

# MUSSOLINI UNLEASHED 1939–1941



POLITICS AND STRATEGY  
IN FASCIST ITALY'S LAST WAR

MacGregor Knox

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Fascist Italy's Last War*

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## Preface

I wrote this book to try to explain to myself what actually happened. When I had finished, I realized that I had quite unintentionally produced a work with something in it likely to annoy most people connected with Italian history. In mitigation, I can only plead that I have attempted to fulfill the historian's duty to call things by their right names. As an outsider born in 1945 (who has nevertheless lived in Italy for a number of years and speaks the language) and as a historian with training and experience in a variety of fields, I think I can claim some degree of detachment from my subject. That does not mean I believe "historical objectivity" demands abstention from judgment. I hope those who read this book will take it as I intended it, as a small contribution to the far from complete task of understanding the Fascist past.

One pleasant side of finishing a project is that it brings the opportunity to acknowledge one's debts. I could not have done research in Europe without grants both from Yale University's Concilium on International and Area Studies and from the American Council of Learned Societies. A Yale University Whiting Fellowship in the Humanities supported me while I wrote much of the text. I owe a great deal to Mrs. Marian Johnson, who shared with me her profound knowledge of Italy, and opened a number of important doors for me during my stay in Rome in 1973-4. Colonel and Mrs. John Weaver of Chelsea welcomed me warmly, and generously put me up during my work at the Public Record Office in London. A number of people at the various archives I worked at were especially helpful: Messrs. George Wagner, John Mendelsohn, Harry Riley, Timothy P. Milligan, and Robert Wolfe of the U.S. National Archives; Drs. Carucci and Nicola Gallerano of the Archivio Centrale dello Stato; Generale di Brigata Rinaldo Cruccu of the Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dell'Esercito; Contr'ammiraglio Gino Galuppini of the Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare; and Dr. Maria Keipert of the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts.

## PREFACE

I have learned a great deal from the published works of other scholars, above all those of Alberto Aquarone, Lucio Ceva, F. W. Deakin, Renzo De Felice, Andreas Hillgruber, Klaus Hildebrand, and Giorgio Rochat. I am deeply indebted to Henry A. Turner, Jr., for arousing my interest in the Fascist regime and "fascism." I have had pleasant and useful conversations with Alberto Aquarone, Jens Petersen, David D. Roberts, and Michael Geyer. Geoffrey Warner offered great encouragement at an early stage, and generously allowed me to consult a chapter of his unpublished work on Italy in World War II. Brian R. Sullivan has been ever generous with time, advice, copies of documents, and chapters from his outstanding dissertation, "A Thirst for Glory: Mussolini, the Italian Military, and the Fascist Regime, 1922-1940." Williamson Murray, Isabel Hull, and Tina Isaacs, whose careful reading and criticism of the manuscript was indispensable, helped me at every turn. Bianca VanOrden, Frank M. Snowden, and Piotr S. Wandycz read the part of the book I submitted as a dissertation, and offered invaluable suggestions. Stanley Engerman helped me avoid statistical gaffes. Eugene D. Genovese and Perez Zagorin have been liberal with comments, counsel, and support. Above all, my *Doktorvater* Hans W. Gatzke has watched over the project throughout. Without his acute criticism, unfailing encouragement, and friendship I would have been lost.

