be taken out of circulation long in advance. Then there was the real and potentially highly risky problem of naval politics. The Naval chief concluded his contribution to the meeting with a barely veiled warning. 'Such an expedition', he noted, 'would have two extremely delicate phases each of them dependent for their outcome on the attitude of other powers', by which he meant France and Great Britain. The first of these was the tricky

question of Italy gaining permission to use the Suez Canal for the shipment of troops and equipment, and the second of ensuring British and French compliance in stop and search operations against ships carrying cargoes destined for Ethiopia. Vastly complicating this would be the fact that under the League of Nations' law Italy would be the aggressor against a fellow member state, and that the same states may be compelled to join any action designed to halt the aggression.[20]

Vanutelli was only too aware of the potential international risks Mussolini was prepared to take in order to begin his programme of imperial expansion. While the Army High Command and Badoglio were anxious to keep ground force strengths at their maximum in case of further German threats against Austria, the navy had rather different priorities. The previous year, one week before Hitler had won power in Germany, Vanutelli's predecessor at the Italian admiralty, Gino Ducci, had written a detailed study of Italy's place within the international naval political order, and the degree to which Italy should adhere to international law. His conclusions should have given Mussolini plenty of pause for thought. Italy, Ducci had argued, was effectively trapped within the Mediterranean and could not conduct any naval operations outside of that sea. In any war therefore Italy had 'everything to lose and nothing to gain' and should adhere strictly to all codes of maritime warfare. Most important of all, Ducci concluded, British predominance over the Suez Canal meant that in any conflict in which Italy might come to be involved it was critically important that Great Britain 'remained neutral'.[21]

Across the board planning for the northern front was confused and seriously disorganised. As Visconti Prasca informed Badoglio privately, none of the planning documentation had discussed where Italy's principal defensive positions were to be located in Eritrea, who was responsible for the crucially important defensive strategy, who was to take responsibility for strengthening the existing fortifications and, crucially, who was responsible for road improvements and water supplies, the Achilles heel of the 1896 expedition.[22] So far, Prasca added, the Colonial Ministry had revealed nothing about strategic and logistical planning for the southern front in Italian Somaliland, aside from De Bono's rather slender study of the colony's defences of 23 August 1933 and his updated version produced in February the following year. As the Colonial Minister and for that matter Badoglio and the Army High Command saw it, Somaliland would have to survive any war with Ethiopia solely with its own resources. De Bono viewed the southern front as a defensive one given that, as he put it, 'the Abyssinians group their forces and operate only in one direction, and the one that interests them the most is toward the north across the Tigre',

[20] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale*, meeting of 27 July 1934, pp. 297–309.
[21] Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare (USMM), Cartelle Numerate, busta 1727, 'Criteri informativi sulla nostra guerra marittima', Ducci, February 1933.
[22] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, Visconti Prasca to Badoglio, 25 July 1934.

the northernmost region of Ethiopia bordering Eritrea. What this meant in practice was that there was no possibility of any Italian troops ever being sent to the colony, and neither was it likely that any indigenous forces from outside the region would ever be deployed there owing, in part, to the hostile climate and terrain. Somaliland would therefore have to depend on its own forces comprised of some 20,000 'irregular' units organised into one 'mixed' brigade, broken up into six battalions. De Bono hoped at some point to be able to form a second mixed battalion but only when the number of possible reservists made this possible. As had been stipulated so many times by many other senior Fascists the Minister reiterated the vital importance of securing Anglo–French support, or at least neutrality:

> Ultimately the war we are aiming to wage presupposes a prior agreement with Britain and France, and will by virtue exclude any concerns we may have about eventual offensives being launched by these powers from neighbouring colonies.[23]

Given the precarious condition of the defences in both Italian East African colonies and Somaliland in particular De Bono's worries were hardly surprising. Italian Somaliland had been occupied by Italian forces during the same phase of late nineteenth century Italian expansionism as Eritrea, but had remained significantly underdeveloped. For one thing its logistical facilities were, to say the least, extremely primitive and there was little question of using the colony for major military operations. Its only real port, Mogadishu, was so primitive that ships wishing to unload their cargoes had to make do with barges rather than proper docking facilities. Reaching the interior from the coasts was equally as challenging. Most roads were very basic and even the most robust vehicles struggled to cope with the huge amount of sand that covered the landscape. Then there was Somaliland's climate. It was a widely held view among Italian officials that the southern colony's climate could not sustain any foreign expeditionary army. The at times torrid heat, absence of regular rainfall and unpredictable monsoon outbursts suggested to many in the Fascist military hierarchy that any European army would struggle to survive there under battlefield conditions. It was for reasons such as these that Italian colonial and military experts came to view Eritrea as the colony of principal importance in the region. Somaliland's role in any military campaign against its northern neighbour would therefore be simply a marginal one. With just over a year to go before the start date for the invasion Mussolini's military leaders clearly had their work cut out in preparing the nation for its war of revenge against Ethiopia. But financial and material difficulties were merely one part of a complex set of factors militating against the forthcoming Fascist invasion.

[23] ACS, Carte Graziani, busta 19, 'Organizzazione e impiego dell'artiglieria in Colonia', De Bono to Army High Command, Italian Somaliland and 'Direttive per i'impiego del R. Corpo e delle bande armate in caso di conflitto', De Bono to Governor of Italian Somaliland, 6 February 1934.

A little over a month after the Dolfuss murder had rocked Europe and deeply shaken the Fascist–Nazi relationship tension between Rome and Berlin appeared, on the surface at least, to have subsided. From Rome von Hassell felt able to report that the 'obnoxious effects' of the failed putsch had been 'neutralised', and Suvich himself had been at great pains to stress to the German ambassador that there had been no break in Fascist policy towards Germany. But beneath the surface the relationship between the two dictatorships remained strained and Berlin feared that the traumatic events in Austria in July had sowed the seeds of deep mistrust and suspicion within official Fascist circles. Indeed von Hassell, always the most pragmatic and sensible of diplomatic commentators, now viewed a major Fascist shift of policy as something of an inevitability. As he put it in his report to von Neurath of 8 August 1934:

> Italy, in her own interest, will depart from her present course, yet nevertheless one is increasingly forced to recognize, on the basis of many impressions acquired recently, that we must seriously reckon with the possibility of Italy changing course even on questions of general policy.[24]

The directional change von Hassell foresaw taking place in Italian foreign policy had already been in progress for some time, although it had been forestalled by events in Austria. Mussolini and key elements in the French government such as Louis Barthou had begun the process of moving towards a closer and more formal bilateral relationship by the summer of 1934, but the process had become stalled following the untimely death of Dolfuss. By mid-July the *Palazzo Chigi* had produced a detailed memorandum outlining Fascist expectations from the new arrangement, a document which clearly outlined the true extent to which Mussolini expected a free hand against Ethiopia as the centre piece to any agreement. More explicitly, the Fascist regime expected France to relinquish its existing interests in Ethiopia, to show no further interest in the country and to grant Italy the freedom to act against the country as it saw fit and necessary. While the Austrian crisis acted as an immediate brake on any progress in the Anglo–French conversations, and Barthou himself postponed a planned visit to Rome to meet Mussolini following the murder of Dollfuss, Nazi actions in central Europe served to highlight the urgent need both countries had of each other. Neither Italian Fascism nor the French Third Republic could permit Adolf Hitler to attempt an Anschluss or any other form of treaty revision, especially so while the Italians were heavily engaged in East Africa. It was now a question of finding the right mechanism for a future alliance.

Barthou's cancelled trip to Italy did not prevent him, in what were to be the final weeks of his life, from continuing to lobby senior French officials for an imminent alliance with Mussolini's Italy. Barthou was convinced of the intrinsic value of such an alignment, which, from a broader perspective, he believed might also prise the Yugoslavs away from their increasingly close

[24] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, 'Political Report', von Hassell to von Neurath, 8 August 1934.

relationship with Nazi Germany, thus increasing the isolation of the latter. Naturally, regional rivalry between France and Italy remained fierce whatever political overtures were being made by their respective leaders. While Italy's military attaché in Paris, Lieutenant Colonel Arturo Kellner, could stress that French armament's factories were not building anything beyond the existing programme for national defence, he could not discern the pace at which the programme itself was being carried out. Likewise, the *Marine de Guerre*'s intention to lay down two new battleships of 26,000 tons displacement, considerably less than provided for by the Washington Treaty limitations, nevertheless sparked a rapid and sharp response from the Fascist government, which in turn laid down the 35,000 *Littorio* class shortly afterwards. A 'pre-emptive war', as Kellner rather ambiguously termed it, had been on the cards in French circles a year ago, but no longer. Most of the senior French military did, nonetheless, see a war as now 'inevitable', although no one speculated on the political make up of such a conflict.[25]

The truth was that a number of French military suppliers were working flat out to fulfil their current production schedules as quickly as possible. As the Italian naval attaché reported in mid-June French arms firms such as *Hotckiss*, *Creusot*, *Poudres de Angoulême* and *Cantiere A. Normand* were working around the clock with staff capacity at the maximum in order to complete government orders as rapidly as possible.[26] This sense of urgency was more than amply reflected in French official attitudes as the dramatic summer of 1934 wore on. In mid-August, with Barthou having left Paris for his summer vacation, Pignatti met instead with Navy Minister François Piétri. From an Italian perspective the meeting was both useful and insightful in that the minister provided some clear perspective on how ruling circles in France viewed the prospects of a closer alignment with Italian Fascism. Pietri, a Corsican with many years ministerial experience that had included the Defence, Colonial and Budget portfolios, turned immediately to the question of Barthou's rescheduled visit to Italy. Pietri, who would accompany the foreign minister on his official visit to meet Mussolini in person, immediately set out what the French priorities were with no hesitation. The whole of France's defence establishment were determined, the minister emphasised, to maintain a strict status quo in all matters concerning international armaments. Not surprisingly, he cited German rearmament as being of the greatest concern to the French establishment and, he stressed, the government in Paris would be pressing for an agreement that would at the same time satisfy Germany, while preventing it from breaking international arms limitation agreements. Clearly the French viewed Mussolini as playing a vital role in the design and enforcement of such a policy.

[25] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Situazione politico-militare della Francia', Kellner to Mussolini/SIM, 18 June 1934.

[26] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, Parova to Pignatti, 14 June 1934.

Having set out with abundant clarity what French governing circles expected from any new Italian–French agreement, Pietri was less than disposed to discuss Fascism's colonial aspirations in East Africa until formal Italian backing against Hitler was assured. Using carefully phrased language he told Pignatti that he was well aware of Italy's interest in seeking a 'solution in East Africa', before adding that this would invariably 'encounter profoundly grave difficulties within French colonial circles'. Recent discussions between himself, Barthou, the Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay and Marquis Alberto Theodoli the President of the League of Nations' Commission for mandates had very clearly highlighted how difficult the question of Ethiopia would be to broach for the French government, Pietri noted, although 'in principle' French officials had shown no opposition to Italian plans. Pignatti more than took the hint. An agreement with France over the future of Ethiopia was possible but would certainly not be easily reached. Much would depend on the extent to which Mussolini supported French diplomatic initiatives and continued to defend Austrian independence, an issue at the very heart of French anti-Hitler thinking. In fact, if anything had induced the French political class and French public opinion to refocus their view of Mussolini and Fascism, it had been the *Duce*'s rapid and stiff response to the Austrian Nazi coup attempt in late July. As Pietri put it France as a whole had been generally delighted at Mussolini's action, and had it not been for a 'resolute British attitude' in the days that followed the Dolfuss assassination France would have provided even more tangible evidence of it its admiration for Italy. The British, as non-committal and ambiguous as ever, were not it seemed prepared to become involved directly in European affairs and therefore were not willing to join any Italian–French protest against Hitler's appointment of von Papen to the post of ambassador to Vienna. Mussolini still had much to do before he could be sure that both the London and Paris governments would not cause complications during the coming war with Ethiopia.[27]

By the first days of autumn enthusiastic French declarations of friendship for Mussolini's Italy continued unbounded. As Suvich informed Mussolini in late August, the French Ambassador Charles de Chambrun had been at great pains to stress the 'rapid progress' which the idea of an Italian–French rapprochement had made at all levels of French society. It was obvious that Chambrun had been ordered to flatter and charm Mussolini personally, or at least had taken it upon himself to do so given his assurances to Suvich that 'His Excellency (Mussolini) enjoyed great popularity among the masses even within the smallest villages of France.'[28] Just a few years earlier any such pro-Mussolini declaration by a French official would have been unthinkable.

[27] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio R. Ambasciatore-Ministro Pietri', Pignatti to Mussolini, 13 August 1934.

[28] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 11, fascicolo 1 'Suvich to Mussolini', 27 August 1934.

Now, as Hitler re-armed Germany beneath a cloak of secrecy and intrigue, the Italian Fascists had become indispensible and valued friends of France and the French people. The war scares and press hostilities of the 1920s and early 1930s lay forgotten as the two Latin cousins realigned themselves to deter the march of Hitlerism, albeit with rather differing agendas.

Mussolini, eager to have the planning process for Ethiopia moved along more vigorously, was more than happy to please his new friends in the French establishment. In early September he embarked upon a brief tour of Puglia, the southernmost region of Italy's eastern seaboard, and made a number of salient and inflammatory speeches. Of these, the speech the *Duce* gave in front of a large crowd gathered in front of the *Palazzo del Governo* in Bari would have pleased his French allies the most, while no doubt causing Hitler considerable alarm. During the speech, greeted by the thunderous cheering and clapping of the gathered Fascist faithful, Mussolini declared the cultures of the Mediterranean peoples to be vastly superior to that of doctrines to be found 'on the other side of the Alps'. Along the shores of the Middle Sea, he declared to his audience, 'the great philosophies, the great religions, (and) great poetry' had all been born and thrived for more than thirty centuries unabated. Likewise, in this same region had emerged a great empire that 'had left an indelible imprint on the history of all civilised peoples'. Such an enduring legacy now permitted the peoples of the Mediterranean to 'look with supreme pity' upon ideas sustained by the descendants of northern peoples who had ignored the vitality of Mediterranean ideas, and to their great cost.[29] The *Duce*'s dramatic and angry speech, coming at a time of continued Italian press attacks on Germany and ever-improving Italian–French relations, constituted a clear and aggressive critique of National Socialism and provoked further disquiet in Berlin. In the coming months the dictator was to pursue a persistent anti-Nazi policy designed to isolate Germany in Europe, and prevent Hitler from staging any further ill conceived attempts to annexe his Austrian homeland. Just over a year into his chancellorship Hitler faced a serious and unrelenting crisis with a fellow Nationalist regime whose leader he had hitherto idealised.[30]

CONTAINING HITLER

After Mussolini's dramatic anti-Nazi speech at Bari he went on to deliver similarly aggressive and highly nationalistic speeches at Lecce, Taranto, the home of the Italian navy's main naval base, Brindisi and Foggia. The key theme remained the same throughout his tour of Puglia: Fascist Italy was strong and would fight hard to protect its rights in what had become once more 'a restless,

[29] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Al Popolo di Bari', 6 September 1934, pp. 318–320.

[30] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 23, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio S.E. Suvich con Ambasciatore di Germania', 11 October 1934.

tormented Europe'.[31] Should the call to arms come and the great bell summoned all Italians, from north and south to war, Mussolini told the people of Taranto, he knew full well that 'the Italian people will respond, it will be ready to make the necessary sacrifices'.

Just days before Mussolini set off on his tour of Puglia he had ordered Badoglio to convene the *Stato maggiore generale* and discuss the probability of war with Germany and Yugoslavia. As usual, and as was to become more than customary in subsequent years, the military chiefs complained about the political uncertainties that afflicted their various operational possibilities, as well as the usual deficiencies within the Italian military apparatus. Badoglio opened the meeting by announcing that 'the global political situation is very uncertain', before informing the military commanders in chief that with another German move against Austria potentially imminent the armed forces had to be ready for war at any moment. Yugoslavia's support for Germany during the time of the Dolfuss crisis, Badoglio noted reading out Mussolini's directive, meant that such a war would most likely be fought on two fronts. Rather confidently Mussolini claimed that both France and Great Britain would support Italy in such a conflict either directly or indirectly, although it was difficult to imagine what Britain could at that time have contributed towards the defence of land-locked Austria. The overall strategic concept conceived of by the *Duce* was 'decisive action to the north; vigilance towards the east', even if, as Badoglio pointed out, the likely allegiances of the region's smaller powers could not easily be predicted.

Badoglio insisted that war with Germany was definitely on the horizon. He stressed to the gathered service chiefs that given his own experience of the German national character Hitler's determination to resolve the Austrian question 'would inevitably result in an armed resolution'. But the Marshall was rather less than forthcoming when it came to setting out his understanding of British and French policy towards any such war with Germany. The new Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, a stern Fascist with a reputation for toughness, confronted Badoglio over his understanding of likely British and French responses to the war, and pushed him into setting out what level of support each would offer Italy. Put on the spot Badoglio replied awkwardly that the *Marine de Guerre* would provide operational support while the British would remain 'favourably disposed' towards Italy. Still not satisfied, Cavagnari pressed Badoglio further, asking him how he saw British and French naval units reacting to any German vessel carrying weapons, which simply elicited the same response: 'the Head of Government has said that France will be on our side while England will not be against us.'

[31] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Al Popolo di Lecce', 7 September 1934; Al Popolo di Taranto', 7 September 1934; 'Al Popolo di Brindisi', 8 September 1934; Al Popolo di Foggia, 8 September 1934, pp. 320–327.

The Admiral's dogged persistence in seeking clarity from Badoglio as regards the likely political dimensions of any anti-German war was both typical of him, and eminently logical. Earlier in the year army planners had warned that Italy could not defend Austria single handedly and now, with war against Ethiopia also looming large on the horizon Italy would require very significant international backing in protecting Austria's independent status from Hitler's clutches. The British, as Badoglio hinted, agreed on the need to defend Austria but as usual were not committing themselves. The French, who had been making increasingly warm advances to the Fascist regime in recent months were, Mussolini had ensured the military chiefs, definitely onside. The French military, however, had their reservations about the value of any alliance with Italy and doubted that it had any real long-term value. The unpublished diaries of Maurice Catoire, French military attaché to Italy between 1934 and 1937 suggest that at this time, early September 1934, the official French view of the Italians was shrouded by more than a few uncertainties. As Catoire put it, both governments were clearly desirous of reaching a new accord given the tortuous nature of European politics at that time. But behind the scenes the Italians were 'profoundly embarrassed' at their need for French help in resolving their quarrel with Hitler, and once that had been resolved had very little else to offer France. It was likely, Catoire added, that the Italians wanted an agreement based more on 'pure form', which would allow them a free hand in the pursuit of their colonial ambitions. For the French government it was simply a case of ensuring that in future the Fascist regime would not 'return to the opposing camp' once Mussolini had secured all of his objectives.[32]

The Fascist military would have needed all the help they could get if Italy had found itself at war with the Nazi Reich, and potentially Mussolini's long-standing enemies, the Yugoslavs. As Air Chief Valle indicated to the meeting 'there is very little we can do in the northern theatres, given that all we have is the air field at Bolzano'. Despite Badoglio's insistence that the air force make significant efforts to improve its operational capability in the mountainous northern areas, Valle continued to argue that time was very short and resources still scarce. Cavagnari, who had pressured Badoglio continuously about the need to clarify the political support Italy could expect from Britain and Italy's new allies in waiting the French, expressed similar caution. Without any aircraft carriers or modern battleship capability, at least until the new *Littorio* class vessels were scheduled for completion in 1940, Cavagnari knew that a two-front naval war in the Adriatic and the Atlantic would stretch his ageing naval resources to the limit, while also creating serious logistical problems for which the Naval High Command were not prepared. The Admiral read Badoglio's discernible reluctance to give any concrete assurance about Anglo–French backing for the war as an unmistakable sign that nothing was yet

[32] M. Catoire, *Journal de ma Mission à Rome, 1934–1937* (unpublished ms), 7 September 1934, p. 9.

set in stone, or even that backing may not be forthcoming at all. Setting out the navy's perspective on a war with the Germans and the Yugoslavs he therefore limited himself to stating that many ships were currently undergoing 'major repairs', and that he could not undertake any key naval operations before November at the earliest. Valle and the recently appointed Undersecretary of State for war Alfredo Baistrocchi were equally as cautious in their own conclusions, with the latter making the obvious declaration that the Ethiopian campaign had, now, to be subordinated to Italy's potential war effort in Europe.[33]

Throughout the autumn and early winter of 1934 relations between Rome and the Nazi regime remained tense and riven with mutual suspicion. Although the heat had been taken out of the Fascist anti-Nazi press campaign of the previous summer, the shock and profound offence it had caused within Hitler's Germany still lingered. Von Hassell, on returning to Rome from his summer vacation in Germany, immediately expressed the general upset the campaign had caused in German society at his meeting with Fulvio Suvich in early October. The Reich authorities had made every effort to understand Italy's position, Hassell began smoothly, but the tone of some Italian newspaper articles had considerably heightened the emotions of a great many Germans. Remarks to the effect that 'Germany is a country of murderers and paedophiles' and a nation that had 'lost all sense of honour' carried in large-circulation newspapers such as *Il Messaggero*, had consequently created a major crisis among the German people, the ambassador warned. But von Hassell's attempt to claim that – or at least discern whether – the 'violent' nature of the press offensive constituted a latent and longstanding hatred for Germany among the Italian people met with Suvich's firm rebuttal. The Austrian question alone had 'provoked such profound indignation among us', Suvich replied firmly, and Hitler and the Nazi leadership should have no doubt that any other German-inspired incident in Austria would lead to an immediate resumption of the campaign.

Clearly anxious and concerned about the extent of the fallout from the failed Vienna coup d'etat, Hitler had given von Hassell specific instructions to assure the Fascist regime that no further episodes of rashness would occur on the part of the German Nazi Party. Von Hassell stressed quite vigorously that although the *Führer* did not regard the Austrian situation as stable, he had given the strictest instructions to ensure that there would be no further German interference in Austrian affairs, and had rejected calls from within the NSDAP for a reconstitution of the Austrian Legion. In return for these assurances von Hassell asked for more information about the recent three-way agreement on Austrian independence signed by Britain, France and the Italians and about the nature of Barthou's forthcoming official visit to Rome. Rather brusquely the famously anti-German Suvich provided von Hassell with little more than peremptory replies to questions that had clearly come straight from the lips of Hitler himself. Refusing to provide any substantive detail, Suvich merely

[33] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo stato maggiore Generale*, meeting of 3 September 1934.

stated that Fascist Italy's position regarding Austria 'had not changed', meaning that Rome would steadfastly defend Austria from any further attempts to overthrow its legitimate government. The Barthou visit to Rome had yet to be confirmed Suvich added, before going on to stress that the Abyssinian question was not the chief topic for conversation during the French foreign minister's stay in Rome. Indeed, Suvich stressed, Italy had no plans to annexe Abyssinia whatsoever at this time, so discussions with the French on this question hardly seemed appropriate. 'It was', he concluded, 'quite fantastic to assume that Italy had plans for military aggression in that direction'. A year later Suvich's words were to have a hollow ring as von Hassell in person watched Mussolini announce the invasion of Ethiopia from the infamous balcony of the *Palazzo Venezia*.[34]

Von Hassell had passed on Hitler's alleged assurances on Austria to other senior figures in the international diplomatic corps at this time, including Chambrun in Rome. But the French ambassador remained deeply sceptical about the genuineness of the *Führer's* declarations and, as he put it to von Hassell, he could only 'hope that the facts correspond to the words'. As Chambrun noted, he also had real problems in believing Hitler because time and again he had had concrete proof that 'Hitler's orders were not always followed.'[35] Mussolini reacted rapidly enough to Hitler's promise to refrain from further attempts to unite Germany and Austria during a speech to 6,000 factory workers in the *Piazza del Duomo* in Milan in early October. With Ethiopia looming over the horizon, and the vitally important alliance with Paris coming closer to fruition by the day, Mussolini did not need any further importune and clumsy initiatives on the part of the Third Reich. The result would, he warned, only lead to German isolationism:

> We defended and we will defend the independence of the Austrian Republic, an independence that has been consecrated in the blood of a Chancellor who may have been small in stature, but great in heart and soul.
>
> This gives me the opportunity to affirm that it is not conceivable that European History can evolve without Germany, but that it is necessary that Germany's official circles and Germany's various schools of thought do not give the impression that it is Germany that wishes to isolate itself from the course of European History.[36]

Von Hassell urged Hitler and the Aswartiges Amt to pay heed to Mussolini's various attempts to secure a lasting agreement over Austria throughout that difficult autumn. During a meeting with Mussolini in late October the Fascist dictator had informed him that he had 'strictly forbidden any further attacks on Germany', a fact borne out by the comparatively friendly tone of his recent

[34] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, 'Political Report', No. 230, von Hassell to von Neurath, 4 October 1934.

[35] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 23, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio S.E. Cerrutti-von Hassell', 29 September 1934.

[36] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Discorso agli operai di Milano', 6 October 1934, p. 358.

Milan speech. But to von Hassell's enquiry as to whether he now felt 'reassured' about German policy towards Austria Mussolini merely replied that the current situation remained unclear to him. He distrusted Hitler and the Nazi government, hardly surprising given the violent events of June and July. Berlin, Mussolini added, never seemed capable of giving a categorical assurance of Austria's independent status, but preferred to make ambiguous statements to the effect that 'there was no question of an *Anschluss* for the present', which served only to arouse Italian suspicions. Hitler needed to be clearer and to make a firm and unequivocal statement to the effect that he regarded Austria as an independent state. So far no statement of this kind had been made.[37] They were highly unlikely to be made either. Von Neurath had rejected von Hassell's idea of accepting a deal over Austria on the grounds that Germany would be the potential 'victim' of such an arrangement. Hitler agreed with his foreign minister entirely, stressing that Berlin should under no circumstances enter into any such undertaking. On the one hand, Mussolini would use it to strengthen Italy's hand in its negotiations with the French, while on the other it would be a clear and irrefutable sign of German weakness.[38] As 1934 drew to a close, the underlying crisis in Nazi–Fascist relations showed no signs whatsoever of abating.

It said much about the determination of the French and Fascist governments to reach a binding political deal in the autumn of 1934 that even two major political assassinations, for which Mussolini was blamed, were unable to derail the progress of dialogue. On 9th October King Alexander I of Yugoslavia had just landed in the French port of Marseilles, on an official trip to the Third Republic designed to boost *Petite Entente* defence policy at a time of heightened fear regarding Nazi designs against Austria. After being formally greeted by Foreign Minister Barthou the two men began their journey through the city in an open topped car flanked by large crowds, and rather limited security. Shortly after the two men set off on their journey to the *Gare de Marseilles Saint-Charles* members of the Croatian separatist movement the *Ustaša* opened fire on the car, fatally wounding Alexander. Barthou died of his wounds in hospital an hour later. Immediately the finger of blame was pointed at Mussolini and Fascist intelligence. Anté Pavelic, a senior figure in the *Ustaša*, had had close links with the Fascist regime since 1927, given Mussolini's determination to see the Yugoslav state dismembered. For many years after his arrival on Italian soil as a wanted fugitive from Yugoslavia, Pavelic secured safe haven and funds for his organisation and was quite free to establish training camps for *Ustaša* recruits. But failed attempts to stage an insurrection in the Lika region of the Yugoslav Kingdom in the autumn of 1932 led to a more lukewarm approach being taken by the Mussolini regime. In 1934 this did not stop many voices squarely blaming Mussolini for the events in Marseilles, with

[37] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, No. 266, von Hassell to von Neurath, 23 October 1934.
[38] Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 333–334.

left-wing dailies such as *Le Populaire* seeing direct *Ustaša*/Fascist collusion in the murders.

Much as the circumstances seemed to suggest that the Fascist regime had been complicit in the assassination of Alexander and Barthou – including the fact that the assassins had allegedly entered France from Italy – there exists no tangible proof to this effect. Post-war testimonies provided by key officials such as Aloisi claimed that Mussolini had ordered the murder of Alexander as a means of destabilising Yugoslavia, leading to the final dissolution of that country and the creation of an independent Croat state under Fascist Italian protection. If this had been Mussolini's intention and handiwork then such an outcome simply failed to materialise; furthermore, the Italian *Duce* had every interest in seeing the new alignment with France come to full and proper fruition, because only by doing so did he have the means to truly defend Austrian independence from Hitler's attempts to annexe the country. In a similar vein, French approval of and support for the planned war of conquest against the Ethiopians, by this time merely a year away from its scheduled commencement, meant that such an atrocity on French soil undertaken with the authorisation of Mussolini remained highly unlikely. Having spent over a decade as a prisoner of geopolitical circumstance in Europe, the dictator fully realised that Ethiopia remained his best and perhaps only realistic chance at imperial conquest. Indeed, if any European government possessed an incentive to carry out the murders so as to derail the new Italian–French agreement in waiting, it was Hitler's Germany. But then no evidence has ever emerged from that quarter either.

In Rome France's Military Attaché Maurice Catoire immediately dismissed any notion of Italian involvement in the murder out of hand, quite rightly claiming that if were it to be true the fall out would be extremely grave. 'Fortunately', he noted in his diary on the day of the assassination, '– and this was our first thought – the assassin is not an Italian. If he was, all is irredeemably lost'.[39] This did not prevent the Yugoslav government, who were not surprisingly furious at the murder of their monarch, from laying the blame at Mussolini's door. It was to be the appointment of former Socialist deputy Pierre Laval as Barthou's replacement that helped prevent the anti-Fascist fallout from becoming truly seismic, thereby salvaging the new Franco–Italian alignment, which had still to be fully agreed. The new French foreign minister, realising the sense of urgency with which both his and Mussolini's government were pursuing the new alliance, quickly buried the entire Marseilles incident and shifted the emphasis of culpability away from Italy and towards the Hungarians. Although the majority of Yugoslav public opinion remained convinced that Mussolini had orchestrated Alexander's death, Laval persuaded the Belgrade government of the urgency of anti-Nazi treaty arrangements with Italy. So pleased was Mussolini at the outcome of Laval's intervention that he

[39] Catoire, *Journal*, 9 October 1934.

invited him to Rome the following January to complete the negotiations for their new treaty. Finally, the alliance with France so essential to the defence of Austria at a time when planning for the Ethiopian campaign was gaining momentum was close to being realised.[40]

The Nazi government, itself in the process of seeking out some form of rapprochement with the French, became increasingly nervous as the new Fascist alignment with the Third Republic took shape. In military terms although the *Reichswehr* had strengthened its forces along the frontier with Austria, senior figures such as Chief-of-Staff General Werner von Fritsch remained adamant that Germany should remain free of entanglements for the foreseeable future. As Giuseppe Mancinelli reported from Berlin in early December von Fritsch had been infuriated at attempts by Goebbels to 'reactivate the flame of an Austrian annexation' as early as January, at which point the Saar plebiscite on German rule would act as a distraction. After being informed of Goebbels' intention to prepare the ground for a new attempt at an *Anschluss*, the General immediately met with Hitler and warned him that the army 'could not possibly tolerate adventures of this nature'. Bearing in mind the nature of the forces even at that moment lining up against Germany it was beyond any doubt, von Fritsch warned the *Führer*, that any war over Austria would lead to Germany's total defeat. Germany must focus on its rearmament programmes, and not the wild ideas of ideological zealots such as Goebbels.[41]

If the unrealistic expectations of pro-*Anschluss* elements such as Goebbels had been dampened by the military realities of Nazi Germany, the view from Rome of Hitler's regime could only have added to the German sense of discomfort and unease. In early December, as the Italian–French discussions in Paris moved forward at a rapid pace, von Hassell found himself dealing with the anti-German hostility of the *Duce*. Mussolini informed the German ambassador that according to 'very reliable reports' the Nazi Reich had developed considerable anti-Italian feeling, all of which stemmed directly from within the NSDAP organisation. So much had bilateral relations deteriorated that a war with Italy would now be massively popular within the mass of German society. Indeed the Nazi government, the dictator concluded, was pursuing its rearmament programme with Italy as the principal military objective. In flatly denying that any of the Mussolini's claims had a factual basis von Hassell could only advise Berlin that the *Duce*'s allegations belied the sense that an Italo–French alliance was close to being concluded. The strong emphasis the *Duce* placed on 'Germany's alleged arming against Italy' was, the ambassador noted, no doubt driven by a need to ingratiate himself comprehensively with the government in Paris by following a strong anti-Nazi line.[42]

[40] De Felice, *Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 514–519; Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 334–335.

[41] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 21, fascicolo 5, 'Il dissidio Esercito-nazismo', Mancinelli to SIM, 3 December 1934.

[42] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume III, von Hassell to von Neurath, 6 December 1934.

Mussolini's 'estrangement' from his great but isolated German admirer seemed to grow more pronounced by the day.

APPROACHING STORMS

By mid-winter the Fascist regime had entered the decisive phase of its negotiations with Laval and French officials, and the first signs of a deal had begun to materialise. By 15th November the French, in the form of Prime Minister Pierre Flandin, were stressing that any resulting treaty arrangements should ensure that an Anglo–French–Italian bloc in future dealt swiftly with any Nazi delinquency in Europe. Given that such an arrangement suited Mussolini perfectly at that time there was little difficulty in securing Italian agreement, either to this or to French demands for superiority in armaments over Hitler's Germany. To ensure that the Fascist military did not face a second threat from Yugoslavia analogous to the one of the previous summer, Mussolini also happily agreed to an improvement in relations with Belgrade, provided as he put it, that the '"right atmosphere" prevailed'. But what had specifically interested Mussolini the most about the conversations had been French attitudes towards his plans to conquer Ethiopia of course. Although Navy Minister Piétri had earlier warned Pignatti that French colonial officials would harbour serious reservations about the entire Ethiopian project, senior negotiators at the Quai d'Orsay such as Alexis Léger gave assurances that France would do nothing to impede Italy's 'economic-commercial policies' in the region. Mere economic concessions in Ethiopia were very far from what Mussolini wanted, and it was clear to the Italians that in their dealings with Paris they would need to take a firmer negotiating line. By the final days of December the negotiations had reached a critical stage, and a widespread sense prevailed throughout French and Italian official circles that talks could collapse at any time. However, shortly after Christmas, even as von Hassell reported to his superiors that Mussolini's 'pretentious East African ambitions' had been rejected by Laval, a breakthrough finally came. The French foreign minister would meet with Mussolini in Rome on 4th January and the entire nature of his proposed 'désistement' in Ethiopia could be discussed accordingly.[43]

While the Fascist dictator had been taking care of the international political dimension of the forthcoming assault on Ethiopia, Alessandro Lessona and his Colonial Ministry colleagues had made some albeit very limited progress towards readying Eritrea for the campaign. Modest shipments of weapons from August onwards had increased arsenals of rifles from 30,300 to 42,850, light machine guns from 734 to 1,628 and all types of artillery from 142 to 332 pieces, all of which were destined for the use of indigenous forces. But the most striking progress came with the increase in troop numbers. Between 1st

[43] De Felice, *Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 519–524; Petersen, *Hitler e Mussolini*, pp. 336–337; Catoire, *Journal*, p. 25.

August and 1st November Lessona was able to double the number of officers based in Eritrea from 119 to 220, while tripling the number of indigenous conscripts during the same period from 3,850 to 10,800. The increase in numbers was, Lessona informed Mussolini, to ensure that the territory's defences were ready at the time of mobilisation. Similarly the Colonial Ministry's decision was determined by a need to have new units ready in order to strengthen Eritrea militarily, while the colony awaited the arrival of Italian forces from the metropolitan theatre. Lessona was also able to claim some progress in the improvement work carried out on various roads in the region as well as on the Massawa—Asmara railway, although work on improving the facilities at the crucial port of Massawa was still at the planning stage.[44] Clearly Lessona would have his work cut out given the very poor condition of local roads, which, as one Italian officer put it, just about dealt with unruly local traffic but 'would immediately reveal themselves to be inadequate by the needs of a modern military campaign'.[45] But the two-year time frame requested by Fascist officials on the ground to modernise key Eritrean roads was likely to be far too long for Mussolini, who could not hope to contain the balance of forces in Europe for more than a few months at best.

Nonetheless, however urgently Mussolini needed operational readiness in East Africa by the autumn of 1935, disagreements continued to prevail on the best way in which to achieve it. De Bono had moderated his earlier belief that concentrating 85,000 indigenous and national troops on the Eritrean plateau in under a month was the best way to proceed. He now proposed a deployment plan involving fewer numbers over a longer time frame, although even this raised the eyebrows of senior army staff officers. The Head of Badoglio's secretariat, Visconti Prasca, not surprisingly all too eager to criticise De Bono's latest planning initiative, described the new deployment schedule as being characterised by 'overwhelming optimism'. In a memorandum to Badoglio the Colonel dismissed De Bono's plan on the grounds that the navy could only offload metropolitan troops in Eritrea following a much longer mobilisation timeframe, namely day X + 120. Beyond that the rapid deployment to the Eritrean plateau which De Bono had envisaged was not currently possible owing to grave deficiencies in docking facilities, road communications and transport in the colony.[46] Further memoranda from Visconti Prasca to Badoglio were in addition severely critical of the whole strategic concept which De Bono and Luigi Cubedo, Army Commander in Chief in Eritrea, had been developing. Their vision, Visconti Prasca wrote in a note to Badoglio, was woefully retrograde and amounted to little more than planning for a traditional colonial war à la Adowa. De Bono's plan was 'semi-improvised' and not designed to concentrate

[44] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Preparazione militare in Eritrea. Provvedimenti attuati nel mese di ottobre', Lessona to Mussolini, 12 November 1934.

[45] Rochat, *Campagna d'Etiopia*, p. 88.

