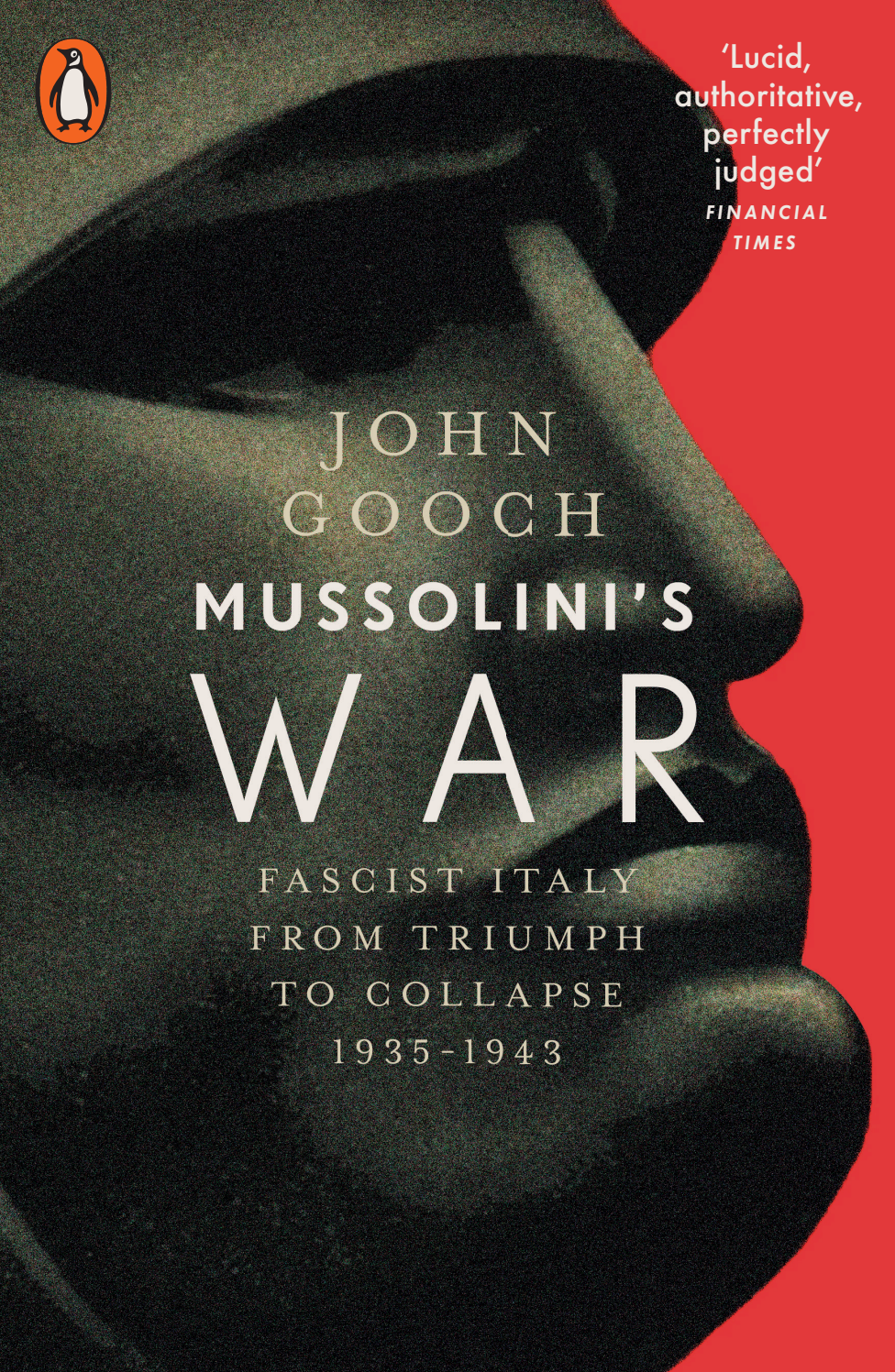


'Lucid, authoritative, perfectly judged'
FINANCIAL TIMES

JOHN GOOCH

MUSSOLINI'S WAR

FASCIST ITALY FROM TRIUMPH TO COLLAPSE 1935–1943

PENGUIN BOOKS

MUSSOLINI'S WAR

John Gooch is one of the world's leading writers on Italy and the two world wars. His books include *Mussolini and His Generals* and *The Italian Army and the First World War*. He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Leeds. In 2010 the President of Italy appointed him Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana.

JOHN GOOCH

Mussolini's War

Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse, 1935–1943

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2020
First published in Penguin Books 2021
001

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–141–98029–4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

The character of a leader is a large
factor in the game of war . . .
General William Tecumseh Sherman

Contents

	Acknowledgements	viii
	Dramatis Personae	x
	Maps	xxv
	Introduction	1
1	On the March	7
2	The Reluctant Neutral	53
3	First Moves	96
4	Defeat, Disaster and Success	140
5	Sea, Sand and Endless Steppes	186
6	Terror in the Balkans	230
7	Year of Destiny	278
8	Overstretched and Overcome	325
9	Endgame	369
	Afterword	411
	Abbreviations	425
	List of illustrations	427
	Notes	429
	Bibliography	499
	Index	523

Acknowledgements

Once again I am deeply grateful to the personnel who man the Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito in Rome for their help and support while I was researching this book. Colonel Filippo Cappellano, first as *cap'archivio* and latterly as Head of the Office, a distinguished historian in his own right, has welcomed me on numerous occasions and shared with me his unbounded knowledge of the archives. His predecessor, Colonel Cristiano Dechigi, was no less supportive in his turn. Lieutenant-Colonel Emilio Tirone, currently head of the archive, has been – and is – no less welcoming and has given me much unobtrusive but invaluable assistance. Trawling through the archives themselves was made infinitely easier with the advice and guidance of the principal archivist, Dottore Alessandro Gionfrida. My thanks go to him, to his deputy Dottore Filippo Bignato, and to the unfailingly cheerful and friendly staff who ferry the files to and fro. With the help of *caporale maggiore* Claudio Piddini, and some much-appreciated cups of *espresso* coffee, I was able to make a brief raid on the photographic archives – a source of extraordinary depth and richness which remains underexploited by historians.

My entry into the Italian Air Ministry was made simple and straightforward thanks to the friendship, help and hospitality of Lieutenant-General Basilio Di Martino. The head of the Ufficio Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare, Colonel Luigi Borzise, opened its resources to me without hesitation. He and his staff, Dotoressa Monica Bovino and Signore Marcello Neve, were friendliness personified and made my brief time with them both productive and delightful.

Getting into Service archives in Italy requires jumping through bureaucratic hoops. Signora Palmina Cerullo of the British Embassy in Rome has come up trumps every time yet another of my requests for help has landed on her desk. Thanks, Palmina.

In Genoa, Dr Gianni Franzone, director of the Centro Wolfsoniana, kindly found me room and time in which to consult his archive. And at

Castiglione delle Stiviere, Professoressa Dr Silvana Greco and Professor Giulio Busi, directors of the Fondazione Palazzo Bondoni Pastorio, were the most hospitable and kindly of hosts.

My visits to the outstation of the Imperial War Museum at Duxford were among my most enjoyable outings thanks to the presence there of Stephen Walton as Senior Curator. Stephen provided everything a researcher could want: swift and comprehensive guidance through the holdings, ready help when needed, relaxing surroundings – even coffee and a biscuit!

In Rome, long-time friends Dr Ciro Paoletti and Professor Andrea Ungari made my visits even more of a pleasure than they would otherwise have been. And in London Drs. Jenny and Michael Sevitt provided home comforts while I visited the ever-efficient National Archives at Kew.

Assembling the materials for a book such as this is not straightforward and I am deeply grateful to friends old and new for helping me do so. My warmest thanks go to Professor Holger Afflerbach; Dr Fabio De Ninno; Dr Jurgen Foerster; Dr Emilio Gin; Dr Richard Hammond; Professor MacGregor Knox; Dr Jacopo Lorenzini; Professor Evan Mawdsley; Dr Steven Morewood; Professor Rick Schneid; Dr Matteo Scianna; Dr Brian Sullivan; and Dr Nicolas Virtue.

My editor at Penguin Books, Simon Winder, has been enthusiastic about this project from the outset. His experienced eye has been of the greatest help in getting the manuscript into its final shape. To him, to Richard Mason, who copy-edited the book, to Ruth Pietroni and Eva Hodgkin, who oversaw its progress through the editorial process, and to Jeff Edwards, who drew the maps, my warm gratitude.

Many years ago a professor in my college remarked that historians should not marry. For me at least, he was wholly wrong. Ann has lived patiently with Italian matters military for a very long time, managing our lives together here in England and in Rome. Without her as a partner this book would not have been written, so it is at least as much hers as it is mine.

Dramatis Personae

AMBROSIO, General Vittorio (28 July 1879–20 November 1958)

Commissioned as a cavalry officer, Ambrosio served as a divisional staff officer during the First World War and a divisional and then corps commander in the years that followed. In 1939 he was given command of 2nd Army on the Yugoslav border, leading the Italian offensive against the Yugoslavs in April 1941. Exchanging posts with Mario Roatta, he became chief of the army general staff in January 1942. On 1 February 1943 Mussolini appointed him chief of the armed forces general staff. A dyed-in-the-wool monarchist, he played a major part in the plotting that led to Mussolini's downfall after repeated but fruitless attempts to persuade Mussolini to change course. On 8–9 September, after the announcement of the armistice, he left Rome along with the king, Badoglio and others, serving under the rump Italian government as inspector-general of the army until November 1944.