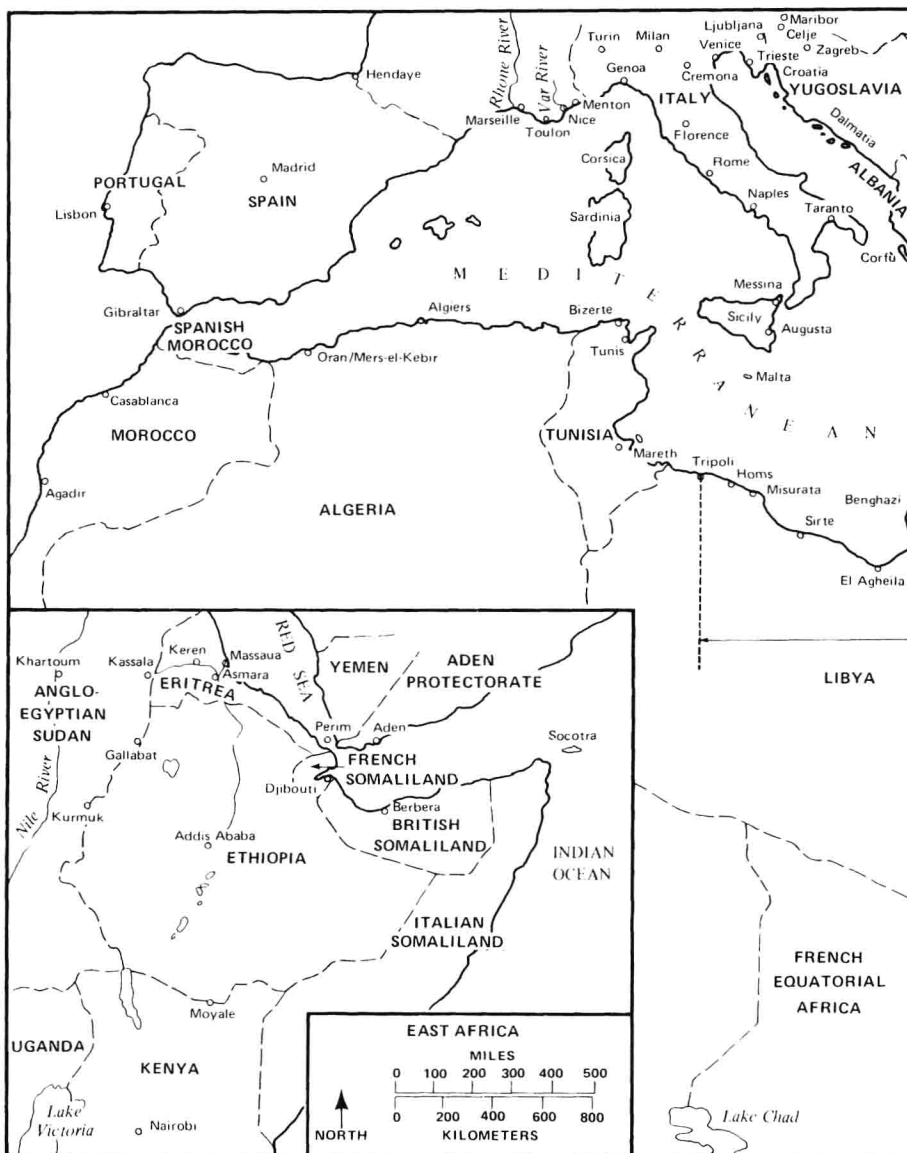
All of those I have mentioned have contributed in one way or another to whatever merits this book may possess: sins of omission or commission and errors of fact or judgment are mine alone.