[46] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, Visconti Prasca to Badoglio, 14 October 1934.

large numbers of troops for sudden, rapid and decisive attacks against a number of different objectives. To win the Italian armies would need to make effective use of concentrated artillery fire, effective transport and air power, none of which had even been considered by De Bono and his planners.[47]

In the midst of a perplexing all-round confusion and unreadiness for war on the northern front the army staff, most likely on Badoglio's orders, undertook an assessment of the situation. General Fidenzio Dall Ora, later appointed Quartermaster General for East Africa in 1935, studied the existing planning documentation for the Eritrean front and by 7th November had produced a largely scathing report on the level of progress to date. From the evidence he had seen Dall Ora concluded that all preparations undertaken to date by the Colonial Ministry had been seriously inadequate, and had done virtually nothing to prepare Eritrea for the rigours of a major modern war. 'At present', the General noted, 'the equipment and logistical organisation in Eritrea provides *very little opportunity* for any eventual operations in East Africa.' Little or nothing had been done to improve conditions in the colony, and the authorities in command there appeared to be in no hurry to make any significant improvements. Crucial work to update and modernise the docking facilities at Massawa remained at the planning stage, nothing had been done to improve the Massawa–Asmara rail link and only a small number of road improvement works had actually begun. Dall Ora strongly recommended that the army staff take control of logistical planning in Eritrea, and begin a programme of 'urgent and indispensible' improvements to render Eritrea's communications more efficient. As things stood any expeditionary army arriving from Italy would face a very long journey, difficult lines of communication on the ground and very erratic services. Life for such an army would swiftly become 'prohibitive', the General warned starkly. Effectively Italy could not deploy enough forces to Eritrea to ensure victory, given that the logistical situation and the colony's organisational structure would only permit the deployment of units of the indigenous Colonial army and a small number of metropolitan forces. Even if Fascist Italy was faced with a 'generally favourable situation' in terms of international politics, and thereby plenty of time to deploy forces, the ability to garrison a large expeditionary army for use in East Africa while not totally impossible would certainly be very difficult. The situation was full of dangerous unknowns, the General warned.[48]

Rising star of the *Stato Maggiore del Esercito* General Alberto Pariani, Badoglio and Baistrocchi lost no time in adding their own criticisms of De Bono's planning capabilities to those of Dall Ora. On 23rd November, in a memorandum to Baistrocchi, Pariani reiterated General Dall Ora's main criticisms adding that under current conditions in Eritrea the army could only

[47] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, Visconti Prasca to Badoglio, 8 November 1934.

[48] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, Promemoria per S.E. il Sottocapo di Stato Maggiore, Dall Ora, 7 November 1934.

deploy one full Corps of indigenous troops supported by three regular infantry regiments. Only when De Bono and his 'Colonialists' took the situation in Eritrea more seriously and began to act rather less complacently, would the logistical and other military needs of the territory be dealt with. Repeating Dall Ora's recommendations about the need to upgrade the port, road and rail facilities of Eritrea, Pariani stressed that these were now of an urgent nature and must take absolute precedence over all other activities.[49] Badoglio, as ever eager to assert his own superiority in rank and experience, largely agreed with the need to work hard and fast on the necessary improvements required in Eritrea. However, he reminded Pariani, Baistrocchi and the Army High Command that in 1896 the Italian army had deployed both indigenous troops and an entire national Army Corps to the region together with additional supporting units. Therefore, the Marshal suggested, it should be possible to ship all the relevant units to a colony where local facilities were 'in a phase of continual development', and land them there, 'albeit with inevitable difficulties'.[50]

Ignoring what he no doubt viewed to be Badoglio's pointless contribution to the now inflamed argument raging between the Colonial and War Ministries, De Bono looked into the Eritrean situation for himself, and presented an update for the benefit of all interested parties. In mid-December he wrote to the Army High Command and to Badoglio stressing that Dall Ora's conclusions about the state of readiness were already well out of date. For one thing, over half the materials required to fight the war had already been sent to East Africa, and the remainder would arrive 'before the summer'. As regards the urgent improvements to the port of Massawa De Bono announced that he had given the order for these to commence on 12th October, although he would not commit himself on any likely completion date. Other crucial strategic improvements to Eritrea – the railway line and road works – were now close to being completed, De Bono claimed, and he had approved additional funding of 355 million lire to ensure that all works finished on time. Using funds he alleged had been destined for the agrarian development of the colony De Bono also boasted that he had been able to increase the size of the Eritrean army to 55,000 troops, built new air bases from scratch and prepared operational plans in time for the scheduled invasion the following year. More than this, he concluded, 'would not have been humanly possible', adding that perhaps General Dall Ora might have taken rather more care in preparing his recent report.[51]

Throughout December, while Mussolini and key elements of the *Palazzo Chigi* battled with the fallout from the Marseilles assassinations and the tricky

[49] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Oraganizzazione militare dell'Eritrea, Pariani to Baistrocchi, 23 November 1934.

[50] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Organizzazione militare dell'Eritrea', Badoglio to Army High Command, 3 December 1934.

[51] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Organizzazione militare dell'Eritrea, De Bono to Baistrocchi and Badoglio, 14 December 1934.

negotiations with the *Quai d'Orsay*, the feverish disputes between the army and Colonial Ministry staff over the failures to prepare Eritrea for war became increasingly heated. Quite clearly, Badoglio had by no means given up his ambition to wrench control of the planning phase of the war from De Bono, and, supported by his cronies in the Army High Command, took every step to undermine and humiliate the Minister for Colonies. Badoglio was indeed to win the battle for control of the Ethiopian campaign, although it was not to come before the offensive began the following October. In the meantime, he relentlessly kept up his attacks. On 18th December, after making his own enquiries about the overall state of readiness on the northern and southern fronts, Badoglio reported back, in the process launching another broadside against De Bono. First, he poured considerable scorn on his rival's claim that he had been able to raise the number of Eritrean conscripts to 55,000 troops, pointing out that because it had been Mussolini who had given the order Badoglio was more than aware of it. He was aware too that De Bono had reduced the length of active service among Eritrean forces from three months to one month, a move that he regarded as woefully inadequate. Badoglio even suggested, with more than a measure of poisonous sarcasm, that 'Your Excellency, an old and experienced officer, will no doubt consider whether such a period of service is sufficient while on the ground, or whether it might be wiser to increase it to three months.'

Elsewhere in De Bono's grand strategic plan for Eritrea Badoglio unearthed plenty of other deficiencies and oversights with which he could undermine the minister's position. In terms of shipments of materials to Eritrea Badoglio doubted these would be completed by the summer of 1935, believing 1936 to be a more realistic date. The Marshal also poured further scorn on De Bono's logistical planning and in particular on how best to organise the crucial question of air supplies from the metropolitan sphere. Two possible options were on the table here, Badoglio argued, neither of which had yet been seriously considered. One possibility was to fly materials and men to Eritrea across Egypt and the Sudan, an arrangement which would require legally binding agreements with the British. Or, failing this, Italian aircraft heading for East Africa could transit Libya and refuel at the south eastern most point of el Auenat. Either way, this would require considerable political initiative in the former case, or a great deal of hard work in the latter instance given the primitive nature of the existing settlement at el Auenat. Badoglio also scathingly dismissed De Bono's claim that he had built new air bases for the *Aeronautica* from scratch out of hand. The main air facilities in Eritrea at Otmulo, Asmara and Gura would take at least two years and considerable expenditure to reach operational effectiveness. Not surprisingly, Badoglio found the road improvements situation to be equally as serious, claiming that the current programme could only be completed by the end of 1936 and provided that work proceeded 'with all intensity'. Radio communications in Eritrea remained 'in a primordial state'. By contrast, and because of its differing strategic role in the future war,

Italian Somaliland was in better shape given its reliance solely on indigenous forces. This did not, however, prevent Badoglio from setting out a whole list of recommendations for the strengthening of the colony which De Bono should follow.[52]

Badoglio's report, and the various criticisms emanating from the Army High Command, amply illustrated the fact that although an attack on Ethiopia had been on the table since 1932, very little had, in effect, been done to prepare the two East African colonies for such a war. Then, by mid-late November, as Mussolini inched towards his goal of an alignment with the French Third Republic, those military preparations that had been undertaken by the De Bono regime were put to the test following a border skirmish between Ethiopian forces and Somali *Dubat* units under Fascist command.

The now infamous fortress at Wal Wal lay well inside Ethiopian territory, although it had actually been constructed by the Italians in 1930 on the dubious grounds that it fell within territory occupied at the time of the Cesare De Vecchi governorship of Italian Somaliland, between 1923 and 1928. What gave the oasis such importance within the arid southern Ogaden region was its plentiful supply of water all year round. The 359 wells at Wal Wal constituted the most important resource of fresh drinking water in the region, and had led to them being fought over many times among local tribes such as the *Merehan rer Beidan* and the *Omar Mahmud*. Now, in late November 1934, it was the turn of a European power, Fascist Italy, to re-assert its claim to the area. At dawn on 22nd November Somali troops on sentry duty at the Wal Wal fort sounded the alarm. Some six hundred Ethiopian regulars acting as escort to a British boundary commission delineating the frontier between British Somaliland and Ethiopia had appeared at Wal Wal, where around sixty *Dubats* faced them. Very quickly the Ethiopian game plan became clear. In the recent past Addis Ababa had attempted to take back the wells at Wal Wal with a military expedition headed by Gabre Miriam in 1931, but this had failed. After numerous subsequent protests to the Italians to the effect that Wal Wal lay within Ethiopian territory, Haile Selassie had again chosen the route of direct confrontation. This time around, however, Ethiopian demands that the *Dubat*s abandon the Wal Wal fortress and oasis were to have more serious consequences.

Rather than desert their posts as the Ethiopians demanded, the two *Dubat* non-commissioned officers in command at Wal Wal, Ali Uelie and Salad Mahmud Hassan, instead headed off for the nearby Italian fortress at Werder some 12 kilometres away. There they raised the alarm with the Fascist governor in Mogadishu Maurizio Rava who immediately sent air units and armoured vehicles to deal with the Ethiopians at Wal Wal. Two days after the incident had begun the overall Italian commander of the Somali units, Captain Roberto Cimmaruta, arrived at Wal Wal to be met by the head of the British Boundary

[52] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Preparazione militare delle colonie orientali', Badoglio to De Bono and Undersecretaries of State for War, Navy and Air, 18 December 1934.

Commission, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Clifford. Clifford immediately handed Cimmaruta a written protest to the effect that he had arrived at Wal Wal to find that the Commission's 'liberal passage' in Ethiopia was now being forcibly prevented by armed troops. In Rome De Bono suspected the worst, describing the 'arrogance' of the Ethiopians in his diary and adding that they 'were almost certainly being backed by the English'.[53] On the ground Cimmaruta tried to work out a compromise with Clifford's team on the basis that both men would together try to work out where the boundary between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland lay. Briefly work on the delineation of the frontier got underway, before two of the Italian aircraft sent by Rava in Mogadishu arrived in the skies over Wal Wal and began buzzing the Ethiopians and the tents of the Boundary Commission. At one point one of the Italian pilots was seen to point his aircraft's machine gun at the British and Ethiopian soldiers, forcing Clifford to abandon Wal Wal and head for the comparative safety of Dolo Odo 30 kilometres away. Later it transpired that not only had the pilot of So 4 pointed his gun at the Anglo–Ethiopian troops but had, albeit briefly, opened fire.

Although both the Ethiopians and Rava slowly reinforced their respective forces over the course of the following ten days, the situation remained largely quiet if rather tense. Further letters of protest were despatched by both sides in the burgeoning dispute, and the tension mounted as the Ethiopian troops at Wal Wal hurled insults and even rocks at the *Dubats*, accompanied by further invitations for them to desert. In Addis Ababa Hailie Selassie took counsel from, among others, the British ambassador to Ethiopia Sir Sidney Barton, who, like the others in Selassie's select group, urged restraint. But determined once and for all to resolve the Ogaden territorial question in his country's favour the Emperor refused to follow advice and withdraw his forces from Wal Wal, and sent a formal letter of protest to Giulio Mombelli, the Italian ambassador to Ethiopia. By 5th December, two weeks after the first confrontation at Wal Wal had taken place, fighting had broken out between the Italian-led Somali forces and Hailie Selassie's troops. Each side, naturally, blamed the other for starting the armed confrontation, but what is certain is that Mussolini took full advantage of it to create a convenient pretext for escalating the situation and, ultimately, invading Ethiopia. Given that armed bands of Ethiopian militia had attacked the Italian Consul General in the city of Gondar, the former Imperial capital that lay close to the frontier with Eritrea in early November, the Fascist *Duce* was never likely to let such an opportunity slip.[54] On Christmas Eve De Bono, on Mussolini's instructions, gave orders for an immediate strengthening of the Fascist military presence in Somaliland as a way of showing that Italian Fascism meant business in the region. Two companies of fast tanks were to be sent by sea from Libya together with a further nine bomber/reconnaissance aircraft of the Ro 1 type, while an entire Libyan regiment was also to be mobilised

[53] E. De Bono, *Diario*, cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, p. 101.
[54] Del Bocca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, pp. 245–254.

and made ready to be despatched to the southern colony in the event that armed Ethiopian bands attempted to threaten Somaliland's frontiers. It was essential, De Bono informed Badoglio and the other military chiefs, that the current emergency was dealt with quickly and only by Italian forces on the ground or easily transportable from other colonies. Given that this was a 'delicate period in international politics' he did not expect any metropolitan forces to be diverted at present.[55]

Again De Bono's prognosis of how best to strengthen Italian Somaliland, while also ensuring that Ethiopian incursions to the north did not cause difficulties in Eritrea, amply indicated that for all Mussolini's ruthless determination he was effectively clueless as to how to deal with the situation. Three days after assuring Badoglio and the Fascist service chiefs that existing colonial forces would suffice to resolve the East African crisis without recourse to drawing from metropolitan military resources, De Bono was forced into a humiliating climb down. On 27th December he informed the military hierarchy that the Libyan units that were meant to have acted as reinforcements for the Colonial army in Somaliland were in fact too weak to do so. De Bono himself duly exposed the superficial nature of the assurances he had given Badoglio over his preparations for the coming war with Ethiopia, by then first requesting substantial metropolitan forces to be sent instead, before adding that the poor condition of the existing port and road facilities in Eritrea would not permit deployment to be complete before at least April 1935.[56] It was hardly surprising that Badoglio was, once again, less than impressed at the manner in which the Colonial Minister had handled matters, and in his peremptory reply made every effort to let De Bono know this. He took note, Badoglio wrote, of the fact that De Bono did not consider it opportune to deploy battalions from the Libyan army in Somaliland, but refused to comment in any detail on the minister's request for metropolitan units to be sent there. Instead, he simply stressed that he 'did not agree with the assessment that had been made' by De Bono, and further criticised his arch rival for not including him in recent discussions on the question with Baistrocchi and the Army High Command. He concluded by highlighting what he again regarded as De Bono's incompetence and sheer lack of nerve. In 1896, he commented acidly, three entire divisions were unloaded at Massawa at a time when it was even more poorly equipped than at present. He urged De Bono to get on with his task and stick to the original plan of sending part of the Libyan army to Somaliland. A force of Italian troops could always be shipped to Massawa at a later stage if further reinforcements were necessary.[57] The two men were

[55] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Provvedimenti per la Somalia', De Bono to Baistrocchi and Badoglio/Cavagnari/Valle, 24 December 1934.

[56] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, De Bono to Baistrocchi and Badoglio/Cavagnari/Valle, two despatches of 27 December 1934.

[57] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Provvedimenti per la Somalia e per l'Eritrea', Badoglio to De Bono and Baistrocchi/Valle, 28 December 1934.

now irrevocably on a collision course, although the main issue was how ready the Fascist armed forces would be for their real showdown with the Ethiopian Empire, now just a few months away.

Although the Wal Wal incident resulted in a death toll of around three hundred Ethiopians and twenty-one Somalis, plus a number of injured on both sides, it was, in reality, just one of many similar violent skirmishes that had afflicted the region. Between 1923 and 1935 there had been at least fifty-one incidents involving Italian forces along Ethiopia's borders, and more still involving British and French citizens, many of which involved fatalities. As historians have pointed out, what was important about each of these clashes was that the European powers as a rule resolved them quite easily as 'tribal questions', seeing no reason to dramatise what were to all intents and purposes comparatively minor issues.[58] Mussolini dealt with the armed clash at Wal Wal altogether differently, however. Now sure that Pierre Laval would conclude a new bilateral deal between France and Fascist Italy, and certain that this deal involved a French 'green light' for the Italians in Ethiopia, the dictator issued definitive directions for an East African war of attrition against Addis Ababa. On 30th December as unofficial Italian–Ethiopian talks tried to resolve mutual differences, and as Haile Selassie denounced Italian claims to the League of Nations, pointing out that Wal Wal was 100 kilometres inside his country, the *Duce* ordered his military to be ready to settle the Ethiopian question by force of arms. After more than twelve years of promising the people of Italy that Fascism would restore the nation's imperial grandeur, and after over a decade of hopeless incarceration in a French-dominated Europe, Mussolini realised the opportunity that had come his way. It was, in effect, now or never and accordingly he made use of a minor territorial dispute in East Africa to launch a major war that was to have far-reaching and profoundly grave wider consequences.

Mussolini's directives for Badoglio and the Fascist military dealt directly with the problem of how to crush Ethiopia militarily with a war that he stressed must begin no later than the autumn of 1935. The Ethiopians were, he claimed, developing their military capability and therefore must be dealt with directly before their power became a serious regional problem for Italy. 'Time is against us', Mussolini warned Badoglio and the longer Italy waited to resolve this problem the harder it would be to do so. Therefore his objective could now only be the 'destruction of the Abyssinian armed forces and the total conquest of Ethiopia'. Assuring Badoglio that the situation in Europe would permit the invasion to be completed without complications, Mussolini emphasised that the new arrangements with France would greatly limit any further Nazi attempts at an *Anschluss* and do much to contain Hitler's rapacious Third Reich. Rather confidently the dictator promised the Marshal that provided Italy carried out a fait accompli against Ethiopia rapidly, the British and French would remain silent provided that he gave specific assurances that

[58] Del Bocca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, pp. 254–255.

their own regional interests were not at risk.[59] The fact that Mussolini had yet to even begin sounding out London on his forthcoming military intentions amply demonstrated the extent to which this was a case of bravado and risk taking on an epic scale.

On the morning of 4 January 1935, Pierre Laval and a delegation of French officials that included the Secretary General of the *Quai d'Orsay* Alexis Léger, arrived at the *Stazione Termini* in Rome to finalise the new political deal reached between their two countries. Many of the critical questions that underpinned the agreement, particularly the colonial dimension, were dealt with in various late-night meetings between Suvich, Chambrun and other senior diplomatic officials. But Mussolini made very sure that when Italian aims and objectives in Ethiopia came up for discussion he was present and able to make his views abundantly clear. According to Suvich Mussolini joined the meeting at precisely the point when the matter of the 'so called "désistement"' promised by Laval needed clarification. Laval, Suvich claimed, 'perfectly agreed with this principal. He simply wanted to arrive at a formula that would present the French attitude in the correct light, even when it was published.'[60] At the two official encounters between the *Duce* and the French foreign minister on 5th and 6th of January the discussions more or less exclusively focused on vital areas of European policy such as Austria, Nazi rearmament and the need for improved Italo–Yugoslav relations. Only at the very end of the final meeting did Mussolini mention Ethiopia, obtaining from Laval a clear confirmation that he fully understood what Italian aims were, and that 'his country did not intend to hamper Italy's policy of penetration into Abyssinia'.[61] Much as Laval would later try to distance himself from such statements of support for Fascist aggression there would be no stopping Mussolini now. The *Duce* simply needed to convince London that his plans would not generate problems for Britain and its Empire. It proved rather more difficult to do so that he could ever have expected.

[59] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Direttive e piano d'azione per risolvere la questione Italo-abissina', Mussolini to Badoglio, 30 December 1934.

[60] Suvich cited in De Felice, *Gli anni del consenso*, p. 525.

[61] *I documenti diplomatic italiani*, series 7, volume XVI, nos 391 and 399.

7

Darkening Waters

January–May 1935

A large crowd gathered at the *Stazione Termini* in Rome on 8 January 1935 to see Pierre Laval off. According to one witness the number of people present at the station entrance had been even larger than when Laval had arrived four days earlier, largely because the official presence was considerably greater. The general mood among the gathered throng was upbeat and brought into particular relief by the cordiality with which Mussolini and Laval bid their adieus, as well as by the presence of three *Petite Entente* foreign ministers.[1] Two days earlier, at an official banquet held to toast the success of the new agreement at the grandiose French Embassy in Rome housed in the *Palazzo Farnese*, Laval had stated how he interpreted the spirit of the accords. As he put it:

> We have given birth to a great hope. And we will never disappoint you. Peace must be maintained, and consolidated. Our civilisation cannot disappear. Let us listen to the lesson of history: it is always through war that civilisations have disappeared. Will it be us who, at a certain point in the history of humanity, will think to destroy all that our genius has built? With the vestiges of ancient Rome to guide us, let us swear together that we will not allow humanity to fall again into the obscurity where it lay for so many centuries.[2]

Quite clearly Laval alluded to Western civilisation and to the need to maintain peace in Europe, although events later that year were to give his words an unintentionally tragic and ironic meaning. For Laval's complicity in Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia did not bring about peace but instead directly generated serious tensions within European politics, particularly between the British and Italians. The resulting damage to the League of Nations proved incalculable, and the organisation slipped rapidly into decline and insignificance as the revisionist excesses of the later 1930s multiplied in earnest.

[1] Catoire, *Journal*, 8 January 1934.
[2] *OOBM*, XXVII, Laval speech, 6 January 1934, p. 4.

Outwardly, many viewed the Franco–Italian accords as a positive step along the road to curtailing Hitler's aggressive militarism and, in Mussolini's case, did much to enhance his public persona. Not only did the new agreements promise to keep the Third Reich in check but they also meant that France and Italy could markedly decrease their military deployments along their common metropolitan frontier as well as in North Africa. In France, where Mussolini's reputation had soared during the summer of 1934 because of his determination to defend Austrian independence, the press showered him with praise and flattery. Mussolini the *Duce*, 'young and blessed with a revolutionary audacity', commented an article in *Paris soir* in late 1934, had brought about the rebirth of Italy. France now had on its flanks 'one of the pillars of stability and the guarantee of precious European peace', and this was all down to Mussolini whose 'clear Roman mind' had helped create a new order wherein France and Italy would take responsibility for Europe's destiny.[3] As far away as the United States Franklin Roosevelt himself placed enormous store on Mussolini's political skills, and openly admired his stance against Hitler's warlike posturing. Roosevelt believed Mussolini to be an honest, decent man – a good Fascist compared to the dark, evil variant of Fascism represented by Hitler and the NSDAP. So great was the president's esteem of Mussolini that he claimed Fascist Italy to be 'America's only real friend in Europe', and he promised to support Italy to the hilt in its anti-Nazi policies.[4] Within Italy Mussolini's reputation had already grown significantly among large areas of the population since various PNF General Secretaries, especially Achille Starace, had successfully created the *Duce*'s personality cult. While there was still plenty of evidence of leftist and other forms of dissent within the country it remained beyond doubt that Mussolini was very popular with many Italians, and he was able to attract crowds of up to 50,000 to hear his speeches in evocative arenas such as the *Piazza Venezia*.[5] By the summer of 1936, with the conquest of Ethiopia finally completed successfully, the dictator's standing among many of his fellow Italians was to arrive at even greater heights.

PLANNING DIFFICULTIES

In the agreement he concluded with Laval, Mussolini was convinced that he had found a foolproof mechanism for ensuring Nazi restraint in Austria, and a trouble-free ride to dominion over Hailie Selassie's Ethiopian Empire. As he told the French press delegation at the conclusion of the conference he and Laval had had the initial objective of arriving at a complete agreement, and that in his opinion they had 'achieved just this'.[6] It soon became clear that

[3] Paris-soir cited in De Felice, *Gli anni del consenso*, p. 568.
[4] Sullivan and Cannistraro, *Il Duce's Other Woman*, p. 407.
[5] Canali, *Le spie del regime*, see for instance pp. 335–339; *Il popolo d'Italia*, 24 March 1932.
[6] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'L'anno cruciale', Mussolini press statement, *Il popolo d'Italia*, 8 January 1935, pp. 7–8.

Mussolini could scarcely contain himself after concluding the deal with the French. Showing more than a little importunity, less than a week after Laval had made the train journey back to Paris Mussolini ordered Badoglio to assemble the service chiefs and speed up preparations for the coming attack on Ethiopia. At 10 A.M. on 14th January the *Stato maggiore generale* convened in the great salon adjoining Badoglio's office in the *Palazzo Viminale* and, in the absence of De Bono who Mussolini had ordered to visit Eritrea in order to oversee military preparations in the colony, discussed the crucial aspects of the planning process in earnest. Opening the meeting Badoglio emphasised the need for a rapid response from the service chiefs to the issues due to be discussed, and he moved on immediately to address the question of what force strengths should be deployed in East Africa. Reading out a memorandum already circulated by Mussolini after the bitter disputes between the Marshal and De Bono of the previous year, it was clear that the *Duce* intended to wage war by way of crushingly superior force. If Italy was to avoid another Adowa or dragging the conflict out unduly then the war had to be 'rapid and definitive', the dictator had written. Therefore, the armed forces had to have superior means at their disposal. What this meant were force strengths on the ground of 60,000 indigenous troops, at least as many again metropolitan units, around 250 aircraft in Eritrea and 50 more in Somaliland. In fact, Mussolini added, the 60,000 metropolitan troops would most likely be increased to 100,000. There should be 'a wealth of ammunition' and 'absolute superiority in artillery and gas', all of which should be in Eritrea by October 1935.

Mussolini's deployment order for Eritrea and Somaliland, designed to win the coming clash of arms with the Ethiopians through the use of overwhelming military might, demonstrated how wide of the mark De Bono's operational planning had been. Far from viewing the conquest of Ethiopia as a nineteenth-century-style colonial war Mussolini, aware of the lethal dangers in European politics and the subsequent need for a rapid execution of hostilities, ordered a massive force presence that included the use of mustard gas and chemical weapons to guarantee victory in the shortest time frame possible. With De Bono out of the way in East Africa Badoglio was able to move the planning process forward in earnest, and without any unwanted interference from other elements within the Colonial Ministry such as Lessona, who was not invited to attend either. Given the largely inadequate planning hitherto initiated by De Bono much still needed to be done. The air force had just thirty-nine aircraft in Eritrea at that point plus another twenty in Somaliland, meaning that a large number of air units still had to be deployed to the northern and southern fronts. But as Air Chief Valle indicated the real problem was that no air bases had been constructed from which Italian bombers could launch bombing and chemical warfare offensives against Ethiopia, and he complained bitterly that the three air fields needed on the northern Eritrean coast would now have to be built from scratch at a cost of 90 million lire. Neither had De Bono taken steps to secure diplomatic authorisation from the British and French for the transit

of any Italian bombers, or indeed all other aircraft travelling from Italy to East Africa across Egyptian, Sudanese and French Somaliland's air space.

In terms of troop numbers Badoglio made it clear that he regarded Mussolini's anticipated deployment of 60,000 indigenous troops for service in East Africa to be an overestimation of the forces currently available. By the end of June 1935 Italy would be able to deploy around 25,000 militia combatants plus another 25,000 of the *Chitet*, able bodied men liable for front-line duty by way of a general levy. This would mean that approximately 10,000 extra troops would have to be deployed from the metropolitan sphere and even so, Badoglio claimed, Italy would still face a competent foreign trained Ethiopian army 'numerically superior to our own', and with all the incumbent risks. Clearly, Eritrea continued to suffer from De Bono's failure to develop modern lines of communications in the colony. Recent studies by the Naval Staff had indicated that the transportation of an entire metropolitan division plus equipment and support units, would take 110 days by way of a merchant vessel requisitioning policy that sought paradoxically to avoid disrupting Italy's maritime trade. If, however, the Ethiopians threatened to mobilise faster than Italy then it would be necessary to make use of requisitioned shipping without any regard to national trade. Under less regulated conditions troop deployments would take some two months, Badoglio stressed, and it was crucial that Italian units were deployed to the Eritrean theatre some time before Hailie Selassie's forces had mobilised. But the problem was that while the general mobilisation mechanism for Italy 'existed and was ready to perform its tasks', it was 'down there', as Badoglio dismissively defined it, that the 'mechanism of bases is not ready at all.' Massawa and its nearby adjunct facility at Khor Dalkyat could offload ten fully laden troop ships in seven days, although as Admiral Vanutelli, the Undersecretary of State for the navy, quickly interjected this did not include the unloading of other essential supplies for the navy and airforce. The logistical situation was little short of critical, and left Badoglio with little choice other than to order the Naval Staff to investigate the possibilities for organising additional docking facilities in Eritrea. According to the Marshal the Gulf of Zula south of Massawa offered good possibilities for a new logistical base, although construction work would need to begin immediately in order to be complete by the end of September at the latest. It was imperative that the seven-day lead time for offloading troop transports was halved Badoglio argued, rejecting Vanutelli's suggestion that transports begin immediately on the grounds that by the summer the Eritrean coast would be amid its rainy season, and uninhabitable for European soldiers unaccustomed to such intense heat and heavy rainfall.

If anything, the situation on the ground was even worse and again reflected badly on De Bono's claims that he had prepared Eritrea for the rigours of a full-fledged conflict with Ethiopia. Although the Colonial Minister claimed that work on road improvements had made steady progress Badoglio's investigations into the question led him to reach a rather different conclusion. De Bono,

it emerged, had authorised improvement work on a number of key transportation routes but had neglected the most important route of all, namely that from Massawa to the town of Decameré, the assembly point for the Italian invasion army in the Eritrean highlands. Just one road was available to carry large amounts of motorised traffic transporting the expeditionary army up onto the highland region, and the same road would provide the only means of keeping this force supplied once it had been concentrated there prior to the invasion date. Left with little choice in the matter Badoglio emphasised that this, plus the limited benefits offered by the Massawa–Asmara rail link, was all that would be available to the Army High Command by 1st October. It would be down to the army's logistical planners to deploy the large Fascist expeditionary army and all its equipment and supplies, to the Eritrean *alto piano* in readiness for the early October invasion date set by Mussolini. Clearly, given the chaotic and unrealistic logistical planning organised by De Bono this would be no small task, and would be a serious race against time. But an even more serious problem troubling Badoglio was the question of water supplies for Italian troops arriving in the highlands, and eventually moving southwards to the Ethiopian frontier in early October. In 1896 General Baratieri's forces operating close to Adigrat had been only sporadically supplied from the supply base at Massawa and had begun to run out of water. This had proved disastrous in terms of the overall Italian campaign and he was determined to avoid any such repetition. As he put it, planning would need to ensure that 100,000 men and 20,000 pack animals were kept well supplied with water, and that equally significant supplies would be available for use in motor and aero engines, field hospitals, laundries and so on. At present no one, particularly the Colonial Ministry, had had the foresight to investigate and resolve this urgent problem, Badoglio noted acidly, and now the Army High Command would take on this responsibility too.

Clearly Mussolini envisaged a brutal war of attrition and revenge against the Ethiopians that would be as unsparing as it would be overwhelming. At the meeting Badoglio endorsed Valle's decision to ship plenty of two kilogramme fragmentation bombs, as well as ten and fifty kilogramme bombs 'to enhance the effect on enemy morale'. He also ordered the Air Chief to store large quantities of incendiary bombs given their great effectiveness in certain operational theatres, and also mustard gas which would be 'delivered' to the Ethiopian population by crop spaying aircraft. Wal Wal had greatly demoralised the Ethiopians Badoglio claimed in closing the meeting. Mussolini had sanctioned the use of massively overwhelming force against them, led primarily by Italy's 'magnificent air force', but also by its fast tanks and other innovations such as the flame thrower, which the enemy were wholly unfamiliar with. Fascist Italy simply could not fail with such crushing superiority in the realm of modern warfare. There would be no repetition of Adowa this time.[7]

[7] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo Stato maggiore generale*, meeting of 14 January 1935.

As key scholars of the Italo–Ethiopian war have noted Fascist military preparations during 1935 were frequently overshadowed by other considerations. Predominant among these were the ongoing Badoglio–De Bono dispute and Giuseppe Valle's decision to circumvent his own Air Staff, whose planners had designed a network of air bases at Gura'e and Asmara in the Eritrean highlands, with his own plans for other less important bases at Otumlo close to Massawa, Assab and a network of air fields near the border designed to support land operations.[8] On 12th January, following the directives laid out in late December by Mussolini to the letter, Valle set out a new strategic air plan for the war against Ethiopia. The present arrangements, Valle informed Badoglio, would inevitably be problematical owing to the absence of sufficient roads able to keep air bases supplied. The high altitude and climate of the highlands, meanwhile, would affect the performance of air craft and almost certainly the limited road network into the highlands would lead to massive congestion if traffic supplying air bases clashed with that heading for the army's base at Decameré. By way of a solution Valle suggested that a main air base be activated at Zula close to Massawa instead of Gura'e, with further facilities at Otumlo, Marsa Fatma, Eid and Assab, all of which were close to the coast. Valle's underlying motives for situating the *Aeronautica*'s bases so far from the army assembly point in the highlands were clear enough. He had no intention of subordinating the *Aeronautica* to the operational planning of the army, and instead intended to operate with maximum autonomy against population centres such as Addis Ababa, Gondar and Harrar, while also 'systematically setting alight all of the Somali moorlands'.[9]

Although Mussolini, in pushing the Fascist military towards an invasion of Ethiopia in early October 1935, had a pressing political rationale underpinning his decision – principally the recurring risk of Nazi revanchism in Europe – it was clear that military and logistical problems and continuing disputes about how to resolve them continued to dog preparations. The *Stato maggiore generale* meeting had revealed logistical deficiencies, largely the fault of De Bono's inept planning, shortages of front-line aircraft which could not be rectified satisfactorily until late 1936 and a shortage of water for troops deployed at Decameré. Badoglio, highlighting the various difficulties facing the campaign for Mussolini shortly after the meeting, made sure that his arch rival De Bono received more than his fair share of the blame. The port and road facilities were still in a primitive condition, there was no regular supply of water and there existed few if any secure storage facilities and little by way of barrack accommodation for troops massing at Decameré. Any expeditionary army would not, under such circumstances, be able to complete deployment

[8] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'AO – Studio del problema aeronautico', unsigned/undated memorandum but probably from late 1934.

[9] ACS, Carte Badoglio, 'Impiego dell'Aviazione nella esigenza A.O.', Valle to Badoglio, 12 January 1935.

until February 1936 at the earliest. It was likely that Italian forces in Eritrea and Somaliland would require reinforcements, none of which could begin leaving Italy before the following October. Badoglio summed up his pessimistic conclusions by warning the *Duce* that, 'We would need all of 1935 and the first eight months of 1936 in order to be able to deal with these problems with ardour and with the security of success.' The start of operations should, thus, be 'delayed until the autumn of 1936'.[10]

For all of Badoglio's pessimism, which the diligent observer might be tempted to judge as partly another attempt to discredit De Bono, his views were not shared by either the service chiefs or for that matter De Bono himself. The navy staff had, after all, confirmed that they could ship the three initial divisions required in Eritrea in four and a half months if necessary, a timetable which did not cause Baistrocchi and the Army High Command any particular difficulties. Valle and his subordinates at the Air Staff certainly joined Badoglio in complaining about the deplorable communications situation in Eritrea, and bemoaned the absence of suitable accommodation for air force personnel. Valle also clearly indicated that the air war would be better fought towards the end of 1936, but seeing an opportunity to ingratiate himself with the *Duce* he committed himself to deploying 300 aircraft to the northern colony which could then, 'halt and even break up any fanciful offensive, thereby engendering a salutary sense of terror in the enemy from which we could then profit in 1936'.[11] Badoglio's was a lone voice of opposition to the idea of an October 1935 campaign, which as Mussolini was soon to demonstrate would in any case go ahead without fail. By then other considerably more serious problems would face Badoglio and the service chiefs, and as evidenced by Valle's cavalier determination to conduct independent air operations free of army interference, Fascist Italy's total lack of politico–military coordination by way of a functioning military high command structure would become seriously exposed.

While the discussions and rivalries raged on in Rome De Bono, in Eritrea, produced the first real pre-conflict planning document which arrived on Mussolini's desk in mid-January. The minister fully agreed with Mussolini's plan to invade that coming autumn, stressing that the European situation was working against Italy and that time was now of the essence. He urged the dictator not to flood Eritrea with men and materials for the time being as this would reveal Italy's hand. In the meantime he intended to 'make it as clear as possible that we do not intend to wage war'. Although ready to admit that there was 'much to do' to ready the northern and southern fronts for Italy's great day of reckoning with the Ethiopians, he proposed to begin mobilisation in earnest as soon as possible. By early March De Bono planned to have the first indigenous division on a war footing, and the whole of the first metropolitan division

[10] ACS, Carte Badoglio, 'Preparazione militare in Eritrea ed in Somalia', Badoglio to Mussolini, 19 January 1935.

