Mussolini

Diplomatic dictator?

Could Mussolini have fought on the Allied side in the war?

The two dictators — Adolf Hitler (the Führer) and Benito Mussolini (the Duce) — were booted by ideology, so many commentators assumed that, once Hitler and the Nazis came to power in 1933, a military alliance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany was a natural conclusion. Yet on closer inspection it becomes clear that this is too simplistic a view, clouded by the historians’ retrospective knowledge of Mussolini’s wartime coalition with Hitler.

Mussolini’s alliance with Germany was far from inevitable and, although the Duce enjoyed claiming that his creation, fascista, was spreading throughout Europe, he did not want to be overshadowed by Hitler.

Consequently, for much of the interwar period, Mussolini was more closely aligned to the western democracies of Britain and France, taking the lead in resisting Hitler’s domination of Europe.

However, Mussolini also realized that a strong, resurgent Germany could intimidate France and Britain and make them more amenable to Italian demands. This ambiguity in Italy’s foreign policy and the Duce’s pragmatic statesmanship cause problems for historians. Revisionists such as Richard Lamb refer to Mussolini as a ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ character. On his whim, Italy swung to and fro between the countries of Europe as the balance of power shifted. Mussolini revelled in having his feet in both camps, enabling him to manipulate the affairs of Europe by playing off one country against another. Fascist Italy could exploit the growing tension in Europe to indulge in pan-European (determinant weight) to make gains. As testament to this, there is a substantial amount of evidence to suggest that, even by as late as 1939, Mussolini remained undecided between siding with the Western democracies or with Germany.

First impressions

The first decade of Mussolini’s rule has been described as a decade of ‘good behaviour’, perhaps rather misleadingly, given Italy’s occupation of Corfu in 1924 and Mussolini’s increasingly dictatorial foreign policy style. Nevertheless, the Western democracies were willing to accept Mussolini’s good citizen demeanour at face value. At Locarno, Mussolini struck up a friendship with the British foreign secretary, Austen Chamberlain, and the chancellor of the exchequer, Winston Churchill. These eminent statesmen spoke of the Fascist leader in glowing terms: Chamberlain called him ‘a very remarkable man’ and Churchill later dubbed him the ‘Roman genius.’ The British left was annoyed by these friendships (particularly when it led Churchill to make a generous settlement of Italian war debts) but many contemporaries...
Anschluss: Union of Germany and Austria.

Lehman Pact: diplomatic agreements concluded in Locarno, Switzerland, between Britain, France, Italy and Germany. Included a Rhineland Pact confirming the region's demilitarization and boundaries and a Treaty of Arbitration, binding Germany and France to accept arbitration to settle disputes.

Count Galeazzo Ciano (1903–44)

 Held several diplomatic posts in Brazil, Argentina and China before marrying Mussolini's daughter, Anna, in 1930.

 In 1935 Mussolini appointed Ciano minister of propaganda. In 1936 he became minister of foreign affairs and commanded a bomber squadron in the invasion of Abyssinia.

 Ciano was a supporter of the alliance with Germany but objected to the way that Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland without consulting with Italy.

 Mussolini followed Ciano's advice to keep out of the Second World War until the fall of France in May 1940.

 After a series of heated arguments with Mussolini, Ciano resigned as foreign minister in February 1943. After Mussolini's overthrow, Ciano was captured by the German army. He was given a mock trial and shot as a traitor on 11 January 1944.

 Stress: Front agreement between Britain, France and Italy to oppose further German rearmament and promising 'less coercive and cordial collaboration' to maintain existing treaties.

 Economic sanctions: prohibitions on trade with an aggressor. Intended to deprive Italy of vital supplies, they excluded coal, oil and steel, they proved ineffective.

 Ciano's fall, however, demonstrated that Mussolini's policy of economic sanctions was unsuccessful. Germany's imports of coal and steel from Italy were significantly reduced, but Mussolini's policy of economic sanctions was ultimately a failure.

 Anschluss — a turning point?

 Although the British foreign office and cabinet were concerned in 1935 that Mussolini was contemplating an invasion of Abyssinia, the issue was not discussed at Stresa. Mussolini thought that the tactic support of both Britain and France. This was a misjudgment and immediately after Italy's invasion on 3 October 1935, the League of Nations declared Italy an aggressor and preparations were made for the internationalization of the Egyptian border. However, these sanctions proved ineffective and Mussolini began to negotiate with Britain in the hope that legal recognition of his invasion would be granted and that the Stresa Front would be re-established.