December 1980

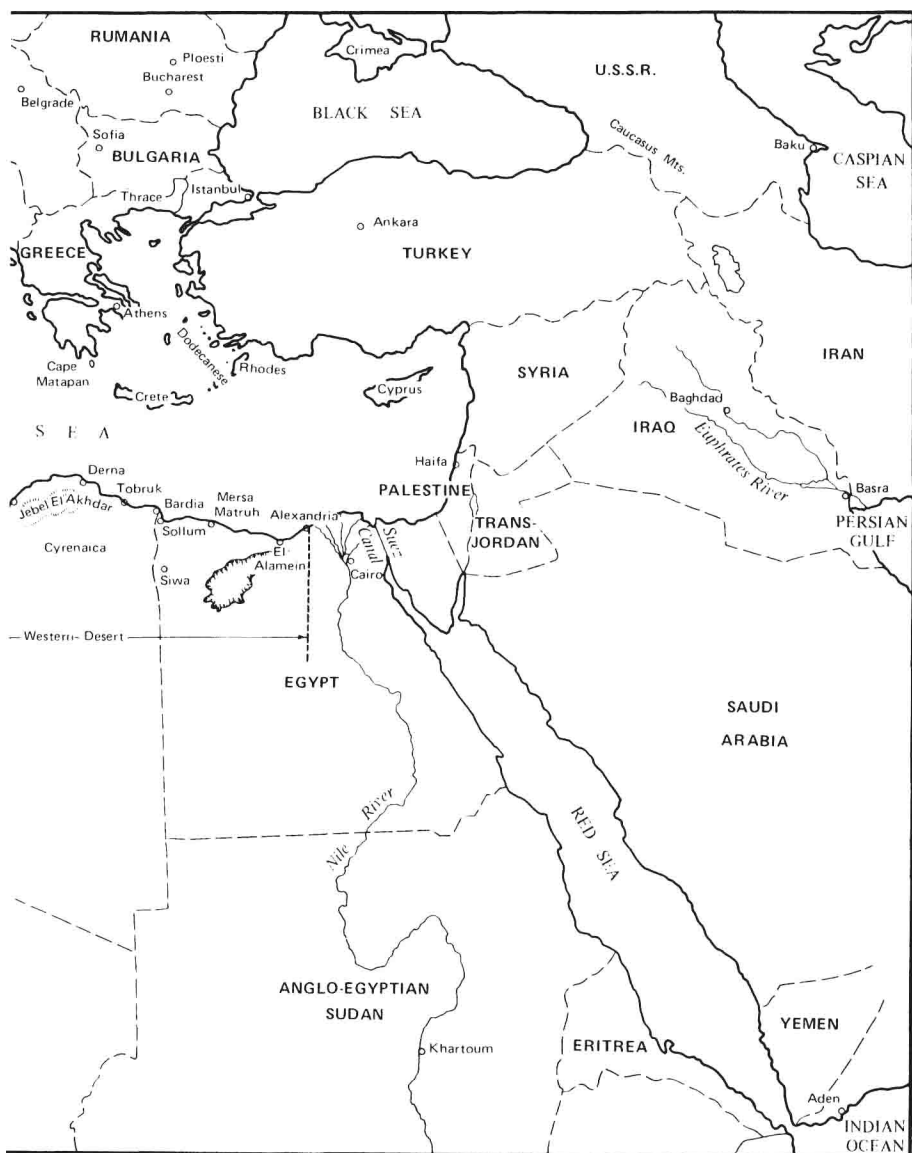
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Map 1. The Mediterranean and Africa. *Source:* United States Military Academy, *A Military History of World War II: Atlas* (West Point, New York, 1956), map 73.





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## Introduction

Failure, as Hitler put it in December 1940 with a touch of racist contempt, had the “healthy effect of once more compressing Italian claims to within the natural boundaries of Italian capabilities.”<sup>1</sup> The Fascist regime, which Mussolini and many contemporaries believed had at last made Italy a great power of sorts, had failed the only test its founder recognized as valid, the test of war. That failure has dominated later interpretations of the regime, which have tended to underestimate its brutality, the vigor and extent of its expansionist ambition, and the degree of domestic support its aims enjoyed until their price became fully apparent.

The sources of this underestimation are various. Professional historians have no direct experience of wielding power, except in academic politics. They tend, perhaps naïvely, to underrate the degree of unwisdom prevalent in the world of action, and too often expect political leaders to behave rationally – as men of goodwill with the advantage of hindsight define rationality. Mussolini’s outwardly erratic course and irresponsible decisions, and above all his failure, have therefore aroused widespread contempt, which in turn has inhibited analysis of his intentions and activities on their own terms.