[11] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, Valle to Badoglio, 22 January 1935.

shipped to Eritrea by the end of April. If all of these troop movements could be completed without attracting the attention of Addis Ababa, the minister expected that the rainy season would put paid to any aggressive intentions by Hailie Selassie's forces. By the summer the second indigenous division would be fully mobilised, with the final two metropolitan divisions in place for August. He suggested that Valle despatch whatever air units were to be deployed to Eritrea at a time of his own choosing, although they should be in place before the campaign began in earnest.[12]

On receipt of De Bono's deployment plan Badoglio, firm in his conviction that full mobilisation in East Africa could not be completed before February 1936 at the earliest owing to the rainy season, lost no time in attacking his bitter rival. Two weeks later he reminded De Bono that any troop movements from Italy to the colonies could only take place with his full authorisation, as Mussolini himself had previously decided. He also took the opportunity to demand that De Bono clarify whether the appalling internal communications situation would be remedied by October, whether there would be enough water for one hundred and forty thousand troops, thirty thousand pack animals and thousands of vehicles, and whether metropolitan troops arriving in Eritrea would have adequate accommodation to see them through the coming rainy season.[13] De Bono, by this stage quite obviously rattled by the number of criticisms being levelled his way over shoddy planning in East Africa, turned to his old Fascist cohort Mussolini for support. In a personal letter dated 5th February he placed great emphasis on the 'advanced phase of preparation' for war in East Africa, stressing that he alone was responsible for commanding both the planning and the eventual war effort. Feeling the pressure of the mounting criticisms De Bono ultimately resorted to flattering Mussolini who, he claimed, would unfailingly guarantee that 'success will be ours'.[14]

Unfortunately for De Bono, Mussolini had other ideas in mind. Aware that Somaliland had become transformed from military backwater to high-risk conflict zone as a consequence of Wal Wal, the *Duce* had been heavily influenced by Badoglio's assessment of the situation in the southern colony in his memorandum of 19th January. The Marshal had warned that while 'we' had considered Somaliland to be a 'secondary theatre of conflict', this opinion was by no means shared by the Negus who could launch a 'decisive strike' against the largely undefended southern colony at any time. Just 12,000 indigenous troops stood between Somaliland and a force of around 40,000 to 80,000 Ethiopians. In a colony as vast and vulnerable an under deployment of troops could easily lead to a strategic disaster with long-term ramifications. Mussolini should approve the sending of three Eritrean battalions from Libya to Somaliland, and act as

[12] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Preparazione militare nella Somalia ed Eritrea', De Bono to Badoglio/Baistrocchi, 22 January 1935.
[13] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, Badoglio to De Bono, 7 February 1935.
[14] De Bono to Mussolini, 5 February 1935, cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, p. 134.

quickly as possible to increase the number of irregulars there at the same time.[15] Without even informing the Minister for Colonies Mussolini moved without delay. Within days the dictator gave the order for fifteen fast tanks, fifty aircraft and four Eritrean battalions to be deployed to Somaliland directly from Libya. Such a measure hardly came as a shock to any of the Fascist military given that such a deployment had been the subject of heated discussions between De Bono and Badoglio in the final months of 1934. However, Mussolini's decision to despatch the entire *Perloritana MVSN* (Blackshirt) division as well as Rodoflo Graziani to act as military commander and governor in Somaliland took many by surprise, particularly De Bono. Among both Colonial and War Ministry officials there had always been agreement that white troops could never hope to operate in the challenging geographical and climactic conditions that prevailed in the southern colony. Now Mussolini swept such assumptions aside, and on giving Graziani his orders informed the General that a further division and the doubling of tanks and air units in Somaliand would be made available to him if he requested them. If anyone doubted that his 30 December 1934 order to smash Ethiopia and its armed forces had been anything short of genuine, then wholly unexpected decisions such as these showed beyond doubt that Mussolini meant business. De Bono, for so long sure of himself and of his authority over the war effort, suddenly felt much more vulnerable, declaring that the Fascist government were being premature if they calculated the 'international situation' as being wholly favourable to Italy.[16] Badoglio simply fell into line, informing the *Duce* on 18th February that 'With the end of this month the despatch of troops and materials to the eastern colonies will be intensified.' It would not be long before the Fascist armed forces would be ready to wage war.[17]

TROUBLESOME ALBION

In the years before Fascist Italy's military build up in Eritrea and Somaliland a number of highly placed officials such as Raffaele Guariglia, De Bono and the Naval Staff among others, had placed great emphasis, it will be recalled, on the need for Anglo–French cooperation in advance of any campaign against Ethiopia. However, Mussolini's negotiations with the French had taken some considerable time to complete and by late 1934 it was clear that if Italy did not proceed with its planned invasion very soon, German might in Europe could quickly develop overwhelming proportions.

It was amid a background of European political tension, chaotic military planning and the hurried shipment of large numbers of troops and war

[15] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Preparazione militare in Eritrea ed in Somalia', Badoglio to Mussolini, 19 January 1935, cited above.
[16] Rochat, *Militari e politici*, pp. 134–138.
[17] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Colonie orientali', Badoglio to Mussolini, 18 February 1935.

materials to Eritrea and Somaliland that Mussolini began the process of trying to convince the British to reach a similar understanding to that reached with Laval in early January. By late January 1935, buoyed by his success at winning what he viewed as clear French backing for a war with Ethiopia, the Fascist dictator felt confident that he could also win Britain over and in doing so neutralise any potential League action over Ethiopia. After first asking Laval whether he 'would have any objections if, via the Royal (Italian) Embassy in London, the Italian government verbally and confidentially communicated to Mr Simon the content of the secret agreement on Ethiopia recently concluded in Rome', Mussolini gave Dino Grandi specific instructions on how to proceed.[18] The nature of Britain's relationship with France meant there would be little point in being anything less than upfront with the Foreign Office, and yet Mussolini ordered his former comrade in arms not to reveal the full extent of his deal with Laval or broader Fascist intentions in Ethiopia. Laval's team at the *Quai d'Orsay* had closely examined the fine print contained in the 1906 Tripartite Agreement, and on that basis the French government agreed to renounce all of its claims in the country aside from those economic interests that were connected to the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway. In short, Mussolini emphasised to Grandi that he should point out clearly to the British that the agreement with France 'neither violates nor diminishes any of Great Britain's interests'. But the *Duce* expressly forbade Grandi to make any mention of the crucial fact that he intended to resolve the Ethiopian problem by 'radical means', and introduce 'direct dominion' over the country. It was difficult to see how Mussolini could avoid any mention of the fact to London and, at the same time, expect the British government to view his annexation of Ethiopia 'in a sympathetic manner' at any point in the future.[19] The very fact that large quantities of troops and equipment were already passing through the Suez Canal en route to Massawa suggested that the Italians were not exactly seeking a peaceful outcome to their issues with Addis Ababa. It hardly went without saying that British officials would soon ask some rather probing questions of Mussolini and his regime. This was where the *Duce*'s problems would begin.

In his at times less than honest memoirs Dino Grandi later argued that in failing to appreciate Britain's delicate position over the Ethiopian question, Mussolini committed his most fatal mistake.[20] With that statement of Grandi's, at least, it is possible to agree, although as we shall see Britain's role in the unfolding international drama was to be a less than glorious one. It is clear that in dealing with democratic states such as France and Great Britain, Mussolini failed to appreciate that the political leadership could not simply click their fingers and initiate any change in policy at the drop of a hat. The lengthy and

[18] *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (*DDI)*, seventh series, volume XVI, (Rome, 1990). Mussolini to Pignatti, Paris Embassy, 25 January 1935.
[19] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Mussolini to Grandi, 25 January 1935, number 492.
[20] Grandi, *Il mio paese*, p. 390.

protracted conversations with the French that first began in 1931 and culminated in early 1935 should have made the complex nature of modern democratic government clear to Mussolini, but it simply did not. When it came to making their first critical approaches to the Foreign Office the *Duce* and officials such as Grandi should have been aware of the upcoming general election, and the effects that any desultory British approach to the League might have had on the electorate. They should also have been far more aware of the binding nature of the *Entente Cordiale*, and of the fact that, inevitably, the British would have most likely been fully aware of Mussolini's aggressive plans, especially so in light of the troop shipments passing through Suez. Instead, the dictator elected to pursue a path of half truths and deliberate misinformation, which only served in time to fuel Whitehall's suspicion that he would prove to be a threat to British regional interests in the future. Backed by what he believed to be robust French support Mussolini failed to consider the extent to which British political difficulties over Ethiopia might generate turbulence within the *Entente* framework, and with serious international ramifications. When added to the problems and complexities of the military campaign itself, Mussolini's difficulties with Britain would probably have caused him many a sleepless night.

From the offset Mussolini and Grandi only had themselves to blame for the British reaction to their clumsy and frankly dishonest diplomatic approaches. On 29th January the Italian ambassador visited Sir John Simon, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, at the Foreign Office presumably expecting him to understand and support Italy's future intentions without a murmur. He was to be sorely disappointed. After Grandi laid out the new arrangements Mussolini and Laval had agreed upon that he quickly informed Simon that Rome would be, 'quite prepared to negotiate … such an agreement' that would set out mutual 'British-Italian interests in Ethiopia'. But Simon did not simply proffer his assent, as Mussolini no doubt expected, on the grounds that French approval for changes to the internal structure of Ethiopia now required Britain to reciprocate. Instead, he delivered a specific warning to Grandi that the Ethiopian government had recently concluded an agreement with a British transport company, 'for the conveyance of war material through the Somaliland Protectorate'. Therefore, because the Ethiopian request was perfectly legal under the terms of the Tripartite Treaty there was no way that the British government could object to such a business transaction provided, as was the case, that the final recipient of the weapons in question was Ethiopia. Grandi 'manifestly disturbed' by what Simon had told him, and no doubt more than a little concerned at Mussolini's reaction, expressed considerable annoyance. He could scarcely believe, he told the Foreign Secretary, that a country such as Britain would attach such importance to a nation such as Ethiopia at a time of great tension in Europe. He scarcely dared inform Mussolini, he went on, and expressed his great regret that Ethiopia had ever been admitted into the League, clearly forgetting Mussolini's role in that particular process. Simon,

quietly but determinedly, reminded Grandi that however valid his arguments may have been Ethiopia was still a sovereign state, and a League member.[21]

Tension and suspicion underpinned those early meetings between Fascist diplomats such as Grandi and Leonardo Vitetti, the Counsellor at the Italian Embassy and senior Foreign Office staff such as John Simon and Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office. In a lengthy despatch to Mussolini on 1st February Grandi set out in detail how he had tried his utmost to persuade Simon, and later Vansittart, that British interests in Ethiopia were in no way under any threat, but that both men were worried about the implications for 'Ethiopian integrity' of the Italo–French deal. The British strongly suspected Mussolini had far more in mind than a re-negotiation of economic interests in the country, and planned a wholesale invasion and its annexation. Grandi reciprocated in kind by accusing British colonial officials of having provided 'shelter' for Ethiopia ever since the time of Wal Wal, an accusation which, he alleged, had caused Simon much embarrassment. British suspicion that rather more lay behind Mussolini's declared intentions than met the eye was amply confirmed when Vitetti was compelled to dictate the terms of the Italian–French accords in the presence of Geoffrey Thompson, head of the Foreign Office Egyptian desk. Vitetti insisted that Fascist intentions in Ethiopia were 'pacific', and that Mussolini merely sought an exchange of views on respective Anglo–Italian interests in the country. Clearly, the Foreign Office did not believe him.[22]

As Italian military preparations continued apace, and as the controversy with Ethiopia gradually began to attract international attention, so the discrepancies between Mussolini's official line with London and the realty underpinning Fascist intentions became apparent. As Grandi put it in a letter for Mussolini it was obvious that what was beginning to emerge was a conflict of interests between Fascism's colonial aims and Great Britain's specific regional interests. The Foreign Office viewed any armed clash between Italy and Ethiopia as likely to permanently damage the 'peace of East Africa', and it was plain that London wished at all costs to maintain Ethiopian independence and integrity. Despite Fascist denials to the contrary it was widely suspected and feared in official London that Mussolini aimed precisely to attack and occupy all of Ethiopia, which served only to further suspicion about wider term Fascist objectives in the region.[23] In mid-February the question of latent, albeit increasing, tension between the Ethiopians and the Mussolini regime was raised in the House of Commons, with concerns being raised about Rome's decision to mobilise its 1911 class reservists.[24] For now, Vitetti

[21] *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, second series, volume XIV, (London, 1952), Simon to Drummond, 29 January 1935, number 143.

[22] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Grandi to Mussolini, 1 February 1935, no. 523; *DBFP*, second series, volume XIV, no. 145.

[23] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Grandi to Mussolini, 1 February 1935, no. 523.

[24] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Appunto, unsigned, 12 February 1935, no. 584.

informed Mussolini on 13th February, Simon was prepared to respond to the Parliamentary questioning by playing down the matter. He would tell the House that Italian military measures were merely 'precautionary', and that negotiations over the Wal Wal dispute were still in progress, as a means of quelling the fears of many Members of Parliament (MPs) that Italy planned to invade shortly.[25]

Simon's actions in sustaining the official Fascist line over Ethiopia within the very halls of the British Parliament itself betrayed the fact that the Foreign Office was not exactly eager to lose Mussolini's 'friendship' at this time. Senior officials such as Vansittart, acutely aware of the rapidly growing military and naval threat of both Hitler's Germany and Imperial Japan, believed it essential that Fascist Italy remained firmly in the Anglo–French camp. Vansittart and many within both the Foreign Office and the Cabinet were adamant that Mussolini should avoid any future alignment with Hitler, even if Fascism and Nazism had far more in common with each other than with western democracy. It simply failed to enter their minds that the *Duce* may have had far greater ambitions for Fascism and that these ambitions might, in time, run against the existing geopolitical status quo in the Mediterranean and Red Sea. The international crisis over Ethiopia as it unfolded in the months ahead would render all of Vansittart's views wildly unrealistic.[26]

The British political class may have aimed to retain Fascist Italy's support on an ongoing basis, but this did not extend to permitting Mussolini to lay waste to Ethiopia and occupying it permanently. They could not afford to. Within British society a significant majority of the electorate were strongly in favour not only of the League of Nations but also of the collective use of force by this organisation to deal with aggression on the part of one member to another. Even as Mussolini's military leaders were busy finalising their plans for aggression that autumn, a very large proportion of politically aware public opinion in Britain was making its support for the League very clear. Around 90 per cent of the 11.5 million British voters who took part in the League of Nations Union Peace Ballot between February and June 1935 voted in favour of British membership and of the use of sanctions if they were required to halt aggression.[27] In the light of such an enormous swathe of pro-League opinion, and in a year – 1935 – where an election was due shortly after Mussolini's invasion was due to commence, British politicians and government officials would have to be seen to be very firmly pro-League. As a consequence they would have to deal with Mussolini's aggression in the strongest possible terms, up to and including

[25] *DDI*, 7, XVI, 'Vitetti to Mussolini, 13 February 1935, no. 585.

[26] E. M. Robertson, *Mussolini as Empire Builder: Europe and Africa, 1932–1936* (Macmillan, London, 1977), pp. 120–121; S. Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt*: 1935–1940 (Routledge, London, 2005), p. 31.

[27] D. Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War, 1935–6* (Maurice Temple Smith, London, 1975), p. 19–20.

economic sanctions and military intervention if the circumstances demanded it. It was to prove a terrible conundrum for Britain's political establishment.

As February wore on Grandi and Vitetti, urged on by their highly determined political master in Rome, continued to withhold the true nature of Fascist intentions on the Horn of Africa from the British Foreign Office. Instead both men continued to insist that the Fascist government simply desired an end to Ethiopian-instigated border incidents in the region, and peaceful coexistence with Haile Selassie's government. The best way of achieving this, Vitetti cynically warned Geoffrey Thompson on 13th February, was to have the whole matter discussed only by the signatories of the Tripartite Treaty, leaving the Geneva Assembly entirely out of the matter.[28] Vague suggestions of a 'neutral zone' tabled a week later by the British ambassador to Rome Sir Eric Drummond met with a cold response from Suvich who replied that such a measure could only be the 'first condition' in Fascist dealings with the Ethiopians. Suvich also swept aside Drummond's rather limp appeal that Italy avoid entanglement on the African continent at such a difficult time in European history, replying that 'there were no worries in that regard.'[29] Suvich, like so many of his colleagues in the Fascist diplomatic corps, had lied shamelessly.

As Parliamentary questions on the Fascist build up in Eritrea continued to cause increasing discomfort and embarrassment for John Simon on a daily basis, Grandi, on Mussolini's orders, moved to reassure him that there was no cause for concern. Simon, an Oxford-educated lawyer and the son of a clergyman, had been extensively criticised for his handling of the Manchurian crisis, particularly his failure to condemn strongly enough the actions of the Japanese military on the Chinese mainland three years earlier. Unhappily he seemed often incapable of making up his mind, a characteristic that made him easy prey for someone as cynical and Machiavellian as Dino Grandi. In the meeting Simon made no secret of the serious difficulties in which he found himself over the entire Ethiopian matter. MPs were, he complained to Grandi, showering him with requests for information about Italian troop vessels passing through Suez, and had even demanded that a 'neutral force' be sent to Wal Wal to head off the inevitable Italo–Ethiopian war. 'Up to now', he told Grandi, 'I have limited myself to giving evasive replies, and to repeating the assurances given to Sir Eric Drummond in Rome.' But the massive Italian mobilisation programme and the departure of so many troops to Africa was receiving extensive coverage in the British press. It went without saying that what Simon feared the most were Opposition attacks on his inability to deal with the burgeoning crisis, and on the British government's abject failure to prevent a conflict between the Fascist regime and the Ethiopians.

[28] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Vitetti to Mussolini, 13 February 1935, no. 590.

[29] *DDI*, 7, XVI, 'Colloquio fra il Sottosegretario agli Esteri Suvich, e l'Ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna a Roma, Drummond', 20 February 1935, no. 624.

Grandi, by then a well-established figure in London society, would have been more than aware of the 'alarm' that Italian mobilisation was causing in British Parliamentary and governing circles. He tried to reassure Simon, claiming that 'the situation is absolutely normal' and that he saw no reason whatsoever for alarm. Mussolini was already moving to resolve the dispute over Wal Wal, and both governments were working towards a lasting agreement. The Italian ambassador again reiterated that the Italian build up in East Africa was merely 'precautionary' and designed to make it clear to Addis Ababa that Italy was ready for any eventuality. 'The *Duce* does not want war', Grandi assured Simon, 'and he will do everything necessary to avoid it', although he would insist that Italian rights in the area were respected.[30] Of course Grandi knew full well that far from seeking to avoid war Mussolini was intent on waging it against the Abyssinians, a fact which given the continuous military shipments passing through Suez must have been obvious to a great many people by the spring of 1935. The Fascist dictator was at this point in fact broadening the strategic scope of the coming war quite considerably in order to give the Italian army the best possible chances for success. This included a far greater emphasis on the military role of Somaliland and the southern front which, as he told Graziani on 20th February, should have a force strength of 50,000 metropolitan and indigenous troops with the capability to wage an offensive against Harrar in conjunction with operations taking place in the north.[31] In light of the escalating dimensions of Mussolini's imperial war, Grandi's statement to the effect that the development of Italian policy in Ethiopia depended entirely on the Ethiopians was simply another transparent lie.

Mussolini's success in winning over Laval to his grandiose East African scheme had proven short lived. The British government, the other interested party in any Italian claims on the sovereignty of Ethiopia, proved rather less than willing to negotiate on any territorial revision in the region. Although less than assertive in dealing with Mussolini Simon, Vansittart and other Foreign Office officials had consistently pointed out the contradiction between Fascism's official line to them, and the Italian military build up taking place in Eritrea and Somaliland. Fortunately, to back up their somewhat unconvincing opposition to Mussolini's imperialist plans, the British government had the might of its empire to fall back on. Apart from key operational bases in the Mediterranean such as Malta, Gibraltar and Alexandria, Britain's imperial stranglehold dominated the whole of Eastern Africa and the Red Sea littoral, stretching from Egypt and the Sudan through Uganda and Kenya all the way to South Africa. Further east, Britain controlled British Somaliland of course, as well as the key base at Aden in the southern Red Sea, and possessed a number of mandates to the north in the Middle East. Eritrea, Somaliland and Ethiopia itself were surrounded by a swathe of red backed up by the power of the British

[30] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Grandi to Mussolini, 22 February 1935, no. 638.
[31] Mussolini cited in, Rochat, *Militari e politici*, p. 137.

Royal Navy and Air Force. Unless Britain could be made to rethink its opposition, or somehow be forced to do so through some act of political subversion, Mussolini's ambitious plans would remain indefinitely shelved.

In the face of British resistance Mussolini emerged totally defiant. With Nazi and Imperial Japanese militancy beginning to make their presence felt on the international stage, he knew full well that even the mighty British Empire could not engage with two foes in separate theatres simultaneously. This new sense of self-belief and assertiveness was plainly in evidence as Foreign Office officials in London blustered and panicked over what to do with Fascist Italy's emerging stridency on the world stage. On the afternoon of 16th February the *Duce* gloated with arrogant pride as two battalions of the *MVSN* staged a march past at a barracks in central Rome, before leaving for East Africa the very same day. Later that evening the dictator chaired a major meeting of the Fascist Grand Council at which he declared that current Italian preparations were merely to ensure the safety and security of Italy's East African colonies.[32] But in London nobody believed him. On 27th February Grandi met with a highly anxious Vansittart who complained bitterly about the now glaring discrepancy between official Fascist policy and the loud public displays of support being given to Italian troops bound for Eritrea. 'Italian military preparations', he warned Grandi, 'appear disproportionate to the essential nature of the Italian–Abyssinian controversy.' The fact that Britain was now accused of 'connivance' with the Mussolini regime was generating serious problems for the government. So, too, was the fact that the much talked about bilateral talks between Rome and Addis Ababa had not even begun, and despite all of Grandi's assurances that they were making excellent progress. In practise what this meant was that Britain could not avoid taking a position at Geneva which Mussolini would find 'unpleasant', at least if it was to stand any chance whatsoever of winning the forthcoming elections.

Grandi, compromised by his government's reckless policy line, was left with little option but to fall back on familiar excuses and explanations. The current situation on the ground was entirely the fault of the Ethiopian government whose provocation of further, post-Wal Wal 'incidents' in the region effectively prevented any meaningful dialogue. Ethiopia was not a harmless victim of Fascist bullying but a real military threat to all of the European powers with territories in East Africa. A misguided sense of sympathy for Hailie Selassie among the British voting public could not be allowed to stand in the way of Mussolini's determination to eliminate the threat posed by Ethiopia, he insisted. What the *Duce* was aiming for was a genuine agreement with Britain over the matter, and within the aegis of the Tripartite Agreement. He did not have in mind any attempt to change the territorial status quo in East Africa, let alone go to war with Abyssinia. But Vansittart should be very clear: it was important that Ethiopia understood that it would receive no guarantees or

[32] *OOBM*, XXVII, '156a Riunione del Gran Consiglio del Fascismo', pp. 23–24.

protection from the League of Nations. Fascist Italy had no intention whatsoever of discussing the Ethiopian question at Geneva.[33] For the first time since the Corfu Crisis of 1923, the British government were now being confronted with the true extent of Mussolini's uncompromising personality.

ALL OR NOTHING

Even as Grandi had been attempting to dupe the British government about the true nature of Fascist policy in East Africa, Badoglio and the *Stato maggiore generale* were pushing ahead with their preparations for war. A greater sense of urgency now underpinned the logistical and planning dimensions of Mussolini's war, for as political events in Europe were clearly demonstrating, Fascism's window of opportunity in international geopolitics would not remain open for long. On 5th February, in a meeting attended by Lessona as well as the normal retinue of senior military figures, the overarching issue under discussion was the financing of the coming Fascist colonial enterprise. Much had already been spent on regime policies designed to protect the Italian economy from the worst ravages of the Depression of course. In practise this meant that Fascist Italy, the poorest in GDP and material terms of all of the major European powers, was struggling to pay for Mussolini's ambitions. As Lessona pointed out the Ministry of Finance had originally declared that 'it was able to handle all requests connected with the current situation', but in reality the sums actually available had been very meagre. The Under-Secretary of State had requested 500 million lire towards the Colonial Ministry's war budget, but this had been turned down. The service ministries had fared little better. Baistrocchi complained that the War Ministry found itself in 'grave conditions' given that a promised 172 million lire in extra funding had yet to be paid. The Ministry's ordinary budget had already been spent, and the army was now relying on credit to acquire war materials. Valle quickly added that the *Aeronautica* was in very similar shape. The Air Ministry had a level of expenditure that was well above its means, and it too was now compelled to acquire materials on credit. The navy, at this point the service least directly involved in the Ethiopian campaign, was, according to Cavagnari, operating with a deficit of 17 million lire, although it faced no real problems in making acquisitions. The *Marina*'s position, and indeed that of Fascist Italy's entire war budget, could of course change overnight if political circumstances were to undergo a profound shift.

With Mussolini now fully committed to 'dealing' with the Hailie Selassie government by brute force, and with the ever-present shadow of Adowa hanging pall like over Fascism, there clearly was to be no retrenchment at such a late hour. Rather typically the dictator had seized on the opportunity presented to him by the uncertainties and fears within European politics, and pushed

[33] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Grandi to Mussolini, 27 February 1935, no. 670.

the military into preparing for a war that had yet to be fully financed. Valle summed the situation up starkly for the meeting. 'One does not construct an aircraft quickly', he pointed out, and therefore it must be made clear that all aircraft to be deployed in East Africa could only be replaced in the autumn of 1936. Until that time the *Aeronautica* would be in a very vulnerable position, and he could only hope that a mobilisation in Europe was not required in the meantime.[34] It was not simply the Air Ministry's position that appeared vulnerable, but the whole future of Mussolini's imperialist design in East Africa. Felice Guarneri, an economist who had been a key figure in the establishment of the *IMI* in 1931, was tasked by Mussolini with resolving the national cash crisis in 1935 upon becoming a senior official at the Ministry of Trade and Currencies. The situation was grave. Either the Fascist government could find the financial means to resolve the worsening funding crisis, or Italy could well face insolvency abroad and an imports crisis which would effectively cripple all national economic activity. As a perfect example of how ideological visions so often collide with the realities of life's mechanisms, and as a good illustration of how weak Fascist Italy was in economic terms, the financial crisis of early 1935 was difficult to beat. The only way of resolving the situation, according to Guarneri himself, was to make use of national reserves. With foreign loans now prohibited to Italy owing to the international uncertainty surrounding its objectives in East Africa, there was no other option than for the Mussolini regime to make use of its reserves of gold, foreign currency and other valuables. Even this proved complicated and far from straightforward given that under an Italian law passed in 1927, the Bank of Italy was compelled to hold reserves of no less than 40 per cent of the value of all of its banknotes in circulation. The problem was that the 40 per cent limit had already been reached, which meant that Guarneri was forced to revoke the 1927 law in order to release sufficient funds for the war effort. The measure, desperate as it was, ensured that the *Duce* would now have his war. In the vaults of Italy's national bank, where once stood rows of gold bars, one could only find countless notes signed by the dictator ordering the mobilisation of the country's dwindling reserves.[35]

By early spring a memorandum for Mussolini from Naval Chief Domenico Cavagnari gave a stark warning regarding the likely position Britain, and indeed France, might take in the worsening European situation. Addressing Mussolini in his customary blunt manner the Admiral warned that it was very possible that Great Britain would ultimately be, 'inclined to block our expansion in Abyssinia'. The reason was very simple. A major new and expanded Italian colony on the Horn of Africa could in future exert pressure on the Cairo–Cape of Good Hope shipping lanes, as well as on British imperial territories such as Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika. The British would never allow Italian predominance in a region which was a source for the Nile and, in terms

[34] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo Stato maggiore generale*, meeting of 5 February 1935.
[35] Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche I*, pp. 373–374.

of the Red Sea a sea route that was also vital for communications with India. As major players in the League of Nations Cavagnari believed that the British would make full use of the 'bureaucratic bridge' offered by the League Covenants to protect their regional interests from any future threat. The recent case of Japan had illustrated only too well how some countries, through pure circumstance, were permitted to 'act undisturbed in violating the Statute' of the League, while others were 'prohibited from breathing'.

London's recent reluctance to sanction even the limited territorial changes within Ethiopia admitted to by Grandi demonstrated that public and political pressure within Britain would force its National Government to place the dispute with Addis Ababa before the League. If that were to occur and Geneva were to invoke sanctions and possible military intervention against Italy under the terms of Article Sixteen, there was a real risk that Britain would push for the closure of the Suez Canal. This would mean that the entire logistical operation supporting the war in Ethiopia would be required to transit via the Cape of Good Hope, which would make the task 'extremely difficult'. More seriously still for Italy's position generally were the League to intervene directly, the French would invariably side with the British government in order to face down the future 'German spectre' of which they were so terrified. By way of a solution Cavagnari suggested that Mussolini keep a close eye on 'European events that were evolving at a rapid pace', and let it be known that sooner or later Paris and London would need Italy's friendship. In the meantime the divisions already sent to Eritrea and Somaliland would act as a warning to Ethiopia, and Mussolini might usefully begin condemning that country as an unfit League member state, demanding that Italy be given a mandate to rule it. More direct rule could be imposed in the fullness of time.[36]

Cavagnari's memorandum alluded to an impending policy decision in Berlin that would invariably increase the value of Fascist friendship to France and Great Britain, and at a critical time in its pre-Ethiopia planning process. In late January Cerrutti learned from von Hassell, who was in the German capital for discussions with Hitler, that a major change in Germany's military policy was now imminent. According to von Hassell Berlin had become overwhelmed with fears over Soviet military policy, and in particular the fact that Moscow had created an army of one and a half million men. Hitler was clearly preoccupied with German vulnerability to an attack on separate fronts – namely east and west – in which it would be greatly outnumbered. The talk in Berlin now was of the need for an army of 800,000 troops if the Reich was to be in any position to survive a major war of this nature. The time for talk of disarmament and disarmament treaties was over because the 'political situation had changed', von Hassell claimed, obviously a reference to Mussolini's recent deal with Laval. Quite clearly the Nazi government

[36] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Cavagnari to Mussolini, 4 March 1935, no. 694.

would need 'to adopt different methods in order to calculate the defensive needs of the Reich'.[37]

The world did not have long to wait before Adolf Hitler provided the Nazi 'antidote' to disarmament and international treaties. The *Führer* had no intention of allowing any outside interference in German affairs, especially should it concern national defence. Neither did he demand any input from his foreign policy and military advisers before announcing the reconstitution of the *Luftwaffe* on 11th March and the introduction of conscription on 16th March.[38] Mussolini was informed of Hitler's decision immediately. At 16:15 on the afternoon of 16th March Cerruti was called to meet Hitler, and at 17:30 was promptly informed by him of the decision to pursue a wholly independent path in national armaments policy. Hitler, suffering from a bad sore throat, informed the Italian ambassador that he intended to create twelve Army Corps made up of thirty-six divisions in violation of Clause V of the Versailles Treaty. Cerruti surmised that Hitler had made the decision sometime previously and that he had based it on the growing size of the Red Army, British policy towards Germany as well as Pierre Laval's frequently hostile statements about the Nazi threat. Hitler claimed that the thirty six divisions he would be creating through conscription were modest by comparison to the size of French, Polish, let alone the Soviet armies. His was a purely defensive measure taken in an increasingly hostile European environment, as he would tell John Simon in person when he arrived in Berlin on 24th March.[39]

Predictably the British reacted with alarm at Hitler's announcement, although with the benefit of hindsight Germany's departure from both the League and Disarmament Conference in October 1933 had clearly showed the direction the Third Reich was travelling in. Relations between Fascist Italy and the British, already strained over Ethiopia, underwent still more turmoil after the Foreign Office presented a written condemnation of Hitler's recent announcements, and without any prior consultation with Paris or Rome.[40] Suvich, for one, was less than impressed. In a meeting with Drummond two days after the event, he declared that he found Britain's approach 'very strange' given that the communiqué had not even been sent to Mussolini and Laval for prior inspection. As Germany had, to all intents and purposes, written off all of Clause V of the Treaty of Versailles, which prohibited it an army of above 100,000 troops and the construction or importation of 'armed aircraft', this was nothing short of astonishing. To Drummond's rather lame suggestion that Germany might come to 're-visit' its decision, Suvich replied that he found it

[37] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 26, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio Ambasciatore Cerruti-von Hassell', 24 January 1935.

[38] G. Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy, 1933–1939* (Enigma Books, New York, 2005), pp. 160–161.

[39] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 28, fascicolo 1, Cerruti to Mussolini, 16 March 1935.

[40] *DDI*, 7, XVI, 756, attached note, 18 March 1935.

impossible to believe that Britain could ever be taken in by such an idea. If anything British panic in sending the note to Hitler without prior consultation had surely played right into the *Führer*'s hands. As Suvich went on, it was Berlin's aim to sow mistrust between Britain and her Latin allies, and besides on their own they would achieve nothing at all in Germany. Britain had much to answer for.[41]

The Fascist regime had much to fear from any Nazi military expansion, especially given the precedents in Austria the previous summer. With serious political, financial and military problems having already bedevilled Mussolini's coming war with the Ethiopians, what Rome did not need in 1935 was a second attempt by Hitler at incorporating his homeland into the Greater Reich. The fear of an *Anschluss* was already vivid before Hitler made his announcement. In the weeks and months that followed it was to become a major preoccupation of both the various High Commands and the *Palazzo Chigi*. Amid reports of feverish production of military aircraft in German factories and claims that the whole of the German nation was now being prepared for war, von Hassell, in a conversation with Aloisi, attempted to reassure the Italians. He hoped that the Head of Government would not pay any attention to the relentless 'chatter' that was currently circulating as regards Hitler's supposed intention to resolve the Austrian question militarily. Nothing, the German ambassador repeatedly insisted, could be further from the truth. Aloisi rather dryly replied that Nazi Germany had earned a reputation for itself as a country that had no qualms about violating even the accepted norms of international life.[42] Why should the Fascist government believe any of Hitler's assurances, especially those on Austria, his homeland? Amid the growing unease about Hitler's intentions Mussolini needed to create an opportunity to warn the Germans against risking an *Anschluss* at any time during 1935, while at the same time reminding the British that support for Italian claims in Ethiopia would help bolster Fascism's anti-Nazi stance. He needed to move soon.

Faced with illegal German rearmament the Italians would have been wise to have made use of the Geneva framework to organise an effective international response to the Nazi threat. Instead, because Mussolini was determined to avoid League commitments of any sort and detested the very ideals of the Geneva Assembly, the *Duce* elected to deal with the problems confronting Italy outside of the League, and invited the British and French governments to attend a conference on Italian soil. The conference, to be held in northern Italy, would have the outer scope of discussing a collective response to Nazi rearmament.

[41] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 28, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio con l'Ambasciatore d'Inghilterra', 18 March 1935.

[42] On German air armaments, see ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 42, 'Informazioni sugli armament tedeschi', Pinna to Valle, 31 March 1935 and 'Colloquio con l'Ambasciatore di Germania', Aloisi to Mussolini, 21 March 1935.

However its true purpose, at least as far as the *Duce* was concerned, was to clear up misunderstandings with the British over Ethiopia. While outlining the conference objectives for Suvich, who attended a three-power meeting in Paris on 23rd March to discuss the rearmament crisis, the dictator made no mention of Ethiopia and simply instructed the Under-Secretary of State to discuss the conference idea with Simon and Laval. The meeting should only be attended by the signatories of the 1906 Tripartite Accords, he stressed, and 'the three' should operate completely 'outside of Geneva.' So nervous were British and French politicians about Hitler's recent announcements that they accepted Mussolini's invitation. They did not even consider the fact that the Fascist dictator might make use of the event in order to pursue his own imperialist ambitions.[43]

Stresa, a picturesque town on the shores of Lago Maggiore in Piedmont Northern Italy, hosted Mussolini's hastily convened gathering of British, French and Italian ministers which met in mid-April. The eyes of the world watched as the political leaders discussed the best way to deal with Nazi militancy, but beneath the surface suspicion was already growing between the Fascist regime and the other Locarno signatories. The French, as Aloisi put it to Mussolini shortly before the conference, were 'obsessed with the German danger' and terrified that the recent British visit to Berlin marked a new relationship between the two countries. Laval now expected Mussolini to postpone his campaign in East Africa so as to keep the British if not the French happy. In his meeting with the French foreign minister in Paris a few weeks before Stresa Suvich had been bluntly informed that Italy, 'should not even give the impression' at this time of being distracted by anything outside of Europe. To give such an impression would be full of dangerous unknowns. Indeed, whatever he may have said in Rome two months earlier, Laval now went as far as to claim that 'a military expedition was not convenient' and that a 'well armed' Italy could secure advantages over Ethiopia far more easily and cheaply. Mussolini, who no doubt reacted angrily to Laval's remarks, would have been greatly irritated when he learned that according to the latter British statesmen had no grasp of what Fascist aspirations in Ethiopia were about. Irritation turned to rage when Mussolini later learned that the British planned on referring the entire question to the League at the earliest opportunity. But from Mussolini's point of view it was not all bad news. Rising European tensions would no doubt create room for manoeuvre for Fascist Italy, given its increasing value in any French military policy designed at containing Hitler. And it was very likely that the dictator was equally aware that Britain, too, was obsessed with halting the Nazi Behemoth, and would stop at nothing to prevent ideologically sympathetic countries such as Fascist Italy from aligning with Hitler. As far as Ethiopia

[43] *DDI*, 7, XVI, 'Tesi da sostenere a Parigi', unsigned memorandum, but most certainly the work of Mussolini, 22 March 1935, no. 785; Drummond to Mussolini, 23 March 1935, no. 798.

went, Aloisi suggested, a threatened Italian withdrawal from the League might well make Simon et al rethink their position.[44]

If Stresa was intended to reinforce a common three-power bond for dealing with Hitler then it failed catastrophically. Before the conference began Nazi officials courted and flattered Mussolini at a point when Hitler would have known full well of latent Anglo–Italian tensions over Ethiopia. All it took were frequently repeated assurances that Nazism had no intention of reaching a forceful resolution to the Austrian question, and Mussolini started listening with interest. Although such reassurances had often been given by von Hassell and von Neurath in their conversations with senior Fascist diplomatic figures, these took on a notably greater urgency as the start date for the three-power conference drew closer. On 4th April von Neurath, almost certainly on Hitler's orders, instructed von Hassell to play down the Austrian question with the Italians for the foreseeable future. 'We should', he wrote, 'be particularly gratified if the Austrian question would be excluded from discussion between Italy and ourselves, thus at last establishing better relations between our two countries'. Germany, he added, had 'no aggressive intentions' and 'least of all against Italy'.[45] After the German ambassador repeated Berlin's new policy on the *Anschluss* verbatim to Suvich two days later, it was the turn of Goering and Hitler to give additional affirmations of Nazi good faith. While attending the lavish wedding of Goering, the ostentatious *Luftwaffe* boss, on 10th April Giuseppe Renzetti, now retired from all 'political activity', received more assurances of Nazi friendship towards Italy. Goering claimed that he had felt 'great regret' at the poor state of bilateral relations, and deplored the way in which the Austrian controversy had caused his country to lose Italian friendship. It was left to Hitler to contribute the final flourish. The *Führer*, Renzetti informed Mussolini's son-in–law Galeazzo Ciano, was eager to arrive at a comprehensive 'clarification' with Mussolini over potential areas of conflict. There was no point in an Italian–German war. The time had come for genuine collaboration between the two regimes.[46]

Vittorio Cerruti made it clear to Renzetti that Fascism would never change allegiance from France to Germany so easily, but there could be no escaping the fact that the Mussolini regime had more in common with Nazism than with western democracy. Once at Stresa the silence of senior British figures over the entire Ethiopian matter, and the continued voice of opposition represented by Geoffrey Thompson in his meetings with Vitetti and Giovanni Guarnaschelli of the *Palazzo Chigi*, must have left the dictator wondering whose side he

[44] *DDI*, 7, XVI, 'Colloquio fra il Sottosegretario di Stato agli Esteri, Suvich, e il Ministro degli Esteri Francese, Laval, Paris, 23 March 1935, no. 794; Aloisi to Mussolini, Rome, 23 March 1935, no. 797.