AMÉ, General Cesare (18 November 1892–30 June 1983)

Amé joined the Italian Military Intelligence Service (*Servizio Informazioni Militari* – SIM) in 1921, serving first in the counter-espionage centre at Turin and then in Vienna and Budapest. Leaving SIM in 1929, he held a command post in Perugia and then taught at the Air Force Academy at Caserta from 1933 to 1935. Promoted colonel in 1937, he commanded an infantry regiment and served first as a divisional and then as corps chief of staff. Recalled to SIM as vice-chief with Mussolini's approval at the beginning of January 1940, he was appointed head of SIM on 20 September 1940. By the end of 1941 he commanded an organization of 1,500 officers, non-commissioned officers and specialized troops, double the size of the one he took over. He was removed by Badoglio on 18 August 1943.

ARMELLINI, General Quirino (31 January 1889–13 January 1975)

A faithful follower of Badoglio, Armellini commanded an Eritrean battalion during the reconquest of Libya. In November 1935 Badoglio made him operations chief in Ethiopia. From 1936 until 1938 he served as military commander of the Amhara district. Following divisional commands in Italy, he served as Badoglio's chief staff officer at the *Comando Supremo* from June 1940 until he was replaced in January 1941 following his master's fall. He commanded the *La Spezia* infantry division and then XVIII Corps in Dalmatia and Croatia until he was replaced in July 1942 following a clash with the civil governor of Dalmatia, Giuseppe Bastianini. When Mussolini fell on 25 July 1943, Armellini was tasked by Badoglio with dissolving the Fascist militia (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*) and incorporating it into the army. After the armistice he joined the resistance in Rome, heading the clandestine military front there from March 1944.

BADOGLIO, Marshal Pietro (28 September 1871–1 November 1956)

Badoglio enjoyed a meteoric rise during the First World War, climbing from lieutenant-colonel to lieutenant-general in only two years. His XXVII Corps front collapsed during the battle of Caporetto (24 October 1917), giving rise to accusations of failure and then of a cover-up which dogged him throughout his life – as they continue to do. After serving as ambassador to Brazil between 1923 and 1925 he became army chief of staff and then *Capo di stato maggiore generale* (chief of the armed forces general staff) from 1925 to 1940. Between 1929 and 1933 he was governor of Libya and then from November 1935 to May 1936 he directed the war in Ethiopia, all the while still holding his position in Rome. He both solicited and received rich rewards: the king made him duke of Addis Ababa in July 1936. His direction of military affairs was generally unimpressive. Uncharacteristically, he openly criticized Mussolini after the Greek debacle in November 1940 and lost office as a result. His deep-seated dislike of the Germans was probably only exceeded by his visceral hatred of Cavallero, in whose death he may have had an indirect hand. Appointed head of the government on

25 July 1943, he fled Rome for Brindisi with the king and others on 8–9 September 1943, continuing to head the rump Italian government until June 1944.

BALBO, Italo (6 June 1896–28 June 1940)

Fascist *ras* (Party chief) of Ferrara and one of the four men appointed by Mussolini to lead the March on Rome in October 1922, Balbo became first under-secretary (1926–9) and then Minister of Aviation (1929–33). Courageous, energetic and charming, he made an international reputation by leading four long-distance training flights, including a double crossing of the Atlantic. A good organizer, he was unable to overcome deep-seated inter-service rivalries or to impose a uniform doctrine on the air force. In January 1934, seeing him as a dangerous rival and potential successor, Mussolini 'exiled' him to Libya as governor. In June 1940, his plane was misidentified as a British fighter shortly after an enemy attack and shot down over Tobruk by Italian anti-aircraft batteries. Balbo Drive, a street in Chicago where he was fêted on reaching America, is still named after him.

BASTICO, General Ettore (9 April 1876–1 December 1972)

Bastico's fifty-three-year military career began, like many others, with the Italo-Turkish war in Libya (1911–12). After distinguished service during the First World War he rose through the ranks during the inter-war years, establishing a reputation as something of a thinking general with his book *The Evolution of the Art of War* in which he took on Giulio Douhet, who he thought had over-emphasized the mechanized aspect of war at the cost of the human element. He also developed a close friendship with Mussolini. During the Abyssinian war he commanded the 1st Blackshirt/*23 Marzo* division, and in 1937 he briefly led the *Corpo di Truppe Volontarie* (CTV) in the Spanish Civil War. In December 1940 he was appointed military governor of the Dodecanese and on 19 July 1941 Mussolini made him governor of Libya and nominal commander of the Axis forces in North Africa. Rommel, who clashed frequently with him over his logistical and strategic caution, nicknamed him 'Bombastico'. Promoted *Maresciallo d'Italia* (Marshal

of Italy) on 12 August 1942 so as not to be junior to Rommel, he was relieved in February 1943 after Tripoli fell.

CAMPIONI, Admiral Inigo (14 November 1878–24 May 1944)

Widely regarded during the latter years of his peacetime career as the most promising officer in the *Regia Marina*, Campioni served on battleships and then commanded convoys during the First World War. His interwar career, during which he rose to flag rank in 1932, included time as naval attaché in Paris, command of the battleship *Duilio* and a heavy cruiser, and service as Admiral Cavagnari's office chief. In 1938 he was made deputy chief of the naval staff and in 1939 he was appointed to command the 1st Naval Squadron – the main Italian battle fleet. Criticized after the battles of Punta Stilo and Capo Teulada in July and November 1940 for being over-cautious and failing to press home his advantage, he was replaced on 8 December 1940. He returned to the post of deputy chief of the naval staff and then in October 1941 became governor of the Dodecanese, surrendering them to the Germans on 11 September 1943, three days after the armistice. Imprisoned by the Germans, he was handed over in January 1944 to Mussolini's Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana* – RSI), which convicted him of high treason after he repeatedly refused to collaborate with it. Offered a pardon if he recognized the RSI as Italy's legitimate government he rejected it outright and was shot in the city square of Parma. In November 1947 he was posthumously awarded Italy's highest decoration for valour, the *Medaglia d'Oro*.

CAVAGNARI, Admiral Domenico (20 July 1876–2 November 1966)

During the First World War Cavagnari commanded a squadron of destroyer leaders (*esploratori*). From 1929 to 1932 he was head of the Italian Naval Academy at Livorno. His time there coincided with a change of tone in the navy's relationship with the regime and an increased emphasis on the positive virtues of Fascism. As undersecretary of the navy from November 1933 and chief of the naval staff from June 1934, Cavagnari shaped the navy that went to war in 1940,

keeping a tight hold on everything and insisting on uniformity and obedience. A 'battleship' admiral, he showed little interest in aircraft carriers (like his master) or in radar, effectively closing down research and innovation in January 1934 with the declaration that 'at sea a simple device, resistant and which functions reliably is preferable to another which, though more sophisticated and faster, is more complex, fragile and less reliable'. He did, though, oversee the construction of sixty submarines, intended to attrite enemy battleships and carriers, between 1935 and 1940. The indecisive battle of Punta Stilo and the successful enemy strike at Taranto in November 1940 ended his career.

CAVALLERO, Marshal Ugo (20 September 1880–13 September 1943)

During the First World War Cavallero, who was popular with the rank and file there for his easy-going attitude, served first on Cadorna's headquarters and then as operations chief under Badoglio, deputy chief of staff to Cadorna's successor Marshal Diaz. In 1920, sensing that peacetime promotion would be slow, he left the army for private industry. In 1925 Mussolini made him under-secretary of state for war, a position he held for three years, during which time he and Badoglio became bitter rivals and from which he was removed after direct intervention from the king. He then worked for five years for Ansaldo, as a result of which he was suspected for the rest of his life of profiteering from the firm's supply of poor-quality steel for the armed forces. After a period commanding the troops in Italian East Africa he was sacked by the viceroy, Amedeo Duke of Aosta. In June 1939 Mussolini sent him to Berlin to handle the negotiations that followed the signing of the Pact of Steel on 22 May. On 6 December 1940 he succeeded Badoglio as chief of the armed forces general staff and was immediately sent to Albania to take over the conduct of the Greek war from Ubaldo Soddu, returning to Rome in May 1941. Somewhat too accommodating to the Germans for some of his fellow generals, Cavallero held office until 31 January 1943, chiefly perhaps because, unlike his successor Ambrosio, he never questioned the *Duce*'s direction of the war. In July 1943 Badoglio had him arrested and then, when he was released after the king's intervention, had him arrested again. During his imprisonment he wrote a memorandum in which he claimed to have conspired against

Mussolini from November 1942. When Badoglio fled Rome he left the '*memoriale Cavallero*' on his desk. The Germans found it. With this in his hands, Kesselring offered Cavallero command of the armed forces of what would become the RSI. On 13 September 1943 Cavallero had supper with Kesselring. Next morning he was found dead in the garden of the hotel in Frascati in which he was staying, having apparently committed suicide. Some suspect that he was murdered.

CIANO, Count Galeazzo (18 March 1903–11 January 1944)

The son of an admiral and a minister in Mussolini's cabinet who was close to the *Duce*, Ciano married Mussolini's daughter Edda in April 1930. His rise thereafter was rapid: under-secretary and then minister for propaganda (1934–5), he was promoted Foreign Minister by his father-in-law on 9 June 1936, a post he held until February 1943 when he was demoted to ambassador to the Holy See. Vulgar, ambitious and opportunistic, Ciano was at first little more than a placeman. Mounting anxiety about Italy's vulnerability to a dominating Nazi Germany changed that and led ultimately to Ciano's voting for his father-in-law's dismissal at the meeting of the Fascist Council on 24–25 July 1943. That cost him his life. After foolishly fleeing to Germany he was handed over to the RSI, tried and convicted as a traitor, and shot in the back. For anyone so minded a video of his execution can be found on YouTube.