Italian liberals from the philosopher Benedetto Croce downward have tended, once they ceased to support Fascism, to dismiss it as “antihistorical” and condemn it as the “anti-*Risorgimento*.”<sup>2</sup> The regime’s success until 1940 affronted their tidy vision of civilization and progress, and the Fascist movement’s not entirely illegitimate claim to the heritage of Mazzini and Garibaldi outraged their sense of propriety. From a more dispassionate point of view, Renzo De Felice has in his awe-inspiring multi-volume biography of Mussolini conjured up a fundamentally humane dictator, “far from the cold fanaticism and the ferocious determination of a Hitler, of a Stalin, or, on the other hand, of a Churchill” – an interpretation not entirely free of apologetic nationalism. De Felice has done a great service in emphasizing the popular support the regime enjoyed in the early and middle 1930s. But he has also

implied that Mussolini's later foreign policy was a Nordic import that increasing German preponderance forced upon a fundamentally opportunistic Duce, and has suggested that Mussolini merely "tended" toward certain unspecified "general objectives" he allegedly sought through a policy of balance between European power groupings.<sup>3</sup>

Some British scholars, and even anti-Fascists of the stature of Gaetano Salvemini, have exchanged analysis for sarcasm, and given us a Mussolini operating "from hand to mouth" as an "artist in propaganda" whose sole driving force was "egotism and self-justification."<sup>4</sup> Political scientists have attempted to define and confine the regime within the abstract categories of "mass society," "totalitarianism," or "fascism" (the last a generic phenomenon characteristic of those of whom one disapproves). Such terms either encourage static analysis of a system inexplicable except through its ultimate goals, or dissolve its uniqueness in a morass of transnational generalities.<sup>5</sup>

Italian Marxists, whose struggle against the regime has led them to underestimate it less than others, have done more justice to Mussolini's brutality and seriousness of purpose. Nevertheless, they have too often assumed that the "stage of capitalism" Lenin defined as "imperialism" explains both Mussolini's expansionist foreign policy and the context in which he operated. Some Leninist accounts have considerable descriptive merit, but the theory that underlies them does not face the sad truth that in relations between states and in much else, "the strong do as they will, and the weak suffer what they must,"<sup>6</sup> regardless of historical epoch or economic system. Internally, the usual Marxist counterpart to "imperialism" has been the characterization of Fascism as a "class dictatorship of the bourgeoisie," or, in embarrassed tribute to its popular support, as a "reactionary mass regime."<sup>7</sup> Even against the will of the historian, such formulas reduce Mussolini and his associates to mere agents of shadowy malefactors of great wealth.

The regime was far more than a "class dictatorship." Unfortunately for Italy its leader aspired to more than self-justification or even self-preservation — as his goals and his policies in the years from 1936 to 1941 demonstrate. In those years, which historians of the regime have yet to explore fully, the growing power of a resurgent Germany gave Italy unprecedented leverage and freedom of action. In 1940, that freedom unleashed Mussolini's long-meditated assault on the West's Mediterranean position. That assault, its motives, preparation, objectives, execution, and consequences, is the subject of this book.

## CHAPTER I

### "There has been much bluff"

"... tutt'i profeti armati vinsono e li disarmati ruinorono."

Machiavelli

*Duce politics.* It is a commonplace among educated Italians that "Mussolini was indeed a dictator, but no bloody-handed murderer [*sanguinario*] like Hitler." Scholarly sources tell us that he was a "realist," unlike Hitler, who "was gripped by a delusion which he made from the purely personal into a collective organic delusion shared by thousands of his fellow-countrymen."<sup>1</sup> Finally, "far from possessing the gifts of intelligence and character of a truly great and creative statesman," Mussolini had a hidden weakness in dealing with individuals, and was incapable of choosing or retaining competent subordinates.<sup>2</sup>

Mussolini was certainly no *sanguinario* on Hitler's scale. He did not have millions of people murdered in the service of a racialist pseudoscience. Italian political prisoners generally ended up in desolate corners of the South and the Islands rather than in concentration camps of the German type. The regime's systematic persecution of the Jews did not end in their extermination until Italy's collapse in 1943 brought German occupation.<sup>3</sup> But Mussolini was hardly squeamish, nor was his brutality free of racialist motivation even before the adoption of an anti-Jewish policy. The imposition of what the regime pleased to call a "Roman peace" upon the Arabs of Libya required mass shootings, large-scale population transfers, and concentration camps.<sup>4</sup> In Ethiopia, Italian forces employed mustard gas systematically in accordance with Mussolini's own directives, issued eight months before the campaign opened.<sup>5</sup> The telegrams with which he bombarded his viceroy, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, vividly render the Duce's conception of what he called a "radical house-cleaning" of the newly conquered *Impero*:

H[is] E[xcellency] GRAZIANI — ADDIS ABABA  
6496 — 5 JUNE 1936 — ALL REBELS MADE PRISONER ARE TO  
BE SHOT.