[45] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume IV, no. 6, von Neurath to von Hassell, 4 April 1935.

[46] *DDI*, 7, XVI, no. 908, Renzetti report, 11 April 1935; no. 915, Cerruti to Mussolini, 13 April 1935.

truly belonged on: that of his fellow revolutionary nationalists in Germany, or the 'parasitical' nations that prevailed in the Mediterranean Sea – *Italy's* sea. If Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, Vansittart and Simon for whatever reason failed to broach the Ethiopian controversy in the main conference forum, Guarnaschelli and Vitetti, no doubt acting on Mussolini's instructions, did not. Guarnaschelli stressed that Italy would never allow League arbitration in its dispute with Addis Ababa, leaving Thompson to reply bluntly that, 'Italy could expect no co-operation from the United Kingdom in any attack on Ethiopia.' Warned menacingly about the dangers posed by the new Germany, and reminded of Britain's need for Italian friendship in dealing with this danger, Thompson stuck to his guns. Great Britain would not stand by and allow Mussolini's Italy to wage indiscriminate war on the African continent. The British, Vitetti informed the *Palazzo Chigi* afterwards, were nothing short of 'hostile' to any idea of a forcible Fascist solution of the 'Ethiopian problem'. Only if Mussolini succeeded in persuading them that their regional interests were not under threat from an expanded East African empire, might they view this prospect rather more favourably.[47]

For the Fascist regime Stresa had a dual purpose. On the one hand, Mussolini conceived it as a political mechanism that warned Hitler against interfering in Austrian internal affairs at a time when Italian troops were being deployed in large numbers to East Africa.[48] On the other, Foreign Ministry staff used the conference in a clumsy attempt to coerce British diplomats into supporting the invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. This ill-conceived attempt failed, and with ultimately catastrophic consequences for Mussolini. MacDonald, Simon and Vansittart were happy to agree on a 'common line of conduct' towards German rearmament with their Franco–Italian allies. But rather than risk an open rupture with Mussolini in the main conference forum, British leaders avoided any discussion of Ethiopia there, making use instead of informal meetings between diplomatic staff to re-emphasise their disapproval of the entire idea. The notion that an anti-Nazi 'front' had been formed at Stresa was bogus given the tensions that were generated by Thompson's meetings with his Fascist counterparts. If proof were needed of the breakdown in British–Italian relations that followed the Stresa encounters it was not long in coming. At the League Council meeting of 15th April the Italian delegation seemed nervous and anxious about the intentions of British ministers after their strange silence at Stresa. Mussolini had instructed his negotiating team at Geneva to focus only on the events at Wal Wal, in the meantime dragging out any arbitration process until after the war with Ethiopia began in early October. However, this process of deception not only undermined the entire ethos upon which

[47] *DBFP*, series 2, volume XIV, no. 230 and 232, conversations between Thompson, Vitetti and Guarnaschelli, 12 April 1935; *DDI*,serie 8, volume I, no. 70, Buti to Suvich, 23 April 1935 and no. 72, 'Conversazioni di Stresa per la questione etiopica', 11, 12 and 13 April 1935.

[48] *DGFP*, series C, volume III, no. 563, von Hassell to von Neurath, 29 March 1935.

the League was founded, but more crucially for the Italians required the full backing of France and Great Britain. At first John Simon maintained the Stresa silence, and Mussolini's plan to avoid any arbitration in the immediate future met with no obvious opposition from even the Ethiopians. Then, without warning, Simon made two sudden and unexpected statements that shocked everyone. Faced with mounting anti-Fascist, pro-League sentiment at home Simon tabled the idea that both the Italians and the Ethiopians should appoint 'conciliators' before the May session of the League expired, with fixed terms of reference for their subsequent deliberations. With this negotiating mechanism in place practical results could quickly be achieved. Although Aloisi, the head of the Italian team, tried politely to brush aside Simon's recommendation, the Foreign Secretary remained adamant. Afterwards he continued the discussion alone with League Secretary General Joseph Avenol, obviously determined that his idea should be given serious consideration.[49] The British were not prepared to turn a blind eye to Fascist aggression in Africa.

THE STRESA FALLOUT

Mussolini remembered Britain's failure to uphold the principles of the Geneva Assembly during the Manchurian Crisis, and resented what he viewed as Simon's double standards then and now. For him the League remained a flawed organisation serving the interests of its more powerful members. With the British facing domestic protests over Ethiopia and the National Government plainly sensitive about the threat to the balance of power posed by Fascist militancy in East Africa, the *Duce* suspected that London had referred the dispute to Geneva purely to stifle Italy's expansionist policy in its infancy. This, for the *Duce*, was only to be expected. But now that the first signs of a schism with the British had come, it marked the beginning of a new hostility between the revolutionary dynamics of Fascist ideology and the conservative world of vested interests. As he had noted in his *Doctrine of Fascism* in 1932 all 'internationalist' or League superstructures 'crumble to the ground whenever the heart of nations is deeply stirred by sentimental, idealistic or practical considerations'. Fascism as an idea had been born to fight against entrenched power structures, and had always been based on a 'fighting spirit which accepts all risks'. Now that the time had come to fight, Mussolini had every intention of doing so.

The *Duce* lost little time in responding to John Simon's call for League arbitration of the Ethiopian question at Geneva. Five days after the Foreign Secretary's remarks rocked the Fascist regime to its foundations, he wrote to Grandi instructing him to be 'less vague' in setting out Fascist objectives in Ethiopia in future. He was not averse to understanding the British government's problems with public opinion and its obligations as a powerful member

[49] G. W. Baer, *The Coming of the Italian–Ethiopian War* (Harvard Press, Cambridge MA, 1967), pp. 133–134.

of the League, he told the ambassador, but there was no excuse for Simon's behaviour or his decision to act as the 'defender of Abyssinia's arguments'. Given that the British establishment either did not have or did not want to demonstrate a clear understanding of what drove Fascist policy in East Africa, the time had come for some plain speaking. Fascist Italy needed to secure its national prestige in the region; it needed a greater sense of security for its existing colonies and the freedom to develop them without continual difficulties. Simon must be made aware that he had reduced the risk of any resolution to the Italo–Ethiopian question in that his recent words would only serve to encourage Addis Ababa, and stiffen Ethiopia's determination to resist. Grandi should make it clear to Simon that any attempt to impose a League solution on Fascist Italy was futile, and that it best served British interests to reach a mutual understanding with him over the future of Ethiopia outside of the League machinery, as the French had already done. Britain was hardly in any position to dictate terms to anyone when it came to colonial expansion. Neither could it realistically advise Italy to restrict its colonial policy and settle for the existing status quo, while simply encouraging all of Fascism's efforts to remain concentrated on protecting Europe from Hitler.[50]

In truth Dino Grandi, who enjoyed cordial relations with many leading British figures including Vansittart and John Simon, claimed that he had already made the Fascist position expressly clear in London. In Grandi's lengthy report for Mussolini dated 3rd May it emerged that his 'clarity' of expression had done little or nothing to bridge the widening gulf between Mussolini and London. Vansittart, showing some irritation, had stressed that he did not doubt Mussolini's intentions in East Africa. 'Italy', he declared, 'wanted to get its hands on Abyssinia.' But Mussolini must begin to get it through his head 'that Italy could expect no British backing in the event of any conflict with Abyssinia'. Neither, reiterated Simon in a subsequent conversation, could Great Britain enter into negotiations over Ethiopia with Italy. The British government were repeatedly accused of complicity and subterfuge with Italian Fascism over the entire issue, especially in the House of Commons where the government faced a daily barrage of questions over the entire matter. The fact was that it was not in Italy's interests to engage in any formal conversations with Britain over its intentions anyway, because to do so would entail Foreign Office officials being obliged to make specific demands about the ongoing independence of Ethiopia. Britain's enemies could make use of the Italian–Ethiopian controversy to demonstrate Britain's hypocrisy in terms of its commitments to the League. Under the circumstances, and given Vansittart and Simon's persistent refusal to enter any extra League agreements on the lines of the Mussolini–Laval Accords, Grandi was left with little choice than to prepare Mussolini for a difficult road ahead. Until the opening shots of the coming war the *Duce* should expect the British to do everything within their

[50] *DDI*, 8, I, no. 60, Mussolini to Grandi, 20 April 1935.

power to stop the Italian enterprise. Perhaps the best response to this would be to 'put England in the painful position of having to choose between Italy and Ethiopia at Geneva'. If Italy then refused to cooperate with a country like Ethiopia, which was 'not worthy of membership of the League of Nations', the British would find themselves in an uncomfortable position.[51]

The Italian dictator was by now aware that Britain and France faced fresh difficulties with Hitler's Germany. The Nazi government's announcements on German air power and conscription that March were soon supplemented by Hitler's declaration that he intended to announce a new construction programme for the newly renamed *Kriegsmarine*. After the Nazi government hinted to the Italians that it would be seeking parity in qualitative terms with all other navies in September 1934, the matter was broached more directly in the *Führer*'s presence during the official British visit to Germany of 25th March.[52] John Simon and Foreign Secretary in waiting Anthony Eden learned directly from Hitler himself that what he wanted was a Nazi navy 35 per cent the fleet strength of Britain's Royal Navy, and more or less equal to that of the *Marine de Guerre*. As the Italian Naval Attaché in Berlin, Raffaele de Courten, informed the Naval High Command in Rome his British counterpart placed great emphasis on the fact that parity with the French meant Germany could build approximately 110 submarines, hitherto forbidden under the terms of Clause V of the Versailles Treaty. Although British anti-submarine technology had made considerable progress since the dark days of the Great War, the 'spectre of undersea warfare' was one that was always likely to provoke a profound reaction in British society. According to de Courten Simon expressed his 'disappointment' at Hitler's proposals on the basis that parity on this scale could not be justified by the current situation governing international naval politics. Hitler may well have introduced new policies as regards air and land armaments, but these had been conceived in response to the growth of Soviet military might. Such a response was hardly needed against the 'reduced effectiveness' of the current Russian fleet, and therefore the Foreign Secretary suggested that Germany send a delegation to London to discuss the question 'informally'. Hitler agreed immediately, declaring to Simon that Germany 'did not have the financial resources to be able to participate in a naval armaments race' akin to that prior to the Great War.[53]

The news that the British government had sanctioned conversations with the Nazis that could result in an unprecedented expansion of the *Kriegsmarine* beyond the stipulated limitations set down in Clause V confirmed Mussolini's

[51] *DDI*, 8, I, no. 134, Grandi to Mussolini, 3 May 1935.

[52] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 30, fascicolo 3, 'Pro-memoria per S.E. l'Ambasciatore', De Courten to Cerruti, 18 March 1935.

[53] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 28, fascicolo 1, 'Armamenti Marttimi della Germania', de Courten to Naval High Command, Rome, 31 March 1935; A. Eden, *Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (Cassell, London, 1962), p. 139.

cynical view of Britain's commitment to international treaties. Simon's ready agreement to the opening of naval conversations with the German Admiralty suggested that the British Naval Staff, headed by Admiral Ernle Chatfield, would stop at nothing to contain Nazi naval ambitions. As Alberto Theodoli, president of the League Mandate Commission, stressed to Drummond in early May, the British government was now very aware that its armed forces would inevitably be used to 'stem Germany's ever more menacing insanity', not to mention the rapidly growing naval might of Imperial Japan.[54] With such intense pressure on its naval forces and imperial lines of communication, Britain hardly needed to add a major political dispute with Fascist Italy to its growing list of potential military commitments. But the tensions underpinning the normally cordial Anglo–Italian relationship indicated strongly that an Italian–British war in the Mediterranean could not be ruled out by mid-1935. Mussolini was fully aware that Britain might eventually find itself enforcing League sanctions against Italy. This consideration underpinned a major shift in Fascist strategic policy that was, in time, to become a permanent one.

By spring 1935 the dying days of the MacDonald premiership were characterised by growing domestic opposition to Mussolini's designs on Ethiopia within Britain. Large swathes of British society expressed growing apprehension about the threat of nationalist militancy in Europe and the Far East and generated a feeling that, 'the support and extension of the authority of the League of Nations (should remain) a cardinal point in Great Britain's policy'. The so-called 'Peace ballot', organised by Britain's League of Nations Union in April, led to around eleven and a half million voters declaring total support for any future League use of sanctions against an aggressor state, up to and including the use of military force.[55] Mussolini, impervious to the immense pressure such a groundswell of public opinion had in a democratic society, continued to ignore the realties faced by Britain's leaders. While many of them, such as Chatfield and even prime minister designate Stanley Baldwin, had little time for the Geneva Assembly and preferred to put Britain's imperial interests first, they could not ignore public pressure on such a scale in an election year. Yet still Mussolini refused to listen to the facts as set out during Grandi's conversations with British statesmen, and instead turned his ire against '*gli inglesi*'. In a speech to the Fascist Chamber of Deputies in mid-May the *Duce* scathingly declared that, 'Only those men of bad faith, only those underhand enemies of Italy can pretend surprise and simulate protests against the military measures' Italy had taken in 'self-defence' on the African continent. Even if Italy had adhered in full to the conciliation process with Ethiopia, it remained clear that it was 'not the Abyssinians' who were negotiating. No Italian should harbour any illusions about that. And in spite of all these difficulties everyone would do

[54] *DDI,New8, I*, no. 135, Theodoli to Aloisi, 3 May 1935; N. Rostow, *Anglo-French Relations, 1934–1936* (Macmillan, London 1984), p. 168.

[55] Waley, *British Public Opinion*, pp. 19–20.

well to remember that Fascist Italy would never allow its troops or its overseas territories to be attacked without responding in kind.[56]

The British Foreign Secretary's sudden recommendation that League arbitration should resolve the acrimonious Italian dispute with Ethiopia took the matter out of the hands of the Anglo–French–Italian triumvirate and positioned it within the Geneva Assembly. Given that this was precisely what Mussolini had been striving to avoid since he first considered invading and occupying Ethiopia, there could be no doubting his anger at Simon's actions. The subtle venom contained in Mussolini's Chamber of Deputies speech betrayed a sense that the dictator was not simply annoyed with London, but had come to a realisation that the British political establishment would oppose any future Fascist expansionist programmes in the Mediterranean or Red Sea regions. Although the *Duce*'s policy experts gave specific advice on the need to secure French and British backing before attacking Ethiopia, relations with the two countries had not played out according to plan. While the terror-stricken French had leapt at the opportunity of an anti-Nazi agreement with Italy, the British had proved a rather different proposition. Although statesmen such as Simon and Vansittart and officials such as Geoffrey Thompson had given off at times confusing signals about British policy over the matter, there was an underlying logic to their avoiding a similar bilateral arrangement with Mussolini at all costs. Mussolini's initial instructions to Grandi in late January hardly helped matters. Claims that the Fascist regime were merely taking 'military precautions' in Eritrea and Somaliland in the event of Abyssinian aggression contrasted sharply with the sheer scale of equipment and troops being deployed there. In Britain the great number of individuals who supported the League of Nations' role in arbitrating and dealing with international disputes began to speak out against what were seen as openly aggressive Fascist designs against an independent country and fellow League member. Such concern was also voiced repeatedly in both British Houses of Parliament, leaving officials with no choice but to endorse the League and refer the Italians to Geneva for arbitration. Naturally, the fiercely anti-League Mussolini failed to understand such facts, and turned his ire against Great Britain.

Although Mussolini had spoken of Britain's 'parasitical' presence in the *mare nostrum* before seizing power in Italy, Fascist hostility had been directed against France and Yugoslavia and later Germany after Hitler's failed coup in Austria in 1934. Following Simon's rejection of any 'redefinition' of the East African status quo along the lines demanded by the Fascist regime, and his referral of the matter to the League Assembly, a major turning point came in Fascist policy. Faced with the risk that League sanctions could be imposed on Italy after the invasion in October and imposed by the might of the Royal Navy, the *Duce* ordered the *Regia Marina* onto a war footing in readiness for a

[56] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'La vertenza Italo-etiopica e la politica estera italiana alla Camera dei Deputati', Mussolini speech, 18 May 1935, pp. 79–80.

showdown with the British Mediterranean Fleet. In an internal memorandum for the Naval High Command on 14th April Cavagnari announced that the 'changing political situation makes it necessary that we update our defensive and offensive planning' in view of ever-changing war scenarios. While at present naval planners should continue to concentrate on the 'Western Hypothesis' for war against the German navy with support from the *Marine de Guerre*, Mussolini had asked him to take war with the Royal Navy into consideration. It spoke volumes for the position into which Mussolini was now steering his country that Cavagnari could only sanction such a conflict provided the defensive arrangements concluded with the French held true. This, he would surely have known, was highly unlikely given the nature of the Anglo–French relationship, although the Admiral possibly intended to make use of the argument to deter Mussolini should he actually give the order to attack British bases and naval units.[57]

Domenico Cavagnari would not have appreciated his sudden catapulting into the position of being the first Italian Admiral to be ordered to war with the British. As a professional naval officer of some standing within the ranks of the *Regia Marina*, and renowned for his common sense if hard-headed approach to running a modern fleet, he understood the formidable nature of the undertaking potentially facing him. In practically every category of vessel the Royal Navy was superior in size to all other operational fleets, and comprehensively dwarfed that operated by the Fascist regime. It was hardly surprising that in a subsequent communication Cavagnari informed his planners that he wanted them to prepare the appropriate operational plans, even if the prospect of such a war was 'grave and alarming'.[58]

[57] Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare (USMM), busta DG 1-D, 'Piani di guerra', Cavagnari to Naval High Command, 14 April 1935.

[58] USMM, DG 1-D, 'Piani di guerra', Cavagnari to Naval High Command, 24 April 1935.

8

Facing Down the British

May–July 1935

Great Britain's dogged resistance to Mussolini's aggressive imperial designs throughout early 1935 fuelled the dictator's suspicion that the 'parasitical' British planned to oppose Fascism's colonial aspirations, through the mechanism of the League of Nations and quite possibly through the use of force. On paper the British Royal Navy certainly enjoyed total superiority over its Fascist counterpart in the Mediterranean and Red Sea, and even without support from its traditional modern ally, the *Marine de Guerre*, would have had little difficulty in imposing both economic and military sanctions against the Italians should the League Assembly have voted to do so. In reality, however, British politicians faced considerable imperial strategic overstretch by this time, and within the walls of the Admiralty in Whitehall there was a growing reluctance to add more enemies to an already significant list of potential threats to the security of the British Empire.

While British leaders such as John Simon, Robert Vansittart and eventually Anthony Eden seemed quite prepared to tough it out with the *Duce* over his plans to annexe Ethiopia – primarily for domestic political reasons – it soon became very clear to Mussolini that Britain would find halting him rather more problematical than its politicians were willing to admit. Given the nature of the *Duce*'s relationship with Laval it was perfectly credible that the French might not back stiff League action against Fascist Italy, leaving Britain to deal with Mussolini alone in a volatile international climate. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office and Admiralty decision to conclude the naval construction agreement with Nazi Germany in mid-June 1935 provided the Fascist regime with conclusive evidence that Britain's defence capabilities were feeling the strain both in Europe and the Far East. If anything the Anglo–German Naval Agreement gave Mussolini every initiative to seek a rapprochement over Austria with Hitler, and to improve relations with Nazi Germany on a long-term basis. As relations with the British worsened throughout 1935, and while Laval increasingly

struggled to remain loyal to the Accords concluded with the Italians in January, there could only be one eventual outcome: a gradual improvement in Nazi–Fascist relations that eventually became enshrined in the Rome–Berlin Axis in late 1936.[1]

A NECESSARY FRIENDSHIP

One of the earliest signs that the Fascist and Nazi regimes had weathered the worst of the Dolfuss Crisis came in mid-May of 1935. On the 18th, enraged at Simon's decision to refer the Ethiopian dispute to the League, Mussolini made a defiant speech to the Chamber of Deputies in which he warned Britain against pursuing hastily conceived, anti-Italian policies. Hidden away among the anti-British vitriol were more measured remarks which indicated that he had reconsidered his difficult relationship with Hitler. Relations between Italy and Germany, Mussolini commented, 'could now be considered compromised by only one problem, namely Austria'. It remained a fundamental difficulty but not one which should allow others to 'petrify us to the Brenner to prevent us from moving in any other part of the wider world'. The question of Austrian independence was a matter for the Austrian people Mussolini added, but it was also a European matter. As a consequence it 'concerned Italy, but was not exclusively, Italian'.[2]

Behind the scenes Mussolini's regime moved to improve its relations with Berlin as those with the British deteriorated. Four days before his statement to the Chamber of Deputies Mussolini suggested to von Hassell that the two countries 'conclude a mutual press truce'. Taken aback, von Hassell wondered what had prompted the *Duce*'s change of heart. The answer came promptly enough: 'our rivals'. It was clear to the German ambassador that Mussolini foresaw a break between Fascist Italy and the British government. Visibly agitated by the ongoing discussions over Ethiopia at Geneva Mussolini stressed – twice – that the British delegation 'should take very good care about what they did there' from that point on. Von Hassell could only conclude that Paris and London were now 'exerting pressure' on Fascist Italy over the dispute with Ethiopia, thereby hoping to avert a war that might have untold ramifications. In this struggle Nazi Germany, which was, as von Hassell put it, 'not at present a colonial Power', could only assume a position of 'the strictest neutrality'.[3] The question was did this 'neutral' German stance also extend to Austria?

[1] For an excellent analysis of the deterioration in Italo–French relations, see R. J. Young, 'Soldiers and Diplomats: The French Embassy and Franco-Italian Relations 1935–6', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, volume 7, number 1, 1984 pp. 74–91; and on improving Italian–German relations, see Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy*, pp. 183–186.

[2] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'La vertenza Italo-etiopica e la politica estera italiana alla Camera dei Deputati', Mussolini speech, 18 May 1935, op.cit, p. 78.

[3] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume IV, von Hassell to von Neurath, 14 May 1935.

Without the full support of France and the troublesome British Mussolini knew that Italian forces deployed in Eritrea and Somaliland would be highly vulnerable once his Ethiopian campaign got under way. Should Geneva seek to prevent the imminent Fascist invasion through sanctions or even military force, there would be comparatively little Mussolini could do other than to wage a rather futile 'mad dog' attack on enemy naval forces in the Mediterranean and Red Sea. His anxiety about Italy's current situation was obvious to von Hassell to whom Mussolini emphasised the 'precariousness' of Italy's position in East Africa. In particular, it was the realisation that Great Britain would, in all likelihood, impede Fascist imperialist policies in Africa that prompted the dictator's decision to rethink not only his relationship with the Nazi Reich, but gradually with Austria too. Hitler soon gave Mussolini every incentive to do so. Earlier that year, on 19th January, the *Führer* met with a group of senior Austrian Nazis and ordered them to stay out of Austrian internal affairs for the time being. While the Nazi Party in Berlin would continue to finance its Austrian junior partners Hitler emphasised that the matter of the *Anschluss* would be resolved in three to five years time, at a point when Germany would be militarily too strong to be challenged. After the meeting Hitler ordered the German press to cease all reporting on Austria, telling the Austrian NSDAP leadership to keep as low a profile as possible.[4]

Three days after Mussolini played down any major differences between Berlin and Rome Hitler lessened the impact of the one remaining point of bilateral contention between the two regimes. In his 'Peace Speech', a series of deliberately misleading statements on international security and lies about the nature of Nazi policy delivered to the *Reichstag*, the *Führer* finally gave the public guarantee of Austrian independence that Mussolini had been awaiting for over two years:

> Germany has neither the wish nor the intention to mix in internal Austrian affairs, or to annex or to unite with Austria; Germany regrets the tension caused by the Austrian conflict all the more because it has led to disturbance of our former good relations with Italy, with which country we have otherwise no divergences of interests.

The Italian dictator, who had never liked or trusted Hitler in the past, was unlikely ever to believe a statement of this nature without corroborating evidence. The experience of the Dolfuss murder the year before had demonstrated that he could not take Hitler at his word, and that the current international climate was unpredictable and turbulent. But the Nazi dictator's désistement came at a time when the Fascist regime needed it most. It was now a case of making sure that Hitler kept his word and remained aware of the consequences if he did not.

Some three weeks before the Hitler speech intelligence sources informed Mussolini that the Nazi government had recently strengthened its forces

[4] Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy*, p. 182.

along the Austrian frontier. A report dated 24th April claimed that SS, SA and *Reichswehr* units had deployed to the region between Reichenhall and Lake Constance in order to be able to invade Austria immediately, 'in the event that Italy mobilised on the Brenner'.[5] But quite clearly Hitler had no intention of making any forward move into Austria until Nazi rearmament was at a considerably more advanced stage. Therefore the reinforcement of German positions close to Austria was simply a defensive precaution taken at a time when relations between the two regimes remained tense. As the *Führer* informed senior Austrian Nazis the next day 'a purely Austrian question' did not exist in any case. It was more a case of creating a 'Greater Germany' composed of German-speaking peoples, and as soon as possible. A second intelligence report for Mussolini added that this did not signify any end to Nazi claims on Austria, but rather that these claims were being widened to include Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania and Italy, all of whom had significant German-speaking minorities. The Nazi Reich was making extensive military preparations to achieve Hitler's ideological objectives. Major German armaments manufacturers such as *Maybach, Siemens* and *Junkers* were turning out large quantities of aircraft, tanks and armoured vehicles destined for the 'southern frontier'. In Austria the leadership of the Austrian NSDAP had already begun laying down detailed military preparations for each separate administrative district of the country.[6] In short, if Mussolini were to abandon his defence of Austria as a consequence of a new understanding with Hitler, who would protect the country from the invading German armies?

With the Fascist regime estranged from Britain's National Government and strain being consequentially placed on the 'alliance' between Paris and Rome, it was evident that the process whereby Mussolini questioned the practicality of defending Austrian independence on an ongoing basis had already begun. A SIM report on the internal situation within Austria of 30th April would have generated still further misgivings in the *Duce*'s mind. Despite the impressions created by the state censored press, the report began, it would be 'incorrect to believe that the orientation of Austrian public opinion is favourable to us'. The fact was that 'Italy and the Italians are not well regarded by anyone', apart that is from the paramilitary *Heimwehren* and a Jewish community terrified at the prospect of a Nazified Austria. The Nazi Party, the Austrian officer corps, the Police, all left-wing parties, most Catholics and the remains of the old Imperial infrastructure were all opposed to any Fascist Italian presence in Austrian society. Resistance to Fascism's overbearing influence in Austria also came from the government and national security services, who did not appreciate the fallout from some of the more controversial antics perpetrated by Italian agents. SIM

[5] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 27, fascicolo 1, Ministero dell Interno, Ovra, 24 April 1935.

[6] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Germania, busta 27, fascicolo 1, Ministero dell Interno, Ovra, 30 April 1935.

concluded that 'the orientation of almost all sections of Austrian life, including those of the state authorities, were fundamentally and for many reasons hostile to us and to any intentions we may have on Austrian territory'. This situation was very unlikely to change at any time in the future.[7]

Determined to proceed with his attack on Ethiopia that autumn unopposed by his former friends, the British, Mussolini moved to mend fences with the Nazis throughout May. Earlier in the month clear signals emerged from the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, in advance of Hitler's *Reichstag* declaration, that the *Führer* was not considering the possibility of an *Anschluss* at present and had in fact forbidden all talk of one.[8] After both men had made their respective declarations on the future of Austria it became abundantly clear to 'insiders' in Rome such as Maurice Catoire that a new Nazi-Fascist alignment was not far off. At the end of May Catoire, always an astute and informed observer of the twists and nuances within Fascist policy, noted that a new dawn in Italian-German relations was now all but inevitable. Mussolini was determined to wage war in Africa the following autumn and the risk now was that this conflict would 'scramble' European affairs, separating Britain from Italy and bringing together Fascism and Nazism. The French position would become considerably weakened as a consequence given that the Italians would probably no longer be quite so keen to defend the Brenner, not to mention the difficulties that would now arise as a result of 'Italy's truly cynical attitude' towards Abyssinia.[9]

Catoire's views about the likely direction Fascist policy would take were borne out by the facts. On 30 May a political report from von Hassell to von Neurath claimed that 'The tendency, noticeable here, towards improving relations with Germany has meanwhile become more marked.' So much so, the ambassador added that 'one might almost speak of a reversal of Italy's attitude towards Germany'. Even the Fascist controlled press had changed its view of Nazism and become more positive in tone, in sharp contrast to the vitriolic outbursts of the previous summer. The *Duce* had spoken openly to German officials of the great importance of a mutual 'political reorientation', as he described it to outgoing Nazi Air Attaché Otto von Waldau. Such a reorientation must then lead to a 'systematic rapprochement between Italy and Germany' resulting in greatly improved relations. Von Hassell left the Nazi government under no illusions that the reasons for the sudden and dramatic Fascist *volte face* were largely 'negative in character'. The recent Franco-Russian Pact had led to considerable suspicion and anger in Rome but most of all it had been the result of 'bitterness over the French and, above all, the English attitude in the Abyssinian question'. In view of the dramatic deterioration in relations with the British since Stresa von Hassell added that Hitler's *Reichstag* speech had

[7] *DDI*, 8, I, number 114. SIM to Mussolini, 30 April 1935.
[8] *DDI*, 8, I, number 125, Cerruti to Mussolini, 2 May 1935.
[9] Catoire, *Journal de ma Mission à Rome*, 30 May 1935.

done much to prepare the ground for much improved Fascist–Nazi relations. But any improvement would take quite some time, and would depend heavily on the extent to which Hitler kept his word over Austria.[10]

The so-called Stresa 'front' had been conceived of as a tripartite mechanism for protecting Europe from the growing military might and ambition of Hitler's Germany. Now, six weeks on, Stresa lay in ruins with at least two of its luminaries, Fascist Italy and Great Britain, on the verge of a head on collision. By May the *Duce*'s disgust with the British and the manner in which they had referred the Ethiopian matter to Geneva against his wishes precipitated his headlong rush to seek a new relationship with Hitler. This was, if nothing else, typical of Mussolini's impulsive and petulant character. For the Italians a fresh start with Nazi Germany was not without its dangers, especially should Berlin continue to undermine the Austrian government during the critical months ahead and cause complications on Italy's northern frontier while the *Esercito* was committed in East Africa. Given the intense political and military climate that followed the failed Nazi *putsch* the year before few people in Italy were likely to believe anything Hitler said, and any rapprochement with Germany would be a tense and prolonged affair. But Rome also faced a rollercoaster ride as it awaited developments in its relations with Britain, France and the League of Nations to unravel. Mussolini may well have given orders to the Naval Staff to deal with any British-inspired implementation of Article XVI, but this was very unlikely to do anything more than bring about a rapid and disastrous Italian defeat if, that is, the British government could be induced to act. With British pressure on Mussolini to resolve his issues with Ethiopia mounting as the intense summer of 1935 wore on, the dictator would need every ounce of his supposed political skill to keep his colonial policy on course.

THE TIGHTENING OF THE SCREWS

Prior to Stresa, Mussolini had been worried about the potential for League involvement in his war with Ethiopia. As the dictator told De Bono shortly before the summit meeting in Northern Italy the game plan was to win the conflict as quickly as was possible, and the only way to ensure this was to attack the enemy with overwhelming force. Nominating De Bono overall commander-in-chief of the entire operation the dictator informed him that he would be responsible for an exceptionally large fighting force that should be used to crush the enemy mercilessly. As Mussolini put it, 'You have asked for three divisions by the end of October: I intend to send you *10*, ten I'm telling you.' Of these five would be regular *Esercito* divisions, with the remainder being made up of Black Shirt units. In total the expeditionary army would constitute 300,000 men equipped with 300 fast tanks and between 300 and 500 aircraft. De Bono's task was to 'house, feed, transport and deploy in combat' all

[10] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume IV, 'Political Report', von Hassell to Foreign Ministry, 30 May 1935.

of this large army, which the *Duce* readily admitted constituted an 'extremely grave problem'.[11]

Given the scale of the enterprise facing the *forze armate* on the Horn of Africa, and after the wrangles and disputes between the Colonial and War Ministries that had dogged all areas of the planning process, Mussolini needed to make considered choices when it came to other senior military commanders. Throughout the spring months, amid the growing dispute with Britain, it became clear that there would be little or no margin for error in terms of the prosecution of the campaign. From the Fascist point of view the war with the Ethiopians would need to be ruthless, brutal and above all extremely quick. Therefore to ensure that the East African high command had the best prospects of achieving this Mussolini appointed senior generals who were regarded as both competent and highly diplomatic. As De Bono's chief of staff he selected General Melchiade Gabba, a former diplomat who had represented Italy in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia and who had until recently served as adjutant to the Prince of Piedmont. General Gabba had the undoubted merit of being well regarded by both the Colonial and War Ministries, as did the other main appointment General Fidenzio Dall Ora. Dall Ora, who had recently been so critical of the military situation in Eritrea towards the end of 1934, had nonetheless succeeded in winning the confidence of De Bono, a factor which made him the perfect choice as his Quartermaster General. With Graziani seemingly making good progress in Somaliland it now remained for the colonial minister and his new command to put aside the problems of the recent past and concentrate on the formidable and challenging tasks facing them in the five months ahead.[12]

By early May a general sense of nervous apprehension prevailed among the upper echelons of the Fascist military. Mussolini's greater involvement in the planning dimensions had generated a new sense of vigour and purpose to the ongoing military preparations, and tacitly at least the recent political conflicts were replaced by a stronger sense of purpose. As an army staff update on military preparations noted:

> The undertaking can now be considered militarily serious. It remains impossible to predict the maximum limits of force and the time that will be required; but the means that we have had at our disposal from the beginning will undoubtedly facilitate and shorten our overall effort.[13]

At the Ministry of Colonies De Bono and his planners had spent the spring months preparing early draft versions of their operational plans, and organising the significant troop deployments to Eritrea recently approved by the *Duce*.

[11] *DDI*, 7, XVI, Mussolini to De Bono, number 707, Mussolini to De Bono, 8 March 1935.
[12] Rochat, *Militari e politici*, pp. 152–153.
[13] Report by General Ezio Bobbio on Eventual Operations in East Africa, March 1935, cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, p. 155.

De Bono foresaw a cautious strategy with the great mass of Italian forces being held in defensive positions along the whole of Eritrea's front with Ethiopia, from Assab on the coast to Om-Ager in the far west. The overwhelming superiority in manpower and weapons was only to be deployed once it became clear how and where the enemy planned to mount their attacks. De Bono argued that the effective concentration of Fascist forces along the Ethiopian frontier would permit them to intervene through 'decisive actions', adding that 'vigilance' would clearly be of great importance.[14]

The question was, would Eritrea and for that matter Somaliland be ready in time? On 7th May De Bono circulated a deployment plan for the northern colony based around the new overall troop figures authorised by Mussolini in early March. With time now clearly running out and the threat of League action to halt the flow of materiel clearly a threat to be taken seriously, De Bono proposed to move all remaining units through the Suez Canal to Massawa in two principal tranches. Before the rainy season began in earnest in June both the *Gavanina* and *Subauda* regular divisions were to be in place on the Eritrean highlands but without their pack horses. Towards the end of the rainy season at the beginning of September the second stage of the deployment plan would see the arrival of two additional regular divisions, the *Gran Sasso* and the *Sila*, as well as a total of five *MVSN* divisions. Indicating the urgency of completing the deployment by the coming December De Bono ordered that all equipment, supplies and pack horses, including those destined for the *Gavanina* and *Subauda* units, be transported at the same time.[15]

Contrary to De Bono's deployment plans Mussolini had, of course, made it clear both to the colonial minister and to his arch rival Badoglio that the East African offensive must begin by no later than October. When Badoglio convened the *Stato maggiore generale* on 8th and 9th May it soon became clear that, from a logistical point of view, the key players in the planning process believed that date to be unworkable. Domenico Cavagnari, already preoccupied with the prospect of a war with the Royal Navy, pointed out that the harbour authorities at Massawa were not yet sufficiently organised for offloading troops and cargoes, to which Lessona added that he did not yet have sufficient means at his disposal to be able to improve the situation. The inevitable delays that would result from underperforming port facilities in Eritrea were likely to be made worse by the fact that no further vessels could be handled at Mogadishu until at least June. Under the circumstances, Badoglio interjected, the sensible measure to take would be to establish a better system of communications between metropolitan ports and those in East Africa, which, if anything, illustrated the improvised nature of the whole logistical operation.