FAVAGROSSA, General Carlo (22 November 1888–22 March 1970)

An engineer, Favagrossa served as a junior officer in the Libyan war and the First World War. After presiding over the control commission for the observation of the armistice in Vienna in 1919 he served in Cyrenaica and then on military and diplomatic duties in France and Czechoslovakia. Following regimental command and then service as deputy commandant of the Artillery and Engineers' Academy, he was given command of Italy's lone motor-mechanized brigade in June 1936. Sent to Spain in the aftermath of Guadalajara, he completely reorganized the Intendance (supply) service. After divisional

commands he took over the presidency of the General Commissariat for War Production (*Commissariato Generale per le Fabbricazioni di Guerra* – COGEFAG) on 1 September 1939. On 23 May 1940 he was renamed an under-secretary of state for war production, and on 6 February 1943 raised to the rank of minister. In office he controlled the allocation of raw materials (though always having to contest this with various branches of the Fascist Party), but not weapons procurement.

FOUGIER, General Rino Corso (14 November 1894–24 April 1963)

Fougier began war service in 1915 with the *Bersaglieri* (light infantry) but transferred to the air wing in 1916, winning three silver medals for valour. After the war, as successively a squadron, wing and group commander he impressed the air minister Italo Balbo, who when governor of Libya called him to Tripolitania between 1935 and 1937. Put in command of the *1a Squadra Aerea* in May 1940, he commanded the air expeditionary force (*Corpo Aereo Italiano*) in Belgium which joined in the bombardment of Great Britain between 10 September 1940 and 28 January 1941. On 15 November 1941 he succeeded Pricolo as undersecretary of state for air and chief of the air staff. He was removed from office on 27 July 1943.

GAMBARA, General Gastone (10 November 1890–27 February 1962)

Gambara began his military career as a non-commissioned officer before graduating from the Modena Military Academy via a special course for promising NCOs. During the First World War he served in the *Alpini* (specialized mountain troops), winning two *Medaglie d'Argento* (silver medals, Italy's second highest award for gallantry) in nine months in 1918. After commanding an *Alpini* battalion in the early 1920s he held a variety of staff posts. He fought in Ethiopia and then in Spain, where he was chief of staff to the CTV. After commanding XV Corps in the brief battle in the French Alps in June 1940, he next commanded VIII Corps in the war against Greece from 5 February 1941. On 11 May 1941 he was transferred to Tripoli, first as Gariboldi's, and them Bastico's chief of staff, and then as commander

first of the *Corpo d'Armata Corazzato* (Armoured Corps) and subsequently the *Corpo d'Armata di Manovra* (Manoeuvre Corps). After falling out with Rommel and Cavallero he was recalled on 6 March 1942 and sent to Slovenia in September to command XI Corps, staying there until 5 September 1943. After the armistice Gambara sided with the Fascist *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* and on 20 October 1943 he was appointed chief of staff of the Republican National Army. Mussolini removed him on 12 March 1944 for 'excessive pessimism'. His name was on the 1947 Anglo-American list of war criminals, but like others he escaped arraignment either in Italy or abroad.

GARIBOLDI, General Italo (20 April 1879–9 February 1970)

Gariboldi served in staff posts during the First World War. Between 1920 and 1925 he led the Italian delegation determining the Yugoslav frontier. Regimental and brigade command was followed by command of the Military Academy at Modena and the School of Application at Parma. In 1936 he commanded the *Sabauda* division in the march on Addis Ababa. As chief of staff to the governor of Italian East Africa he participated in the brutal repression of Abyssinian resistance. Recalled in February 1938, he commanded an army corps and then from 11 June 1940 to 11 February 1941 5th Army in Tripolitania, at which time he took over from Graziani as commander-in-chief and governor general. Tense relations with Rommel, of whose lightning re-conquest of Cyrenaica he disapproved, led to his recall on 19 July 1941. In spring 1942 he was appointed to command 8th Army (ARMIR) in Russia. Gariboldi was at Parma rebuilding the shattered 8th Army when, on 15 September 1943, he was arrested by the Germans. Refusing to collaborate with them, he was first interned in Germany and then handed over to the RSI, which condemned him to ten years' imprisonment.

GELOSO, General Carlo (20 August 1879–23 July 1957)

An artilleryman, Geloso won three silver medals for valour during the First World War. Emerging from it as a colonel, he went into the special reserve until recalled with the advent of Fascism. After regimental

command and staff service he fought in Somalia in 1936 and then participated in the 'pacification' of Ethiopia, using methods which even Roberto Farinacci, a hard-line Fascist, judged 'often disproportionate and unjustified'. In December 1939 he commanded XXVI Corps in Albania, succeeding Guzzoni, but was replaced in the summer of 1940 by Visconti Prasca at Ciano's behest. Recalled to Albania in November 1940, he commanded 11th Army until April 1941. He then served as military governor of Greece until unseated by a scandal in May 1943 after which his pleading letters to Mussolini were studiously ignored. Following the armistice in September 1943 he was captured and interned by the Germans at Poznan until freed by the Red Army. The Ethiopian government tried unsuccessfully to extradite him for war crimes in 1947, a year after the Greek government, then in the midst of a civil war, announced that it did not intend to pursue the extradition of any Italians held to have carried out illegal actions in their country.

GRAZIANI, Marshal Rodolfo (11 August 1882–11 January 1955)

After gaining his university matriculation Graziani enrolled for a two-year course in law but never completed his studies. Too poor to attend one of the military academies he was conscripted into the army, serving as a non-commissioned officer and then as a second lieutenant before winning a permanent commission in 1906. In Libya throughout the First World War, he emerged from it the youngest colonel in the army and one of the most decorated. After briefly abandoning the army but failing to make his way in the civilian world he returned to Libya in 1921 and stayed for thirteen years, taking a leading part in the repression and re-conquest of the colony and carving a reputation for himself as one of Italy's most aggressive – and successful – soldiers. Promoted to *generale di corpo d'armata* (lieutenant-general), he was recalled to Rome in 1934 but left again in February 1935 to take command of Italian forces in Somalia. His success there earned him the baton of *Maresciallo d'Italia*. As viceroy of Ethiopia he hanged and shot 'rebel' leaders, becoming markedly more ruthless after an attempt on his life on 19 February 1937. Returning to Rome in January 1938, Graziani was appointed chief of the army general staff on 1 November 1939 (apparently learning of his appointment on the 1 o'clock news) and

then, in June 1940, governor of Libya. He was relieved of command on 8 February 1941 and was not employed again until Mussolini made him War Minister of the RSI in late 1943. On the partisans' list for execution, Graziani escaped retribution when he fell into American hands. First an Allied prisoner of war and then imprisoned in Italy, he was tried in May 1950 'for military collaboration with Germany' and condemned to nineteen years incarceration, but released four months later. The Abyssinian government's attempt to extradite and try him for war crimes came to nought.

GUZZONI, General Alfredo (12 April 1877–15 April 1965)

Guzzoni served as a front-line staff officer for most of the First World War, during which he won two *Medaglie d'Argento*, and afterwards on the inter-Allied control commissions for Austria and Hungary. Regimental, brigade and divisional commands followed. In November 1935 he was sent to Eritrea, where he stayed as governor from June 1936 to April 1937. After leading the forces that invaded Albania on 7–8 April 1939, he commanded 4th Army during the brief campaign against France in June 1940. On 30 November 1940 he was nominated under-secretary of state for war and deputy chief of the armed forces general staff, a job he seems to have done fairly well. Cavallero abolished his deputy's post on his return to Rome after the Greek war ended and forced Guzzoni to resign as under-secretary in May 1941. On 1 June 1943 Guzzoni was given command of 6th Army and made responsible for the defence of Sicily, a difficult role in which he failed to shine. He was imprisoned by the RSI on 26 October 1943 following an attack on his record in Sicily by Roberto Farinacci but released two weeks later after pressure from the German high command.

IACHINO, Admiral Angelo (24 April 1889–3 December 1976)

Iachino spent the early part of the First World War on board the battleship *Giulio Cesare* before commanding a torpedo boat in the Adriatic and winning a *Medaglia d'Argento* (Silver Medal). After serving as naval attaché in China between 1923 and 1928, he commanded a

destroyer, a light cruiser and then two groups of light ships during the Spanish Civil War. In August 1940 he was given command of the 2nd Naval Squadron. He took part in the battle of Cape Spartivento in November 1940 and replaced Campioni as commander of the battle fleet the following month. Much criticized for his handling of the battle of Cape Matapan, during which he lost an entire cruiser division, he survived until 5 April 1943 and was then replaced by Admiral Carlo Bergamini. He was restored to active service in 1948 and finally discharged in 1962.

MARRAS, General Efisio (2 August 1888–29 January 1981)

An artilleryman, Marras was selected as Italy's military attaché in Berlin in October 1936. He stayed in post for seven years, apart from a short interlude in the summer of 1939 when he was replaced by General Mario Roatta. Acting as the *Comando Supremo*'s eyes and ears there, he reported and interpreted Nazi military policy. After the armistice he was interned by the Germans and then handed over to the RSI and imprisoned. In August 1944 he escaped and reached Switzerland. After the war he served first as army chief of staff and then from 1950 to 1954 as chief of the defence staff, playing a major role in the reconstruction of the Italian army.