 The successful invasion of Abyssinia was widely regarded as an impressive and most appalling part of Mussolini's colonial policy, raising questions about his long-term intentions. Traditionally, the invasion is seen as the event which marked the beginning of Italy's balance of power, signalling Rome's increasing shift towards improved relations with Berlin. However, the evidence suggests that, in the aftermath of the invasion, Mussolini's closest allies were France and Britain. Equally, despite British disapproval of Mussolini's actions and support for the League of Nations' sanctions, the Anglo-Italian position was essential for Britain. Mussolini was an unpredictable ally but in the face of the potential menace of Nazi rearmament, his goodwill was vital for peace in Europe.

 Anti-Communism

 Following his successful invasion of Abyssinia and the failure of Britain and France to act when, in March 1936, Hitler marched into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland in defiance of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the dictators felt it was in the interest of Britain and France to continue flexing their military muscles.

 In July 1936, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany both joined the forces of Franco's nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. This joint intervention, it has been argued, was not the result of closer cooperation between the two countries, but rather the result of a lack of trust in each other. Nevertheless, many members of the British government, opposed to the Fascist aggression, saw Franco as a shield against communism and hoped he would be victorious. In terms of desired outcome, therefore, the policies of Italy and Britain were similar. Thus, even by 1936, Mussolini was able to keep his options open so that a military and political alliance could be formed with either Germany or the Western democracies (economic sanctions).

 In November 1937, Mussolini appeared to take another decisive step towards Hitler by signing the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan. However, the purpose of this agreement was to halt the spread of communism, an aim which was opposed by several politicians in the West. The signing of the Rome-Berlin Axis (economic sanctions) with Mussolini still balancing the pros and cons of an alliance with either camp. He remained cautious of an alliance with Hitler, knowing full well that German military support would be granted only at a high price — the Anschluss.

 Anschluss and Munich

 Germany's impressive military potential and territorial expansion in central Europe in the late 1930s had a destabilising effect on the balance of power. In March 1938 Hitler annexed Austria, thus posing an obvious threat to Italian security and demonstrating Mussolini's inferiority to the Führer. Much to the Italian leader's relief, in May 1938 the Munich Agreement provided the opportunity he needed to re-establish himself as a prominent figure on the international stage.

 Key points

 • Although early relations between Hitler and Mussolini were based on mutual suspicion, many powers assumed that, because of their similar ideologies, a military alliance between them would be a natural conclusion. This was not so.
 • Mussolini did not want to be overshadowed by Hitler so he aligned himself with France and Britain. He realised that a strong Germany could intimidate France and Britain and make them more likely to appease Italy. Mussolini changed sides as the balance of power in Europe shifted.
 • Mussolini recognised that both Nazism and fascism were authoritarian and anti-democratic, but dismissed the idea of a master race as nonsense.
 • Hitler feared that a confident new Germany might threaten European stability. He was concerned with the possible disintegration of the League of Nations and the rise of other powers, such as Italy and Germany, who could challenge the traditional balance of power.

 Chronology

 August 1923 Mussolini orders the bombardment and occupation of the island of Corfu.
 January 1926 Locarno Pact guarantees the existing boundaries of Germany, France and Belgium.
 March 1933 Mussolini's Four-Power Pact of cooperation brings the leaders of Germany, Britain, France and Italy together in Rome.
 April 1938 The Stresa Front: Britain, France and Italy protest against Hitler's rearmament.
 October 1935 Invasion of Abyssinia.
 July 1936 Mussolini sends planes and troops to help Franco in Spain.
 September 1939 Mussolini is hailed as European Emperor (Machﮐ
 May 1939 Pact of Steel between Italy and Germany. Mussolini starts World War II in Sicily.
 September 1939 Italy stays out of the Second World War.
 June 1940 Italy declares war on Britain and France.
If it is straight facts you want, there are plenty of encyclopaedia pages on Mussolini and his foreign policy, and both Spartacus and Wikipedia will answer queries on Locarno, the Stresa Front or the Pact of Steel. Dickinson College has the original text of the Pact of Steel at: https://esop.sous拳m.edu/~rhyme/232/2/0106Stel1.html. It also has the text of the Anti-Czernin Pact, as has Yale Law School, at: www.yale.edu/tenweb/avalon/wuli/i5.htm.