Turning to De Bono's deployment plan Badoglio as usual found plenty to criticise. The minister's decision to send the *Gaviniana* and *Subauda* divisions

[14] De Bono Operational Plan, cited in ibid, note 51, p. 156.
[15] ACS, Carte Badolglio, busta 4, Lessona to Badoglio, 7 May 1935.

to Eritrea close to the start of the rainy season caused him great concern, the Marshal claimed. Deploying an entire division to the inhospitable Eritrean countryside without its packhorses would be full of unknowns. With local communications still in a state of flux, and motorised transport still in the process of being shipped down from Italy, it was clear that Badoglio's criticisms were not unwarranted. Both divisions would face considerably greater difficulties during the forthcoming rainy season than De Bono appeared to imagine, the Marshal continued, and this was not likely to be made any easier by the Colonial Ministry's blasé attitude. Simply ordering that troops be sheltered 'as best as possible' was a reckless attitude, given that the extremes of the rainy season were likely to claim around 80 per cent of all packhorses and 40 per cent of troops through sickness and disease. The proposed solution to the problem of shelter – tents – would not work given that the type of tent proposed by De Bono would prove to be too 'cumbersome'. It would be better if work proceeded as fast as possible on barrack facilities for incoming troops, and Badoglio ordered that the requisite materials be despatched without further delay. The second major tranche of post-rainy season troop deployments could not be undertaken in anything less than three months. Therefore, the Fascist deployment of its East African expeditionary armies could not be completed before December. The numbers involved were mind boggling, particularly so when one considers the rigid time constraints which the logistical planners had to battle against. Shipping seven regular divisions, plus *MVSN* units, 8,000 pack horses, aircraft, weapons, ammunition and supplies over 2,000 miles and all within three months would put a major strain on Italian resources at an uncertain time in European politics. Mussolini's war of revenge against the Ethiopian Empire was most certainly taxing the resources of the Italian nation to the limit.[16]

At 9:15 A.M. the next morning the combined Chiefs-of-Staff met once again and for the penultimate time before the Fascist war against Ethiopia began in earnest early on the morning of 3rd October. Much still needed to be done in logistical terms to prepare both East African fronts for that autumn's war of conquest, and once again the mood of the meeting amply reflected the sense of urgency that now prevailed throughout the Fascist military environment. Clearly the use of airpower was regarded as an indispensible means of bringing the war directly to the Ethiopians, both the military and the civilian population. Air Chief Valle confirmed that more than a thousand air crew and technical staff had been sent to the theatre so far, along with considerable quantities of ordnance including incendiary bombs, and some 200 bomber aircraft to be deployed to bases at Assab, Massawa and Zula, south of Massawa. Air units destined for close support operations with ground units would be based in the highlands, Valle noted, adding that the *Aeronautica* foresaw extensive use of internationally banned chemical weapons such as mustard gas and phosgene

[16] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo Stato maggiore generale*, meeting of 8 May 1935.

so as to crush the enemy and help bring a rapid end to the war. Chillingly, the air chief displayed a detached nonchalance as he claimed that 'smaller weight bombs' would be of no use in inflicting widespread death and terror, and that he had therefore ordered 5,000 500-kilogram bombs. Weapons of this nature had great capacity to cause death and injury, and as Valle informed the meeting each weapon would disperse gas over an area about five metres in circumference. No one, not even Badoglio, who had himself ordered a gas attack on what he had believed to be Libyan militants hiding at the Taizerbo oasis in late July 1930, wished to discuss the use of such weapons, let alone question the legality of using them against combatants or the civilian population of Ethiopia. The effects, felt later that year, were to be truly devastating. None of the Fascist military involved in the operations were ever held to account.

It remains beyond doubt that the use of mustard gas and other weapons banned under the terms of the 1925 Geneva Protocol had been sanctioned by the most senior figures in the regime, by Mussolini in fact.[17] Given the tense climate in Europe after Stresa it is likely that the decision to use such weapons had been motivated by a need to avoid a protracted Italian conflict against the Ethiopians. Inflicting suffering and pain on the civilian population of Ethiopia had another motivation: a determination to avoid any risk of an Adowa style setback or defeat at the hands of a weaker, but certainly determined opponent. The use of banned weapons alone could not win the war for Fascism, and everyone present at the meetings of the *Stato maggiore generale* knew it. The truth was that a number of serious problems still faced the rapidly approaching war effort, and no one from Mussolini down, was prepared to live with the possibility of failure and its consequences.

Deep concerns remained about the capacity of primary and secondary road communications to connect the Eritrean coast with the highland. Lessona informed his colleagues that he intended to return to the colony in the coming days to ensure work was proceeding to schedule in view of the imminence of the rainy season. Badoglio lost no time in focusing the meeting's attention on what was undoubtedly the most important question of all: the logistical situation, inviting Alberto Pariani to produce a daily breakdown of equipment and supplies to be shipped to East Africa. The problem was, as Lessona was at great pains to reiterate, that just four months remained before the start of the offensive, and two months of this period would be lost because of the climactic situation in Eritrea. The Under-Secretary had been compelled to divide the logistical timetable into three periods, with the second period constituting the rainy season during which little or nothing could be shipped. In terms of laying up chartered merchant vessels for a whole two months this would prove extremely costly and inefficient, Lessona continued. One solution would be to house the Black Shirt divisions in purpose-built barracks close to Massawa where the rains were less intense, but as Baistrocchi quickly pointed out De

[17] A. Del Boca, *I gas di Mussolini* (Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1996), p. 18.

Bono had already stressed that no shipments were to arrive in Eritrea between July and August. Sensing a golden opportunity to once again undermine the hated minister for Colonies Badoglio insisted that the matter be looked into. As the Marshal stressed, they were all under orders to make as effective use of the chartered merchant vessels as possible, and to not 'condense' all shipments to East Africa into the three months after the rains. What he failed to say openly must have been obvious to everyone present: he had again found a way of ingratiating himself with Mussolini, and to De Bono's cost and no doubt serious annoyance.[18]

A week after the combined chiefs had met to discuss the difficult issues still facing the logistical operation for East Africa, and after Badoglio had taken the opportunity to provide Mussolini with a blow by blow account of the preparations, the *Duce* wrote to De Bono complaining about delays. Facing increasing pressure from the British and the League, and with the renaissance in relations with the Nazis barely off the ground, the dictator was not prepared to put his campaign back three months. He was, he said, convinced that by the forthcoming October De Bono would have 'sufficient force strength to deal with any defensive or offensive eventualities'. Influenced by a report from Baistrocchi forwarded to him by Badoglio, which claimed that it would be possible to have all troops and equipment in Eritrea by October as planned, Mussolini ordered De Bono not to delay the beginning of operations by a single day. 'It is absolutely necessary that we do not change the October start date for the beginning of operations', the dictator wrote. In fact, he added, De Bono should sweep aside any idea of remaining logistically paralysed during the rainy season, and make use of it to continue moving troops and supplies to Massawa to complete mobilisation before the end of October and no later. The frantic pace of the Fascist regime's deployment to its two East African theatres, and the at times shambolic organisation which coordinated it came at a high price. Vast amounts of equipment were moved from Naples to Massawa without adequate planning, and with virtually no coordination and command centre at either of the two ports. The result was a frequent duplication and loss of shipments, while the poor quality of the port facilities at Massawa meant that extra workers were needed to offload incoming merchant vessels. Around seventeen Italian workers lost their lives working in what were frequently dangerous conditions on the ground, and a further 800 were repatriated either through illness or for disciplinary reasons. De Bono had ultimately presided over the chaos, and would shortly lead the offensive against the Ethiopians. Many within the high commands of the Fascist military must have wondered what realistic chance their armed forces had of securing a quick and decisive victory, especially Pietro Badoglio.

[18] Biagini and Gionfrida, *Lo Stato maggiore generale*, meeting of 9 May 1935.

THE EMERGING CRISIS WITH GREAT BRITAIN

While the regime's logistical drive to prepare Eritrea and Somaliland for war gathered momentum, Mussolini confronted the problem posed by the risk of League intervention in the Italian-Ethiopian dispute, and with it the possibility of a head on collision with the British government. By mid-May the dictator suspected that League intervention to halt the war might soon become a reality, and increasingly feared an Anglo-French political initiative aimed at forcing him into a last-minute compromise. As he informed De Bono on 18th May League action might well compel him to 'withdraw from Geneva', hence the urgency of ensuring that the war got underway in October as planned. But an equally serious threat to Italian operations would come if Britain pressed ahead with a closure of the Suez Canal, as was currently being demanded by MPs in the House of Commons. Although the waterway was owned jointly with the French, and while the French were the majority shareholders, Britain had secured de facto control over Egypt by making it a Protectorate in 1882 and hence wielded considerable influence over its use. The *Duce* would most likely have known that under the terms of the 1888 Convention of Constantinople the Canal was to remain open to sea traffic at all times. As Article I clearly stated, 'the high contracting parties agree not in any way to interfere with the free use of the Canal, in time of war as in time of peace. The Canal shall never be subjected to the exercise of the right of blockade'. But Mussolini, who harboured a deep-seated mistrust of the British, would also have known that this legal technicality could easily be circumvented if circumstances dictated it. After all, had not the British denied enemy vessels use of the Canal during the Great War?

With the general mobilisation for war now at an advanced stage there was, in reality, no chance of Mussolini accepting any Anglo-French compromise plan at such a late hour. To back down to international pressure would mean a catastrophic loss of prestige for both dictator and dictatorship, and Mussolini threw his country irrevocably into confrontation with the League of Nations and the British. On 14th May Ambassador Drummond warned Simon of Mussolini's growing intransigence. In a tensely worded memorandum recording a meeting with Guarnaschelli, the Head of the *Palazzo Chigi*'s African Department, the Fascist official made it very clear that 'Signor Mussolini had now gone so far that it was quite evident that he would not draw back.' It was a great shame that the British government had elected not to support the dictator's drive to ensure the security of Italy's East African colonies, but in any case Italian action 'would take place without it'. Rome would accept only total control over the Ethiopian economy as a means of preventing the imminent war, Guarnaschelli added cautiously, although he knew full well that such a likelihood was as good as non-existent.[19]

[19] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 263, Drummond to Simon, 14 May 1935.

Later that day Mussolini made his position on the entire issue of Ethiopia clear to the whole world in a speech to the Italian Senate. Towards the conclusion of a sitting called to approve the Colonial Ministry budget, Mussolini made use of the occasion to emphasise that Italy's invasion of Ethiopia would proceed regardless of any international opposition. Much of what was being written about the current situation was frankly not worth reading, the dictator began. But one voice in particular 'could formally and immediately be dismissed out of hand, the voice of the Anglo-French démarches in Rome'. Such initiatives were futile, Mussolini continued amid the cheers of the Senators, because the British and French could easily obtain a clear Italian exposition of Italy's current position by reading the already ample documentation covering it. At the risk of repeating himself, the dictator continued sarcastically, he would yet again give the following advice to those 'zealous and disinterested gentlemen who consider our presence in Europe so indispensible. We are of the same opinion', but Italy must be secure in Africa in order to be secure in Europe. Besides, he noted wryly in a statement clearly directed at both Hitler and his former allies, the 900,000 troops currently under arms in Italy guaranteed Italy's security on the European continent.[20]

It was clear that Mussolini meant what he said. Having placed the *Regia Marina* on a war footing it was clear that he was ready to risk a permanent rupture, or worse, with London if necessary. Four days after making his uncompromising Senate speech he informed De Bono, in Eritrea coordinating the influx of men and materials, that the British were creating many difficulties for Italy. The 'English', he wrote, 'were agitated'. But there really was no use in this agitation. In his recent speech he had made it very clear 'that I would never turn back, not at any cost, even if this meant a permanent break with England; even under the extreme hypothesis of a war with England'. The situation was at a point now where he may well have to take Italy out of the League, a move which would generate unprecedented difficulties for both the British and the French.[21]

On 19th May British, Ethiopian, French and Italian delegates gathered at Geneva in readiness for the forthcoming Council meeting, which was scheduled to include a debate on the Italo-Ethiopian dispute. While French representatives remained eager to maintain their relationship with the Fascist regime and moved to keep the entire dispute over Ethiopia off the Council agenda, the British line had hardened considerably. Any sense of 'understanding' official British policy may have demonstrated towards Fascist policy in East Africa in the past had evaporated, replaced instead by an insistence that Mussolini's issues with Addis Ababa had to be resolved by purely peaceful means. The British government, fully aware that domestic public opinion favoured

[20] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'Dichiarazioni al Senato per la vertenza Italo-etiopica.', Mussolini speech, 14 May 1935.

[21] *DDI*, 8, I, number 247, Mussolini to De Bono, 18 May 1935.

collective League action against aggressor states whoever they might be, also placed great emphasis on the matter being fully resolved prior to the following League session in September, a month before Mussolini's invasion was due to begin. Determined to spell out to the British that he was not prepared to compromise the *Duce* ordered his *chef du cabinet* at the Foreign Ministry, Baron Pompeo Aloisi, to invite Anthony Eden to dinner and spell out Fascist intentions yet again.

On the evening of the 20th, while awaiting the opening of the first session at Geneva, Aloisi reiterated the Fascist position for Eden's benefit. Signor Mussolini's decision was 'irrevocable', Aloisi informed Eden. What was at stake for Italy was 'much more than the question of a colony', but rather the 'whole prestige of the regime was at stake'. The *Duce* had already spent about six million lire preparing for the nation's showdown with the troublesome Ethiopians, and there could be no question of any compromise at the request of the League of Nations. Fascist Italy was 'definitively engaged in this business'. After many years of 'aggravation' and 'pinpricking' from their Ethiopian neighbours in East Africa, the regime was determined to resolve its difficulties definitively. Although Aloisi demonstrated some sympathy for the British government's need to challenge the 'trend of Italian policy in Africa' given the pro-League orientation of domestic public and political opinion, it was clear that this did not extend far beyond the realm of polite form. Fascist Italy would proceed with its war of aggression whatever position Great Britain and the League Assembly adopted.[22]

The following morning at 11:30 A.M. Eden and Aloisi met again, joined this time by René Massigli, Deputy Political Director at the *Quai d'Orsay*. Massigli, a leading expert on Germany heavily critical of Hitler's rearmament policies favoured either peaceful Italian penetration of Ethiopia or failing this, a general agreement that the Ethiopian question should not come before the Geneva Assembly. His reasoning was simple. Italy's dispute with the Ethiopians threatened to undermine and thereby destroy the League as an international security organisation, while also having the potential to damage much of what constituted French diplomatic policy. While many within French political life endorsed Massigli's reasoning as regards Italy, especially so in view of its military cooperation with Paris, any peaceful resolution of the Ethiopian Crisis seemed highly unlikely. At the meeting Aloisi amply confirmed that this was the case. Rejecting any idea of placing the dispute in its entirety before the Assembly, Aloisi insisted that only the Wal Wal incident was to be discussed there, as had been the official Fascist line for some time. In response to Eden's claim that there existed an urgent need to 'remove the threat of war' by having the Ethiopian question thrashed out at Geneva, Aloisi merely repeated his affirmation that this was not possible and that the 'prestige of the whole regime

[22] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 278, Patteson to Simon, 21 May 1935; P. Aloisi, *Journal (25 juillet 1932 – 14 juin 1936)* (Librairie Plon, Paris, 1957), 20 May 1935.

was at stake'. Much depended now on Drummond's encounter with the Italian dictator in Rome the next day, although no one seriously expected any significant concessions to emerge from this particular meeting.[23]

Throughout his meeting with Drummond on the evening of 21st May Mussolini proved unstintingly determined to emphasise that there existed no possibility of his changing Italian policy over the dispute with Ethiopia. No doubt recalling the British and League failure to deal with Japan's aggression in Manchuria, and fully aware of the extent to which London feared Japanese and German militancy, he felt no pressure to negotiate or compromise. As it transpired, he did neither. Drummond, who had just returned from official discussions at the Foreign Office designed to seek a League-driven resolution to the international crisis now emerging over Ethiopia, had already sent Mussolini an aide-mémoire requesting that the Fascist regime assist in finding 'some agreed method of maintaining contact with the course of events'. This 'method', Foreign Office officials anticipated, might provide the League Council with a mechanism for 'leaving conciliation to pursue its natural course'.[24] But the *Duce*, increasingly tired of British efforts to orchestrate an Italian reconciliation with Ethiopia, swept the idea aside brusquely. There were simply 'no precedents' for contacts of this nature he informed Drummond, and he had already cooperated with League requests by nominating Italy's representative on the conciliation commission. That commission could now happily move to resolve the dispute over Wal Wal, as the government in Addis Ababa had already agreed to do. The 'process of conciliation' was already underway, he added, the League Council simply needed to take account of that fact.

Mussolini's mood darkened once Drummond attempted to emphasise the British government's 'preoccupation' over the Italian-Ethiopian dispute. During his recent trip to London he had noted that, 'in Great Britain all political circles were in favour of the principal of collective security'. It was, Drummond claimed, the first time he had ever witnessed such unanimous support for the League among his fellow countrymen, and the British government now hoped that the *Duce* would appreciate the 'delicacy of the situation' facing it. But the dictator swept aside British 'preoccupations' and starkly set out his position. He could understand British worries and concerns over the current situation, but the situation in Europe was wholly different to the one that prevailed in East Africa. There could be no going back on the regime's decision to resolve its difficulties with the Ethiopians, and he was 'determined at all costs to definitively resolve the position of our colonies as regard Abyssinia'. Fascist Italy needed to 'radically alter its position regarding Abyssinia' because every time his country had been engaged elsewhere, in Libya for instance, the Ethiopians had attempted to 'push us into the sea'. Only Italy could resolve its security

[23] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 280, Patteson to Simon, 21 May 1935; Aloisi, *Journal*, 21 May 1935.

[24] Ibid., number 273, Simon to Ingram, 17 May 1935.

problems in the region, and he intended to ensure that this finally happened given the serious situation in Europe. 'It must be clearly stated', Mussolini stressed, 'that the means to achieve this might well be through war'. He had already sent large numbers of troops and materials down to East Africa, and had used up far too many financial resources than could be compensated for by mere 'concessions of an economic nature'.

Somewhat taken aback by Mussolini's outburst Drummond could only warn the dictator that Italian policy now threatened to take his country into direct conflict with the League, and would provoke considerable tension between their two countries. Quite obviously Mussolini did not care. He did not care much for the 'political organisation of Europe' at the present time anyway, and warned that if forced to 'we would leave the League of Nations and, he might add, he would not be likely to ever rejoin'. In drawing the meeting with Drummond to a close Mussolini could not resist highlighting the contradictions and oversights, as he saw them, underpinning British government policy over Ethiopia. While British governing circles now seemed attached to the whole idea of collective international security, had they not acted in exactly the same way he now proposed to do in the past? Had not Britain fully occupied Egypt in order to restore political stability to the country, and had not the French taken similar measures against Morocco? If at sometime in the future he asked the ambassador, Britain felt it appropriate to take certain measures to protect its interests in Egypt, would he be permitted to be critical of such measures? Dismissing Drummond's final warnings that Fascist policy now risked destroying the traditionally amicable relationship between Great Britain and Italy, Mussolini reiterated that all materials necessary for the 'defence of our colonies' would be sent to East Africa without delay, and that he fully intended to wage war against Ethiopia if necessary. He could not help it if this conflict damaged Italy's relationship with Britain, which could be attributed largely to 'circumstances'.

By the second half of May 1935 Mussolini increasingly found himself in an uncomfortable political position. Having roundly lectured Drummond on the impossibility of any negotiated solution to the crisis with the Ethiopians, the dictator found himself once more facing another initiative at Geneva designed to achieve a political solution to the crisis. On the morning of 22nd May while League delegates were digesting the fallout from the Mussolini–Drummond encounter, Pierre Laval arrived in Geneva and immediately sought out Anthony Eden. The French foreign minister expressed himself troubled by the direction Fascist Italy's dispute with Ethiopia was taking, and vigorously denied that he had ever given Mussolini any 'free hand' in East Africa. To add weight to his denials Laval went as far as to suggest to Eden that the French delegation, under his direction, should now produce a draft resolution with the objective of ensuring that all incidents in the Ogaden, and not simply the Wal Wal controversy, should be considered by the League Council. It was of key importance, Laval stressed in private to Eden, that Britain and France now

began cooperating much more closely on this entire matter. According to Eden's memoirs the Frenchman expressed his deep concern at the 'cynicism' of Mussolini's policy, and fear for the fate of French nationals in Somaliland and Ethiopia.[25] Fascist officials, such as Theodoli and Aloisi, were far from sympathetic towards Laval's arguments. During dinner that evening Aloisi took a 'tough and intransigent' line towards the French compromise proposals, stating firmly that any such idea would go down extremely badly with Mussolini. Theodoli, again warning Laval that his idea risked Mussolini walking out of the League of Nations, asked how Laval intended to resolve the current crisis. Did he intend to keep his word and the spirit of the 7th January Accords by helping Italy realise its aspirations in East Africa?[26]

Laval was finding life increasingly difficult and complicated. As foreign minister of the Third Republic he knew as well as anyone that his country could not afford to alienate itself from its British allies, and his initiative at Geneva was almost certainly designed to demonstrate that his country had every intention of remaining loyal to the *Entente*. The problem was that similar gestures of loyalty also had to be made to Mussolini's Italy whose forward policy in Ethiopia he had openly agreed to support. When Anthony Eden and other British officials were not present, Laval took great care to reassure Aloisi and the Italian delegation that all would be well. He was, according to Aloisi', 'perfectly behaved and helped us enormously', in particular by steering a watered down version of the Anglo-French resolution on reconciliation through during a late night sitting of the League Council.[27] But as far as Mussolini and the vast majority of the Fascist Party membership were concerned Laval and the French were not the problem. 'Le duel', wrote Aloisi in his *Journal*, 'n'a' pas été Italo-éthiopien mais anglo-italien, et derrière l'Angleterre s'est range tout le Conseil de la S.D.N.'[28]

Although Mussolini, to most peoples' surprise initially agreed to the French-inspired conciliation plan this proved short lived, and he was soon annoyed that the British press presented the initiative as a great success for the London government at Geneva. The *Duce* was even angrier at the idea that he had been compelled to bow to British pressure as a consequence of its approval. As Suvich angrily pointed out to Drummond a few days after the Council meeting, Mussolini and many other Fascists were irritated by the specific interpretation that Eden had given the conciliation plan. There was no question that anyone in Italy would accept such an interpretation, Suvich stressed, and the ambassador should be clear that for the Fascist government

[25] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 283, Patteson to Simon, 23 May 1935; A. Eden, *Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (Cassell, London, 1962), p. 212.

[26] Aloisi, *Journal*, 22 May 1935; *DDI*, 8, 1, number 276, Theodoli to Suvich, 23 May 1935.

[27] Aloisi, *Journal*, 24 May 1935; *DBFP*, second series, XIV, second series, number 292, Patteson to Simon, 25 May 1935.

[28] Aloisi, *Journal*, 24 May 1935.

any discussion beyond the issue of responsibility for the events at Wal Wal was unacceptable. To Drummond's customary expressions of regret at the grave condition of British relations with Italy, Suvich abruptly retorted that had Britain not offered such a degree of 'moral assistance' to Hailie Selassie then the situation would be altogether different. Fascist Italy would nevertheless proceed with its intended course of action 'to the bitter end and without settling for half measures'. But in any case, he added rather ominously, there was little that even Britain could do to compel the Ethiopians to resolve Italy's regional security concerns.[29] Only Fascist Italy could and would ensure those.

The extent to which Italian relations with Britain after Stresa had degenerated in a hitherto unparalleled fashion was clear to all by the last days of May. The press in both countries had launched bitter attacks on each other's policies over Ethiopia, and it was obvious that any reconciliation between Rome and London was unlikely to be imminent. Aloisi summed the status of bilateral relations up in a detailed memorandum for Mussolini written on his rail journey from Geneva to Rome on the night of 26th May. Negotiations with the British had been difficult and at every step he had been forced to meet the 'intransigence' of London's delegates with his own. It was no exaggeration to point out that the British government, and for that matter Anthony Eden personally, now had one very simple objective in mind: 'to stop Italy'. The great irony contained within the British position was that this country was itself 'rich with imperial and African interests, while it very skilfully hid behind the screen of the League of Nations'. The League was a chief pillar of British policy which Britain claimed would collapse should it ever elect to abandon Geneva. What this inevitably meant in practise, he assured the equally cynically minded *Duce*, was that Britain could exercise considerable power and influence over world affairs largely unopposed.

The hard-line British policy over Ethiopia now being pursued by the 'darling' of British politics, Anthony Eden, had done much to endear him to many sections of the British press and public opinion Aloisi continued. This policy had also consolidated support for Britain among virtually all League members, with the exception of the French. But even if Laval had been studiously helpful to the Italian cause at Geneva, Mussolini should have no illusions that were Italy's French allies be forced to choose between Italy and Great Britain, the latter would triumph beyond any doubt. Despite the weight of opinion directed against Fascist Italy Mussolini's threat of an Italian withdrawal from the League Assembly had given everyone considerable pause for thought. The overall effects of Italy's policy at Geneva could only be judged very positively. To date there had been few legal impediments placed in the path of Fascism's intended war of aggression by the Geneva Assembly, and Rome had gained some five months until the next Council meeting to prepare for it unobstructed

[29] ASMAE, Affari Politici, busta 17, fascicolo 1, 'Colloquio con l'Ambasciatore d'Inghilterra', 30 May 1935.

and 'immune from every limitation'. The *Duce* should have no doubt that Britain would make its opposition felt at the earliest opportunity, Aloisi concluded, and that this would have its resonance right around the world. The conflict now was not simply between Italy and Ethiopia or even Italy and the League. It was mainly between Italy and the British.[30]

A confrontation with the might of Britain, its Empire and its powerful navy was what every advisor to Mussolini from Rafaelle Guariglia onwards had hoped to avoid at all costs. Although Laval irresponsibly gave the Fascist leader approval for greater Italian dominance over Ethiopia in January 1935, British officials for a number of reasons were not prepared to commit their country to a similar political arrangement. Mussolini failed to understand the reasoning behind British reluctance and rather than seek a sensible solution, continued to pursue a policy of outright annexation even when it was imprudent to do so. He became enraged at what he viewed as British stubbornness largely because he did not understand the pressures of public opinion, and the electoral process inherent within a modern democratic state. He assumed that British government concerns about domestic opposition to the coming Fascist war were simply an excuse to prevent Italy's national development. Laval had been able to sell the accords with Mussolini to the French people on the basis that they helped safeguard the Third Republic from the menace of Hitler. The National government of Ramsay MacDonald, already facing much questioning about Fascist intentions in Ethiopia, could not agree to any such arrangement. This was especially so given the frequent shipments of Italian troops and equipment passing through the Suez Canal after February 1935, shipments which contradicted Mussolini's assurances that Italy's military build up was merely 'a precaution'. The dictator personalised the burgeoning dispute with London over Ethiopia, and accused Britain of perfidy, of hiding behind the 'altar of the League of Nations' as a means of safeguarding its huge global Empire. As future events were to demonstrate the *Duce* had every opportunity to obtain much of what he wanted without the need for a full-scale military assault on Abyssinia. It was he who rejected what he viewed as unacceptable compromise in favour of all out confrontation.

While Mussolini had been angered at what he believed to be British-induced difficulties within the League Council, his expectation that any collective security decision could be faced down militarily was to be the source of much frustration. Since receiving the dictator's order to consider its strategy towards a Royal Navy led imposition of League authority, Cavagnari and the Naval High Command had assessed the *Marina*'s prospects in consultation with their colleagues at the *Aeronautica*. Each of the senior officers involved in considering Fascist Italy's possibilities in any 'sanctions-busting' operations fully realised that the Royal Navy would constitute the spearhead in any implementation of League policy. The navy and air force would equally have been aware of

[30] *DDI*, 8, I, number 285, Aloisi to Mussolini, 26 May 1935.

both Mussolini's views of Mediterranean geopolitics and the high hopes he ultimately pinned on the Fascist fleet to bring about a revolution in the military balance of power in the region. As Mussolini declared during his infamous speech at Taranto of September 1934, the *Regia Marina's* main operational base in southern Italy:

> We were great when we dominated the sea. Rome could never have built its empire without having first crushed the naval power of Carthage. In order that the Mediterranean, which is not an ocean and has two exits guarded by others, should never become the prison which debases our vigour for life, we must also be strong at sea.[31]

The level of sea power that Mussolini needed to challenge the might of his British enemies and their various allies did not exist in the summer of 1935. The Royal Navy boasted a fleet made up of fifteen battleships, sixty cruisers, six aircraft carriers and a host of other types of fighting and auxiliary vessels. Pitted against this re-modernising the Italian navy with its incomplete *Littorio* programmes and without effective air cover stood little chance and almost certainly faced a crushing defeat. A situation report produced by the Naval Plans Office in mid-May accurately highlighted the problems facing the High Command. The British naval base at Malta could be attacked successfully by both air and sea units, and submarine and mine warfare would make access to La Valletta difficult for the enemy once any naval forces had been driven from the island, the report noted. But beyond this Italy's range of strategic options were limited. Outside of the *Marina*'s 'comfort zone' in the Central Mediterranean there was little chance of either naval or air operations succeeding in the outer reaches of the Mediterranean. The planners ruled out operations against Britain's base at Gibraltar owing to the 'preponderance of enemy forces' there, and to the limited range of Italian aircraft. In terms of ensuring the continued accessibility of the Suez supply route, the naval planners offered nothing more than a suggestion that the navy might deploy ageing units of its air arm and 'eventually' a limited number of surface vessels to the theatre. There was no indication as to what operations could be undertaken in the event that Suez might be closed, or how the main logistical bases at Massawa and Dahlak were to be defended in the event of attack. Any threat of enemy attack on merchant shipping could, the planners optimistically surmised, be met by commissioning 'neutral' vessels.[32]

The weaknesses of the Italian fleet were easily matched by the *Aeronautica*'s serious inability to wage any real form of aggressive air warfare against Britain in the Mediterranean. Already committed heavily to the East African campaign where air force units were expected to spread extensive terror among

[31] *OOBM*, XXVI, 'Al Popolo di Taranto', Mussolini speech, 7 September 1935, pp. 322–324.
[32] USMM, DG1-D, 'Ipotesi di contrasto Italo-britannico', Naval Staff, 16 May 1935.

the military and civilian population in Ethiopia, the cash strapped air planners could hardly be expected to take on as serious a commitment as a conflict against Royal Navy warships, designed to block any enforcement of League policy. Domenico Cavagnari, who had warned Mussolini about the risks that would be incurred in antagonising the British two months earlier, soon discovered that any air support for naval operations would be limited. On 23rd May, as Mussolini's diplomatic staff toughed it out with Anthony Eden and the British delegation at Geneva, the Naval Chief-of-Staff informed both the Air High Command and Badoglio of current naval thinking in the event of a showdown with the Royal Navy, stressing that joint planning now needed to focus on 'operations against common objectives'. This entailed air force support for naval attacks on Malta and enemy naval forces operating from there, although Cavagnari also earmarked reconnaissance missions and attacks on 'Egyptian ports' as other key areas of collaboration. The navy, he stressed, would 'deploy the totality of its forces' in order to secure its main objectives and he accordingly requested the, 'fullest cooperation of the Air Force in attacks on the bases and mobile units of the enemy'.[33]

Meetings between the navy and air staffs soon revealed how effective Fascist aero-naval cooperation was likely to prove. In early June a joint discussion of Cavagnari's request for air support at the Air Ministry revealed that, like the navy, the air force was reasonably comfortable with mounting attacks on Malta and British forces based there. But even so, the air force faced limitations in this theatre, and as Pietro Pinna, Valle's deputy chief of staff emphasised, the 150 aircraft committed to mount the central Mediterranean offensive might not be 'constantly available'.[34] Responding to Cavagnari's outline plans for air and naval cooperation Valle confirmed that the *Aeronautica* would commit 'its entire bomber capability' to the assault on Malta, and enemy naval forces operating in the Straits of Sicily. Crucially for the fate of the entire Fascist war in East Africa, the air staff could not attack the Suez Canal zone with any guarantee of success. Valle would only commit one group of Savoia Marchetti 55-X flying boats based on the Dodecanese island of Leros to the task. Veterans of Italo Balbo's propagandistic trans-Atlantic crossings a few years earlier, it was difficult to see what use such units would be of against the comparative strength of the Royal Navy and Air Force. The British base at Gibraltar meanwhile was 'beyond the range of our air units', as Valle put it, although he reassured the Admiral that the *Aeronautica* would be able to monitor enemy naval movements via the Straits through effective reconnaissance operations.[35]

[33] USMM, DG1-D, 'Operazione B', Cavagnari to Valle/Badoglio, 23 May 1935.
[34] USMM, DG2-A, 'Pro-memoria a S.E. il Capo di Stato Maggiore', Vanutelli to Cavagnari, 6 June 1935.
[35] USMM, DG2-A, 'Operazione B', Valle to Cavagnari/Badoglio, 27 June 1935.

THE WAR OF WORDS

By early June a beleaguered Fascist regime found itself dealing with new governments in both London and Paris. In France a poor run on the Franc brought down the administration of Pierre Flandin of the Democratic Republican Alliance, as well as the short-lived premiership of Fernand Bouisson, which lasted barely a week. Pierre Laval, already faced with a deteriorating international situation, subsequently assumed the mantle of responsibility and became prime minister on 7th June. Across the channel the ailing Ramsay MacDonald, Labour prime minister of a National Government dominated by the Conservative Party, was replaced by heir apparent Stanley Baldwin. Baldwin, a third class honours graduate of Cambridge University, seemed well enough suited to the task of keeping the government in power in the general election due that November. He was 'conciliatory, mildly bumbling', a 'political moderate and the "natural leader" of an uncombative 'national coalition' composed largely of "men of goodwill"'.[36] In place of Simon, Baldwin appointed Sir Samuel Hoare, an experienced politician with a reputation for good mediation and reconciliation skills. Unfortunately, by this time Hoare too had succumbed to physical ill health and mental exhaustion, having recently steered the gargantuan India Bill through the House of Commons. With the benefit of hindsight this combination of political leaders and their domestic circumstances was hardly ideal for dealing with an aggressive, temperamental and ruthless man such as Mussolini on the eve of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. Nevertheless, this was the reality of the situation in the summer and autumn of 1935.

Throughout June Mussolini continued to defy what he viewed as British attempts to derail his colonial ambitions. The one-time architect of the campaign to rid Italy of Socialism and Communism during the 1920s stressed his determination to lead the country to its place in the sun, and by equally brutal means. On 7th June in *Il Popolo d'Italia* Mussolini made a direct analogy between the conquest of Ethiopia and his nation's Roman imperial legacy. Just as the Roman legions 'had imposed laws and regulations with the sword of dominance' in Rome's colonies, so would 'Fascist Italy pursue the same civilising policies' in its own African territories. Italian Fascism had created its own élite, 'legionaries' trained to conquer new lands and impose the will of the regime. Recent history had witnessed Italy's exclusion from the ranks of the colonial powers, but this was about to change. 'Our legionaries', he wrote, 'will carry with them authority, order and Fascist justice' when they marched into Ethiopia. With 3,000 years of civilisation behind it the Italian people would display the 'conquering and civilising virtues' of Rome.[37] The next day, while addressing the very 'legionaries' upon which he pinned his expectations for the

[36] R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (London, Macmillan, 1993), p. 46.

[37] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'Le province africane', Mussolini article, *Il popolo d'Italia*, 7 June 1935, p. 84.

future in the form of the Black Shirt regiment of Cagliari, Mussolini used even stronger language. Once the assault on Ethiopia began, the *Duce* announced, 'We will take no notice of anything said abroad, because it is we who best judge our own interests, guarantee our future, it is we, only we, who are exclusively capable of this.' Obviously less than well disposed towards the British government Mussolini instructed his troops to imitate those who, 'teach us lessons' by also 'creating an empire and defending it and without paying any attention to world opinion'. He vowed that Italy would act as one people when it came to defending, as he put it, the 'power and the glory of the homeland'.