MESSE, Marshal Giovanni (10 December 1883–18 December 1968)

Italy's finest general, Messe took a major part in training and then leading elite *Arditi* infantry units during the latter years of the First World War, winning a *Medaglia d'Argento*. After service as a royal aide-de-camp between 1923 and 1927, he commanded a *Bersaglieri* unit and then a motorized brigade, which he led during the war in Ethiopia and from which he emerged as a major-general. Deputy commander during the invasion of Albania in April 1939, he then commanded the *Celere* ('rapid') corps between June and December 1940. His success during the Greek war, in which he commanded the *Corpo d'Armata Speciale* (Special Army Corps), led to his being

appointed to command the *Corpo di spedizione italiano in Russia* (CSIR) in July 1941 when the first choice fell ill. After failing to persuade Cavallero and Mussolini not to expand the CSIR to full Army size, rubbing up against the Germans, and disagreeing with the new 8th Army commander, Gariboldi, over strategy, Messe asked to be relieved and left Russia in November 1942. In February 1943 Mussolini handed him a poisoned chalice, appointing him to command Italian forces in Tunisia. After the surrender of Axis forces in North Africa in May 1943 he was confined along with other senior captives in England, his conversations bugged by his captors. In September 1943 he was made chief of staff of the Italian Co-Belligerent Army, a post he held until the end of the war.

PIRZIO BIROLI, General Alessandro (23 July 1877–20 May 1962)

The son of one of Garibaldi's volunteers, Pirzio Biroli was commissioned into the *Bersaglieri*. During the First World War he first served on the staff in Rome and then as a staff officer in Macedonia before transferring to the Italian front after Caporetto. Between 1922 and 1927 he headed a military mission to Ecuador, following this with divisional and corps command. He commanded the Eritrean corps during the Abyssinian war and then, as a full general, held office as governor of Amhara. After attempting and failing to crush the revolt which broke out there in August 1937, for which Graziani held him responsible, he was dismissed in December 1937. Unemployed until February 1941, he was then made commander of 9th Army in Albania. As governor and military commander in Montenegro from October 1941 he used the ruthless methods practised in Abyssinia to hold down his fiefdom. In June 1943 the *Comando Supremo* created Army Group East, leaving Pirzio Biroli with only civil powers. He returned to Rome the following month. Following the armistice he was offered the post of Minister of National Defence by Mussolini but declined it. Passing through the German lines, he escaped to Brindisi and in October 1944 he was recalled to temporary service to head a commission examining awards for valour. On the Allied list of war criminals, he too escaped retribution. Reportedly a crack shot with a pistol, Pirzio Biroli won a silver medal in the team sabre event at the 1908 London Olympics.

PRICOLO, General Francesco (30 January 1891–14 October 1980)

Commissioned as an engineer, Pricolo flew dirigibles in the Italo-Turkish war and then in the First World War, winning two Silver Medals for valour. After filling a variety of command and staff posts, including deputy chief of the air staff for ten months in 1932–3, he was appointed under-secretary of state for air and chief of the air staff on 10 November 1939. Used by Mussolini as a personal channel of information on the mishandling of the early stages of the Greek war, he had disagreements with Cavallero and was distrusted by Rommel, who accused him of 'fickleness'. He was fired on 14 November 1941 after failing to send the new Macchi 202 fighters to North Africa as ordered, on the grounds that the personnel to fly them were not yet trained and the planes lacked sand filters. He was put on permanent leave in August 1945 and finally retired in 1954.

RICCARDI, Admiral Arturo (30 October 1878–20 December 1966)

Riccardi began his career serving with the Italian marines in the Boxer rebellion (1900–1) and then in the Far East campaign of 1905. Following war service he held several important staff posts in the main office of the Navy Ministry, becoming director-general of personnel and military services in August 1935, three years after he made admiral and one year after he joined the La Spezia branch of the Fascist Party. On 8 December 1940 he succeeded Cavagnari as under-secretary of the navy and chief of the naval staff. He was removed from both offices by Badoglio on 27 July 1943, following Mussolini's downfall.

ROATTA, General Mario (2 January 1887–7 January 1968)

A highly intelligent, equally controversial and somewhat elusive figure, Roatta served in Italy and France during the First World War and then as military attaché in Warsaw between 1924 and 1930. In 1934 he was chosen to head the *Servizio Informazioni Militari* (Italian military intelligence – SIM). Likely involved in the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in October 1934 (and shadowed thereafter by

French intelligence during his visits to France), he planned in January 1936 to kidnap or assassinate Haile Selassie but was prevented from doing so by Mussolini. As the first commander of the CTV in the Spanish Civil War he failed to distinguish himself, losing the battle of Guadalajara. After acting as military attaché in Berlin between August and October 1939 he served first as Graziani's deputy chief of army staff from 31 October 1939 and then as chief of army staff until 20 January 1942, when he took over command of the occupation forces in Slovenia and Dalmatia. He left the Balkans in February 1943 and after briefly being responsible for the defence of Sicily became chief of army staff for the second time in June 1943, fleeing Rome with Badoglio in September. He was sacked by Badoglio on 12 November 1943 on Allied insistence after being charged by the Yugoslavs with war crimes. In circumstances that are still unexplained he escaped from a prison hospital in Rome on 5 March 1945 and took refuge in Spain, where he stayed until 1966. In Italy he was sentenced *in absentia* to life imprisonment and a year's solitary confinement, a sentence that was overturned by the High Court of Appeal in 1948. Allied opinions of him varied from the uncomplimentary to the unprintable.

SODDU, General Ubaldo (23 July 1883–20 July 1949)

Soddu spent most of the First World War in Cyrenaica, returning in May 1918 and serving in France where he won a *Medaglia d'Argento*, a *Croix de Guerre* and the *Légion d'Honneur*. Much of his interwar career, during which he took a law degree, was spent teaching at various military institutions and publishing military studies. He caught the *Duce*'s eye first as head of the War Minister's office between 1934 and 1936 for his skill in shaping military legislation and then as author of a book proclaiming the virtues of 'rapid decisive war'. In December 1937 he was made deputy chief of army staff for operations and in October 1939 under-secretary of state for war, a post he held until 30 November 1940. On 8 November 1940, promoted full general, he was given command of the war against Greece, a position he held for only fifty-two days before being replaced first unofficially and then officially by Cavallero. Placed in reserve thereafter, he was arrested twice and imprisoned once following the fall of Mussolini on 25 July 1943 and freed by the Germans on 12 September 1943. He spent the rest of his life in retirement.

VISCONTI PRASCA, General Sebastiano (23 January 1883–25 February 1961)

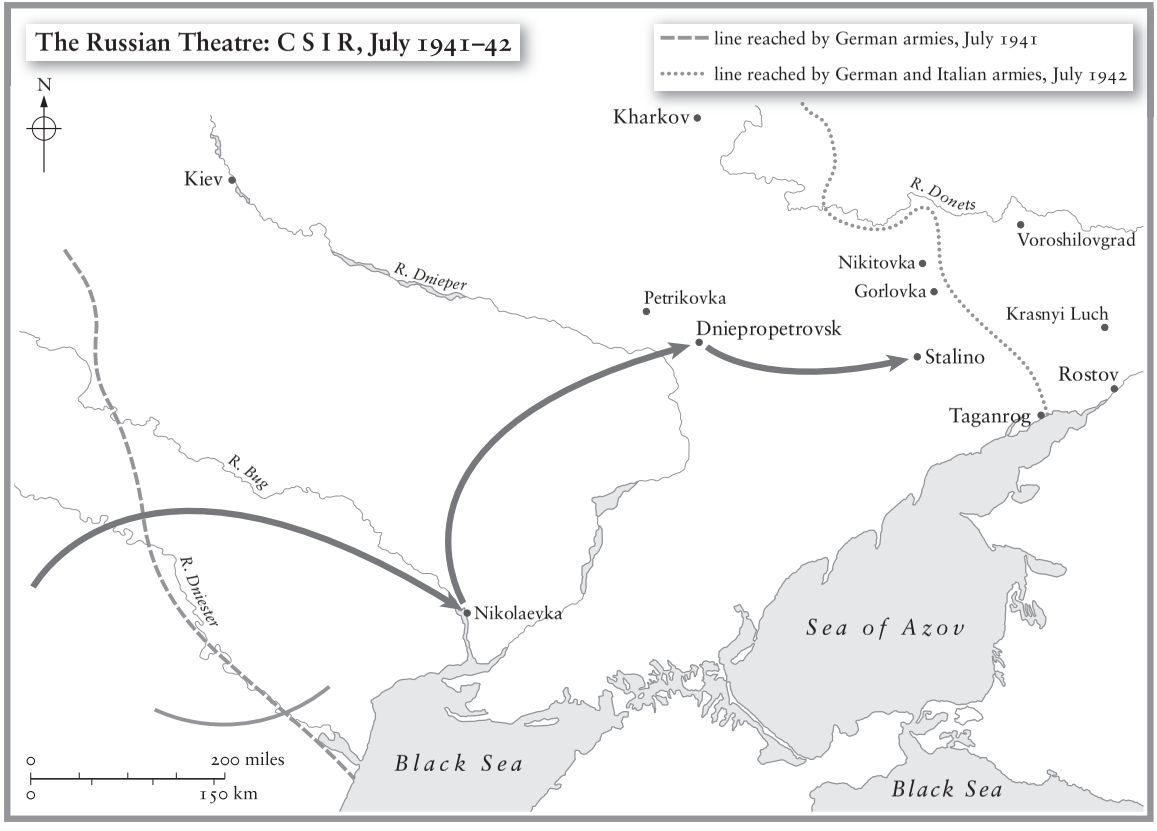
After service during the First World War, Visconti Prasca served as military and air attaché in Belgrade between 1925 and 1930 before commanding the Italian corps in the Saar in 1934. He served as military attaché in Paris from 1937 to 1939. A proponent of the new-style Fascist 'lightning war', as commander of the Italian forces invading Greece he failed dismally and was replaced by Ubaldo Soddu after only two weeks. He was immediately retired. In September 1943 he joined the resistance movement. Captured by the Germans and sentenced to death, subsequently commuted to life imprisonment, he escaped and reportedly fought with the Red Army, taking part in the battle of Berlin.