MUSSOLINI

H. E. GRAZIANI — ADDIS ABABA  
6595 — SECRET — 8 JUNE 1936. TO FINISH OFF REBELS AS  
IN CASE AT ANCOBER USE GAS.

MUSSOLINI

H. E. GRAZIANI — ADDIS ABABA  
8103 — SECRET — 8 JULY 1936. I REPEAT MY AUTHORIZA-  
TION TO YOUR EXCELLENCY TO INITIATE AND SYSTEMATI-  
CALLY CONDUCT POLICY OF TERROR AND EXTERMINATION  
AGAINST REBELS AND POPULATIONS IN COMPLICITY WITH  
THEM. WITHOUT THE LAW OF TEN EYES FOR ONE WE CAN-  
NOT HEAL THIS WOUND IN GOOD TIME. ACKNOWLEDGE.

MUSSOLINI

H. E. GRAZIANI — ADDIS ABABA  
54000 — 21 FEBRUARY 1937. AGREED THAT MALE POPULA-  
TION OF GOGGETTI OVER 18 YEARS OF AGE IS TO BE SHOT  
AND VILLAGE DESTROYED.

MUSSOLINI

H. E. GRAZIANI — ADDIS ABABA  
93980 PERS[ONAL] — 21 FEBRUARY 1937. NO PERSONS  
ARRESTED ARE TO BE RELEASED WITHOUT MY ORDER. ALL  
CIVILIANS AND [Coptic] CLERICS IN ANY WAY SUSPECT ARE  
TO BE SHOT WITHOUT DELAY. ACKNOWLEDGE.

MUSSOLINI<sup>6</sup>

These directives were not merely isolated examples of frightfulness. The entire thrust of Fascist colonial policy was to eliminate the native ruling classes and create an undifferentiated mass of disarmed, terrorized, and submissive subjects who would eventually make way for the massive influx of Italian colonists the regime intended to promote. While not strictly analogous to the "final solution of the Jewish question" or Germany's racial war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, such methods hardly testify to a lack of fixity of purpose or an absence of bloody-mindedness on Mussolini's part. Nor do they bear out the suggestion of one belated anti-Fascist that the regime "kept an incorrigibly clownlike appearance even in the crimes it committed."<sup>7</sup>

Mussolini did not mellow with age. At the end of the Spanish Civil War, he ordered the killing of all Italian "reds" captured — justifying the action with the motto, "the dead tell no tales." During the Italo-German occupation of Yugoslavia, he detected a lack of ruthlessness in some of his generals, and praised the example of one officer who reportedly harangued his troops in these terms: "I have heard that you are all good fathers of families. That's fine in your own home, but not here. Here you will never be thieves, assassins, and rapists enough." Mussolini demanded "steel and fire," and initiated a series of massacres and population transfers that rivaled in brutality the actions of his German ally.<sup>8</sup>

As for Mussolini's alleged "realism," one has only to see a few of the

regime's newsreels (admittedly not so well filmed as Leni Riefenstahl's satanic documentaries) to see that his "delusion" that Italy under Fascist leadership was a great power indeed inspired "thousands of his countrymen." No less an expert than Hitler testified to the genuineness of the emotions the Duce roused in the masses,<sup>9</sup> and Mussolini himself drew reassurance from this enthusiasm. In private, while he did not have the "sleepwalker's self-assurance" of the Führer, he did lay claim to an "animal instinct" that he asserted never failed him.<sup>10</sup>