Just a few years earlier statements of this nature from Mussolini, or, for that matter, from any other member of the PNF aimed directly at Great Britain would have been unthinkable. But then the world of June 1935 was a totally different place. The international threats posed by Hitler, Imperial Japan and the ideological threat posed by Comintern meant that even a powerful nation such as Britain had to tread with caution in the world of international politics. The latest geopolitical crisis, this time involving Italian Fascism, aggravated an already serious situation facing the London government. Both Aloisi and Suvich were aware that British officials were concerned about the risk to their national interests posed by the current Ethiopian emergency. In a letter to Cerruti in Berlin Suvich warned that Drummond was growing anxious at the prospect of an Italian-German rapprochement and the effects this re-alignment might have on the balance of power in Europe. Suvich instructed Cerruti to do his utmost to exploit this anxiety among British diplomatic staff in Berlin, even though relations between the two regimes were still recovering from the shocks and tremors of recent months. The ambassador should make use of every opportunity to accentuate British preoccupations about the potential effects Britain's stance over Ethiopia might have, Suvich noted. At the very least he should offer London no assurances of any description for the future.[38]

The Baldwin government's determination to contain threats to its national interests came into sharp relief in early June, when news reached Grandi of the new Anglo-German Naval Agreement. In seeking his deal with the British Hitler had despatched Joachim von Ribbentrop to head up the negotiating team in London, and to set clear guidelines about what he was to secure from British negotiators. The *Führer* wanted to avoid confrontation and conflict with Britain at all costs as he had amply set out in *Mein Kampf* a decade earlier. Second, at least initially he aimed to construct a *Kriegsmarine* able to protect supplies of Swedish iron ore and communications with East Prussia, to guarantee German control of the Baltic Sea by countering the threat posed by the Soviet fleet and, most importantly of all, to provide the navy with the capability to attack French merchant traffic in the Atlantic shipping lanes. Hitler felt that to achieve a fleet strength able to deliver these strategic requirements Germany needed a fleet 35 percent the size of the Royal Navy. This percentage ratio had

[38] *DDI*, 8, I, number 324, Suvich to Cerruti, 1 June 1935.

already been discussed with Simon and Eden in Berlin in late March, and as far as Hitler was concerned had to be the basis of any agreement. Ribbentrop was precisely the right man to 'convince' British officials to agree to the proposed naval formula. Although the formal discussions did not get underway until 4th June, the bloody minded Ribbentrop refused to compromise on the 35 percent figure, and pressed Foreign Office staff hard until they finally accepted it within a matter of days. The risk that Hitler might order the withdrawal of the offer if a reluctant John Simon and his team did not accept it was more than enough to convince Admiralty First Lord Admiral Ernle Chatfield to press for its immediate acceptance.[39] The British government appeared to have little choice but to comply.

Leonardo Vitetti of the Italian Embassy in London learned of the outcome of the talks on 7th June, the very day that they concluded. The British naval authorities, he informed Grandi, had had little choice but to agree to the deal 'offered' by Ribbentrop on the basis that if they had failed to do so, the Germans may well have demanded an even higher percentage in the future. Although the agreement may have settled British nerves about the threat posed by Nazi Germany's naval programmes, the new deal still had to be sold to France and Italy. The Foreign Office was not expecting an altogether positive reaction, particularly from Paris. But from the Fascist Italian perspective what really mattered most was that the agreement demonstrated the steady weakening of Great Britain's position within the context of international politics. The British government had been forced into a deal by Ribbentrop, and this in itself constituted an unmistakeable sign that its policy towards Germany 'was undergoing major adjustments'.[40] The ramifications of Britain's decision to reach such a deal with an aggressive and ambitious Nazi Germany proved to be serious, particularly so when it came to London's efforts to impose its 'moral authority' on Mussolini's colonial ambitions. As the distinguished political historian Donald Watt once argued the Anglo-German Agreement was 'greeted with cynicism' by a League Council that had so recently watched British delegates condemn Mussolini's indiscriminate plans to annexe Ethiopia. London's conclusion of the naval deal 'was not, perhaps, the most suitable position from which to launch the crusade which occupied Britain's attentions for the second half of 1935 against Italy, the defiler of treaties, the breaker of covenants'.[41]

As news of the Naval Agreement broke on the morning of Tuesday 18th June and an astonished world looked on at what many viewed to be British perfidy and double standards, Mussolini elected to say very little. By the time details of the treaty were beginning to emerge in mid-June the *Duce* merely issued a statement declaring that the new British and German naval construction

[39] Weinberg, *Hitler's Foreign Policy*, pp. 166–170.
[40] *DDI*, 8, I, number 353, Vitetti to Grandi, 7 June 1935.
[41] D. C. Watt, 'The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935: An Interim Judgement', *The Journal of Modern History*, volume 28, number 2 (June 1956), p. 174.

arrangements appeared rather short sighted in scope. The agreement broke with the approach of the Washington Naval Treaty and the various international naval conferences that had followed it, and made it difficult to manage naval building as a whole in future.[42] Such a moderate response to what appeared a clear example of British hypocrisy and self-interestedness seemed, on the surface, rather strange for a man such as Mussolini who never lost an opportunity to attack his enemies in every conceivable manner. The reasoning behind the dictator's uncharacteristically diplomatic reaction had an ulterior motive. Three days after the naval treaty had been signed in London von Hassell indicated in a letter to von Neurath that Mussolini's cautious reaction to it formed part of a general Italian approach designed, 'not to jeopardize the improved atmosphere that has been created between Germany and Italy'. The 'improvement' in Nazi–Fascist relations which, from the Italian side, was motivated by Mussolini's determination to end Italy's post-Stresa sense of isolation, was, however, largely a cosmetic one because any genuine spirit of cooperation had not materialised in Berlin. As von Hassell stressed in his letter this was because the *Awswärtiges Amt* judged the Fascist regime to be something of a liability given the 'difficult situation' in which Italy found itself by the summer of 1935. As he put it:

> So unfavourable is this situation that we cannot but wonder whether it would be worth our while seriously to strive for friendly relations with a country like Italy in her present position.[43]

In his response von Neurath readily agreed, stressing that Italy's sudden friendliness towards Berlin was simply the product of its international isolation over Ethiopia. 'We have no occasion to extricate the Italians from this predicament', Neurath noted although Berlin would be willing to talk to Rome when Mussolini finally came to his senses, and showed himself ready to 'discuss and settle the Austrian problem'.[44]

By late June 1935 a widely held British belief that Mussolini's relations with Hitler remained as bad as ever following the dramatic events of 1934 brought about a fresh policy initiative. The new approach towards the Mussolini government aimed at eliminating the risk of any future rapprochement between Fascism and National Socialism, while also securing a change in Mussolini's approach over Ethiopia. Samuel Hoare, Britain's hapless new Foreign Secretary, along with other key players in the Foreign Office such as Vansittart appeared convinced that the right appeal to Mussolini might remind him of the traditionally amicable nature of his country's relations with Britain, thus averting the general catastrophe that many dreaded. Vansittart was brutally frank in

[42] *DDI*, 8, I, number 376, Mussolini statement, 14 June 1935.
[43] *DGFP*, Series C, Volume IV, number 164, 'Political Report: Italian Foreign Policy', von Hassell to von Neurath, 21 June 1935.
[44] Ibid., number 166, von Neurath to von Hassell, 24 June 1935.

his opinions, stressing to Hoare and Eden in early June that 'Italy will have to be bought off' if its exit from the League and eventual alignment with Nazism were to be avoided.[45] Anxiety was running high within the British establishment. Earlier, in mid-May, former Foreign Secretary and architect of the Locarno Treaty Sir Austen Chamberlain had attempted to persuade his old friend Mussolini that any Fascist use of force in Ethiopia would have a 'deplorable effect on British opinion'. But while the *Duce* had been prepared to be cordial towards Chamberlain in the past, in 1935 the latter's appeals had no effect whatsoever.[46]

A mood of tension and doom hung over the Italian–British relationship as the Cabinet in London voted in favour of sending Anthony Eden, now appointed by Baldwin as Minister of League of Nations Affairs, to Rome in an attempt to resolve the impasse over Ethiopia. The official basis of Eden's mission was to explain Britain's rationale in signing the naval agreement to the French and Italians, and to discuss the possibilities for an air pact. But once in Rome the British minister would be pressing Mussolini hard to accept a negotiated settlement to the worsening dispute over Ethiopia. The nature of the offer Eden was to take with him to Italy betrayed the manner in which he, Hoare and Vansittart were prepared to bypass the League when it suited British interests and reach deals that appeased and accommodated the designs of dictators, a pattern that would be repeated in later years. If Mussolini would accept the arid Ogaden region of Ethiopia inhabited largely by Somali nomads including the disputed Wal Wal area, the British would offer Ethiopia the port of Zeila (Zaila) in British Somaliland to be connected by a corridor running through the territory in exchange. Few in London were convinced that Mussolini would be tempted by the deal because it still depended on the approval of Addis Ababa. Despite well-founded claims by experts such as Geoffrey Thompson that Mussolini would accept nothing short of a total absorption of Ethiopia, Eden's mission went ahead regardless. It was a desperate and poorly conceived attempt to avoid disaster that had little chance of success. But then for the British these were desperate times.

Drummond announced Eden's immediate intention to travel to Paris and Rome in a meeting with Suvich the day after the British and Germans inked their new naval accord. His government strongly wished that a war in East Africa be averted at all costs, and that a solution to the present difficulties be found, which could be reconciled with the principles of the League of Nations. Suvich cautiously assented to the visit declaring that he found the British initiative 'undoubtedly interesting'. But like many of his counterparts in London

[45] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 301, Minute by Sir R. Vansittart, 8 June 1935 and number 308, 'Note by Sir R. Vansittart for Sir S. Hoare, 16 June 1935.

[46] ASMAE, Carte Grandi, busta 43, fascicolo 105, 'Austen Chamberlain to Grandi, 10 May 1935; 'Friendly Conversation: Mussolini and Sir Austen Chamberlain', *Sidney Morning Herald*, 19 April. 1929.

it was plain that Drummond harboured serious reservations about the prospects for any major breakthrough. Pompeo Aloisi had already accused Eden of being determined to stop Italy's annexation of Ethiopia whatever the cost, and it was unlikely that the *Duce* would settle for anything less than 'the definitive liquidation of the Ethiopian question', he had informed Drummond. Mussolini would ignore any solution that threatened to leave Italy 'fettered to Geneva' and stripped of its 'freedom of action'. It was hardly surprising that Drummond added his voice to the growing chorus of doubters, claiming that the dictator would never approve the handing over of a potential naval base to the Ethiopians.[47]

Mussolini had effectively rejected the 'Zeila Plan' even before Eden arrived at the *Stazione Termini* on the evening of 23rd June. On the 20th Suvich had travelled to Mussolini's holiday villa at Riccione and found that the dictator had little or no enthusiasm for the British idea, unless it constituted a 'quid' that might lead to 'future developments'.[48] Any possibility that the Baldwin government were using the Zeila proposal as a means of entering a broader political deal over Ethiopia with the Italians evaporated once the encounter with Eden got underway the next day. After Mussolini listened patiently to Eden's justification for the Anglo-German Agreement the conversations quickly turned to the Ethiopian question. As a professional politician and former Great War combatant Eden was as acutely aware as anyone of the horror of war, and of the widespread desire to avoid conflict as Europe continued its recovery from the traumas of 1914–1918. His central argument, that all sides of the British political spectrum, including right-wingers such as Winston Churchill and Austen Chamberlain, one-time friends of Mussolini's, fully endorsed the League of Nations for this very reason, was aimed at appealing to the dictator's 'decency' and 'common sense'. But in reality, Eden himself knew that his mission had virtually no chance of success, having seen for himself that the very virtues Mussolini would have needed to reach a compromise over Ethiopia were largely absent from the man himself. Mussolini spoke only of revenge, of the Italian need to avenge Adowa, while at the luncheon party that followed their first meeting the dictator 'strutted' and 'attitudinised' in a manner which left no doubt as to the extent of his egomania, and his inert inability to compromise under any circumstances. To Eden's solicitation that he avoid breaking up the League by taking his country out of it Mussolini made no comment. No doubt he would have been delighted by such an outcome, although Eden was clearly nowhere near grasping this fact.

To no one's great surprise Mussolini rejected the 'Zeila Plan'. If he accepted it, it would mean that Ethiopia would become a 'maritime power' and under

[47] *DDI*, 8, I, 'Colloquio del sottosegretario agli Esteri Suvich con 'Ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna a Roma, Drummon, 19 June 1935; *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 315, Drummond to Hoare, 19 June 1935.

[48] ASMAE, Carte Grandi, busta 43, fascicolo, 1, Suvich to Grandi, 21 June 1935.

the protection of Great Britain at that. Neither was he prepared to accept deals brokered by third parties, especially as Italy had already spent very large sums on resolving this matter independently of others. Besides, Laval had to all intents and purposes already given him a 'free hand in Ethiopia' during his visit to Rome in early January. Eden's belief that the French foreign minister had simply granted Italy 'economic concessions' in the country was wholly mistaken. During the second meeting held at Eden's request the following evening he again tried to force Mussolini to face up to his League obligations and to understand that Britain could not act unilaterally in the Ethiopian matter outside of the Geneva Assembly. Again Eden's fine words and sentiments were to no avail. His negotiating hand considerably strengthened by the agreement with Laval, Mussolini repeated that for Italy this was a question of national security and that all he asked was for a regime in Ethiopia similar to that of Britain in Egypt. 'If I can give one word of advice to Great Britain', the *Duce* added conclusively, 'it is to simply leave us alone'.[49]

Eden left Rome on the morning of 26th June expressing his regret, en route for Paris where he would have to justify the Anglo-German Agreement to a highly irate French government. His mission in Italy had been a dismal failure and his encounters with Mussolini formal but tense. There had been no meeting of minds between the two contrasting personalities of the *Duce* and the vain, fashionable, old Etonian Anthony Eden. What had made Eden's task wholly pointless had been the fact that the Zeila Plan had already been leaked in the British press prior to his arrival in Rome, which only served to undermine his position totally. Certainly, legends and myths aplenty have sprung up since the meeting took place in the intense heat of the Roman summer. Eden himself later insisted that Mussolini had been at all times polite and the mood of the meetings cordial. Aloisi and Ambassador Grandi viewed it rather differently claiming that Eden had been 'stunned' by Mussolini's blunt rejection of the proposals and that the 'young upstart' from the British Cabinet had been the recipient of a sound 'thrashing' by the *Duce*.[50]

The fact that Eden later claimed his meetings with Mussolini to have been perfectly cordial and devoid of any animosity was largely irrelevant. The British government, for all its previous lip service to the 'sanctity' of the League of Nations and of the importance of Fascist Italy adhering fully to the Geneva Covenant, had acted outside the organisation's legal and ethical boundaries in making its offer to Mussolini. On the morning of Eden's departure for Paris Suvich reiterated Mussolini's conviction that Hailie Selassie now viewed Britain

[49] *DDI*, 8, I, numbers 430, 431 and 433, 'Colloquio del Capo del Governo e Ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, con il Ministro per gli Affari della S.D.N. Britannico, 24–25 June 1935; see also Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 220–229; Baer, *The Coming of the Italian–Ethiopian War*, pp. 194–199; R. Mallett, 'Fascist Foreign Policy and Official Italian Views of Anthony Eden in the 1930s', *Historical Journal*, volume 43, number 1, (March 2000), pp. 164–166.

[50] Aloisi, *Journal*, 25 June 1935; *DDI*, 8, I, number 475, Grandi to Mussolini, 2 July 1935.

as Ethiopia's 'backer'. There would be no point in Italy accepting the offer of the Ogaden even if it had been an acceptable one, he told Eden, because the Ethiopian government still sought 'a rectification of the Ogaden frontier'. Suvich claimed that it would never be Fascist Italy that would 'provoke a crisis of the League of Nations' but this was a shallow and dishonest claim. Mussolini's determination to conquer and occupy a fellow League member state tested the Geneva Assembly and it failed that test comprehensively. Great Britain with its wealth and global might had not been able to persuade the *Duce* to pursue the path of compromise and negotiation, and was now forced into making shady, desperate deals to stave off a war in East Africa at a time of grave crisis in Europe and within its own imperial defence system. It did not bode well for the future.

Once Eden had gone, the Fascist press, and indeed Mussolini himself, soon exposed what they saw as the hypocrisy and double standards of the Baldwin government and its official representative. As Drummond noted in a letter to Hoare on 2nd July state-sponsored, anti-British invective now dominated the front pages of all Italian newspapers, which were proclaiming that Britain had totally failed to understand the Fascist position on the Horn of Africa. *Il Giornale d'Italia* heavily criticised the recent British initiative on the grounds that Italy had been offered nothing but 'barren desert' with which it was already replete. The *Tribuna* went further, accusing London of blanket hypocrisy and of making a risible 'sacrifice on the altar of the League', while at the same time providing Ethiopia with 'an outlet to the sea'. No doubt this was a cynical mechanism for defending Ethiopia should it ever be attacked. For the Fascist media British hypocrisy was writ large across the entire 'Zeila Plan', but of course Mussolini's central role in provoking the entire crisis and refusing to reach a sensible solution to it was never mentioned.[51]

For his part, the *Duce* ratcheted up the anti-British hostility of the Fascist press by provocative and incendiary statements of his own in the weeks after Eden's visit. On 25th July in an interview for the French daily *Echo de Paris* he heavily attacked Britain's attempted use of the League to protect and defend 'inferior peoples'. Had the League really been designed for this he asked journalist Henry de Kerillis. 'Will this be the forum before which 'negroes', the wild and backward people of the world, dragged the great powers who had revolutionised and transformed humanity'? Would the Geneva Assembly become the 'parliament' wherein Europe would succumb to the majority and a majority that would proclaim its decadence? As for the British, nothing had prevented them from creating a global empire, therefore just as they had pursued their own self-interests, he would simply 'think and act for Italy' in the same fashion. He had thought his policy towards Ethiopia through thoroughly and reflected much over the matter. All he was prepared to say now was that 'Italy was certain to impose its will' very soon.[52]

[51] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, number 340, Drummond to Hoare, 2 July 1935.
[52] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'Le mite africane dell'Italia fascista', *Echo de Paris*, 23 July 1935, pp. 106–110.

The Eden mission and its aftermath served to demonstrate to Mussolini that the British were not particularly driven to defend Ethiopia from a Fascist invasion and occupation. An inter-ministerial committee set up under the direction of Sir John Maffey in March 1935 finally presented its findings on 18th June, and famously judged that 'His Majesty's Government recognised almost the whole of Ethiopia as pertaining to the Italian sphere of influence' under the terms of the 1906 Tripartite Treaty. The committee concluded that 'No vital British interests exist in Ethiopia or adjoining countries sufficient to oblige His Majesty's Government to resist a conquest of Ethiopia by Italy', as long, of course, as British relations with Italy remained cordial after any occupation. While the Maffey Report was naturally a confidential document prepared to guide British policy makers through a major international crisis, it is clear that Mussolini did at some point obtain a purloined copy of the document from SIM from which he drew clear conclusions. When considered alongside the recent naval agreement and the offer of Zeila in lieu of a war that would inevitably damage the League of Nations, the *Duce* could only have concluded that the Maffey Report confirmed Britain's international strategic weaknesses. In Mussolini's estimation the British government remained unlikely to risk precious naval and air assets in the defence of a country that John Maffey had criticised as being 'irremediably barbarous and uncivilised'.[53] Although it remains unclear when Mussolini actually obtained his copy of the stolen report from Fascist military intelligence, what can be said is that his claims that Italy's was, in part, a 'civilising mission' in Ethiopia became more frequent in the months prior to the invasion on 3rd October. No one could ever claim that the *Duce* was not a master at using the words of his opponents against them.[54]

THE GATHERING STORM

Back in early March Badoglio had prepared a detailed and comprehensive planning orientation document for Mussolini and the Army High Command on his own initiative, but no doubt with the hidden objective of highlighting De Bono's 'deficiencies' in both the logistical and operational planning aspects of the war. Badoglio's memorandum reinforced the widely accepted idea that the Eritrean front should take priority, and confirmed the validity of Mussolini's 'wait and see' policy contained in his 30 December 1934 directive. Badoglio strongly recommended that Fascist forces deployed on the Eritrean highlands should remain within their defensive positions, encouraging the Ethiopians to attack them first. He stressed the vital importance of Italian air power in the imminent conflict, and encouraged Valle's *Aeronautica* to 'rain down bombs' on the enemy forcing them out into the open where they would be vulnerable

[53] *DBFP*, Second series, XIV, appendix II, 'The Maffey Report', 18 June 1935, p. 752.

[54] De Felice, *Gli anni del consenso*, pp. 622–623; for a broader discussion of Italy's sense of mission as perceived within society see, De Bocca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale*, chapter 4.

to attack by ground forces. If air assaults against the enemy did not succeed in forcing them to attack Italian front-line positions, Badoglio foresaw a final, riskier strategy, namely an advance into Ethiopian territory towards the ultimate objective, Addis Ababa, some 700 kilometres away. Hearkening back to the dreaded defeat at Adowa almost forty years previously, Badoglio concluded by warning Mussolini that Italy's attack on the Abyssinian Empire 'represented, without any doubt whatsoever, the most difficult task that could be undertaken in Africa by any European nation'.[55] Given the political climate now generated by the very prospect of such a war Badoglio was absolutely right.

By early July as the arguments between London and Rome rumbled on with no sign of any breakthrough, the time for that 'most difficult task' was fast approaching. Despite the close proximity of the invasion date, problems and disputes between the Army High Command and the Colonial Ministry continued to bedevil Fascist military preparations. On 7th July Mussolini forwarded to Badoglio a new operational plan for the northern front completed by De Bono in mid-June, which seemed to adhere closely to the Marshal's earlier strategic guidelines and met with the dictator's general agreement. Badoglio, who remained determined to wrench control of the war effort from De Bono, soon found a number of flaws in the document and his criticisms were in part endorsed by the head of his secretariat Visconti Prasca. Both men concurred that the De Bono plan conformed to the guidelines set out in Badoglio's 6th March recommendations even though the new study placed less importance on a 'deep penetration' of enemy territory, or in the comprehensive use of air power against the Ethiopians.

Badoglio's letter to Mussolini of 9th July rejected De Bono's plan of operations completely and highlighted what he believed to be a number of serious oversights in the Colonial Ministry's planning. According to Badoglio De Bono had extensively addressed the 'topographical' dimensions of the land offensive but the Marshal remained of the opinion that conditions on the ground might actually compel De Bono to 'significantly alter the composition of his troop columns', and quite possibly at the very last minute. De Bono should reflect on that fact rather more. Badoglio reserved his harshest criticisms for what he viewed to be key aspects of the strategic planning process that De Bono had, yet again, seriously overlooked. First, confusion reigned over precisely when the *Aeronautica* would be fully prepared to undertake support operations for any army advance into Ethiopia. Badoglio had stipulated that 250 bombers would be required in order to 'inflict terror on the population' of Ethiopia, along with bombing raids against enemy troop positions across the frontier region. De Bono had been able to give no precise date for when air units and their bases would be operationally ready, with his estimates varying from late September to late October. Air Chief of Staff Valle had informed Badoglio that

[55] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Oggetto: Direttive strategiche per gli scacchieri eritreo e somalo', Badoglio to Mussolini, 6 March 1935.

not only would air units need to be re-assembled after being shipped by sea to Massawa, but pilots would also need to be trained and prepared for operations in that particular theatre. When would the air force be ready to fight its air war Badoglio asked? Did De Bono intend to launch the campaign without bomber units, the only effective means of inflicting surprise on the Ethiopians? In dismissing the De Bono plan Badoglio warned Mussolini that the minister had yet to demonstrate whether supply lines from the Eritrean highlands to the Adigrat–Adowa–Axum defensive lines were likely to be fully operational in time, nor could he show with any clarity how much material could be moved so as to ensure that front-line forces remained adequately supplied. Much material still needed to be shipped to the region and the logistical situation in Eritrea still left much to be desired. Badoglio completed his dismantling of De Bono's plan of operations by criticising the manner in which the colonial minister regarded an Italian victory as something of a foregone conclusion. De Bono seemed to have developed the view that 'a stroke of good fortune would force the enemy to surrender'. This approach was little more than a dangerous illusion the likes of which had already been shattered during Italian operations in Libya and during the course of the Great War. 'The war', Badoglio stressed, 'would be long and bitter' and there was no point in De Bono harbouring absurd expectations that anything short of a major battle would determine its outcome.[56]

As July wore on the tense stand-off between the Mussolini regime and the Baldwin government continued to generate considerable tension and suspicion between the two capitals. The Foreign Office regularly insisted that it was not at all concerned with any threat to British interests that might follow Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, but instead the effect this conquest might have on the legitimacy of the League. Mussolini and his officials suspected otherwise. The *Duce*'s fears about British enforcement of League policy through sanctions or even military intervention had, it should be recalled, led him to place the *Marina* and *Aeronautica* on high alert in the period after Stresa. Military intelligence reports from Mogadishu that summer only further fuelled his fears that while British statesmen denied they were trying to thwart an Italian invasion, this was untrue. One report from mid-June claimed that Britain's 'hostile attitude' towards Fascism's 'Ethiopian programme' was generating rumours that Ethiopia would become a British protectorate in order to prevent the country falling into Fascist hands. In fact, the rumour was now so widespread that not even British officials such as Colonel Clifford, who had been present at Wal Wal the year before, had made any effort to deny it. There was every possibility that Hailie Selassie would demand that his country become a British mandate in order to forestall the impending Fascist invasion.[57]

[56] ACS, Carte Badoglio, busta 4, 'Oggetto: Piano operativo per l'Africa orientale', Badoglio to Mussolini, 9 July 1935; see also Visconti Prasca to Badoglio, 8 July 1935.

[57] ACS, Carte Graziani, scattola 2, 'Notiziario Africa Orientale, SIM Mogadishu, 16 June 1935.

Given the findings of the Maffey Report in mid-June it seems unlikely that the Baldwin administration had any intention of seeking any mandate over Ethiopia. Relations with Mussolini were already inflamed enough over the entire question and the dictator would no doubt have responded by leaving the League of Nations immediately, and quite possibly launching a series of attacks on Malta and other British positions in the Mediterranean. But the fact of the matter was that the *Duce* and key Fascist officials continued to mistrust the British government, and this in itself did little to reduce tensions that reached boiling point by the early days of autumn. In meetings with Vansittart and Hoare in July, Grandi issued menacing threats to the effect that should Britain invoke any formal League action against Italy, the two countries would become permanent enemies and the hitherto tranquil imperial waterway that was the Mediterranean would become a problem region for Britain. The ambassador warned that should the British government carry out its threat, as reported in a recent issue of the *Daily Express*, of an economic boycott against his country it 'would inevitably lead to war'.

With preparations for the Ethiopian campaign still far from complete and relations between Badoglio and De Bono's respective teams as antagonistic and mutually hostile as ever, the last thing Mussolini needed was the possibility of concerted Anglo-French League action. The dictator had nothing to fear. The French government were determined to meet commitments that stemmed from the Mussolini–Laval Accords and that summer Badoglio and his French counterpart, General Maurice Gamelin, concluded a military agreement that bound France and Italy together in any war against Hitler's Germany.[58] The French, unable to secure any serious support against Nazism from their *Entente* partners the British, therefore needed their new Italian allies and clearly had no intention of joining League action against them. Eager to see the crisis between Britain and Fascism resolved Laval did agree to a proposal by Hoare that the three countries should meet as co-signatories of the 1906 Triple Agreement, and seek finally to resolve the current impasse. Mussolini knew full well that for his British adversaries this would possibly be the last throw of the political dice before his invasion of Ethiopia began in early October.

[58] *DDI*, 8, I, number 480, Suvich to Mussolini, 3 July 1935.

9

Battle Lines

August–October 1935

By the high summer of 1935 the world looked on anxiously as the international order struggled to produce a formula to diffuse the explosive dispute between Fascist Italy and Great Britain. There was, it must be said, little tangible support for Mussolini's unscrupulous designs on the independent Ethiopian state outside of Italy itself, especially so within large swathes of British society. In July a short pamphlet by the British League of Nations' Union information officer, Freda White, laid the blame for a crisis that threatened to engulf the entire world firmly at Mussolini's door. Miss White's assertion that 'Italy is the prime mover of the crisis' met with considerable resonance. In Great Britain groups of pro-League supporters spoke of forming a corps of volunteers that would fight alongside the Ethiopians in the coming war, and in general politicians such as Samuel Hoare noted that public opinion in his country seemed to be hardening against Fascism. For many both in Britain and beyond, in Africa, the Middle East and France among many other countries, the time had come to put aside the mistakes made at the time of the Manchurian and other crises, and introduce economic if not even military sanctions against an openly aggressive Fascist Italy. With the full weight of the League behind them many believed that effective sanctioning would soon bring Mussolini to his senses and that Ethiopia could be saved from his grasp. The delusion of so many League advocates, when it came, was to prove devastating.

While the world waited for the drama to unfurl the Fascist regime frantically geared up Italian society and its armed forces for the impending war in Africa. Mussolini appointed a new Commissioner General for War Production (*Cogefag*), Alfredo Dallolio, the former Minister for Munitions during the Great War, in mid-July and throughout that summer and autumn factories supplying the war effort worked around the clock. Large numbers of troops were trained, fitted out and equipped for service in East Africa throughout those frenzied summer months, while supply depots were established and countless

chartered cargo ships brought into the service of the state to complete the mobilisation process. In Eritrea, where De Bono had faced serious difficulties with illness among many of his workforce, and where all building work had to be done from scratch, work to prepare the colony for its large influx of troops was also well underway. New air fields had been built, along with barracks and encampments, hospitals, warehousing facilities and, at Badoglio's insistence, a complex water system designed to supply the entire invasion army. De Bono had, finally and most importantly of all, succeeded in completing a new road linking Massawa to the two main garrisons for the army and air force on the Eritrean highlands, at Gura and Asmara. The *Marina*'s improvements to the docking facilities at Massawa and Mogadishu speeded up unloading times considerably, which meant that the deployment of troops from the metropolitan sphere could now take place without the interminable delays previously experienced by commanders on the ground.[1]

Naturally, the Italian war effort and the considerable levels of preparation required to launch the offensive against Ethiopia required a regular flow of capital from the coffers of the Italian Treasury. But by the summer of 1935, as Italy's standing in the international order began increasingly to suffer, dark financial clouds were already causing serious concern to the regime's financial administrators. Felice Guarneri, the *Sovrintendente* at the Ministry of Finance, noted that by August 'black' financial news began to reach his desk with 'increasing frequency'. First, the British-based Midland Bank, with whom the Mussolini regime had always enjoyed very cordial relations, withdrew its credit facilities from Italy. Shortly afterwards, the Westminster Bank announced that it would no longer honour trade transactions on the part of Italian banks based in London, on the basis that they would no longer have the necessary resources needed to complete any outstanding business. As the month of August wore on the situation worsened considerably for the regime. Guarneri learned that Swedish cellulose exporters had been advised, by their own banks, to inform Italian clients that no shipments were to be dispatched to Italy unless payment was made in advance. Gradually, all credit facilities to Italian banks were withdrawn by foreign banking houses, with brokers and commercial firms refusing to deal with their subsidiaries in London and New York. The impact of the 'financial sanctions', as Guarneri termed them, was soon felt. In the six months up to January 1936 the total yearly value of bills of exchange transactions between Italian and foreign commercial interests fell from 313 million lire in August 1935 to 11 million lire. As the *Sovrintendente* noted, the damage to the Italian economy was 'grave', albeit nowhere near as bad as the architects of the sanctions had hoped. Nevertheless, with virtually all foreign credit facilities gone, the Fascist economy was now only able to purchase overseas goods by making further use of its dwindling gold reserves. Should the League Council eventually decide to impose tough, comprehensive economic sanctions

[1] Baer, *The Coming of the Italo–Ethiopian War*, pp. 244–245.

on Italian trade once the war had begun, it was difficult to see how any assault on Ethiopia would not be brought to an abrupt halt.[2]

Faced with mounting British opposition to his war as well as the evaporation of all Italian credit facilities abroad, Mussolini elected to publish a fulsome justification for his coming attack on Ethiopia. In a now famous article, 'The Irrefutable Fact' published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* on 31st July, the *Duce* set out the reasons, as he saw them, underpinning his need to resolve Italy's difficulties with the East African state. Many reasons had been attributed to his decision to wage war on Ethiopia by the foreign media, Mussolini began, and these had already been exposed as irrelevant and marginal by the Italian press. But two major 'explanations' for the Fascist war needed clarification he added, because neither truly defined Italy's justification for waging it. Some claimed that Italy intended to occupy Ethiopia in order to bring to an end the slavery openly practised there, and a slavery that the Ethiopians themselves had promised to abolish upon being admitted to the League, but had failed to do so. But Italy was not making military preparations in the East African region to bring slavery to an end in Ethiopia. 'The abolition of slavery is not our objective', Mussolini wrote, 'but will be the logical consequence of our policy'. Mussolini also dismissed out of hand any racial motivation for his decision to invade Ethiopia. In a somewhat sarcastic sideswipe at Nazi racism he declared that, 'we do not intend to present ourselves to the world as the vexillaries for the white race', especially so given that the greatest opposition to Fascism did not hail from Harlem but from 'many genuinely white people in Europe and America'.

Mussolini's article set out two familiar, and it must be said, morally dubious reasons for the regime's decision to 'deal' with the troublesome Ethiopian state. The 'vital needs' of the Italian people, in short space within which to expand, were urgent in a country with Italy's geographic limitations and could only be met by expansion overseas, the dictator argued. For the regime Ethiopia was the logical choice for such expansion. Beyond that, Mussolini repeated his usual determination to ensure Italy's 'military security in East Africa', in order for Italy to be certain that it could maintain its crucial role in Europe without the fear of difficulties elsewhere. This security problem could have only one solution and this was a solution that Italy alone would find, 'with Geneva, without Geneva, against Geneva', if necessary. None of Mussolini's arguments were especially convincing. The 'vital needs' of the Italian people were not likely to be met through the successful colonisation of Ethiopia. The landlocked country possessed few if any natural resources, was prone to frequent droughts and was characterised by a largely mountainous and desert terrain, presumably the reason it remained the only independent state on the African continent. As for Mussolini's security problems these could have been resolved without recourse to war, and he knew it. The 1906 Tripartite Treaty

[2] Guarneri, *Battaglie Economiche I*, pp. 377–380.

on Abyssinia made provision for the three signatories to cooperate together in order to safeguard interests in countries bordering with Ethiopia. Under the terms of the same treaty Italy, France and Great Britain could also restrict or prevent arms sales to Addis Ababa, thus keeping any aggressive designs in check. Mussolini could, of course, have chosen to refer Ethiopia to the League Assembly after the Wal Wal incident, and had the matter debated and dealt with legally. Instead, he turned his back on all of these options, and chose the path of aggression and war.[3]

AUGUST HEAT

In Italian society the month of August is a key calendar event punctuated by the feast of *Ferragosto*, a traditional Imperial Roman holiday devoted to the goddess Diana, but in more recent times dedicated to the Christian feast of the Assumption. Normally it is a happy, boisterous occasion during which Italians enjoy a large lunch after attending Mass, and rejoice in the pleasures of the summer vacationing season. It is normally a time of packed beaches and empty cities, a time when everyone, from farm labourers to senior officials, savoured life and relaxed with friends and family. In 1935, however, the month of August was not to prove especially imbued with a festive spirit, and many of the key figures in the regime's hierarchy were busy either preparing for the imminent war with Ethiopia or dealing with an increasingly troublesome British government. August 1935 was to be a month when an armed confrontation between Italian Fascism and Great Britain seemed increasingly unavoidable, and when the people of Italy seemed destined to face the full force of international law. Naturally Mussolini and his henchmen continued to blame the Baldwin government for this. The prudent, common sense cautions against antagonising the might of the British Empire, given to the *Duce* by so many senior regime figures, was now long forgotten as the political temperature rose unabated.

Even as the ink dried on Mussolini's late July justification for attacking Ethiopia, 'The Irrefutable Fact', news reached him of a troubling new direction in British policy towards the crisis. Prior to a visit to Paris by the now widely reviled Anthony Eden, Hoare had sent his colleague a briefing document to be used during his conversations with Pierre Laval, which the latter handed over to Pompeo Aloisi in Geneva just hours later.[4] Aloisi, rather taken aback, was shocked by the contents, declaring that 'This is terrible for us.' It appeared, he noted in his *Journal*, that the British Cabinet had revealed its true opinion of the Mussolini regime, was concerned about the potential fate of the League of Nations and the Empire, and was determined at all costs to prevent Italy waging war. In truth this was not Samuel Hoare's, the author's, finest diplomatic hour, and was to be outstripped only by his poorly conceived 'secret'

[3] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'Il 'Dato' Irrefutabile', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 31 July 1935, pp. 110–111.
[4] Aloisi, *Journal*, 31 July 1935.

pact with Laval of December that year, which proposed to dismember Ethiopia to Mussolini's advantage so as to end his damaging war with Ethiopia. The memorandum caused a terrible furore among Mussolini's inner circle. Hoare described Fascist policy as 'opportunist and incalculable', and its open challenge to world opinion and public law would not make it less so. He warned that 'an exhausting African adventure' lasting months or even years would see Italy's European position decline, and that Mussolini personally would have to bear the blame for the inevitable reverses that would ensue within Italy. Hoare doubted the ability of Italy to finance the war, especially should it become a protracted one, and described the conflict itself as 'a plain war of aggression' which would impact very badly upon the reputation of the League. Stressing that British public opinion remained firmly pro-League, Hoare warned that, 'unhappily', his country may be 'called upon to go to war in defence of (the) international order', which would be seriously undermined if the principle of collective action was not fully endorsed and implemented by the Geneva Assembly. Hoare even went as far as to say that an Italian 'reverse' in Ethiopia could well, 'create or encourage amongst the native races a spirit which may assume unfortunate forms and greatly increase administrative difficulties' in the British and French Empires.[5]

Principally what mattered most to the Italians about the note were not Hoare's clumsy remarks and speculations about the potential fallout from any Ethiopian conflict but, rather, whether Britain was actively preparing to confront the Mussolini regime in order to defend the League of Nations. The answer to this question, however, lay in Paris as much as it did in London, for the British Cabinet reached the conclusion that fateful summer that 'the United Kingdom … must not take action against Italy without the certain support of France, assured and worked out in advance'. If the Laval government were to give guaranteed support to Britain in any economic or military sanctioning of Fascist Italy, then invariably the *Duce* would have no choice but to back down. On the other hand, the absence of French support would lead to an Italian success in East Africa, and effectively the end of the League of Nations as a legitimate international security organisation.[6] As it transpired Laval and his colleagues were anything but disposed towards taking a firmer, joint Franco–British line against Mussolini at this point. Paris' main strategic concern remained the threat of Hitler's Germany, and the Anglo–German Naval Agreement had very adequately indicated that London would pursue its own interests when dealing with the menace of Hitler. Throughout the series of three-way conversations that took place at Geneva in early August, Laval continued to support his friend Mussolini, avoiding any idea that he would side with Britain in order to force Mussolini to back away from his Ethiopian war.