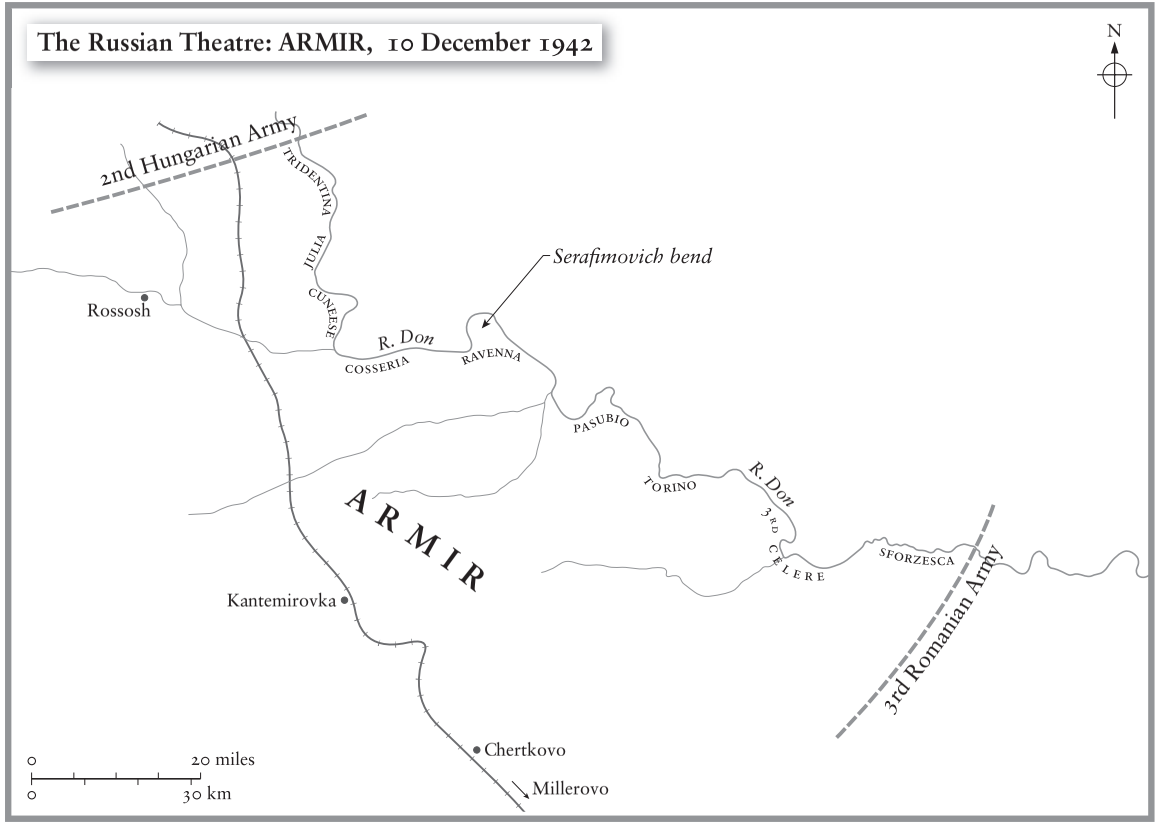
Maps

1. Italy
2. The Mediterranean Theatre
3. North Africa
4. Yugoslavia
5. Abyssinia
6. The Greek-Albanian Theatre 1940–41
7. The Russian Theatre: CSIR, July 1941–42
8. The Russian Theatre: ARMIR, 10 December 1942
9. The Eastern Mediterranean, May 1941
10. The Tyrrhenian Sea and Sicilian Channel, June 1941
11. Air Defences of Corsica and Sardinia, May 1943