His "hidden weakness in dealing with individuals" was not entirely imaginary. He often agreed with the last of his advisers spoken to, a practice that resulted in mutually contradictory decisions and frequent administrative paralysis.<sup>11</sup> But this characteristic was not peculiar to Mussolini. It is more or less inherent in any system of personal rule. Mussolini shared it with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and with Adolf Hitler, who "was likely to avoid conflict, postpone unpleasant decisions, and delay solutions," while issuing "oral orders based on impulse" that produced unending confusion.<sup>12</sup> This "*Führungschaos*" exacted a price, and contemplating it has led one scholar to conclude that it stemmed from weakness on Hitler's part.<sup>13</sup> The Führer's regrettable genius for political and military decision making, without which his rise is inexplicable, is answer enough to such suggestions. Actually, madness – social Darwinism run amok – was method. In both Germany and Italy it enabled the dictator to play off subordinates against one another and remain above the battle as supreme arbiter of their disputes. Paradoxically, competition was not entirely disadvantageous, at least in Germany. It contributed to the regime's expansionist dynamism; Hitler's foreign policy and military subordinates rushed about like eager spaniels, each bearing the Führer a bone. The shared values and objectives of the National Socialist bureaucracies also mitigated the effects of competition, and Germany's economic strength and military leadership tradition made it affordable. The feuds of Ribbentrop and Goebbels, Göring and Raeder, Himmler and the Army, Party and state bureaucracy, did not keep the Reich from conquering Western Europe and almost crushing the Soviet Union. But in Fascist Italy, given its economic weakness and the disparate origins and lack of cohesion of its elites, the conflicts the dictator required to maintain his position were more immediately damaging than in Germany.

Italy's weakness and Germany's strength explain the disparity between the two dictators' performances better than the usually alleged differences between their personalities. Mussolini's tenacity during the Ethiopian crisis suggests that the claim he lacked "nerve"<sup>14</sup> is arbitrary. His performance compares favorably with Hitler's during the Rhineland affair or the crucial last days of August 1939, when news of Italian nonbelligerence, on top of the announcement of the Anglo-Polish alliance, caused the Führer to waver before taking the final plunge. Hitler too was not immune to vanity, as his vindictiveness after foreign press reports that he had "backed down" in the face of Czech partial mobilization of 20 May 1938 suggests. But Mussolini

nevertheless had serious drawbacks as a leader. His vanity, even more than Hitler's, took the form of constant attention to the figure he was cutting. This vanity was not the origin of his expansionism. Certainly, less-dangerous activities could have assuaged it. It did, however, influence his moods and short-term policy choices.

Mussolini's methods of finding out what others thought of him varied from the foreign press, of which he was a voracious reader, to the reports of his chief of police. During the prewar years, Italian military intelligence (the Servizio Informazioni Militari or SIM) systematically photographed the contents of the British Embassy safe, decrypted the diplomatic and military traffic of most of Italy's smaller neighbors, and, in 1935, read communications between the British Home Fleet and the Admiralty. The information these methods produced, as Mario Toscano has pointed out, did not usually lead to a more realistic appreciation of the motives and intentions of the other side, but produced furious outbursts by the dictator.<sup>15</sup> Thus his grudge against the Greeks, latent since his brief but violent occupation of Corfu in 1923,<sup>16</sup> reached new heights after SIM purloined the record of a December 1937 conversation between British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and the King of Greece. The King's hope that Britain would one day "put [the Italians] in their place" and his remark that while in Rome "it had been difficult to resist the temptation to tell [Mussolini's son-in-law and foreign minister] Count [Galeazzo] Ciano that, if Italy were really so great a power, it was not necessary to say so quite so often," produced fury at Palazzo Venezia.<sup>17</sup> But the incident did not cause new departures. Ciano, reflecting his master's preoccupations, had concluded weeks before that "destiny" would take the Serbs, with whom Ciano was at that point attempting to arrange an alliance, "to Salonika, and us to Tirana and Corfu."<sup>18</sup>