[5] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, number 402, Hoare to Clerk, 29 July 1935.
[6] Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 48.

The *Entente* powers were plainly divided, and the *Duce* was to prove more than capable of exploiting such a division for his own purposes.[7]

If Pierre Laval was determined to safeguard his relationship with Mussolini and the Fascist regime, then the French military also remained steadfastly loyal to the idea. The Gamelin–Badoglio accords concluded in late June had planned for the sending of an Italian expeditionary army to eastern France in the event of a Nazi invasion, and for the French to send a force to northern Italy should Hitler attempt another coup in Austria. By the first days of August, as the Anglo–Italian crisis began to develop rather darker undertones, both military staffs were actively studying the entire strategic framework and preparing their respective operational plans.[8] On the strength of what seemed to be an emerging Italian–French military alliance it was unlikely, therefore, that Gamelin and the French High Command would easily abandon their burgeoning relationship with the Italians. This fact became abundantly clear when Gamelin summoned the Fascist military attaché to France, Arturo Kellner, to a meeting in Paris on 1st August.

As soon as Kellner arrived at the General's headquarters the latter enthusiastically announced that the Laval government had approved the agreement reached with Badoglio in late June in full, confirming that the strategic directives decided upon in Rome had already been sent to the French army's chief of staff, General Colson, for implementation. Gamelin's obvious enthusiasm and bonhomie set the tone for the remainder of the meeting, which directly touched upon the current difficulties underpinning relations between Britain and Italy over Ethiopia. After requesting Badoglio's presence at French army manoeuvres in the Reims–Epernay area between 2nd and 24th September in order to confer the *Grand Croix de la Légion d 'Honneur*, France's highest honour, on the Marshal personally, the conversation quickly turned to the current international situation. It was vital, Gamelin emphasised, 'that France and Italy remain militarily strong, and tightly bound together' now that their relationship had undergone such a profound and positive transformation. In terms of Mussolini's ongoing difficulties with the British Gamelin could hardly be accused of appearing to be a staunch anglophile. The new alignment between France and Fascist Italy, the General went on, would undoubtedly create a new balance of power in both the Mediterranean and Europe, a declaration which would no doubt have led the Italians to conclude that a new Franco–Italian axis would deal not only with Nazi militancy but also British stubbornness amid the current tense situation. Gamelin reinforced this sense considerably by indicating that Britain now found itself in a 'new military situation' as regard its Mediterranean interests, and that this situation stemmed from the Franco–Italian alliance. British policy towards Fascist claims in East

[7] Aloisi, *Journal*, 31 July–3 August 1935; De Felice, *Gli anni del consenso*, p. 672.

[8] USSME, H-6, racc. 12, fascicolo I-6 – '0 – Piani di guerra', 'Coordinamento nell'impiego delle forze armate', Army High Command, Operations Department to Badoglio, 2 March 1936.

Africa had to date proved little short of disastrous, having had 'grave repercussions in the Muslim world' to the detriment of both Britain's own Empire and France's. The British, Gamelin inferred, had simply got it all wrong. Kellner should convey a clear message to his superiors concerning the whole difficult situation: 'the French military authorities will follow Italy's forthcoming action against Ethiopia with full solidarity.'[9]

Such encouragement from both Laval and the French military inevitably stiffened Mussolini's resolve and sense of defiance towards the British in the crucial weeks prior to the invasion date. As the dictator noted in a telegram to Grandi in London, as far as he was concerned the Baldwin government was clearly intent on pursuing two irreconcilable goals, the first of 'salvaging the League of Nation's prestige', and the other of 'ensuring European collaboration' against Hitler. This was little short of a 'political illusion' and demonstrated the manner in which London 'totally misunderstood the psychology of Fascism'. If Baldwin and his colleagues believed that pursuing 'openly hostile activities' towards Italy over the Ethiopian question could be separate and distinct from European issues, they were plainly mistaken. The British simply could not pursue a hard line towards Fascism in Africa while attempting to achieve a working consensus with his government over European security questions. There could only be one outcome to such a policy if the British were to pursue it indefinitely: Italy would be compelled to leave the League Assembly.[10]

The intransigent and confrontational tone of 'Sam' Hoare's note to the French government, designed presumably to remind Laval and his ministers whose side they were on, served simply to entrench the Fascist regime and fuel the *Duce*'s already enflamed ire. As Maurice Catoire wrote in his diaries Britain's opposition to the regime's plans to annexe Ethiopia had only served to generate resentment and to unite the whole country behind the dictator. 'I find the Italians more determined than ever', Catoire wrote, 'in spite of the Geneva accords they are completing their preparations in depth'. Britain's continued opposition had only had the effect of 'inflating Italian pride and ensuring that public opinion swung firmly behind the *Duce*'. A little later, with the bilateral relationship between Britain and Italy more envenomed and acrimonious than ever, Catoire noted with some alarm that many Italians now spoke openly of an imminent 'Italian-English conflict' which many in Italy were now steeling themselves for.[11] By 8th August the French ambassador in London, Charles Corbin, confirmed to Vansittart that his government remained unlikely to take a 'strong line' against the Mussolini regime. Even if Mussolini could be persuaded to accept a compromise solution over Ethiopia, Corbin noted,

[9] ASMAE, Affari Politici: Francia, busta 16, fascicolo 1–2, 'Conversazione col Generale Gamelin', Kellner to Badoglio/SIM, 1 August 1935.

[10] *DDI*, 8, I, number 657, Mussolini to Grandi, 3 August 1935.

[11] Catoire, *Journal*, 6 August 1935.

he would most probably accept it only 'grudgingly and with bitterness'. The French were not prepared to take any chances with the Fascist regime and risk losing its military support against Hitler, or even worse witness its wholesale defection to the side of Hitler and National Socialism. In other words, if Britain chose to confront Fascism militarily or otherwise over Ethiopia they would be doing so alone.[12]

For Mussolini and senior officials at the *Palazzo Chigi* the sole priorities in the six weeks or so prior to invasion day were to avoid additional diplomatic complications, and being forced into some form of compromise arrangement by the London government. On 7th August, less than a week before the scheduled tripartite talks were due to get underway in Paris, Suvich produced a briefing document for Mussolini which dismissed any possibilities of a breakthrough in the current political deadlock. The British and Italian points of view were, he noted, 'diametrically opposed' to one another. Eden, now public enemy number one as far as the Fascist state was concerned, had only very recently declared in a radio broadcast that the three powers were obliged to guarantee the territorial integrity of Ethiopia under the terms of the 1906 Treaty. Given that the Mussolini regime fundamentally disagreed with this argument, it was clear that delegates from the two countries would arrive in Paris able to do nothing more than reconfirm their irreconcilable positions. Suvich was all too aware that the pressure was now on Aloisi to reach an agreement over Ethiopia with Eden and the British, and equally aware that Mussolini would never countenance a compromise under any circumstances. As an experienced statesman Suvich would have known that pressure from the British in Paris to settle the Ethiopian question would be intense. He would equally have been aware of the risks of appearing too intransigent, especially so where it involved Anthony Eden, whose approach towards the entire question was now increasingly based on confrontation designed to force the *Duce* into backing down.[13] Under the circumstances, he could recommend nothing other than that Aloisi stall British and French politicians at the talks, giving them the impression that the possibility for a negotiated settlement of Italian claims against Ethiopia existed, when he knew they simply did not. Ultimately, as Suvich put it, Italy 'must be given the possibility of pursuing its policy in Abyssinia', and that policy could only be the full and absolute control of the Ethiopian state. Aloisi in Paris must on no account make this policy objective clear at the very beginning of the Tripartite conference, as this would break up the talks prematurely and leave Italy exposed as the guilty party. This must be avoided at all costs.[14]

Tension prevailed between Italian Fascism and its former Stresa partners in the days leading up to the Paris Conference. On 9th August Grandi met with

[12] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, number 429, 'Note by Sir R. Vansittart of a Conversation with M. Corbin', 8 August 1935.

[13] Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 242–244.

[14] *DDI*, 8, I, number 684, 'Riunione a tre', Suvich to Mussolini, 7 August 1935.

Vansittart, although it was clear that both men had heard their respective arguments rather too many times, and that their mutual positions were, as Suvich had already suggested, deeply opposed and entrenched. Grandi fired off still more accusations about the 'perfidy' of British policy, citing the Anglo–German agreement as one example of this, and fulminated yet again that 'those who intend to get in our way or block our path are our enemies'. Vansittart retorted that Mussolini had never taken the trouble to understand the British position properly and that, if anything, Britain had 'even more grounds of complaint' against Ethiopia than the Italians had. Rather overstating his case, an emotional Grandi could not stop himself from declaring that neither Geneva nor the Tripartite conversations could 'prevent or alter Italy's course of action,' an outburst which amply exposed the petulance and hypocrisy underpinning Fascist policy.[15] Mussolini underscored it further during the course of his brief, if blunt, conversation with French Ambassador Chambrun just days later. In response to Chambrun's enquiry as to whether the Fascist regime would be in any position to defend Austria in the event of Nazi aggression, the *Duce* brusquely swept the question aside. He had no intention, he said, of concluding an agreement over the Austria question 'given that there is talk of sanctions against Italy.' As for any doubts about Italy's ability to defend Austria, Mussolini invited the ambassador to reflect on the fact that he would soon have one million men under arms. That, he stressed defiantly, would be more than enough to deal with the Ethiopians and any European security concerns simultaneously.[16]

CONFLICT WITH ENGLAND

Samuel Hoare's leaked report on changing British perceptions of Mussolini and Fascist Italy triggered alarm bells in Rome. Probably unintended by its author its chief effect was, nevertheless, to bring out all of the dictator's inner resentment against the 'avaricious' and 'plutocratic' imperial powers who had for so long dominated Mediterranean politics. Such criticisms of Anglo–French regional hegemony had been an integral part of the dictator's ideological belief system since at least 1919 of course, but now the prophecy had for him been fulfilled. It had become transformed from belief into conviction. Fascist Italy, the 'proletarian nation', now really did stand alone against the world in its quest to assert its rightful expansionist claims facing, ironically, the opprobrium and opposition of the world's greatest imperial nation. He could not let the moment pass to proclaim the accuracy of his original prediction or to show the world that a defiant Italian Fascism would never back down in the face of

[15] *DDI*, 8, I, number 691, Grandi to Mussolini, 8 August 1935; *DBFP*, second series, XIV, number 430, 'Note by Sir R Vansittart of a Conversation with Signor Grandi', 8 August 1935.

[16] *DDI*, 8, I, number 714, 'Colloquiio del Capo del Governo e Ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, con l'Ambasciatore di Francia a Roma, Chambrun', 12 August 1935.

vested interests and the threat of *force majeur*. Mussolini knew that after so many years in power his great moment had finally arrived, the moment when the whole world watched as he faced down the hated British Empire with a disdainful '*me ne frego*' cast in its direction. In a highly emotional state he informed French Ambassador Chambrun that Britain wanted to 'bring me, at any price, to a Fashoda'. They would never succeed, he added, the strain clearly audible in his normally confident voice. He went on:

> My victory in Abyssinia is certain. I have 170,000 infantry soldiers there and continue to send troops. Cost what it may, I will avenge Aduwa (sic) and if England, putting the mark on its hostility, which is henceforth patent, closes the Suez Canal despite the treaties, under the pretext that the Covenant, in the superior interest of peace, supersedes the previous agreements, I will open the passage myself. Out of desperation I would not hesitate, if it were necessary, to make war on (the British).[17]

Bluster and hyperbole alone would not open a Suez Canal closed to Italian shipping, let alone give Fascist Italy a fighting chance in any conflict with the Royal Navy. Only powerful and well-equipped armed forces and potent politico-military allies could hope to give Mussolini that. In mid-August 1935 the fact of the matter was that Italy was economically and militarily weak and, the French aside, without any effective international backing for either its projected assault on Ethiopia or, not surprisingly, a confrontation with Great Britain and the League of Nations. Nevertheless, even though Mussolini openly complained that British banks had already begun suspending all credit facilities to Italy, on 9th August the *Duce* ordered Badoglio to assess Italy's possibilities in the event of an armed clash with the British. Four days later the *Stato maggiore generale*, already heavily committed to operations in Eritrea and Somaliland, met in emergency session and discussed a contingency which each person present must have dreaded.

At 10 a.m. on 13th August the most senior commanders in Mussolini's much vaunted military machine gathered at the *Palazzo Viminale*, summoned by Badoglio to discuss the military implications of the current emergency with Great Britain. The mood among the gathering was serious and anxious, as the Marshal announced that the meeting had been ordered by the Head of Government to ascertain what steps could be taken in the event of 'extreme tension' with Britain. Immediately, it emerged that although Mussolini had strengthened ground forces in Libya by ordering the deployment of the *Assietta*, *Cosseria* and *Metauro* divisions to Libya, any war would be directed against British imperial communications and would, therefore, be largely aero-naval in focus. Mussolini was aware that the Royal Navy was at that time experiencing serious strategic overstretch given the threat posed by the *Kriegsmarine* and the Imperial Japanese Navy. But would the *Marina* and the *Aeronautica* seriously prove capable of exposing weaknesses in the British defensive chain?

[17] Mussolini cited in Baer, *The Coming of the Italian–Ethiopian War*, p. 255.

Giuseppe Valle and Domenico Cavagnari did not, as it transpired, believe that Italian operational capability could hope to deliver much should war with the British actually break out. Although both Chiefs-of-Staff gave a clear sense that the *Aeronautica* and *Marina* would be ready to undertake operations by the end of August, the truth of the situation lay in the detail. As Valle pessimistically warned, 'The possibility of hostilities between Italy and Britain comes at a time of crisis for the Air Force.' Although it currently possessed 346 aircraft, including around 156 bombers, the majority had, as Badoglio put it, 'very limited capabilities'. The most the air force could realistically do was to mount bombing raids on the British naval base at Malta, given that the extremes of the Mediterranean were beyond operational range. Air operations against Royal Navy units operating in the Mediterranean generally were also likely to prove ineffective, in light of the poor showing of the air force in air to sea bombardment exercises in 1934.

When it came to taking on the Goliath that was the Royal Navy Cavagnari wasted no time in stressing the colossal disadvantages that the *Marina* faced. The British were able to operate two 'organically structured naval squadrons', each made up of five battleships, two battle cruisers, ten *Washington* type heavy cruisers, two destroyer flotillas, a submarine flotilla, aircraft carriers, modern submarines as well as other naval forces based in India, the Cape of Good Hope, the Far East and so on. In the Mediterranean the Royal Navy had deployed its two fastest battleships of the *Queen Elizabeth* class, the battle cruisers *Hood* and *Renown*, large numbers of submarines and aircraft carriers. With such numbers of potent warships Britain could very easily blockade the Mediterranean at Gibraltar and Suez with comparatively fewer ships, and sweep the sea attacking Italian naval and merchant vessels with impunity. The Admiral also cautioned against excessive optimism when it came to aero-naval operations against Malta, given that the naval forces based on the island 'will almost certainly be quickly moved from there' after the onset of hostilities. Summing up, Cavagnari presented the meeting with a doom-laden yet realistic assessment of Italy's position: 'Italy's total lack of battleship capability and the limited operational value of its Air Force render the possibility of war against Britain an extremely onerous undertaking.' Only if Fascist Italy made some show of aggressive intent would the British possibly think twice about the 'global and imperial complications that might be a consequence of the conflict'. As Badoglio instructed at the end of the meeting 'Plan B', the code name for the anti-British war effort, was nothing more than a 'wait and see' plan of operations, or as Federico Baistrocchi termed it, 'a non-passive defensive position'. Undoubtedly Mussolini's military leaders would have hoped that the order to engage Britain would never be given.[18]

[18] 'Meeting of the Supreme High Command held at the Palazzo Viminale, Rome, 13 August 1935', in R. Mallett, *The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism, 1935–1940*' (Frank Cass, London, 1998), appendix 2. The original document can be found in USMM, DG, busta 8-G, 'Processo verbale della riunione del 13 agosto 1935.'

The following day Badoglio informed Mussolini of the pessimism that had permeated practically the whole of the Chiefs-of-Staff meeting. Although Baistrocchi had expressed a little optimism regarding the *Esercito*'s prospects against the tiny British army, largely a force used to maintain order within Britain's sprawling Empire, the navy and air force stood little chance against formidable opponents. The most Cavagnari's fleet could hope to accomplish was, as Badoglio put it, 'maritime guerrilla warfare', which would be of little use when the Royal Navy began the systematic destruction of Italian coastal cities and industrial plants. Italian aircraft, meanwhile, were very outdated and the entire air force was 'passing through a grave crisis phase', which meant that units destined for East Africa would have to be diverted to the metropolitan sphere to plug gaps. Britain's six aircraft carriers with their 220 aircraft could, in the meantime, carry out 'swift and powerful bombing raids' across Italy. Not surprisingly Badoglio ended his report for Mussolini with the starkest of warnings. Although all of Italy remained outraged at the 'English attitude', a war against Britain in the Mediterranean would be little short of a catastrophe for Italy. The situation in which Italy would rapidly come to find itself would be, 'the gravest that our country has ever gone through during the eventful history of its formation and national consolidation'.[19]

With such a negative prognosis on Italian chances in any Mediterranean clash with Britain, it was clear that Mussolini's skills in realpolitik and a good deal of elaborate deception were likely to be needed in the event that London did finally support a League resolution for military action against Italy. What this meant chiefly was ensuring that in the weeks before invasion day Laval and his government continued to play their 'moderating' role in the crisis, and did not support any British initiative designed to prevent the Italian–Ethiopian war by whatever means. In London Grandi's soundings among the British establishment led him to reach the conclusion, on 15th August, that Britain would never go to war without full French backing. To date, he informed Mussolini, 'no measures have been taken in the eventuality of such a war either in Europe or in East Africa'. Only if the current situation was to 'change radically' and general hostility towards Italy grew far more widespread, would 'the British government consider the practicalities of military action against us'.[20]

As the date for the three-power showdown in Paris scheduled for 16th August approached, Mussolini continued to suspect that should the conversations yet again end in deadlock Britain might order the Royal Navy into action in support of a resolution by Geneva aimed at preventing the invasion. Still fuming at Hoare's leaked memorandum Mussolini's anger and nervousness would no doubt have increased markedly when Grandi reported, the day before the Paris meetings were due to begin, that Anthony Eden had pressed the British Cabinet to consider military action against Italy. Fortunately, for the time being

[19] Badoglio to Mussolini, 14 August 1935, cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, pp. 226–227.
[20] *DDI*, 8, I, number 740, Grandi to Mussolini, 15 August 1935.

at least, Ernle Chatfield and the naval staff proved reluctant to countenance any deployment of the Mediterranean Fleet against Italy owing to the fact that its operational strength, 'could not guarantee the success of any war operations against units of the Italian Navy and Air Force'.[21] Therefore, provided that Pierre Laval remained in power and determined to avoid being drawn into any vigorous action against the Italians, Mussolini could continue to pursue his uncompromising line over the entire Ethiopian matter. Most likely the *Duce* was not aware at that point that a conflict of ideas was emerging between the British Admiralty and the navy's commanders in the Mediterranean. Admiral Sir William Fisher, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, simply could not understand the feeble-minded attitude of the politicians in London. He felt more than able to 'blow the Italians out of the water with the ordinary Mediterranean Fleet', and was enthusiastic about deploying the Home Fleet to Malta prior to launching attacks against Italian shore bases. But, for the time being at least, such opinions went by unacknowledged in London, leaving Mussolini free to bully, strut and to threaten the very existence of the League of Nations he so detested.[22]

Shortly after 09:30 A.M. on the morning of 15th August Pompeo Aloisi checked into the exclusive *Prince de Galles Hotel* on the avenue Georges V in Paris, before immediately taking the short journey to the *Quai d'Orsay* to meet with Laval. Following Mussolini's instructions to the letter Aloisi emphasised that Italy would not back down over its decision to attack and conquer Ethiopia, and that the *Duce* expected continued French support in this enterprise in exchange for Fascist backing in the currently volatile European environment. Laval gave clear assurances that France intended to avoid any war over Ethiopia 'at all costs', but that he must in some way balance this with safeguarding the reputation of the League, the very backbone of French international policy. Laval insisted that the British 'did not have the spirit which we all supposed', and would give way to 'every economic concession' that the Fascist government desired during the forthcoming talks. But then, of course, current Fascist claims in East Africa went far further than simple economic questions.[23]

The next morning at 10:30 A.M. the Tripartite talks finally got underway in Laval's office at the French Foreign Ministry. Sure, at least for the time being, that Eden's attempts to get government approval for military sanctions against the Italians had, to date, fallen on deaf ears, Aloisi kept to Suvich's instructions that he reveal little or nothing about Fascist demands. As instructed Aloisi simply proposed that Paris and London endorse Italy's economic and political

[21] *DDI*, 8, I, number 747, Grandi to Mussolini, 15 August 1935; on Eden's perspective, see Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 248–250.

[22] S. Morewood, 'The Chiefs of Staff, the 'men on the spot' and the Italo-Abyssinian emergency, 1935–1936', in D. Richardson and G. Stone (eds), *Decisions and Diplomacy – Essays in Twentieth Century International History* (LSE/Routledge, London, 1995), pp.94–95.

[23] Aloisi, *Journal*, 15 August 1935; *DDI*, 8, I, number 739, Aloisi to Mussolini, 15 August 1935.

'predominance' in Ethiopia, and strongly condemned the 'blind intransigence of states possessing wealthy empires' who now protested against Italy's rather more modest claims. Predictably, Eden flatly rejected any idea of Fascist political control over Ethiopia, a declaration which met with Laval's approval. Instead, the British delegates suggested that the Ethiopians make certain 'economic concessions' to Italy which, along with 'rights of settlement', would effectively 'give Italy by peaceful means a substantial portion of what she might seek by war'. Under the terms of the plan the Ethiopian government would be forced to undertake 'administrative reforms' and Italy would take the dominant role once the agreement had been enshrined in a new treaty. Eden and Laval even suggested the possibility of 'territorial cessions' once the agreement had been concluded, on the understanding that if Mussolini rejected it the French would have nothing left to offer, and Laval would 'range himself' with his British friends.

Mussolini was never likely to accept any last minute offer concerning Ethiopia that did not have full Italian dominion over the country as its main clause. Neither would he ever accept any deal involving Anthony Eden, for whom he harboured a simmering dislike, let alone one that entailed the threat of the French prime minister abandoning Italy in favour of his 'British friends', which he knew Laval could never seriously contemplate. On the evening of the 16th August the dictator accordingly rejected the latest Anglo–French proposal after Aloisi had telephoned it through to him. The proposals were, Mussolini confirmed in writing to his *chef du gabinet* the next day, 'absolutely unacceptable'. Resorting to his now familiar line of argument the dictator reiterated that the Ethiopian military threat, which according to him now totalled some 450,000 men, had to be dealt with. Geneva would offer nothing more than 'vague formulas' and the usual 'smokescreen' against the harsh reality facing the Fascist government. After all, Mussolini reasoned, the only outcome would be that this threat would be left intact to fight another day. Stressing that discussion on the entire Ethiopian topic was now exhausted, the *Duce* declared that any further attempts at a negotiated settlement were 'futile'. Clearly suspicious that the French may now elect to offer greater support to their *Entente* partners, the dictator ended his letter with a veiled warning to Laval. 'Would you thank Laval personally from me for all his efforts', he ordered Aloisi, 'and you might add that despite the failure of these efforts I will not modify the agreement set out in the January protocols, an agreement founded on frank and concrete friendship with France.'[24] The 'rupture' with Great Britain, as Aloisi termed it, had finally come and was never again to heal in Mussolini's lifetime.

The day 17 August 1935 marked the date when Fascist Italy finally and irrevocably identified the British Empire as its mortal and intractable enemy.

[24] *DDI*, 8, I, number 753, Aloisi to Mussolini, 17 August 1935 and number 767, Mussolini to Aloisi, 17 August 1935; Aloisi, *Journal*, 16 and 17 August 1935.

In the morning Suvich met with Drummond in Rome and, in declaring that the Paris conversations had 'already failed', went to great lengths to emphasise that with so many troops on the ground in East Africa, now was the moment for Italy to deal with the Abyssinian 'rogue' state. Were Italy to withdraw its 200,000 troops from Eritrea and Somaliland it would be a certainty that 'Abyssinian bad faith' would very soon rear its head again, and a second major and very costly deployment of Fascist forces would be needed to deal with it. To Drummond's comments that the current talks represented the last opportunity for a negotiated settlement, Suvich offered no reply. A political resolution had never been on the cards for the Fascist government, and at such a late hour it was totally out of the question that Mussolini would countenance such an idea.[25]

In London, Grandi was also in a resigned and defiant mood. In a lengthy despatch for Mussolini he placed great emphasis on the fact that no one in Whitehall had any illusions about the outcome of the Tripartite talks, which were widely viewed as doomed to failure. Nothing could stop the Italian people and its *Duce* now, he continued somewhat unctuously, and together they would resolve their country's security questions in East Africa without any external interference. Demonstrating the extent to which the relationship with Britain had deteriorated in recent times, the ambassador then delivered a blistering assault on the British statesmen he regarded as most responsible for bringing Fascist Italy to the brink of armed conflict with Britain. Anthony Eden and Robert Vansittart, he declared venomously to Mussolini, were 'the two most dangerous men in British politics' at this time. While Eden was, at present, little more than Vansittart's 'over ambitious glove puppet', it was in fact Vansittart who had had the greatest responsibility for Britain's hard line policy towards Italy over Ethiopia. In this man's eyes 'Italy had never counted for anything', except to act as an accessory in the Anglo–French alliance against Germany. Vansittart and his entourage could only conceive of Italy in pre-Fascist terms, namely as a mediocre south European nation and a pawn in the great power alignment against Hitler. The Paris conversations, from the Foreign Office's perspective, therefore had nothing to do with resolving the Ethiopian crisis, but were being used by Vansittart to 'blackmail the French' into applying sanctions against Italy, the logic being that if they failed today, they would also fail tomorrow against Hitler's Germany. With successive French governments having tried in vain for some 15 years to bind Britain to a formal alliance it was clear, Grandi concluded, that the crunch time had come in Anglo–French relations. No doubt Laval would remain loyal to Mussolini, and Vansittart's 'puerile and criminal' plans would fail. But one thing was certain, the *Duce* had successfully stood up to 'despotic British imperialism' and 'defeated and bent

[25] *DDI*, 8, I, number 762, 'Colloquio del Sottosegretario agli Esteri, Suvich con l'Ambasciatore di Gran Bretagna a Roma, Drummond, 17 August 1935.

the British Empire to his will'. Nothing and no one could help Ethiopia now except direct British military intervention.[26]

On the morning of 18th August Aloisi conveyed Mussolini's emphatic rejection of the compromise offer to Laval who was, according to the former, 'très impressionné'. Briefly the two men discussed the dictator's demands for a protectorate over Ethiopia, together with Anglo–French backing for a Fascist military occupation of key points in Ethiopia, none of which came to anything. Laval had plainly foreseen the rupture that had now taken place with the Italians, and both men agreed that the best solution was to conclude the entire matter in the best way that they could. He was, he told Aloisi, 'deeply disappointed in the collapse of his hopes' and asked whether Mussolini might still consider the British proposals as a basis for future negotiation. Without hesitating Aloisi rejected Laval's idea out of hand, pointing to Eden's dogged stipulation that Britain would only consider economic concessions to Italy in Ethiopia as the basis for any agreement. Clearly both recognised the seriousness of the events now unfolding around them. Aloisi attempted to blame the British government for the dangerous impasse that now hung over not only the tripartite talks but Europe as a whole, claiming that Eden and the British delegates had attempted nothing short of the breakup of the Italian–French relationship. In replying Laval made it clear that he took Mussolini's blunt refusal to negotiate as well as his statement concerning the January protocols very seriously. There could be no doubt that in repeatedly turning down every initiative put his way as a means of resolving the crisis over Ethiopia, the *Duce* now risked provoking a 'grave reaction' from global public opinion. Beyond that Mussolini's intransigence and unwillingness to listen was creating many difficulties within France. Months of resulting tension and fear had inevitably had their impact on the French popular perception of Mussolini and Fascism, Laval warned. He could not, he added, 'fail to consider the potential repercussions an Italian resort to war might have on the hoped for Italian-French collaboration' in Europe.[27]

On 18th August the final meeting of Tripartite Treaty signatories got underway. Just before the delegations met at the *Quai d'Orsay* Laval suggested to Eden that he reassure Mussolini of the British government's 'sincerity' in their determination to reach a lasting settlement of the current dispute. Eden stressed, no doubt genuinely, that the British government he represented 'would have collaborated wholeheartedly and loyally in our effort to bring about an arrangement within the League which would have been acceptable to Abyssinia', and ultimately 'secured a peaceful settlement of the dispute'. He went on to ask Aloisi directly whether, given that Mussolini had outrightly 'rejected the basis for discussion suggested to him by the French government', he personally could suggest a basis for which to salvage the current conversations. But despite some

[26] *DDI*, 8, I, number 765, Grandi to Mussolini, 17 August 1935.
[27] Aloisi, *Journal*, 18 August 1935; *DDI*, 8, I, number 767, Aloisi to Mussolini, 18 August 1935.

pressure from Laval to table some suggestion for continued negotiation Aloisi declined. Mussolini had already taken his decision and intended to conquer and occupy Ethiopia by force at the end of the current rainy season. A mere apparatchik such as the *Duce*'s *chef du cabinet* would not dare to speak on his behalf without prior consultation. Hence Aloisi merely confirmed that the Fascist regime could not accept a British proposal limited to granting Italy economic rights in Ethiopia, while Laval and Alexis Léger prepared to pen a press communiqué announcing that the conversations had ended in deadlock.[28]

In the days that immediately followed the failed tripartite talks tension and anxiety prevailed both in Rome and across Europe's capitals. Late on the evening of the 18th senior figures in the British establishment took stock of the volatile and dangerous climate that now prevailed as a result of the failed conversations, and prepared for the worst. Vansittart warned an exhausted and defeated Anthony Eden that 'you are faced with a first class international crisis', and suggested that the Mediterranean Fleet be reinforced as a priority.[29] The next day Vansittart, according to Aloisi, suggested over lunch that he might visit Mussolini from his vacation destination in Antibes and seek a private meeting with him so as to reduce the level of bilateral hostility between their two countries. The idea came to nothing. As Vansittart himself put it, should he visit Rome as part of his brief vacation, 'I should do no more than wreck the remains of a small rest by an unpleasant journey and a bad quarter of an hour.'[30]

There could be little doubt that had Vansittart visited Rome to meet directly with Mussolini he would have most likely befallen the same fate as Eden two months earlier. The *Duce* was in ebullient mood following the collapse of the tripartite talks, and the failure of the British in particular to halt the coming assault on Ethiopia. On 21st August Aloisi arrived back in the Italian capital and presented his report on the Paris meetings to the dictator to be met with glowing approval for the way things had gone. On previous encounters with the British and French governments, Mussolini declared, Aloisi had found himself bogged down in lengthy negotiations, but this time around he had truly excelled himself and avoided such entanglements. Now Fascist Italy was clear of political complications, free of any 'international hindrances'. Aloisi agreed, adding that everyone accepted that 'war is inevitable', and that the British and French could now only limit the effects of the invasion on themselves and on the League of Nations. Clearly satisfied the *Duce* instructed Aloisi to reinforce relations with Laval while scaling down the press campaign against Great Britain, both conceived of by him as means of giving the French Premier instruments with which to keep the pressure on the Baldwin government.[31]

[28] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, number 465, Clerk to Hoare, 18 August 1935.
[29] Baer, *The Coming of the Italo–Ethiopian War*, p. 267.
[30] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, number 466, Vansittart to Hoare, 18 August 1935.
[31] Aloisi, *Journal*, 21 August 1935.

The 'pressure' to which Aloisi alluded had a very simple rationale in those final days of August 1935. Before leaving Paris Mussolini's *chef du cabinet* had discussed the British attitude to Italy with Laval as a means of ascertaining what position Eden and his colleagues would now take. Already facing international financial pressure following the decision by many leading banks to withdraw credit facilities to Italian commerce, the Fascist regime now increasingly feared that broader and deeper economic sanctions might be considered once the Italian invasion was underway. Laval, at great pains to calm the poisonous atmosphere permeating British–Italian relations, assured Aloisi that he did not regard the Baldwin government as likely to push for any implementation of additional sanctions. The French prime minister, he informed Mussolini, was determined to reinforce his country's relations with Italy, a clear implication that France would never back any sanctions policy.[32] But key regime officials if not Mussolini himself, driven by their growing suspicion of what was now viewed as an Eden–Vansittart axis forged to bring Fascist Italy to heal, continued to doubt that Laval could hold out to British pressure for much longer. In London Grandi's sources appeared to confirm that Laval had warned Eden he would only support Britain over the Ethiopian question if sanctions remained off the agenda. Besides, Grandi added somewhat ambitiously, the British risked 'destroying the myth of a secure Mediterranean' should they provoke the Fascist regime by proposing such measures at Geneva. But nevertheless doubts remained, and Grandi could not give Mussolini any categorical assurance that the Baldwin Cabinet would not eventually seriously consider an implementation of sanctions, as a means of ending Mussolini's nakedly aggressive designs.[33]

Palpably troubled, Mussolini moved swiftly to flatter Laval and to ensure that the latter kept the pressure up on Eden to refrain from any further sanctioning of the Italian economy. On 21st August he instructed Vittorio Cerruti, transferred away from the Berlin Embassy at Hitler's request and now ambassador to France, to court Laval and inform him that his recent pro-Italian attitude in Paris had won him admiration from across Italy. Cerruti should then deliver the main message from the *Duce*, namely that he believed the Ethiopian question should be kept 'localised', thereby removing the risk that it might provoke serious tension within Europe. The ambassador should also be sure to remind Laval that Mussolini would not allow anything to, 'compromise the development of the Italo-French friendship as consecrated in the January protocols.'[34] The next day Cerruti reported that he had conveyed Mussolini's message to Laval who had, in turn, reconfirmed that the British had no intention

[32] *DDI*, 8, I, number 773, Aloisi to Mussolini, 19 August 1935.

[33] *DDI*, 8, I, number 781, Grandi to Mussolini, 21 August 1935; on this see also Cerruti's discussion with Laval on possible British-inspired League sanctions, *DDI*, 8, I, number 787, Cerruti to Mussolini, 22 August 1935.