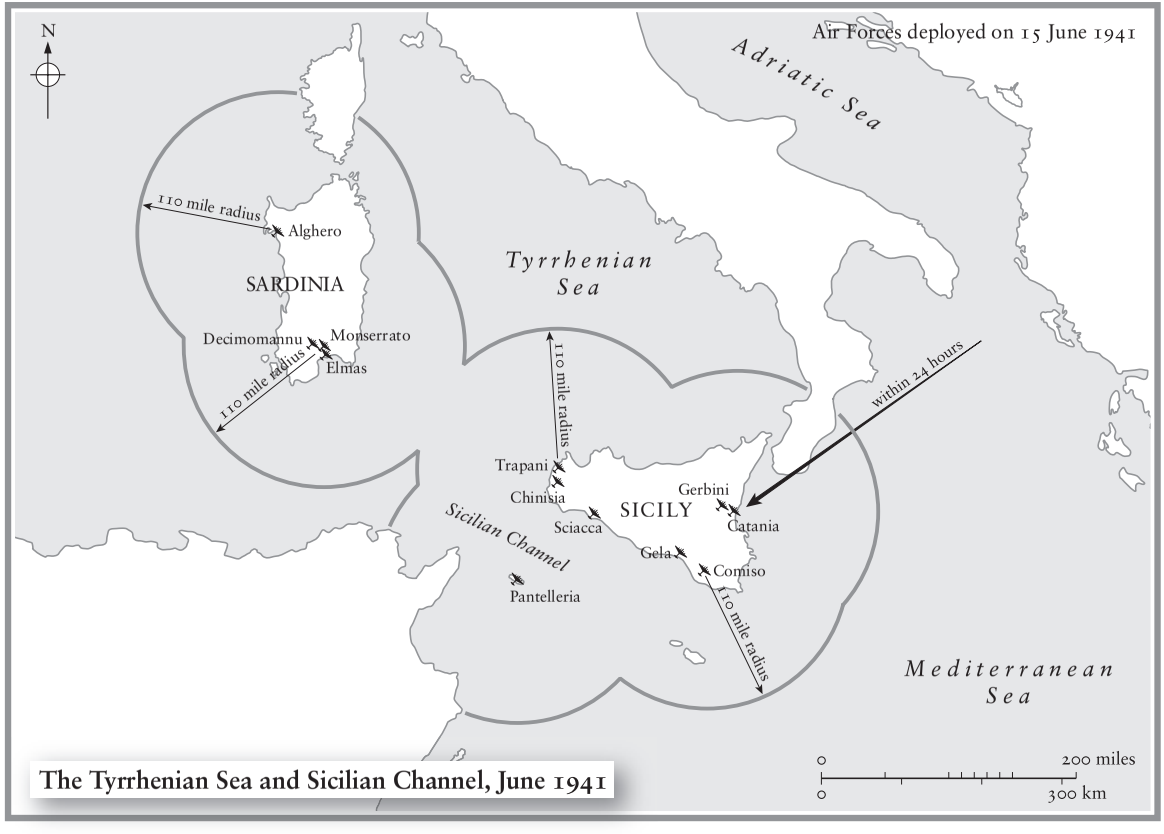
The Mediterranean Theatre

The Greek-Albanian Theatre 1940–41

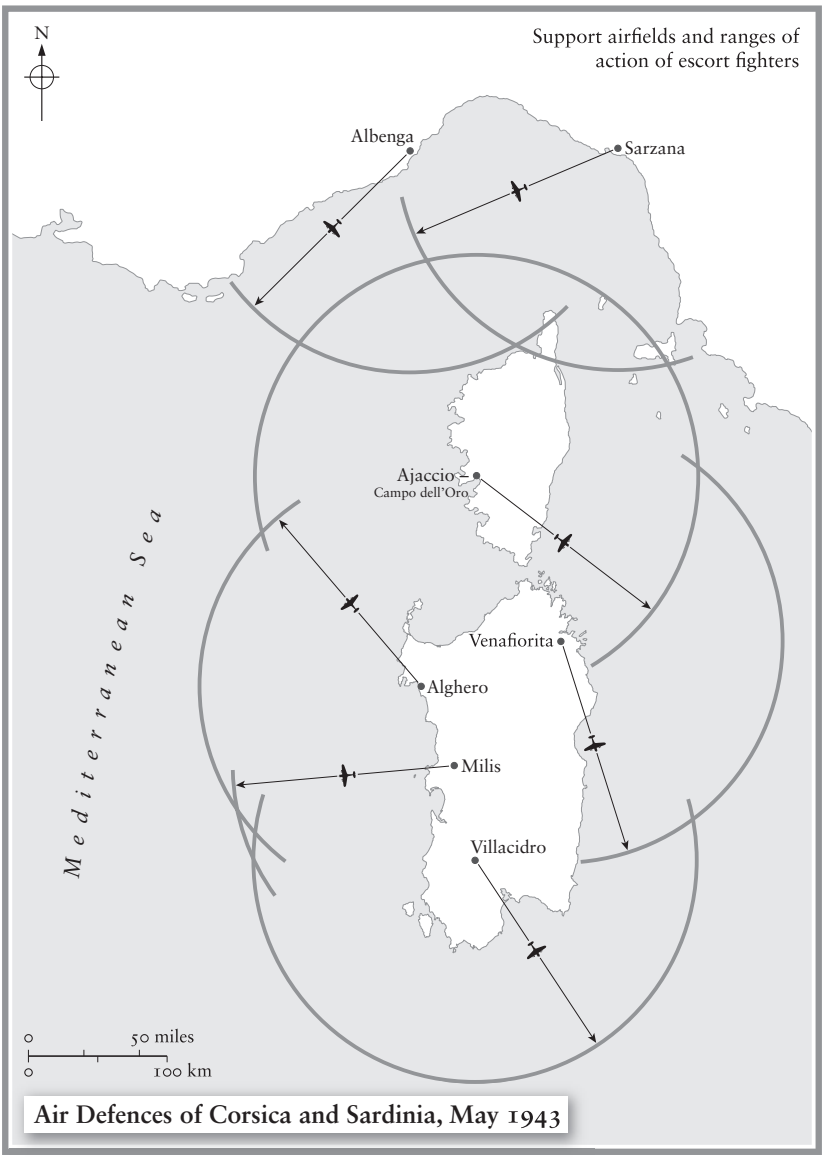




The Eastern Mediterranean, May 1941



The Tyrrhenian Sea and Sicilian Channel, June 1941



Air Defences of Corsica and Sardinia, May 1943

Introduction

When, on 30 October 1922, Mussolini took charge of Italy and inducted the country into Fascism – a revolution that he would begin to try to enforce three years later after defeating the radical wing of his own party – his intention was to forge a new, resurgent state and force the international community to recognize that his fiefdom was no longer 'the least of the Great Powers'. Carving out a new Roman empire that would cover the Mediterranean and North Africa, include a substantial slice of the Balkans, and open gateways onto the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean would give Fascist Italy its rightful place in world affairs. Parts of this agenda were not new – Liberal Italy had unveiled its colonial ambitions when it set foot in Massawa on the Red Sea in 1885 and again when it fought the Turks in Libya in 1911–12 and won possession of a new colony. Nor were Italian ambitions in the Balkans and even, briefly, in Anatolian Turkey signs of a new appetite for expansion. The continuities between the foreign policies of Liberal and Fascist Italy have given historians plenty of ammunition for debate and disagreement. What was new was the interlocking of these goals into a composite programme – and the ambitious drive that Mussolini gave to achieving them. To conquer what he and many in his entourage regarded as Italy's *spazio vitale* ('living space') meant dealing both with legacies from the past and the contextual circumstances of the present. For a while, Mussolini seemed to succeed on both fronts.

Before the First World War, Italian diplomats had worked pragmatically, avoiding antagonizing the Great Powers, seeking openings to advance where there was no powerful resistance, and using force when it looked as though they could do so without causing a hostile international reaction. One consequence of this was that on the eve of the

world war Italy's military record was mixed at best. Allowed by the Great Powers to establish a foothold in Eritrea and encouraged by their politicians, Italian soldiers had pushed inland, challenging the independent warrior empire of Ethiopia. Reach was not matched by grasp, and Italian arms suffered a total and humiliating defeat at the battle of Adowa on 1 March 1896.[1] This put a stop to Italian initiatives in the region. Mussolini would breathe new life into them in 1935. This confirmed the low opinion that many Italian politicians – notably the pre-war premier Giovanni Giolitti – had of Italian military capacity. His army won Libya for him in the Italo-Turkish war, but it was only partially a victory: the troops on the ground suffered some serious setbacks, the Turks only backed out of this war when they faced another in the Balkans, and thereafter Istanbul backed an ongoing guerrilla war in Libya which lasted throughout the world war that followed, during which Italians were able to keep only four coastal footholds. In both colonial wars Italian armies used brutal methods against the local populations.

If the record of the peacetime Liberal administrations appeared to leave a lot to be desired – and much to improve upon – so did Italy's performance during the First World War. Coming late into the war – she joined in on the Entente's side in May 1915 after extensive parlaying with both parties – earned her international disapprobation which only increased with time. Her entry into the war also deepened pre-existing fault lines in society, with right-wing and conservative interventionists ranged against left-wing and democratic neutralists (though, confusingly, democrats could also back the war in support of Belgium), while the official socialist party stood somewhere in the middle, neither for the war nor against it.

For three years the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies grappled with one another in the mountains and limestone uplands along their common border. It was, as an on-the-spot British observer remarked, 'a desperate country to fight in'. Then, on 24 October 1917, Italy suffered an almost catastrophic defeat when German and Austro-Hungarian forces broke Marshal Cadorna's army at Caporetto and pursued it as far as the Piave river. There the army held – before the Anglo-French forces that were coming to its support had got into position to lend a hand – and began first a recovery and then a fightback that ended in

October 1918 when it in turn broke the Austro-Hungarians at the battle of Vittorio Veneto.*

The First World War cost Italy some 650,000 dead. If this casualty list more or less matched that of Great Britain, who lost 750,000 men and fought for nine months more (a macabre form of calculation and not in itself of great value), it did not earn Italy much in the way of international acknowledgement or recognition. In the aftermath both Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George denigrated Italy's military record, the Welshman declaring that when compared with his own countrymen the Italians had 'no idea what fighting meant'.[2] At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Italy's territorial claims were made to look grasping and cynical – which by no means all of them were.

In Italy, Mussolini poured criticism on the government in the pages of his newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*. By making only 'vague and high-sounding' public declarations but failing to equalize the burdens paid by town and country in terms of both blood and money, it had failed 'morally and economically'. How Italy had come to lose the twelfth battle of the Isonzo (i.e. Caporetto) was something of a mystery, but as a front-line soldier himself Mussolini was certainly not inclined to blame the ordinary *fante* (infantryman), despite Cadorna's talk of 'deficient resistance by some detachments'. The future, Mussolini declared, would now be in the hands not of the old elites, civilian or military, but of the 'trenchocracy' which come peacetime would unite class and nation.[3]

The First World War would have dramatic consequences for Italian politics. No less important, though much less obvious at the time, were the strategic lessons it offered – and those it did not. Before the war, soldiers and politicians had agreed that Italy was strategically vulnerable: her lengthy coastline and her islands were wide open to attack, and the mountains along which her northern borders ran to penetration. With the two major naval powers in the Mediterranean – Great Britain and France – on her side her vulnerability to enemy sea power was never really exposed. Wartime Italy faced only minor naval threats from Austro-Hungarian and German units in Pola and Trieste, and by

* The battle of Caporetto has become part of the everyday Italian lexicon: when Ferrari were beaten in the Singapore Grand Prix, Italian sports papers talked of a 'Singaporetto'.

the war's end had support in the shape of British, American, Australian and Japanese naval vessels and a mass of nets and mines closing the neck of the Adriatic. So, with no great sea battles in prospect, the major task the Italian navy faced was shepherding convoys across the Mediterranean alongside her Entente allies. Coal, food and weapons from her Western partners, not least the United States, flowed along the arteries formed by well-defended sea lanes. None of this would Italy enjoy when Mussolini took her into another war.

When compared with the war fought by the powers that would, in 1940 and 1941, become her enemies, the land war that the Italian armies fought between 1915 and 1918 was characterized by particular local conditions and circumstances which would not be repeated. The stage was smaller and the cast of combatants limited – though the action was just as bloody. With France on her side and Switzerland neutral the fighting front was, relatively speaking, small, clearly defined and unambiguous. There were 'side-shows' to be sure – Italian units fought in Greece and were present, albeit in very small numbers, with General Edmund Allenby in Palestine – but in strategic terms this was essentially a single-theatre war. It was also a static war. For most of the time the Italian armies were nailed to the mountains. There they fought their enemy at close range, relying on infantry assaults backed by artillery (of which they never had enough). No mechanized warfare here and no mobile warfare to speak of either. Nor did the Italian armies have much experience of fighting alongside allies: eight British and French divisions were entrained for Italy after Caporetto, but then five of them were hastily withdrawn again when the Germans launched their March offensive in 1918. Thus much of the first-hand lesson-learning which took place at the time and subsequently in the British, French and German armies had to be done by Italy at second-hand.[4]

Under Fascism, all three services had to prepare themselves for modern war. Exactly what war in what circumstances would depend entirely on how the *Duce* read the international situation – an element of continuity with the past here. All would be expected to be ready to shoulder whatever burdens came their way. All would be under pressure – but the army was under a particularly strong spotlight. Mussolini required his soldiers to shake off a legacy of defeats and partial victories which went back past Caporetto and Adowa to the wars of the

Risorgimento and beyond, and give the lie to the old calumny that *italiani sunt imbelles* ('the Italians can't fight').

Joining in a second major war, at first European and then global, would entail grasping, assessing and then mastering complex strategic challenges. Neutrality was one such challenge. In the First World War it had simplified Italy's fight; now a neutral Spain at one end of the Mediterranean and a neutral Turkey at the other would act as geo-political 'book-ends' which Mussolini could do nothing about and which would ultimately play to Allied advantage. Theatre warfare was another. The army, navy and air force had to win their campaigns if Italy was to be victorious, but they had to be the right campaigns fought (if possible) at the right time and in the right place. In 1940 the strategic chequer board was not yet as complex as it would become the following year. There are 'lost opportunities' for every combatant in every war, and readers will be able to judge for themselves how much Mussolini's obdurate refusal to accept German assistance in North Africa in the autumn and winter of 1940–1, when the Wehrmacht was between campaigns of its own, cost him. Then there is resource allocation. Parcelling out men, guns, planes and ships to meet competing demands in ever more widely divergent theatres would be an increasingly demanding task for a combatant that was still the least of the Great Powers. Mussolini's military chiefs would spend increasing amounts of time and energy on a problem they were unable to resolve.

The Second World War was the supreme test for every combatant. Fascist Italy, eighteen years in the making when that test came in May 1940, was no exception. How did warlord Mussolini and the armed forces that served him fare in meeting the challenges that he and they faced between 1940 and 1943? The balance sheet is set out in the story that follows.