The National Archives' most useful site, which has document-based inquiry tasks on Mussolini's foreign policy, is centred on the invasion of Abyssinia. See www.learningspaces.gov.uk/treasuresofbritain/g5/.

**Nazi-Soviet Pact**: non-aggression treaty between Germany and the USSR by which each state agreed to remain neutral in the event of the other state going to war. Its secret clauses gave a free hand to Germany in Lithuania and eastern Poland and to the USSR in Latvia, Estonia, Finland, eastern Poland and Bessarabia. A subsequent secret agreement transferred Lithuania to the Soviet sphere and extended German influence over the whole of Poland.

**non-aggression**: not engaged in war; term coined by the Duca to avoid using the word 'neutral', which he associated with Italy's inglorious stance in 1914–15.

Even after the attack on Poland, the British cabinet hoped that Mussolini would intervene, as he had at Munich. The Duca was far from giving Germany unconditional support — he continued to be temperamental, chopping and changing between backing Germany, staying neutral and siding with the West. Hitler was frustrated by Italy's declaration of non-aggression when war broke out, but when the ensuing British naval blockade deprived Italy of German coal imports, Mussolini cooled towards the British. Hitler invited Mussolini to a meeting at the Brenner Pass, where he revealed his plans to attack the West. Despite the German victory in Norway in May 1940 and Hitler's invasion of Belgium and Holland the same month, Mussolini remained reluctant to join Germany in the war until it looked certain that Britain and France were defeated. So it was only on 10 June 1940 that Mussolini decided to go to war, coming down on the side of Nazi Germany.

**Outbreak of war**

Throughout 1939, relations between Italy and Germany were strained. In direct breach of the Munich Agreement, and without consulting Mussolini, Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia on 14 March. The Duca saw this as a personal snub. As a counter-stroke, Mussolini occupied Albania, already under Italian domination. The invasions were received badly in Britain and supported by British guarantees to Poland. Even in the spring of 1939, Mussolini hoped to utilise his diplomatic advantage to offset Italy's weak military position. He was still wavering, not wanting to distance himself from Berlin, but concerned about keeping his options open with the Western democracies and hoping to instigate another great four-power conference to stabilise Europe, like the 1933 Four-Power Pact.

With his firm anti-Communist stance, Mussolini reacted strongly when Britain and France began negotiations with the USSR in the summer of 1939 for a military agreement to guarantee Poland's continued independence. Ironically, these talks were superseded by the August 1939 **Nazi-Soviet Pact**.

Overcoming his dislike of Hitler, Mussolini impulsively signed the Pact of Steel in May 1939. This trapped him into pledging that Italy would come to Germany's aid in the event of a war. Hitler deceived Mussolini by promising not to go to war for 4 years, the invasion of Poland on 30/31 August proved that Hitler would make an unreliable partner. In an attempt to evade war without renouncing the Pact of Steel, the Italian foreign minister, Count Ciano, announced that Italy could fight only if Germany provided wheat, oil and steel. When Hitler refused to supply munitions, it was announced that Italy definitely would not fight and relations between London and Rome revived.

Whereas Hitler refused to consult Mussolini, the Italian leader appreciated the way that Britain kept him informed about its negotiations with Germany.

**Conclusion**

The question of where Mussolini's foreign policy ambitions, loyalties and alliances really lay remains unclear. The actions of the Duca throughout the interwar period can be seen as thoroughly ambiguous, even erratic, as the historian Martin Clark has argued. The contrast between the two dictators, so evident in their early meetings, was never fully overcome.

Although unsurprisingly an opportunist, as he showed in his role as mediator at Munich, Mussolini was also a skilled and pragmatic politician. His keen interest in foreign affairs was partly motivated by his desire to boost his prestige at home, but it was also triggered by his desire to use diplomacy as a technique to improve Italy's economic and military position. His final decision to aid Germany led ultimately to disaster both for Italy and for Mussolini. But, as we have seen, his friendly relations with the Western democracies throughout the 1920s and 1930s suggest that his fate could quite easily have been different.

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**Further reading**