[34] *DDI*, 8, I, number 783, Mussolini to Cerruti, 21 August 1935.

of proposing a sanctioning of Italy, or any prospective closure of the Suez Canal. But at the same Laval went out of his way to emphasise that he could not be seen to be making 'common cause' with the Fascist regime in public, and expressed the no doubt irksome view that Italy should still consider a negotiated end to its dispute with the Ethiopians. Once the Fascist armed forces had demonstrated their military superiority, which Laval presumed would be sometime after mid-September, he sincerely hoped that Signor Mussolini would reconsider the offer of economic penetration of the country that he had so recently rejected. Sensing that the urge to reconsider the Paris proposals had come indirectly from Eden, Cerruti immediately rebuffed the idea, stressing that Italy would not stop short of a total annexation of Ethiopia.[35]

After the Tripartite talks had collapsed on 18th August Anthony Eden, at Hoare's request, telephoned Stanley Baldwin, on vacation in Aix-les-Bains, requesting an emergency meeting of the Cabinet which was duly scheduled for the 22nd. By the 21st most of the Cabinet were in London amid massive press publicity and claims from Ramsay MacDonald that he viewed, 'the present situation as the most serious thing we have had to face since 1914'. Dino Grandi watched on anxiously as the press frenzy gathered pace and as Hoare invited a number of prominent non-government figures such as Winston Churchill, Lloyd George and George Lansbury to provide him with ideas on how to deal with the mounting crisis with Italian Fascism. Although in his subsequent despatch to Mussolini on the day's events the ambassador created the impression that 'nothing substantially new' had come out of any of the Cabinet deliberations, the sense of crisis in Whitehall would no doubt have given him real cause for concern. As he indicated to the *Duce* the Cabinet agenda had included a discussion on the likely effectiveness of sanctions, what form the sanctioning of Fascist Italy might take as well as what military measures the British government should implement in the event of Italian aggression. But, as Ambassador Grandi made expressly clear to Mussolini, more strident elements within Baldwin's Cabinet had begun pushing for a considerably tougher line to be taken against Italy. Eden, in particular, was at the forefront of attempts to demonise Mussolini, claiming that Fascist Italy had steadfastly refused to negotiate over Ethiopia and had disregarded its commitments to Britain and France as a co-signatory of the Tripartite Treaty. It was apparent that the Minister for League Affairs regarded Mussolini's Italy as something of a pariah state, and a tangible threat to British interests 'on the African continent and in the Mediterranean'. As evidence of the threat now posed by the Italians, Eden had produced reports of anti-British activities around Lake Tsana and attempts by Fascist agents in Egypt to foment 'anti-British agitation'. Clearly, Grandi warned, Eden's thesis was gaining momentum in London. On the same day that the Cabinet had met senior members of the Conservative Party discussed

[35] *DDI*, 8, I, number 787, Cerruti to Mussolini, 22 August 1935.

the menace Fascist Italy might pose to British interests once in control of Ethiopia.[36]

From his holiday villa in Riccione Mussolini reacted quickly to Grandi's reports of newly emerging anti-Italian trends within the British political leadership. On 25th August, in a nervous telegram to Cerruti in Paris, the *Duce* ordered the ambassador to make every effort to ensure that Laval maintained his position of support for Italy, while tempering any anti-Italian tendencies among key British figures such as Eden. The telegram was a mixture of Mussolini's customary bluster interspersed with a real sense of fear and desperation. On the one hand, the dictator instructed Cerruti to emphasise to Laval, 'without appearing obsessive', that it was now a matter of urgency that Italy avoided any risk of war with Britain. On the other, he lied about the 'calm' that supposedly permeated the high commands of the Fascist armed forces, and their undoubted air and submarine superiority over the British. In spite of this 'superiority', Mussolini added, Italy could not fight on multiple fronts. The *forze armate* could launch operations from Eritrea and with their French allies fight a simultaneous conflict against Germany on the Brenner. However, it was out of the question that Italy could fight on a third front against the British in the Mediterranean, and the only outcome of this would be the loss of Austria to Nazi Germany. Cerruti should make it plain to Laval that perhaps the best solution now was an even closer Italo–French military alliance, while his personal objective should be to ensure that Britain remained isolated and any idea of sanctions permanently off the agenda.[37]

Fascist threats of the complications Britain might eventually face in a Fascist-controlled Mediterranean, combined with official pressure on the French government to temper anti-Italian currents within the British political class, in a desperate bid to prevent any major implementation of sanctions, or worse, as August drew to its tumultuous close. In a meeting with Chambrun on the 26th Suvich listened to the ambassador's detailed account of his recent meeting with Baldwin at Aix-les Bains, and the suggestion, tabled by the British prime minister, that an agreement between their respective countries was still possible. Suvich swept the idea aside, and again rejected Chambrun's suggestion that a League solution to the Ethiopian crisis would be the best solution on the grounds that this 'did not correspond with our point of view'. Demonstrating the extent to which the various positions had now become deeply entrenched, Chambrun retorted that any Fascist attempt to conquer Ethiopia by force would 'seriously create difficulties with England', before repeating Laval's suggestion that negotiations should resume after the initial Italian military gains that autumn. Reminding Chambrun of the political reality facing France Suvich suggested that the ambassador ensured French policy focused on keeping British opposition to a minimum. 'An Italo-English war', he warned, 'would mean the

[36] *DDI*, 8, I, number 793, Grandi to Mussolini, 23 August 1935.
[37] *DDI*, 8, I, number 815, Mussolini to Cerruti, 25 August 1935.

end of the actual political system in Europe', given that Italy could never hope to fight a war on three fronts. A major disagreement between the Stresa powers, he added provocatively, meant giving Nazi Germany free reign to annexe Austria and to becoming the hegemonic power of Europe.[38]

Although Dino Grandi had frequently fuelled Mussolini's worst suspicions about Eden's efforts to secure tough League action against the Italians, the general view by the end of August was that the British government would not, or even could not, act at all. Ernle Chatfield had warned Vansittart and the Foreign Office in early August that the British armed forces were 'very unready' for any war with Italy, and that he was, in fact, surprised at the length of time it would take them 'before they could give any effective resistance to Italian action by land or air'. Chatfield counselled strongly against initiating any hostilities with the Italians until Britain was in a better position to do so, adding that the British Fleet was at that time 'immobilised', and the Home Fleet 'on leave and scattered'. Going into action now, he stressed, could prove disastrous, especially so if no specific guarantee of support had been given by Laval and the French government.[39]

Of course, the endless circus of Anglo–French politics, and Laval's reliance on Fascist Italy rather than Great Britain as his chief European ally against Hitlerism, rendered any such support elusive. As the crisis reached its hiatus Laval could therefore quite comfortably continue to reassure his Fascist friends that he did not believe Britain would ever 'set alight the European gunpowder' by proposing sanctions against Italy, and implementing a closure of the Suez.[40] He could also keep the Italians reliant on his timely interventions with the Baldwin government by denying Mussolini, for the moment, what he now wanted most, an even closer and binding politico-military arrangement with France designed largely to alienate the British. Therefore, by the end of August Grandi and presumably his leader Benito Mussolini could afford to gloat, at least outwardly. Britain's attempts to halt the *Duce*'s imperialist drive had so far all ended in failure. There was no sign of any sanctions policy from London, the ambassador wrote on 27th August, the *Duce*'s press interviews with United Press and other media organs denying any Italian threat to British interests had put paid to Eden's attempts to show otherwise, while the British Admiralty itself had declared its unreadiness for any war with Italy. Britain recognised Fascist Italy's power, he glowed, and had finally realised that it now faced their country's military might right across the Mediterranean. Mussolini would finally give Italy its African Empire, because he had already won the war in Europe and the Mediterranean.

[38] *DDI*, 8, I, number 819, 'Colloquio del Sottosegretario agli Esteri, Suvich, con l'Ambasciatore di Francia a Roma, Chambrun, 26 August 1935.

[39] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, number 431, Chatfield to Vansittart, 8 August 1935.

[40] *DDI*, 8, I, number 830, Cerruti to Mussolini, 27 August 1935.

'INFINITE SCORN IN OUR HEARTS'

Although Mussolini's diplomatic staff repeatedly warned the British government throughout the turbulent month of August that 'sanctions meant war' with Fascist Italy, the idea of such a prospect left many in the regime anxious and troubled. The Fascist military had been contemplating the prospect of such a clash with Britain since April. But at no point did Domenico Cavagnari or Giuseppe Valle believe that much could be achieved beyond a limited number of offensives against the island of Malta, a fact they spelled out very clearly for Badoglio in their mid-August meeting. Although Grandi for one made much of the Royal Navy's supposed weakness at the time of crisis over Ethiopia, a view that would appear to have been derived from the British Admiralty's own assessment of its global strategic capabilities during the summer of 1935, neither the Fascist military nor British regional commanders such as Admiral William Fisher, commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, believed that the *Regia Marina* stood any credible chance against British aero-naval power. Certainly, whatever the levels of bluster that characterised Mussolini's and Grandi's statements throughout August, by the end of the month the level of anti-British invective became markedly toned down.

With a full session of the League due to sit on 4th September in order to assess and discuss every element of the troubled Italian relationship with Ethiopia, and with Eden in London adopting an increasingly harder line towards the Mussolini regime, a greater sense of prudency came to infiltrate Fascist policy. Rather sager personalities within the Fascist official machine, such as Ferrante Capponi the naval attaché to Britain, began to warn, prior to the Paris meetings, that Whitehall was beginning to assess the potential threat posed by Mussolini's Italy much more seriously. On 13th August Capponi informed the *Marina*'s intelligence section in Rome that the British government had become increasingly concerned about the effects the Italian attack on Ethiopia would invariably have on 'indigenous populations' right across the Empire, particularly in Egypt. Then there was the question of Italy's violation of a number of treaty arrangements, and indeed the impact on League of Nations policy that would result from the same invasion. The British were, Capponi noted, very nervous about the effects such a treaty violation might have on British policy, especially where it concerned Nazi Germany who would undoubtedly exploit them fully in future. Official Britain was becoming increasingly nervous about the reality of Italy actually controlling Ethiopia, and being able to exert influence over the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and how this control might pan out were the Fascist regime to no longer be on amicable relations with London. Despite the long tradition of Italian–British friendship, Capponi concluded, the 'strategic' dimension of this relationship was now very much under reappraisal by the Admiralty and Colonial Office. For the moment at least the Admiralty did not appear to be considering any 'special measures' as regards 'exceptional

movement of (naval) forces'.[41] But notably Capponi did not rule such 'special measures' out.

Three days later Grandi and Capponi took further soundings from their London contacts about whether the Admiralty had taken any decision to strengthen the Royal Navy's Mediterranean presence. Although rather tense and apprehensive, Grandi informed Mussolini that to all intents and purposes the situation in London remained calm and that nothing out of the ordinary appeared to be occurring as regards the redeployment of naval units. He and Capponi had carefully studied the 'movement of British warships', as well as the movement of naval personnel, but could see nothing that might generate cause for concern in Rome. In fact, having talked to several Royal Navy officers he could discern that nothing had changed in the Admiralty's deployment plans which had, as far as he could discern, been in place since 10th March.[42] On the 20th August Grandi reported on the British strategic situation once again, setting out Royal Air Force deployments across the Mediterranean basin and in enough detail to demonstrate the difficult task the *Marina* and *Aeronautica* would have in dealing with them. He added that the Mediterranean Fleet was lacking its aircraft carrier HMS Furious and was, therefore, currently under-strength. But beyond that the Fleet was practically at full strength, and there was no tangible sign of any likely strengthening either of it or of the Royal Air Force presence in the region. As far as the ambassador could see the situation appeared normal.[43]

Grandi's obvious curiosity about new potential contingencies in Royal Navy and Air Force planning did not simply stem from the tense state of British–Italian relations in the high summer of 1935. He would almost certainly have known that on 6th August the Baldwin Cabinet had instructed the British Chiefs-of-Staff to assess the position if Fascist Italy 'took the bit between her teeth' and, on Mussolini's orders, went to war in the Mediterranean. Someone as well ingrained and as familiar with the British establishment as the Italian ambassador most probably also knew that at the Cabinet meeting of 22nd August, which had been attended by Chatfield, the question of 'precautionary military measures' in the event of greater tension with Italy had been discussed. Quite possibly, he may also have learned that plans to send the Home Fleet on a cruise of home waters had been scrapped, and that it was instead to make for Portland from where it would head for Gibraltar.[44]

Certainly information about the imminent reinforcement of the Mediterranean Fleet with units of the British Home Fleet had already reached

[41] ASMAE, Ambasciata di Londra, busta 891, fascicolo 2, 'Questione Italo-etiopica – Atteggiamento inglese nei riguardi Africa Orientale – Dislocazione di navi, Capponi to Marina, 13 August 1935.

[42] ASMAE, Ambasciata di Londra, busta 881, fascicolo 4, Grandi to Mussolini, 16 August 1935.

[43] ASMAE, Ambasciata di Londra, busta 881, fascicolo 4, 'Etiopia – Situazione militare', Grandi to Mussolini, 20 August 1935.

[44] A. Marder, 'The Royal Navy and the Ethiopian Crisis of 1935–36', *American Historical Review*, Volume 75, Number 5 (1969), pp. 1328–1329.

the *Marina*'s planners before the British Cabinet meeting of the 22nd. By 20th August the planning department, most probably on Mussolini's direct instructions, had produced an updated Plan B which foresaw naval operations against a Mediterranean Fleet strengthened by the main body of the Royal Navy's Home Fleet. If Cavagnari had expressed deep concerns about the *Marina*'s prospects against the Mediterranean Fleet alone, then new operational conditions were unlikely to do much more than confirm the hopelessness of Italy's position. The navy did not believe that the British Admiralty would risk deploying its units to Malta, but believed they were more likely to station the Mediterranean Fleet in its 'eastern bases', with the Home Fleet remaining at Gibraltar. If the Royal Navy took the risk of using Malta as a base from which to attack the Italian mainland then, as already foreseen by earlier versions of the Plan, 'offensive action' would be launched against it. If, instead, the British were effectively to blockade the Mediterranean at both exits then they could easily control the flow of Italian sea traffic, bombard coastal regions and ports with impunity and occupy some of Italy's key islands. In response, the planners foresaw limited Italian possibilities against the full might of the combined British fleets. There were possibilities for 'torpedo units' to launch offensives north of the Balearic Islands, options for light surface units to operate in the Sicily Channel and Lower Ionian Sea and similar operations in the Aegean Sea. But the *Marina*'s High Command offered no suggestion as to how it would counter the many heavy units of the Royal Navy, or its ability to launch aero-naval operations.[45] On the strength of it, an Italian defeat under such conditions would have been swift and certain.

With the League Council scheduled to discuss the entire Ethiopian matter on 4th September, the regime's precarious military position in the Mediterranean did not permit for too aggressive a Fascist stance given the impending strengthening of the Royal Navy's fleet deployment. The combined Home and Mediterranean Fleets would have little difficulty in engaging with and defeating a markedly inferior *Regia Marina*, in disrupting Italian maritime communications, particularly with East Africa, and waging a destructive air and sea bombardment of Italy's key islands and coastal areas. A week after the new version of Plan B emerged Mussolini therefore toned down his rhetoric quite markedly, and even spoke of a possible reconciliation with the British. On 28th August, after attending Italian military manoeuvres in the Alto Adige whose scope was defending the region against a Nazi invasion, the *Duce* convened a meeting of the Fascist Council of Ministers in Bolzano. As soon as the meeting got underway at 18:00 that evening Mussolini announced that at the forthcoming League Council sitting Aloisi would detail Italian relations with Ethiopia over the past fifty years, showing how from the Treaty of Ucciali onward Italy had obtained legitimate 'rights to a colonial priority over

[45] USMM, DG, Busta 0-E, "Piano B – Dislocazione iniziale ed impiego del naviglio di superficie', Naval Plans Department, 20 August 1935.

Abyssinia'. A number of important writers from Great Britain, Germany and France had very clearly set out that the country was little more than a mass collection of 'retrograde tribes' who practised slavery, and that 'centralised power' was effectively non-existent in Ethiopia. He fully intended to defend Italy's rights and interests in the region, Mussolini added, before again emphasising that 'Great Britain had nothing to fear from Italian policy toward Ethiopia.' Italian policy, he stressed, did not 'menace, either directly nor indirectly, British imperial interests, and therefore the tendentious alarm that had emerged from various quarters was simply absurd'. Italy, the dictator declared with some emphasis, had issues with Ethiopia. But it did not have, and did not want to have, issues with Great Britain, a country with whom Italy had collaborated consistently since the Great War. Now playing down any talk of war with Britain Mussolini merely stated that should League military sanctions be implemented against Italy 'the necessary measures' were in place to deal with them. Similarly, economic sanctions, while no doubt a major burden for Italy, would nevertheless be met with effective 'economic resistance' on the part of the regime and the people of Italy.[46]

Mussolini expected little or nothing to come out of the League Council meeting of 4th September and remained largely indifferent to any of the deliberations that took place. As he told Chambrun two days beforehand the British would no doubt not be 'disposed toward making any concessions that might satisfy Italy', and there was no question of him changing his plans now. Despite the ambassador's warning that an undeclared war against Ethiopia, as opposed to a negotiated settlement between the three powers, would turn the 'whole world' against Fascist Italy, the *Duce* simply shrugged his shoulders. He had, after all, always hated the League of Nations and had never believed either in 'perpetual peace' or in 'internationalistic or League superstructures'. At Geneva Aloisi delivered a ruthless character assassination of Ethiopia and its ruling class, which owed more than passing a debt to Mussolini's view of the whole of the League of Nations edifice. After listening patiently to Eden's speech explaining the failure of the tripartite conversations Mussolini's *chef du cabinet* delivered a blistering attack on Ethiopia designed to derail the entire discussion by virtue of its controversial nature. Aloisi claimed that while Ethiopia was a member of the League of Nations, a privilege which required the 'scrupulous observance of existing treaties and of the principles of international law', Ethiopia had in fact disregarded such obligations, showing itself unfit to be a member of any community of nations. The Ethiopian government had blocked every trade initiative proposed by the Italian government, and had even failed to ensure justice for foreigners living within its borders. More seriously the Ethiopian government had repeatedly threatened the security of Italy's East African colonies, and been guilty of serious affronts to Italy's good name and injustices to Italian citizens. Ethiopia was, Aloisi continued, a

[46] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'Riunione del Consiglio dei Ministri', 28 August 1935, pp. 115–118.

lawless and unstable state that lacked central authority and therefore could not maintain internal order. How, then, could such a state be expected to treat neighbouring countries such as Eritrea and Italian Somaliland respectfully in future? Ethiopia had systematically failed to 'raise herself by voluntary efforts to the level of other civilized nations'. Hailie Selassie had steered his country into a position where it was 'unworthy of the trust' placed in it when admitted originally to the League of Nations.[47]

Aloisi's statement not surprisingly generated much controversy both within the Chamber and internationally. His team had prepared two volumes of photographic and other evidence detailing the many atrocities perpetrated in Ethiopia, which they then distributed among the various League delegations. Clearly this was a tactic designed to highlight the Italian case that the country was a danger both to its own people and to the security of neighbouring states. But the problem was that even if Ethiopia was a barbarous, unruly and disorganised rogue state, as so strongly argued by Aloisi and other Fascist officials, this still did not give Mussolini any right to attack it and colonise it for Italian gain. The Tripartite Accord signed in 1906 had been designed to maintain Ethiopia's territorial integrity, and crucially stipulated that any military intervention in the country had to be undertaken by all three signatories. If Mussolini had been as concerned about the security threat posed by Ethiopian armed bands as he claimed to be, then he could have appealed to Paris and London for support in dealing with it. Moreover, Fascist Italy could have put pressure on Ethiopia via Geneva and offered its active assistance in helping it resolve the East African nation's internal difficulties. There was no need for Fascist military aggression and annexation to resolve such issues. But mere security or the bringing of 'civilisation' to Ethiopia had never been the *Duce*'s principal concerns. Rather, his intention was to conquer and occupy the whole of the Ethiopian Empire by force, thereby linking Eritrea and Somaliland and creating in the process a vast new Italian East African territory that would give Fascist Italy considerable strategic leverage over the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Neither was it ever likely that French or British economic interests would have survived for long once the conquest was complete. As Anthony Eden had noted, Britain, too, had endured countless raids across Ethiopia's borders into British Somaliland, 'but they were no pretext for the attempted occupation of the whole country'.[48] No doubt Mussolini would have retorted that Britain had no need of Ethiopia with a global Empire of that sort of scale.

Although the aftermath of Aloisi's statement to the League Council witnessed both he and his assistant Augusto Rosso leaving the Chamber in 'disgust' at the Ethiopian demands that the coming war be prevented at all costs,

[47] Aloisi's Memorandum for the League was published in the League of Nations *Official Journal*, *1935*, cited in Baer, *The Coming of the Italo-Ethiopian War*, pp. 310–313. *DBFP*, second series, XIV, Edmond to Hoare, 5 September 1935.

[48] Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, pp. 258–259.

the atmosphere in Rome continued to be muted and rather cautious. That same afternoon Grandi met again with Samuel Hoare, himself en route for Geneva, and as usual lambasted the British Foreign Secretary over the 'obstinate and absolute incomprehension' so far demonstrated by a British government that had failed to understand Italy's need for security and expansion in East Africa. Grandi produced all the usual expressions of protest and outrage, stressing that the Italian nation was perfectly calm and that the matter of Ethiopia had no connection with the security of Europe. Despite the weaknesses facing the Fascist military in the Mediterranean theatre, the ambassador even emphatically reiterated Mussolini's slogan that 'sanctions meant war'.[49] But this time there was to be no approval from Mussolini at Grandi's latest exposé of the inherent failings of the British political class. The dictator knew that the combined fleets of the Royal Navy were likely to be deployed at each end of the Mediterranean at any time, and he also knew that Fascist options in the face of such a deployment were very limited. The next day, having read Grandi's account of the meeting with Hoare, the *Duce* subsequently ordered the ambassador to exercise greater caution in all future encounters with the British. From that point on, he stressed emphatically to Grandi, 'Your actions must be directed towards convincing the Foreign Office that we do not even admit the possibility of an Italo–British conflict.' Italy would avoid giving any impression that it wanted such a war, and he felt certain that Britain too wished to avoid seeing a colonial war transformed into a European one at all costs.[50] Angry criticism from all quarters of the French press that day, demanding that Britain immediately close the Suez Canal to Italian shipping only served to exacerbate Mussolini's increasingly nervous mood. Writing to Cerruti later that evening the dictator stressed that the Fascist press had been ordered not to retaliate, although if French newspapers continued in this vein 'the consequences could very quickly become serious'.[51]

Five days later, on 10th September, the situation did indeed become considerably more serious for Mussolini. Having rested for sometime on the belief, fuelled by Grandi's frequently exaggerated reports from London, that the British were weak and undecided and had no intention or even the will to wage war on behalf of the League of Nations, the *Duce* received the shocking news that the Baldwin government had finally shown signs of real activity. The Mediterranean Fleet, the ambassador informed Mussolini in a tersely worded telegram, was to be 'strengthened by an aircraft carrier and 14 destroyers of the Home Fleet'.[52] Two days later an even larger component of the Home Fleet than Grandi had anticipated, including the battle cruisers *HMS Hood* and *HMS Renown*, together with a destroyer flotilla and the Second Cruiser

[49] *DDI*, 8, II, 33, Grandi to Mussolini, 4 September 1935.
[50] *DDI*, 8, II, 44, Mussolini to Grandi, 5 September 1935.
[51] *DDI*, 8, II, 45, Mussolini to Cerruti, 5 September 1935.
[52] ASMAE, Ambasciata di Londra, busta 881, fascicolo 4, Grandi to Mussolini, 10 September 1935.

Squadron, arrived off Gibraltar while the Mediterranean Fleet had already left Malta for the waters off the Suez Canal. According to Vice Admiral Andrew Cunningham, second in command of the Mediterranean Fleet at that time, 'a high state of morale and efficiency' prevailed throughout the Station and there existed 'no fear whatsoever of the result of an encounter with the Italian Navy'.[53] The news generated considerable alarm in Rome and within Italy itself. Badoglio, who was only too fully aware of the real weaknesses and deficiencies of the *Marina* and *Aeronautica*, had already warned in advance that Britain might take such strategic measures, and in a letter to Mussolini left the latter in no doubt as to the consequences for Italy. It was, he informed Mussolini, impossible to 'nurture any hopes of positive results in a struggle against such odds' as faced Italy now. The *Marina* as it stood was nothing more than a 'vanguard' with no real 'weight' behind it. The Royal Navy battleships and their large number of escort vessels could, therefore, quickly win control of the Mediterranean and inflict 'damage at will' on Italy's coastal regions and defences. Such a war, Badoglio warned Mussolini starkly, would be nothing short of a catastrophe. Italy would be reduced to the level of a Balkan state.[54]

With such an array of naval armaments at its disposal, and with Mussolini's navy and air force weak and in a phase of transition and modernisation, it was clear that Britain could have quite quickly forced Mussolini to back down over Ethiopia, and without any real need of French assistance. But in Whitehall key figures such as Hoare and Vansittart and senior Admiralty Lords such as Chatfield continued to insist that the British Fleet was unprepared, and a conflict with Italy over Ethiopia too risky at a time when Britain faced other global threats from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. To those in command of the combined Home and Mediterranean Fleets the nervousness and lack of resolve in dealing with Mussolini appeared incomprehensible. As Vice Admiral Cunningham noted in his memoirs the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean theatre, Sir William Fisher, lost no time in informing the Admiralty of his disbelief at their attitude as set out in the latest situation report. 'Cunningham', he proclaimed angrily, 'I have sent a signal to Their Lordships telling them I disagree with every word of this pusillanimous document. The Mediterranean Fleet is by no means so powerless as is here set out.'[55] With the benefit of hindsight, few could ever argue with such a view.

At Geneva Aloisi's brutal assault on the state of Ethiopia continued to generate controversy in the days after he delivered it, although Laval and League Secretary General Joseph Avenol soon regrouped and set up yet another Committee to examine the Italo–Ethiopian problem. In response Aloisi again demonstrated the petulant and obstructive side of his nature by rejecting all

[53] Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Cunningham of Hyndhope, *A Sailor's Odyssey* (Hutchinson and Co., London, 1951), pp. 171–172.

[54] Badoglio to Mussolini, September 1935, cited in Rochat, *Militari e politici*, pp. 228–229.

[55] Cunningham, *A Sailor's Odyssey*, p.174.

of Laval's suggestions for the composition of the new Committee of Five, and subsequently by opposing any British or Ethiopian involvement. Eventually the new Committee was finally established and immediately set about seeking a 'pacific settlement' to the dispute. But the time for any political settlement to a dispute that had been increasing in intensity since January 1935 could not, at such a late stage, have any political outcome. What the League of Nations Council should instead have been seeking were resolutions designed to prevent Fascist aggression against a member state through the use of economic and military sanctions, and not resorted to further pointless dialogue with a regime that had no intention of backing down. Mussolini and his 'new Fascist men' understood only force, and that force was now ranged against them menacingly in the waters of the very sea they boastfully called their '*mare nostrum*'. The League Council could have deployed this force to compel Mussolini to call off his invasion in September 1935, but it did not do so.

The tragic truth for Ethiopia, its people and indeed for the League of Nations itself is that Mussolini's long-held militaristic and imperial ambitions could have been halted in their tracks. Ethiopia could have been spared much tragedy and bloodshed at the hands of Italian Fascism, the League of Nations its loss of credibility and authority in the face of other brutal ideologues, principally, of course, German National Socialism. Certainly Samuel Hoare's now infamous speech to the Geneva Assembly of 11th September gave a waiting world the impression that, finally, the key power in the League of Nations was offering its full backing in halting the menace of Mussolini and Fascism. In particular, his so often cited declaration that, 'the League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, and particularly for steady and collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression' gave many the impression that the *Duce*'s game was now over, his designs on Ethiopia reduced to ashes.[56] But this speech and the strategic measures taken by the Baldwin government were nothing more than a sham. On the same day that Hoare delivered it he met twice with Laval, both men deciding that no rigorous sanctioning of, let alone military opposition to, Fascist Italy could be contemplated. Hoare could, thus, safely declare that Britain would act provided the action was 'collective', knowing well that France would never endorse any such action.[57]

As Fascist Italy geared up for its assault on Ethiopia in late September the *Marina*'s leadership braced itself for what it viewed as an imminent reaction by the Royal Navy. On the 19th senior figures in the Fascist Naval High Command gathered to assess the crisis, and how the Italian fleet might respond

[56] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, appendix 4, 'Sir S. Hoare's Speech at the League Assembly 11 September 1935', p. 789.

[57] *DBFP*, second series, XIV, numbers 553 and 554, 'Record of Anglo-French Conversation Held at the Hôtel des Bergues, Geneva, 10 September 1935' (two meetings) Edmond to Vansittart, 11 September 1935.

if ordered into action. Their collective response was predictably gloomy and negative. Italy enjoyed an enviable strategic position by virtue of its dominance of the Central Mediterranean, but it 'needed adequate means to exploit such an advantage'. Clearly the *Servizio Infomazioni Segreti*, Italy's naval intelligence arm, had not as yet been able to discern likely Royal Navy intentions. As the minutes of the meeting noted the British could strike at any time, while 'the eventual attack could come from either Gibraltar or Suez', with the first operations likely to include the closure of the Suez Canal to Italian troop ships. The *Marina* could concentrate its First Naval Squadron at its Taranto or Augusta base facilities, the senior admirals concluded, but it could do very little in real terms to challenge the inevitable dominance of British capital ship power.[58] The dangerous position into which Mussolini had steered not only the Fascist Navy but the entire country, and a further damning exposition of Britain's dreadful judgement in not ordering the Royal Navy into action came next day. A strategic situation report by the Naval Staff concluded that the Royal Navy was not simply staging a 'show of force' in order to compel Mussolini to call off his invasion, but was going through the 'preliminaries for war'. The scale and vast range of British aero-naval weaponry deployed to the Mediterranean demonstrated beyond doubt that Italy could not hope to resist for long in any conflict, and would rapidly find its Mediterranean and Red Sea communications severed. Britain would aim at ensuring Italy's complete isolation simply by blockading Gibraltar and the Suez area, while the *Marina* and *Aeronautica* would have very limited prospects for securing any successes. Ultimately, even these prospects would diminish rapidly with time. Fascist Italy could be 'brought to reason' very quickly if the order came to engage its armed forces.[59]

Aloisi, Grandi and other officials of the Fascist state reacted as nervously to the British measures in the Mediterranean as did the Italian Chiefs-of-Staff. The *chef du cabinet* warned Mussolini that 'England has mobilised and the situation is tense', while in London Dino Grandi spoke of a 'psychological environment wherein the recourse to force, excluded by the majority until just a few days ago, has become a real possibility'.[60] Foreign observers in Rome, Maurice Catoire for one, noted that the mood in the Italian capital was tense and that even the *Duce* himself had become so worried that he had suddenly become markedly more 'accommodating'. The British, Catoire claimed, had been 'thrown into a panic when faced with the peril of a reconstituted Roman Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean basin'. They clearly wanted, Catoire had been informed, 'to crush this peril at birth' and bring down Mussolini and Fascism in the process.[61] Had wiser and less muddled thinking prevailed in

[58] USMM, busta DG1-E, 'Riunione Stato Maggiore', 19 September 1935.
[59] USMM, busta DG-8G, 'Esame della situazione', Naval Staff Report, 20 September 1935.
[60] Aloisi, *Journal*, 19 September 1935; *DDI*, 8, II, number 146, Grandi to Mussolini, 19 September 1935.
[61] Catoire, *Journal*, 28 September 1935.

Paris, London and Geneva this 'peril' would have been identified more accurately, and national self-interest relegated into second place in the determination to extinguish it. As it transpired the final attempt by the Committee of Five to resolve the Italian–Ethiopian dispute peaceably reached Addis Ababa on 23th September, where Hailie Selassie and his government promptly declared that Fascist Italy would never accept its proposed solution. With this final, slender chance of a political solution now gone, the world waited as the Italian expeditionary army in Eritrea prepared to launch its brutal war of aggression. The price for this failure on the part of all concerned was higher than anyone might have guessed.

Conclusion

Mussolini's War of Revenge

At the close of 1934 Mussolini and his senior military commanders had considered an Italian troop deployment of between 80 and 100,000 to be sufficient to defeat the Ethiopian armed forces. But by the early autumn of 1935 around 400,000 Italian troops had been shipped to East Africa, with a further 250,000 scheduled to arrive there in the early months of 1936. The northern front, which De Bono, Badoglio and the Army High Command had designated as the principal base for offensive operations against the Ethiopians, absorbed the lion's share of available resources. In total around 350,000 metropolitan troops were deployed in Eritrea equipped with artillery, tanks and air units, and a further 70,000 indigenous men gave the Mussolini regime a crushing superiority over its East African adversaries. On the southern front, three battalions of Eritrean troops equipped with armoured cars and thirty aircraft were deemed sufficient to perform the largely defensive strategic role expected of Somaliland and its commander Rodolfo Graziani.[1]

In the last days of September, as Haile Selassie and his advisors in Addis Ababa anxiously awaited news from their delegation in Geneva, the Fascist military machine prepared to launch its much anticipated war of revenge for the humiliating Italian defeat at Adowa. When the news came from Geneva that the League Assembly now viewed a war with Fascist Italy as unavoidable, the Emperor pleaded with the Council that it 'take as soon as possible all precautions against Italian aggression'.[2] But his pleas fell on deaf ears, and during the night of 28th September he took the step his senior military advisors had been urging on him for some weeks, and signed the mobilisation order which came into effect once the Fascist armed forces finally launched their offensive. The Emperor, the Ethiopian people and the world would not have long to wait

[1] L.E. Longo, *La campagna Italo-etiopica (1935–1936)* (USSME, Rome, 2005), pp. 77–78.

[2] League of Nations *Official Journal*, 1935, p. 1602, cited in Baer, *The Coming of the Italo–Ethiopian War*, pp. 369–370.

before Mussolini's armed forces launched their brutal war of conquest against the helpless African nation.

In Eritrea, during those last tense days of peace, De Bono awaited the order from Rome authorising the advance of his forces over the border into Ethiopia. His three great armies composed of army Group I operating to the left of the line of advance, Group II on the right and a Central Group made up of indigenous troops, were to advance towards the Ethiopian cities of Adigrat, Adowa and Axum. Not surprisingly Adowa was to be the primary objective in this first wave of operations, while the significant supplies of fresh water to be found at Monti Alequà near Adigrat also constituted a priority objective. In those final days before the invasion De Bono was clearly feeling the pressure of the huge responsibility thrust upon him by the regime he had so assiduously supported since its very first days. Giorgio Rochat notes that the Minister for Colonies, who had once endorsed the concept of an aggressive military campaign against the Ethiopians, now seemingly baulked at the idea. On the eve of the invasion De Bono appeared to be 'crushed by his own responsibilities' according to observers at the time. He seemed, many noted, incapable of making use of the array of military means at his disposal.[3] But in his spacious office at the *Palazzo Venezia* in Rome Mussolini was eager to start his war against Haile Selassie. Waving aside De Bono's view that synchronised operations on the northern and southern fronts would be impossible owing to shortages of men and equipment in Somaliland, Mussolini ordered the Marshall to begin his attack as soon as possible. De Bono replied suggesting 5th October as the day for the invasion to finally get underway, and again Mussolini dismissed the Marshall's suggestion, ordering him to attack Ethiopia early in the morning of the 3rd.

On the morning of 2nd October Mussolini requested an audience with King Victor Emmanuel at the Quirinale Palace. For all the King's unease at the war Mussolini was about to wage, a war which so many senior regime figures had counselled against if it involved potential complications with Great Britain, he did not appear willing to cause difficulties for the *Duce* as the invasion hour drew ever nearer, and ultimately he gave the venture his blessing. Duly, at least according to Mussolini's own version of events, Victor Emmanuel reportedly declared, 'Duce, go ahead. I am behind you … Forward I say to you!' The same level of support for the impending war was not, however, manifestly visible among the great mass of the Italian people. That afternoon a great demonstration of Fascist force was carefully stage managed by the PNF right across Italy, with up to twenty million Italians of all ages taking part. But as German Ambassador Ulrich von Hassell informed the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, 'In Rome the march in response to the summons was undoubtedly imposing. The atmosphere among the participants was, however, not convincing.' Von Hassell noted no trace of enthusiasm for the *Duce*'s war of revenge against

[3] Rochat, *Militari e politici*, p. 232.

the Ethiopians, largely because for too many Italians 'the colonial idea is still something strange or artificially bolstered up'.[4]

That evening, amid a large gathering of ministers, state secretaries and specially selected foreign dignitaries mingling in Mussolini's antechambers at the *Palazzo Venezia*, von Hassell looked on as the *Duce* prepared to make his speech announcing the imminence of war. In conversation the German ambassador found the Fascist dictator to be 'in an extremely serious almost embittered mood', chiefly because of the difficulties the British government had generated for his regime. For the *Duce* an irrevocable hour had come for Italian Fascism for he was, he warned von Hassell, in no doubt that the British now had every intention of dealing 'Italy a heavy blow'. This 'blow', he warned the German ambassador, should cause Nazi Germany and the *Führer* serious concern, for the present conflict with the British was a 'struggle against Fascism', and as such 'Germany too was concerned.'[5]

With that marked and unmistakeable signal that a great change in Fascist policy was about to be unveiled, a change that would lead directly to the great catastrophe of World War II just four years later, Mussolini strode out onto the balcony of the *Palazzo Venezia*. At 18:30 on that warm autumnal Wednesday evening the *Duce* announced to the crowd gathered beneath him, and to the many millions of others listening attentively across the world, that war with Ethiopia was now imminent. Just as the Fascist Italian army was now 'marching towards its objectives', so too were forty million Italians marching in spirit with this army. The objective of this great Fascist campaign was simple, he thundered. The British had shown beyond any reasonable doubt that they had every intention of robbing Italy and the Italian people of their 'place in the sun'. Following its great sacrifices during the Great War, Mussolini added disingenuously, it had been the British who had enjoyed the 'sumptuous colonial booty' of the post-war years, leaving Italy with mere crumbs. For Fascist Italy the last twenty years had only resulted in a tightening of the ring that constrained and suffocated its natural vitality. To add insult to injury the Fascist regime had also been compelled to tolerate the constant violation of its East African territories by its unruly and barbaric Ethiopian regional neighbours. As he put it, 'With Ethiopia we have been patient for forty years. Now, enough!' Fascist Italy would defend itself against any economic or military penalties imposed by the British at Geneva in the appropriate fashion. Mussolini wished to avoid a European conflict over Ethiopia at all costs, but he would not stop until 'the just rights of Italy' had finally been fulfilled.[6]

Just before 5:00 A.M. on the morning of 3rd October 1935 Emilio De Bono awoke and made the short journey to Zeban Coatit close to the indigenous

[4] *DGFP*, series IV, no. 324, 'General Rally of the Fascist Party', von Hassell to Foreign Ministry, 3 October 1935.

[5] Ibid., no. 322, von Hassell to von Neurath, 3 October 1935.

[6] *OOBM*, XXVII, 'Discorso di S.E. Mussolini a Piazza Venezia', 2 October 1935.

army's assembly point in the highlands. He had hoped to watch as the gathered force began its advance into Ethiopia, but like the large group of foreign journalists also gathered there he was to be disappointed. None of them saw anything as it transpired. After some time spent waiting in vain, De Bono was forced to explain to the newspaper men that the very nature of modern warfare had destroyed the concept of 'the commander who could see, dominate and control his army.' The irony contained in De Bono's words was prophetic.[7]

[7] E. De Bono, *La conquista dell'Impero: La preparazione e le prime Operazioni* (Istituto Nazionale Fascista di Cultura, Rome, 1937), p. 157.

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