Chapter 1
On the March

For Italy the first post-war years were difficult ones. Demobilization was slow: at the end of 1919 there were still half a million men in the army and the process only came to an end in 1921. There was mounting internal disorder as Italian labour joined an international general strike in June 1919 and two violent years of internal strife began. And to many who had worn or were still wearing a uniform the peace settlement and the 'mutilated victory' that the politicians brought back from Versailles confirmed the feeling that the fighting had all been for nothing. 'No march on Vienna,' a disenchanted *Arditi* captain moaned in July 1919, 'no affirmation of victory, no colonies, no Fiume, no indemnity, nothing of any merit.'[1] Economies hit the army hard. All promotions were suspended for five years, several thousand mostly junior officers were retired, and officers' pay was cut. Benito Mussolini's assurance that officers would get a decent salary, made some six months before the March on Rome that brought him to power in October 1922, was welcome. Some of Fascism's goals dovetailed with those nursed by the soldiers, so the army happily collaborated with the Fascist Blackshirts in restoring order after the occupation of the factories and the wave of civil strikes in 1920. It also found Fascism's expansionist agenda very much to its taste. Against that, the early Fascist party looked rather too republican. In August 1922 a group of officers warned it not to set itself against the Crown. They got only an ambiguous reply.

For six years between 1919 and 1925, while Mussolini first took power and then consolidated his hold on it by shedding the radical aspects of Fascism, the generals argued with one another and the politicians over how many men were to be conscripted into the army each year, how long they were to serve in it, and how large it ought to be. Finally, in April 1925, Mussolini took over the reins of the War

Ministry himself (holding them until September 1929) and settled the question. A force of 250,000, mostly conscripts serving eighteen months, would form thirty 'triangular' divisions each made up of nine battalions. Numbers would vary, re-balancing the force over the year in order to keep within the budget. The measure was one of a raft of seven laws intended to create the institutions that would shape the nation's defences in peace and in war. They included the creation of a Supreme Defence Commission to determine in peacetime what the army would need in war, and the position of chief of the armed forces general staff, whose occupant would be the 'technical consultant to the head of government for matters to do with the co-ordination of the defensive arrangements of the State and planning for future operations of war'. The new post was given to General Pietro Badoglio, a conservative Piedmontese professional with a good though not unblemished wartime record – some thought him at fault for the collapse at Caporetto on 24 October 1917. His appointment reassured the king, pleased the army and went down well with the public. For two years he held the new post together with the position of chief of the army general staff. Then Mussolini split the two offices apart and watered down Badoglio's powers.[2]

During the latter half of the 1920s the soldiers rebuilt an army that looked very much like the one that had gone to war in 1915. The Stokes mortars, rifle grenades, flamethrowers and semi-automatic weapons that had given small units the heavy firepower they needed in 1918 were discarded and the army went back to old-fashioned rifle companies. Artillery lagged badly: well into the 1930s pre-war guns were being 'improved' by lengthening their barrels and supplying them with better ammunition. Some of the best guns at the army's disposal were Skoda 75mm and 100mm howitzers captured from the Austrians. As the decade went on the authorities put increased emphasis on physical training and the concepts guiding the army in war began to take on a distinctly nineteenth-century look. Combat regulations envisaged offensives in which artillery barrages would prepare the way for the infantry battalions to strike their blows, and stated flatly that the basis of any manoeuvre on the battlefield was 'the principle of mass'. They acknowledged the importance of air-ground co-operation in reconnaissance and tactical strikes but said little about tanks, mainly because everything was tailored to mountain warfare on the assumption that a

new war would share the characteristics of the old, with Germany and Austria the likely enemies. In 1930 regulations made technology a second-order issue, declaring that war was in its essence 'the struggle of spirit and will'. This was something on which the new generation of Fascistized generals would build in the 1930s.[3]

In 1921 the Liberal government decided that Italy must win back possession of Libya, taken from the Turks in the war of 1911–12 and mostly lost during the world war. The reconquest began the following year. First the army began to spread its reach along the coast of Tripolitania and penetrate inland, using co-ordinated columns of Eritrean battalions and local levies and inflicting harsh punishment on the 'rebels'. It was now that Colonel – later Marshal – Rodolfo Graziani began to make his name as an expert leader of these light mobile forces. By the end of 1925 Graziani and his fellows had reconquered northern Tripolitania, killing some 6,500 Arabs at a cost of 2,582 Italians dead, wounded and missing. In Cyrenaica General Ernesto Mombelli carried out sweeps using columns co-ordinated by wireless and supported by air to hunt down the Senussi tribesmen being led by Omar el-Mukhtar, destroying encampments and tents, seizing sheep and camels, and killing 400 'rebels' at a cost of six dead and twenty-five wounded.

In July 1925 Mussolini decided that it was time for a new man to take over and appointed fifty-nine-year-old General Emilio De Bono as governor of Libya. While Graziani pushed into the interior of Tripolitania, using nomadic tribesmen and forging links with tribal leaders, De Bono sentenced rebels to death without a qualm and approved the use of phosgene gas on at least four occasions. Thanks partly to the effective use of aircraft in carrying out long-range and tactical reconnaissance, transporting troops and materiel, and co-ordinating the movement of columns, hunting down and killing rebel bands produced results. Graziani was particularly good at it. But clearing and controlling the vast desert hinterland was another matter. Also subduing the Senussi needed a higher level of direction and order than De Bono was able to provide, so in December 1928 Mussolini replaced him with Badoglio.

Over the next three years Badoglio and Graziani set about breaking down Libya's entire socio-political order, confiscating Senussi property, disarming the tribes that submitted, and carrying out a series of public trials and executions. To separate the armed Senussi in

Cyrenaica from the tribes who directly or indirectly supported them, they set up barbed-wire enclosures on the coastal strip and by the end of 1930, 80,000 tribespeople were confined in them. The internment camps made their contribution to the final death toll in Cyrenaica, which probably amounted to between 50,000 and 60,000 people.[4] At Graziani's suggestion a 270-kilometre long barbed-wire barrier was put up along the Egyptian border. Penned inside it and hunted down, Omar el-Mukhtar was captured on 11 September 1931 and hanged five days later in front of a crowd of 20,000 Arabs. On 24 January 1932 Badoglio announced that the rebellion in Cyrenaica had been defeated. Rome was triumphant. Libya was now entirely in Italian hands for the first time in almost two decades, the Fascist armed forces had won their first campaign, Badoglio had polished his credentials as Fascist Italy's leading soldier, and the new Italy had shown itself to be efficient, effective and merciless towards its enemies – exactly what Mussolini wanted the world to see.

WAR IN ABYSSINIA

The road to Mussolini's first major war opened in July 1925 when his Colonial Minister, Pietro Lanza di Scalea, proposed reinforcing the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia and blocking any movement of arms to Addis Ababa and to the Abyssinian *ras* (tribal chiefs). The *Duce* was ready to begin positioning Fascist Italy for expansion and conquest. At some time in the future the Ethiopian Empire might collapse and Italy must prepare herself militarily and diplomatically, working as far as possible in collaboration with the English and 'chloroforming the official Abyssinia world' in the meantime.[5] At first things moved slowly. In June 1926 Mussolini agreed that Badoglio send a personal representative to assess the military conditions of Eritrea in view of a possible future conflict. General Giuseppe Malladra duly told Rome what it wanted to hear – that peace was precarious and war with a belligerent Abyssinia could break out at any moment.* To be able to defend itself, the colony needed 160,000 white troops on top of the

* At the time and since Italians have used the terms Ethiopia and Abyssinia interchangeably, with a preference for the former.

30,000–40,000 Eritreans available. Badoglio thought 40,000–50,000 Italian troops and a strong air force would be enough. For the moment, though, Italian policy still concentrated on 'chloroforming' the Abyssinians. Local representatives negotiated a treaty of friendship and good neighbourliness, and a convention on road building was signed 2 August 1928. When *ras* Tafari became emperor two months later relations worsened over the road contract and over Rome's refusal of the new emperor's request for aircraft. On the ground a new governor of Eritrea, Corrado Zoli, attacked his predecessor's weak policies. Half-hearted attempts at an agreement with France were abandoned when the Italians could see no advantage to themselves.

Many of the leading figures in the foreign policy establishment were four-square behind an Italian bid for another African colony. In April 1930 Dino Grandi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, told the Fascist Grand Council that a strong Italy could not for ever remain clinging to the extreme edge of the Eritrean *altopiano* (highland plateau) and stuck in the restricted space of Italian Somalia. The nation had a civilizing mission in the black continent to carry out and the current generation had a problem to resolve – 'the colonial problem'.[6] At the Foreign Ministry Raffaele Guariglia believed it was Italy's destiny to become a major African colonial power, as did Alessandro Lessona at the Colonial Ministry. As the history of colonization proved, 'nothing great is done in the world without getting blood on one's hands'. A war would be easier for Italy now than it had been in the past. Abyssinia had lots of guns, though not of modern types, her territories were well suited to defensive war and her soldiers particularly adapted to fight it, but modern European military technology and particularly aircraft would give Italy the whip-hand. The moment had come to consider 'this whole question, pregnant with dangers, but also with real possibilities for our country'. However, Italy could not act alone. Given the current political and military situation, Guariglia believed that prior accords with France and Great Britain were 'indispensable'.[7]

In 1932 Mussolini singled out Ethiopia – as the Italians liked to call it – as his next objective. As a first step he sent his favourite general to scout the ground. Emilio De Bono returned with the news that the Negus (Emperor Haile Selassie) was consolidating his power and intended at some future time to take up arms against Italy. Italy must prepare for a preventive war in the future. For the moment, though,

armed intervention was out of the question.[8] In August the army approached De Bono about naming a commander designate in order to begin planning. De Bono went straight to Mussolini, who immediately gave him the role. De Bono planned to conquer northern Abyssinia with 35,000 white troops, 50,000 Eritrean *ascari*, 100 aircraft – and only a month's preparation. Now ensconced at Tripoli, where he was masterminding the brutal suppression of the local tribes, Badoglio was happy to see that 'this very important problem' was finally being addressed.[9] The army general staff was not. Its chief, General Alberto Bonzani, excoriated a rash plan that proposed to push two separate forces 80 kilometres forward onto the *altopiano*, fight the enemy when he was mobilized and had been allowed to close up to relatively close range, and then after a successful battle pursue him in depth. Having just expressed 'lively satisfaction' with De Bono, Badoglio now put up a plan of his own: stand on the defensive, wait until the enemy had assembled, strike with air power, and follow that up with a counter-offensive to liquidate him 'definitively'. His suggestions for a designated commander were clearly designed to exclude De Bono.