More important than the gleanings of the SIM was the foreign press, summaries of which Mussolini received twice daily,<sup>19</sup> along with a number of newspapers, principally French. Despite, or because of, his journalistic origins, Mussolini paid great attention to what journalists wrote about him and the regime. Slurs upon his private life routinely produced threats of "cannon fire and bombs."<sup>20</sup> Even more vulnerable was Italian military prowess, upon the exaltation of which the regime's propaganda rested. Unfortunately, the performance of Mussolini's military experts failed to support his propaganda. In March 1937, the four "volunteer" divisions with which the regime had intervened in the Spanish Civil War launched a drive on Madrid through the outlying town of Guadalajara. The Republicans held, then counterattacked with a battalion of Italian anti-Fascists at their head, and routed Mussolini's troops. The military consequences were grave enough: the swift and glorious end to the war that Mussolini, Ciano, and their generals had promised themselves was clearly far off. But British press mockery of the "new Caporetto," including an article by Lloyd George on "The Italian Skedaddle," turned a question of military prestige into a major Anglo-Italian confrontation.<sup>21</sup> The immediate effects of the battle did not die down until



the summer, when Franco victories with Italian participation soothed Mussolini somewhat. Despite the relaxation of tension, Guadalajara played a major part in pushing Italy closer to its partner in the Rome-Berlin Axis that Mussolini had announced with fanfare the previous November.<sup>22</sup>

While Guadalajara was the most conspicuous single incident in which the dictator's vanity, though not exclusively personal, influenced policy, his tenacity in holding to the Axis once committed to it stemmed at least partly from the precedent of 1914-15. Italy had entered World War I alongside the West after abandoning its Triple Alliance partners, Germany and Austria-Hungary. German and Austrian failure to consult Italy before unleashing war in July-August 1914 fully justified Italian neutrality, despite vociferous Austro-German claims of betrayal. But subsequent Italian belligerence, which the Allies purchased in the April 1915 Treaty of London with lavish though later partly repudiated promises of territory, reinforced the Germans in their views. It left an enduring taint of betrayal and of what one Italian statesman had unwisely called “*sacro egoismo*.” Consequently, the new, Fascist Italy, while aggressively proud of its egotism, must of necessity keep faith, must pursue “a policy as straight as a sword blade.” However, more mundane, Machiavellian considerations often overshadowed this laudable aspiration. If, after the surprise German move on Prague in March 1939, Mussolini told Ciano that “we cannot change our policy because we are not whores,” his first thought was of the danger of falling between two stools, of rendering himself, like the cowards in the *Inferno*, “*a Dio spiacenti ed ai nemici sui*.” German power was now overwhelming – and at the Brenner.<sup>23</sup>

More dangerous than vanity was Mussolini's deep-seated distrust of his subordinates. Particularly in the later years, he delighted in sudden “changes of the guard”: the removal, without warning or explanation, of most of his ministers. All too frequently these reshuffles replaced experienced administrators with unqualified nonentities. Perhaps Mussolini was not a good judge of men.<sup>24</sup> More likely, as Alberto Aquarone has suggested, he felt competence and excessive zeal threatened his own position. “Don't beplume your subordinates too much,” Gabriele D'Annunzio, prophet of the “national rebirth” and virtual poet laureate of the regime, had advised shortly after Italo Balbo's great publicity flight to Chicago in 1933.<sup>25</sup> The advice was congenial, and Mussolini followed it systematically. He prized the reliability of discreet apolitical functionaries from the old administrative elite, men like Arturo Bocchini, chief of police from 1925 until his death in 1940. Hitler, by contrast, was fiercely loyal to his Party associates (with the conspicuous exceptions of Gregor Strasser and Ernst Röhm) and found Mussolini's changes of the guard unfortunate. Evidently the Duce could not “find amongst his advisers the sort of collaboration he need[ed].”<sup>26</sup>

Given his ambitions, Mussolini's most serious defect was his military dilettantism, which contributed to his downfall in no uncertain measure. Like Hitler, Mussolini had served in the infantry in the World War, though