On 1 January 1934 Badoglio came back to Rome. Over the next three months the top brass struggled for control over the shaping of Mussolini's first war. Badoglio thought that accords with London and Paris were the essential diplomatic foundation for action, otherwise at the least they might arm the Abyssinians. The army general staff too wanted the whole venture set in a broad scenario which took account of whether Italy was in alliance with France or at war with her. Mussolini wanted action in 1935. Either there would be peace in Europe during the next few years, in which case a defensive position could act as the base either for an offensive or a counter-offensive, or a worsening European situation would not allow Italy to deploy force in Africa, in which case a defensive organization 'will allow us to break [down] any attempt by the Abyssinians'.[10] In late March, with the French now apparently favouring an accord, Mussolini announced that he had decided to finish off Abyssinia. Rather than put De Bono in complete charge he accepted Badoglio's argument that it was the army general staff's responsibility to do the planning. A letter duly winged its way to De Bono. Its recipient exploded. 'That pig of a Badoglio' had tried to do him down – and

had succeeded.[11] With no choice De Bono gave way, though the actual conduct of the campaign still lay in his hands.

The chiefs of staff met briefly at the Palazzo Venezia on 7 May 1934 to discuss force levels for the proposed operation. Immediately Badoglio tried to apply the brakes – as he would do again in 1940. A war would cost six milliards and would put the army in crisis during the campaign and then afterwards as it struggled to refill its magazines and stores. And there would be a permanent burden of occupation. Was it worth it?[12] When he was told that preparing for a campaign in Ethiopia would take three years, the *Duce* called Badoglio and De Bono to the Palazzo Venezia on 31 May and laid out the modus operandi for the next few months. Defensive arrangements must be made as quickly as possible, after which the problem of provoking the Abyssinians into action would be addressed. In the meantime everything was to be done in the colony and internationally to avoid giving the game away.[13] Juggling his multiple offices – and his mistresses – the *Duce* forged ahead, leaving unresolved issues in his wake. How was De Bono's determination to take offensive action as soon as possible to be reconciled with Badoglio's to proceed slowly and cautiously? Whose budget was going to pay for it all? And could the country afford it? The general staff estimated that a six-month war in which four divisions took part would cost about 3,500,000,000 lire and a year-long campaign would increase the bill to just short of 5,000,000,000 lire.

The murder of the Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss on 25 July 1934 left Mussolini unwilling for the moment to do anything that might weaken his military strength in Europe, but still ready to act. Defensive preparations in Eritrea must be accelerated. If the Abyssinians attacked they were to be checked 'decisively', followed by a counter-offensive 'in directions and with objectives that the situation at the time suggests'.[14] That autumn two incidents ratcheted up the temperature. On 4 November the Italian consulate in Gondar was attacked, and on 22 November there was an armed stand-off between Abyssinians and Italians at the wells of Ual-Ual, in an area where the frontier was not defined and where the Abyssinians contested the Italian occupation. Haile Selassie appealed to the League of Nations.

The open challenge to Mussolini's prestige made him all the more determined to solve the Abyssinian problem with force before the tribes could benefit from an ongoing programme of rearmament and training

by European instructors. Time was working against Italy. The problem had to be resolved as soon as possible, 'that is, as soon as our military preparations give us the certainty of victory.' There could only be one objective: 'the destruction of the Abyssinian forces and the total conquest of Ethiopia'. Glancing over the international scene, Mussolini could see no likelihood of war in Europe during the coming two years. Accords with France, the consequent easing of relations with Yugoslavia, and the fact that Germany was as yet still too weak to contemplate attacking Austria, all gave him grounds for certainty. Everything and everyone must be on the spot and ready for October 1935. Until then, foreign policy must ensure that premature conflict was avoided. The 'Gordian knot' of Italian-Abyssinian relations had to be cut before it was too late.[15]

The armed forces prepared to fight a war without quarter against a 'barbarous' enemy. No 'false scruples' were to be entertained, and no potential weapon was to be overlooked.[16] Air power would be one of those weapons. Indeed, Mussolini intended Italian air power to play a leading role in the coming campaign. As well as destroying the only Abyssinian railway, he wanted troops, population, material resources and all the 'bases of life' bombed. The airmen welcomed his directives, which gave them operational and therefore strategic independence from the army, played to the publicity campaign waged by the air minister, Italo Balbo, and would allow them to try out General Douhet's theories of terror-bombing to which their leaders were oriented.[17] The chief of the air staff, General Giuseppe Valle, obediently fell in line. In the closing months of 1935 the air force would wage a defensive war, 'halting and perhaps breaking any enemy offensive inclination' and engendering in the enemy 'a salutary terror, from which we can profit in 1936'. Italian aircraft operating from bases along the Eritrean coast would sweep the entire zone of operations, carrying out whatever actions were required, 'including the destruction of Addis Ababa, of Gondar, of Harrar and the systematic burning of the entire Somalian highlands'.[18] Gas would play an integral part in the coming war: 10 per cent of the munitions were to be gas bombs.

The New Year brought unwelcome news. Badoglio told Mussolini that the air force would not be ready to fight before October and an expeditionary corps could not be in place on the Abyssinian *altopiano* until the following February. A rapid campaign needed foresight and

meticulous preparation. Italy would need 'all of 1935 and the first eight months of 1936 to be in a position to take on such an arduous task with the certainty of success'.[19] Valle concurred: fighting an offensive war would not be possible until the end of 1936, because of the lack of roads and infrastructure. Admiral Cavagnari, chief of the naval staff, warned that British and French agreement to action was essential and League of Nations sanctions were very likely. Mussolini's response was to order his subordinates to press ahead quickly with war preparations. With Fascist Italy's prestige, and his own, increasingly in play he was ready to fight if he had to, but also ready to garner his reward from the mere threat of aggression if that sufficed. 'Only if they [the League of Nations and especially Great Britain] see that we are ready to go to extreme lengths', he told Alessandro Lessona, 'will they perhaps be induced to allow the situation to resolve itself with honour and without war.'[20]

On the diplomatic front things looked promising. Pierre Laval, France's Foreign Minister, arrived in Rome at the beginning of January and concluded an accord with Italy containing a secret clause giving Mussolini a free hand in Abyssinia. Whether this included a rider excluding war, as Laval afterwards claimed, is still contested but there were grounds enough for Mussolini to assume that the French were not likely to try to stop him. The Italian Foreign Ministry advised that Great Britain too was unlikely to put up serious opposition to a war against Ethiopia, and its under-secretary Fulvio Suvich suggested that it would be possible to reach an understanding with her even after Italy had conquered Abyssinia. Italian soldiers and war materiel began transiting the Suez Canal, unmistakable signs that action was in the offing.

Making a determined bid to take charge of the coming war, Badoglio put his war plan to Mussolini. Either the Abyssinians would attack en masse, in which case they would be beaten as long as best use was made by 'an able and energetic command[er]' of Italy's superiority in both means and technical capacity, and could then be harried by Italian air power, or they would hold back, in which case the Italians could advance slowly in stages to Adigrat and Adowa, preceded by a violent air bombardment. Everything in the 700 kilometres between the frontier and Addis Ababa should be destroyed and terror disseminated throughout the empire.[21] The barely disguised move to push De Bono off his

perch failed. On 8 March 1935, a day before Hermann Goering announced the creation of the *Luftwaffe* and a week before Hitler announced that conscription would be revived in Germany, the *Duce* told De Bono he was sending not two but ten divisions along with 300 to 500 planes and 300 fast tanks. He was not going to make the same mistake as his predecessor, Francesco Crispi, had made in 1896 when, in a national humiliation, he had lost a campaign in Ethiopia for want of 'a few thousand men'. Operations must start at the end of the coming September or in October.[22]

To men like Alessandro Lessona the war that was about to start would be the completion of a colonial programme begun fifty years before when Italian soldiers first set foot on Assab on the Red Sea coast, and would put Ethiopia's natural resources at Italy's disposal. To others it was the first step in the planned progress to imperial grandeur, as indeed schoolchildren would be taught shortly after the war ended. 'Young Turks' wanted war to liberate the regime from the stagnation into which it was sinking and remake a party that was no longer the guarantor of the original ideals of the Fascist revolution. War was also welcomed as a mobilizing force that could reawaken the feelings of nationalism and patriotism which had flourished between 1915 and 1918 before being supposedly submerged beneath a Red tide.[23]

On 25 May 1935, addressing the Italian chamber of deputies, Mussolini told them to look beyond the immediate issue of Austria and the defence of the Brenner Pass to the growing threat to Italian East Africa. No one should think of turning Abyssinia into a pistol 'perennially pointed at us'. 'We have some old and some new scores to settle,' he told the *Sabauda* division in June on the eve of its departure for East Africa, '[and] settle them we shall.' At the end of July, in an article in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, his personal newspaper and the mouthpiece of the Fascist Party, he brushed aside slavery, race and civilization as the basic causes of Italy's conflict with Ethiopia. There were only two 'essential, irrefutable' matters at issue: 'the vital needs of the Italian people and the military security of East Africa'. The latter was the decisive one. If Italy were to find itself committed in Europe the threat that Ethiopia would pose would be strategically unsustainable, and until the 'looming military menace' was eliminated, Eritrea and Somalia would never be safe. The solution could only be 'totalitarian'. The Abyssinian threat was about to be eliminated not by diplomacy but by brute force.[24]